The Red String

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The Red String

by KristinaMarie

Summary

Rey waited her entire life for a sense of purpose... to find where she belonged. She thought she would find it with the Resistance, or perhaps it awaited her on Ahch-To. Instead, Rey finds herself desperately clinging to a strange bond shared with none other than Kylo Ren, leading her to realize that the ties that truly bind are no stronger than a thin, red string.

Ch. 23 posted!

His want for Rey had been undeniable since the moment they’d met. Even when he didn’t understand fully what that want entailed. The rush in his veins at her strength and vitality. The ache in his chest at her tears. The coiling heat in his stomach when she spoke with those lips or touched him with those hands. How adamantly he had tried to suffocate his own senses, over and over, to deny that which made him carnally a man. He never could have guessed that he’d have her. All of her. Made her his. She so willingly gave of herself and Kylo gladly took it all. The taste of her on his tongue and the feel of her surrounding him were branded upon him now, and if he were killed the next day, he would die a happy man.

From what he saw, he may very well be killed in a day’s time…

Notes
This story is an epic continuation of The Force Awakens. Though I've tried very hard to follow canon and make this accurate to lore, I am not a Star Wars expert. Please know that I do not take the lore lightly: I conducted extensive research to try and be as relevant to the existing universe as I can. You will see references made to both the script and the novelization, among other things. However, there are bound to be mistakes, both accidental and purposeful. I assure you that everything I went with was for the story's sake. :)

This was definitely a labor of love, and I hope you enjoy it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Forewarning: This story is slow-burn Reylo and has many dark moments. Please do not read if strong themes may be triggering for you, or if you generally prefer fluffy material – this is not the story you are looking for.

If you're like me and love drowning in angst, then this story is surely for you!
Prologue

A bygone legend of a forgotten people once said: destiny is dictated by a thin, red string.
A binding force, infallible, it stretches across the galaxy, from one soul to another. Time, distance, and circumstance have no bearing upon it. It does not bend to one’s will, nor can it be severed. Simply, it exists as fate wills it to.

If one were to follow the string, they would find where such fate leads: A road they were meant to walk; A cross they were meant to bear; A life they were meant to lead; Or a heart they were meant to love.
All are placed in the hands of another: the one at the other end. And one would find themselves bonded to them inescapably. The other, their own selves bound in return, like one soul split into two.

Apart, each end struggles against the tide. But the answers they seek lie ahead, not behind, and to find them is the greatest journey, because through all, the red thread runs, though some may never discover it. For those unfortunate souls, such a wondrous phenomenon is impossible to fathom. For the lucky, star-crossed ones who do, the thin, red string is everything.

When lost, one need only pull on the thread and hold tight, for it cannot and will not break – steadfast in even the darkest hour. But oh, when blessed, how each end will meet and find where they are meant to be: Their belonging, prophetically; Together, finding the balance they seek.
28 ABY

“Jakku would not have been my first choice.”

Two old men huddled together outside of a domed hut, bracing against the high winds and blowing sand. It was a reasonable location with its culled land, moisture farming terminals and the accompanying droids, and most importantly, its utter remoteness. It was also the best option they had, and with the light dying quickly, they hadn’t much time to be picky. Still, they remained outside of the home, one unwilling to go in and the other delaying his transport.

“I’m afraid it is the best option we have for the infamous Lor San Tekka,” Luke Skywalker chided. “No one should think to look for you here among nothing but sand and more sand.” At the thought, he drew the hood lower over his brow. More so than Tekka, Luke would undoubtedly be sought. By whom, it pained him to say. It seemed so impossible, and yet, Luke blamed himself. He could have, no, should have seen it coming. After all, his own hands had helped make it so.

Lor San sighed. Pulling a worn, hardbound tome from the satchel he carried, he pressed it into Luke’s hands. “I feared this may be our last journey together, old friend. A gift for you. Perhaps my most prized find thus far – the Church of the Force believes it tells of a new prophecy.”

Luke couldn’t remember the last time he held such an archaic thing. The cover was made of stiff, cracked leather and the pages within yellowed with age. Nodding his appreciation, Luke handed Lor San a small disk in return.

“When the time is right. And until then –” Luke repeated the directions he’d already recited countless times, and Lor San held up a hand to calm him.

“I will watch over her. As long as I survive, so shall the girl.”

Farewells were spoken hastily then, old friend bidding strength and luck to old friend. Once Lor San disappeared behind closed doors, Luke boarded the oversized transport ship. The pilot was more than happy to alter his trajectory and include an extra stop – a return to a place Luke had once thought of as home. A single fighter ship awaited him there in an unlisted hangar, its coordinates already programmed and ready for departure.

“Forgive me,” Luke whispered to himself, to his students, to his family, and to the galaxy. Most of all, he whispered it to two souls who had no way of hearing him. Two souls who had suffered greatly beneath his watch and by his own doing.

For them, he would wait.
Chapter One

Well I heard there was a secret chord
That David played and it pleased the Lord
But you don't really care for music, do you?
Well it goes like this: the fourth, the fifth,
The minor fall and the major lift
The tragic king composing Hallelujah.

11 ABY

“He won’t come out.”

It was hours after the sun had already set and even longer since Han and Leia’s son should have been tucked into bed, sound asleep. After a long day’s work, Han wasted no time intercepting his wife as she walked through the front door of their home: a modest dwelling far from the city on neutral Chandrilla. They’d chosen the planet for its beauty and peace, though Leia wouldn’t admit to Han how it reminded her of Alderaan. More importantly, it was the perfect hub for her to conduct her affairs whilst maintaining a relatively anonymous façade. Much had happened in both her and Han’s history – much that would call unwanted attention upon them in times of peace as well as in times of war. For their budding little family’s sake, Leia needed and prayed for peace. And in Han’s eyes, the further they could be from the so-called magical mumbo-jumbo, the better… until it bloomed within his own home.

Leia saw how Han itched each time she left for the day. She could see the yearning for freedom in his eyes, and she wondered how much longer he would withstand the calling. It wasn’t for lack of trying; Han stayed of his own free will, even though he would disappear for hours to visit the Falcon in its private, unlisted hangar. Still, he came back. For his son, Han would always come back…But Leia knew the day was coming, when a few-hour trip to the hangar would turn into a few-day or few-week trip, beyond. Perhaps more.

When Leia didn’t answer, lost in her thoughts, Han grew more flustered. “I don’t know what you expect me to do if he won’t come out. I tried…” His words trailed off and he ran a hand haggardly through his hair. Leia believed him. He always tried. Even when the boy who idolized him was too ashamed to go to him, Han still tried. But as a man who never truly knew his own father, Han struggled in being one, himself.

It wasn’t the first time they’d had this conversation, and Han was making that fact blatantly apparent. It was beginning to happen far too often, driving a wedge between their once united front and leaving Han to feel helpless. Something inside of him broke each time and, at a loss, he resigned
to waiting for his wife to return and do the apparent impossible. Helplessly he would watch Leia disappear behind the closed door of their son’s room, only to emerge in quiet, disheartened victory… Though it was difficult to call it that when their child was sure to endure only a few nights’ peace before starting all over again.

Leia could do what Han could not, and the guilt ate at her for it. She knew it hurt him, because he simply couldn’t figure it out: the connection Leia shared with their son that Han did not. Yet she also remembered the first time she tried to explain it, and how Han had not wanted to listen. It was beyond him and it was humbling when he realized that he would never connect the same way she could – or, he feared, at all. He couldn’t help his son, and it tore him apart.

Giving Han’s arm a reassuring squeeze, Leia hurried to Ben’s room. The mechanized door was left open, a usual request from her six year old. Every light, of which there were many, was lit to its highest setting. Stepping inside, Leia could feel the vibrations of everything; the floor beneath her feet, the spire of the bed’s footboard against her hand, even the air itself seemed palpable in its tension. The room was alive and trembling, but nothing more so than the small bump beneath the covers in the center of the bed.

Their son was so strong with the force, and Leia wish she could tell Han what he refused to acknowledge. She wished he would join in her amazement of their son’s remarkable potential. But for six years now, Han made it clear that it was not something he accepted. It was too dangerous, he insisted. He didn’t want it encouraged or nurtured. He said he wanted it quelled, for his son’s sake and theirs. Han had seen enough disaster in the lives of force-sensitives to last him a lifetime, and he refused to watch his son follow the same path.

“Ben,” Leia murmured, her voice just a hair above a whisper. “Please come out, my little one.” Beneath the heavy quilt, Ben visibly shook his head, so Leia followed him under. Safely beneath the warm tent, she took one look at his tear-streaked cheeks and damp eyelashes before pulling him into her lap.

“I hear things when the lights go out, momma,” he whimpered. Leia shushed him knowingly.

“What do you do when I’m not here?”

Ben looked up at his mother, his eyes wide. With much steadier hands now that she was near, he pulled the blanket bit by bit until their heads were free and it was bundled under his chin. Scanning the room full of warm, bright light, he inspected his handiwork.

“You lit all these yourself?” Leia chuckled when Ben nodded vigorously. “Even that one?”

“I-I didn’t,” Ben whispered. “I didn’t reach it, momma.”

Sighing, Leia pulled her son tighter to her chest. “Tell me, my little one,” she asked again. “What do you do when I am not here?”

Ben’s muffled voice murmured from where he hid in her tunic. “Find the light.”

“That’s right,” Leia answered while trying to hide the worried strain in her voice. “When you get scared, just look for the light.” It was the same mantra she recited each morning before she’d leave, her work calling her away no matter how much Ben begged her to stay. Or if she missed their usual bedtime ritual, and returned to find him in a similar state. When they were apart, even miles away, she would feel the little tug in her thoughts and would whisper it into the air. When he was an infant she could sense that same, needy pull whenever he cried. To her dismay, the pull was waning over
the years. But still, it was there, and though Leia’s heart sunk each time her son reached out for her through their bond, she was grateful for it. At least with it, she could help him navigate the growing power within him the best that she could.

“It’s there, little one,” she promised, rocking her baby long after his eyes drifted closed. “The light will always be there…”

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Present Day

"You seek answers that I cannot give."

Rey felt the color drain from her face. Standing in the presence of Luke Skywalker, the supposed "only hope" and plethora of knowledge she had come to expect, Rey felt as if the ground was giving way beneath her feet. Which it very well could have been, there on the highest peak of the island of Ahch-To, its grit and grain crunching beneath her feet and the wind kicking about as if it wasn't sure of which direction it came. She'd found him. She'd found him… not the Resistance. Not the First Order. It was her victory. She’d done so much more than what would be expected of a mere scavenger: rescued BB-8, memorized the map, and flew the Millennium Falcon to deliver the legendary (and lost) Luke Skywalker his lightsaber… the very lightsaber she’d used to strike down Kylo Ren.

"Do not think his name."

Rey looked indignant. "Hey! Get out of my head!" She nearly stamped her foot in annoyance, had she not remembered who she was speaking to. It was unpleasant knowing someone could so readily step inside her mind, feel around, and take what they wanted. The first time she felt such an invasion was at the hands of a creature in a mask. He’d slipped in so easily, and she’d pushed back… Rey couldn’t remember just how she’d done it, but she had with all of her might. She didn’t know what frightened her more: Kylo Ren’s presence in her mind and how complete it had felt, or the fact that ever since she’d forced him out, nothing had rid her head of the deafening, ceaseless hum left in his wake.

"How did you know I was thinking of –"

"Don't say it, either."

Rey deadpanned and took a deep breath. "Why? Are we in danger here?" When Luke did not answer, Rey swallowed her panic. "Is there anything you can tell me? Anything at all? We need your help, Luke. I need training. I-I need you to show me the ways of the force!" The old man looked at her as if she were asking the world of him, and her heart sunk into her stomach. She needed something… anything to calm her mind. A way to regain control – to ease the static that trembled persistently beneath her skin.

"Not until I know you can close your mind off to him."
Rey pursed her lips. In a flurry of excitement upon finally coming face to face with Luke Skywalker, she’d nearly bowled him over with the influx of knowledge that spilled from her mouth. Of it all – Leia and the Resistance’s plans, Han's death, the First Order's endeavors – her connection with… with him was what stood out to Luke. He seemed unsurprised by his own nephew’s pull over her as though he had an answer for it. And though the Resistance’s mission was high on Rey’s priority list, her hopes had been just as high in finding the Master Jedi and in finding that answer. Or at the very least a sense of direction. Anything.

Yet here he was, a stalwart and guarded man who hardly said a thing and feared a name. She’d extended his own weapon to him, asking him to help her save the galaxy, and he refused to accept it.

“Master Jedi…”


Rey was relieved, the tension settling. The nicety felt foreign on her tongue, anyway. Such formality was never necessary on Jakku. Everyone knew their place and not many were above the others, if any at all. “Luke. So will you teach me, then? Will you train me to be a Jedi?”

All of his oddness, his quirks, his eccentricity all froze with that one question. Had she not known better, Rey would have thought he was force-frozen, just as she had been on… She didn’t want to think of it. And before she could anyway, Luke was spinning on his heel and descending the mountain.

“I do not train Jedi. Not anymore.”

Rey scrambled after him. “Wait! After everything we’ve done to find you – after everything that’s happened – you are refusing to help?”

“The Jedi were wrong,” he spat, his sights set ahead of him. “They believed that they could do nothing and peace and light would persevere. It is why they are nearly extinct. I will not train more to follow in their footsteps, just to meet their death.”

“Then don’t ‘do nothing.’” Rey challenged, confused. What little she knew of the force and of the Jedi came from Leia’s briefings over what to expect of her assumed, but now defunct training. Hadn’t the Jedi believed in fighting for peace? “Luke, you can help us make it right. You don’t understand –“

Whirling about, Luke stopped Rey in her tracks, a tired and tortured expression settling into the lines of his face. “Oh, but I do. It is you who do not understand, little one. I have already been asked to do exactly what you are expecting of me, and my answer has always been the same. That is why I came here –” he spread his arms, gesturing to the world around him, “– of my own free will. I left my sister the map so that she may one day find me. Not the Resistance. The fact that you are here tells me that what I feared is true. The Resistance is using Leia for their own agenda: to build an army of Jedi, expendable in nature after their purpose is served. I will take no part in it. I will not be the reason for any more death.”

“It’s not true,” Rey begged, but for the first time since her and the Resistance’s victory in collecting the map, the fire within her was dwindling. “Your sister leads the Resistance. I believe in her cause!”

Luke shook his head and sighed dejectedly. “They are using you as well, then. They sent you to convince me to return for the greater good. But the greater good will not be achieved in the hands of Jedi. There is much you do not know, and I fear that the more you learn, the more you will see that I
am right.”

Rey blinked slowly, confused and frustrated over everything that came from Luke’s mouth. Of it all, the most jarring was what he had called her. *Little one*. Somehow, it felt familiar. Determined as always, she pushed it aside. "Then let me judge for myself. What *can* you tell me?"

Luke scrutinized her, and Rey couldn't decide if his expression was angry or regretful. "I can tell you that you should worry about *yourself*. Because he will find you – the one you are truly running from – and we don't have much time.”

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Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

Thank you to those who have read and reviewed so far! Your kind comments motivate me to continue. Please let me know what you think!

In the last chapter, Luke was not the most inviting! But Rey knows what’s up. He’s hiding something, I just know it! :O And young Ben Solo’s story continues, year by year. When will we see Kylo Ren? Only the “slow burn” knows! :D

Chapter Two

12 ABY

The animal was a little thing, perhaps just a child itself, but it wailed as if its lungs were three times its size. Ben nearly missed it on his usual trek home after school, darting along the littered pathway in a blur of orange and white. Curious, Ben excitedly took flight after it, wondering if his eyes were deceiving him. It looked just like the Loth-cat in his holobook *Animals of the Outer Rim*… but on second thought, it couldn’t be. They weren’t exactly stationed in the exotic cat’s home planet of Lothal, or the Outer Rim at all, for that matter. Far from it, actually – they were home, and unusually so. It was not often that he and mother spent so much time on Chandrilla, what with her importance and her ever-persistent schedule. This time, however, was a special occasion, and Ben knew he had to hurry home… Still, the resemblance was uncanny to the mammal in his book, and Ben had to know for sure. Mother would understand; it wasn’t every day something so special was found. Perhaps he could trap it for himself. None of the other seven year olds had a pet, let alone an exotic one.

Following in its wake off the path and into a shrouded clearing, Ben quickly found it. It was small, not much larger than his satchel, and it held stock still before a half-hazard burrow. Its only movement was the slight twitch of its ears that looked too large for its head, listening for whatever had pursued it and distrusting the quiet. Its chest heaved at a pace much faster than Ben’s own pulse. He made it mere feet away before the little thing snapped to attention and immediately sunk into a defensive, prowling stance.

“I won’t hurt you,” Ben coaxed, easing to his knees and inching slowly, silently toward the cowering thing. It skittered backward, escaping into the burrow. It retreated below the base of a nearly dead and hollow tree that was undeniably meant for something much smaller. Unfortunately for the cat, there was no escape to be found, for whatever thing had broken the earth had given up digging just a
foot into the ground. Ben crawled after it, peering into the burrow. His stomach instantly sunk. Having a much closer look, he could see that the little thing’s orange and black and white striped pattern of fur was marred here and there by matted streaks of red.

“You were almost a snack for something, weren’t you.” With his free hand, Ben pulled the tube of bacta from his pocket; his mother insisted he carried it in the event of scraped knees and elbows. Ben never bothered, however. To his mother’s dismay, the tube remained closed and she never had to replace it with a new one. Her brazen son was an adventurer running the “wilds” of Chandrilla, and his cuts and scrapes were his badges of honor.

Finally finding use for the healing substance, Ben ripped open the seal with his teeth and stretched closer to the cornered creature. Its eyes widened into round, black orbs and it reared back with a hiss, its fur bristling at the foreboding hand. Rearing back, the thing’s paw struck, dragging its nails down the length of Ben’s exposed flesh. Shrieking, Ben toppled backward onto his bottom, cradling his arm. Blood seeped from the torn skin in long, jagged trails, spilling everywhere in a river of red. Heat bloomed in Ben’s cheeks, his eyes flitting from his arm to the creature who still shivered in the burrow. Blinking back tears, Ben squeezed his eyes shut and ground his teeth, futilely willing away the burning in his skin.

“Ben!”

He couldn’t hear his name over the sound of his heartbeat throbbing in his ears. His skin burned so badly, and the blood rushed so freely. It felt as though each throbbing beat of his pulse urged his blood to pool and run. The creature’s warning growl forced Ben’s eyes to snap open, his jaw set and angry tears breaking free. “I was just trying to help you,” he hissed back through sputtering breaths. The thing stilled, its long, triangular ears lying flat, and in the second it took for it to blink, Ben had its neck pressed to the ground.

“Ben! What happened, Ben?”

The thing writhed and clawed, adding fresh claw marks to Ben’s other arm. He felt none of it, simply held true and waited until the thing calmed, its ears no longer flat and its paws no longer searching for purchase. As quickly as the thing, his hold, and the world around him slowed, Ben was yanked backward by strong, slender arms. Yet even as his fingers pulled away from the little thing’s throat, it continued to writhe and squirm as if choking beneath some invisible grip. His mother’s voice was scolding and demanding, begging him to release it. Startled, Ben unconsciously relaxed, the palpable intensity in the air and all around him finally slipping away… but it was too late. The animal was still. Mother was asking a million frantic questions while inspecting the nearly fleshless arms of her son. Ben heard none of it through the din of his blood rushing, his breath heaving and breaking apart into gasping sobs. He collapsed into her lap and pressed his face into her tunic, whispering apologies.

The dinner table was silent that night, and Ben kept his eyes trained to his plate. A thousand questions were tempting his lips to speak, but wisely, he kept quiet. Excitement and impatience had haunted him the whole week knowing his mother would be coming home. It was his seventh birthday in just one more day cycle, and Leia had returned from one of the countless things that kept her away. She was there, just for him. Ben had been so proud to hear the reminder from his father’s lips: "Your mother will be here before you know it.” Now, the pride was gone under her probing
gaze, and the excitement was somewhere missing along with his father as he stared at Han's empty place at the dinner table.

Their plates were nearly clear before Ben finally spoke, wiping his mouth with one of his bandaged arms. "Where's father, momma?" It seemed as though his parents had switched places.

Leia pursed her lips, setting her fork down and folding her hands beneath her chin. "Before I answer your questions, do you care to answer mine?" Her voice was soft but firm and Ben knew he'd have to answer either way.

"I was trying to help it," he muttered, using his fork to scratch at his plate. "It was hurt."

Leia was nodding, her brow knitted as she tried to understand. Ben knew that when she said nothing, she was giving him the opportunity to say more, to clarify untruths or to get his story straight. She'd watched as he pressed the thing's neck to the ground, closing off its wind pipe until it fell limp. Afterward she had picked up the bacta tube and her shoulders had fallen, knowing that his intentions were indeed true… And yet, there was her son, bleeding and red-faced with the lifeless thing still pinned by his will alone. It was an ability Leia hoped she would never see again.

"I don't know why I did what I did," Ben admitted. It was the best he could offer. Leia's expression softened, but still, she remained silent. Ben needed an answer that would appease his mother. He needed her to approve and to bring the smile back to her face. So he searched for one. Biting his lip and closing his eyes, he envisioned the little thing cowering in the burrow – imagined its scared eyes and shivering body, tiny beneath Ben’s looming shadow. And just when he reached… he was given an answer he hadn’t thought of before. Like it wasn’t his own. Materializing out of nothing like a seed planting itself. *It attacked me. Without reason, it attacked me. It is better off dead, before it can attack any others. Before it could attack momma.*

"But it was injured, wasn't it?" Ben's chin snapped upward, finally meeting his mother's gaze. As always, she knew just what he was thinking. "It was scared, and it lashed out. I know it hurt you, Ben, but you must understand that it is not our right to decide what should live and what should die."

Pursing his lips together, Ben returned his gaze to his plate. His holobook would be taken away, and he wouldn’t be allowed out of his room that night. He was sure of it. Dejectedly, he changed the subject. "Is father coming?"

Leia sighed. "He'll be back in just a few days."

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**Present Day**

"You have a bond."

Luke's voice echoed throughout the dank cave, and Rey couldn't help but shudder. It was cold, it was damp, and it was what Luke called home, nestled out of sight and deep within the confines of an Ahch-To mountain. From the peak where she'd found him, they’d travelled down the hillside until a forested grove split apart. A modest clearing sprawled inward from the mountainside, leading to a
hollowed out inlet. Beside it was a shallow pool that stair-stepped downward along the path. Trees arched overhead and bent like a canopy that couldn't quite reach the center, allowing the sky to peer through. Anyone flying overhead would not see it, nor would anyone walking below. It was the perfect cover, save for the critters that scurried about, sharing in their approval.

In his years there on the planet, Luke had molded the cave into something that could have passed for a suitable dwelling. Much more suitable than an AT-AT carcass, anyway. The walls were smooth, shelving and inlets carved into its façade. Thatching was braided and affixed to line them, insulating and drying the interior. A sink-like basin was flanked by smaller, carved out hollows in the wall, various metallic dishes stacked inside them. Above the basin was a circular hole in the overhang of the cave structure with a stone hatch that opened to the sky – to let rainwater in, Rey supposed. On the opposite wall was a hollowed out pit and a tunnel that led upward where it, too, opened to sky: a fire pit for indoor cooking and heat. In the center of the floor was another large but wooden hatch. When they'd arrived, Luke had pulled it open to retrieve berries Rey had never seen before in her life – among various other fruits, nuts, and the looks of fresh, cleaned meats. They were refreshingly chilled from the cool of the cellar. The furniture appeared meticulously crafted or whittled in a feat of love and perhaps overabundance of time: chests with ornate, swirling designs along its edges; a bed that, had it not been for the same carvings and smoothed corners, would have been nothing more than a box to hold the same braided thatching for a mattress; a table and two chairs composed of a red wood and held together by interlocking segments. The shelves contained various gadgets that, though antiquated, looked to be in perfectly working order. Rey hoped she would have a chance to inspect them, take them apart and reassemble, just to see what they could do.

"So I've noticed," Rey murmured before she could think better of it. Just like Luke appeared to be, she'd always been equally resourceful. She'd had to be, growing up alone in a wasteland like Jakku. She could rely on herself. She could make it on her wiles and will alone. Yet here, in the presence of a legend, she could think of nothing but her ineptitude. An ineptitude that would remain just that with Luke's refusal to train her. As strong with the force as she was being made out to be, she felt no control over the supposed ability. It came in moments of desperation, like in the snow on Starkiller base. She'd willed the lightsaber hilt to her hand and had beaten back a warrior nearly twice her size through no aid of formal training. It had all been so impressive, even to herself if she could be so bold, but… here, out of danger and out of any element she could begin to feel at home in, Rey felt the impossible realization that she did not know what to do next. With the force, the "bond," or anything else.

The only thing she was sure of was the constant hum in her mind, like a chord that had been plucked from a single string and never dampened.

"You need to strengthen your will against it."

That, right there, was exactly what Rey had meant. Luke stated his expectations of her as if they were such natural and simple tasks. The idea of such power, wielded and controlled in the depths of her mind, and she had no idea how to find it again, let alone bend it to her will. Twice she'd found that control on Starkiller base, and yet, now, she felt as though she were desperately searching for it amid an endless, sinking mountain of sand.

"Show me. Please."

Luke's eyes dropped, his shoulders falling as well in such a defeated motion that Rey was beginning to doubt he would be of any use to the Resistance at all. Thankfully, finally, he conceded. "I will do what I can. This bond that you have with him… it's not something that can so easily be broken, let alone forged in the first place."
Rey sighed in relief. *He was going to help.* "What do you know of it?" At Luke’s hesitation, Rey could tell that he was holding back. For what reason, she did not know. Perhaps he was as lost as she was over the idea that two beings on either end of the force would be so unceremoniously and involuntarily linked.

"A Jedi…" he started, his voice carefully arching around the word as if it were one he hadn't uttered in ages. "Shares a bond with his teacher. His Master. It is forged and fostered in Jedi training. It allows the transmission of words, thoughts, feelings, images… anything, depending on the strength of the bond. In dark hands it can be used to control and coerce. It is not a simple thing, you see."

Rey looked to her hands, her mind racing. *He*, the one she could not speak of, had forced this bond on her. He must have. *Don't be scared. I feel it, too.* She couldn’t help but wonder if *he’d* been scared. When she’d pushed back, crossing the threshold of her mind into his, she remembered how his stoic face had morphed into panic. As if the act had been performed one too many times on him before. Or perhaps, never at all – at least not by some mere scavenger, a fledgling in the force.

"It is usually honed through years of meditation… through years of *practice* and time spent between those whom share the bond." He looked thoughtful, as if recalling a troubling memory. "My own master taught me that it can only exist between two: the Master and the Apprentice. No more, no less. I thought I shared it with *him*, once, but I see now that it’s not true. He only shares it with you."

Shaking her head, Rey felt her blood run cold. "How is that possible?"

Grinning a melancholic grin, almost apologetic in its sadness, Luke finally met her inquiring gaze… but he would not answer her question. “I cannot train you in the Jedi way, but perhaps there is something else that would help you.”

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Chapter Three

Chapter Notes

Part one of two updates today! Please let me know what you think! This is the last of what I call the "set up" chapters. Things start to take off from here - no more easy days on Ahch-To. ;)

Chapter Three

13 ABY

The last day cycle was ending on Ben's eighth year, and he didn't know where he was. All day, the hours had slowly, excruciatingly ticked by. Each minute carrying him to a new place within the domed, expressionless apartment on a planet he hadn't bothered to ask the name of. He'd studied every little thing there was to study: the ornate table he'd seen his mother spread plans upon with important-looking but nameless individuals. Chalices that served no purpose except to look as though they'd break with just one touch. Overlit images of faraway places he'd only seen in his holobooks. He christened them with names from the adventurous stories his father told him each time Han returned home. The names were getting harder to remember.

Memorizing the room in which Leia left him with nothing but his holobook and some rules for his behavior, there was nothing left for Ben to do but seat himself at the wall-length glass overlooking the ship landing. At first, he'd scrutinized every ship that passed; even the ones he knew looked nothing like his mother's. The skyline was dampening with new colors so unlike what he was used to seeing on Chandrilla. He could not even see the horizon, nor the land below, as the apartment rose high into the atmosphere to join the other countless spires and towers. Inklings of want for his home crept in, tying his stomach into knots, only to vanish as quickly as they came. There was not much to miss, he reminded himself, and where he was now was not so different than home. Not when what he truly missed wouldn't be there, either.

Night was settling almost imperceptibly, the strange colors that burned in the atmosphere finally darkening. Blues and greens were drifting into a deep, murky grey that muffled the stars. Shadows cast from every corner of the room, forming ominous shapes that Ben tried to pay no attention to. He could hear his father's chastisement: nothing to be afraid of in the dark. There's nothing there to get
you. Why be afraid of things that don’t exist? He wished his father was there to remind him of those very things.

Momma will be here soon, Ben thought to himself for the umpteenth time that day. She will be here for bedtime.

Ben needed her for bedtime. He'd finally slept the past few weeks at home, and even a little on the trip to whatever planet or base this was. She'd been close, even falling asleep beside him one night, her fingers idly running through his thick, black hair. Even though it fell into his eyes and tickled at his neck where it curled, more than a bit too long, she wouldn't cut it and he didn't ask her to. He wanted her to like it. To be what she wanted. Keeping it long might keep momma close, cradling him in his bed and brushing his hair away from his forehead so he could forget about the shadows.

But bedtime had come and gone, the room dark save for the lights that illuminated those pictures he now hated. The pictures that were filled with places that kept his father from him. Ben climbed warily to his feet, his legs tired and tingly from lack of use. He busied himself with brushing his teeth, changing into his night tunic, combing his hair and everything else he could think of. Anything to stave off the thoughts he knew would still inevitably come for just a bit longer.

She's not coming.

By the time he crawled into bed and pressed his face into the pillow to shallow his quickening breath, it was there. His own voice in his head. It sounded strong, trying so hard to be "a big boy" like his father would tell him to be while mussing his hair before disappearing into his giant ship. Ben despised that ship. It was always carrying Father away.

He's not coming, either.

Ben curled onto his side, releasing his self-induced suffocation and instead, pulled the pillow over his head. You're alone. His voice was growing deeper in his head, trading the insecurity of his eight year old voice for the strength and timbre of something else... Something that always came, and Ben wasn't sure if it chose to or if he simply let it.

"Father…” Ben murmured, squeezing his eyes shut so tightly that not even the tears that threatened could break through. His resolve weakened. “Daddy…” he pleaded, praying that the forthcoming voice was his. Maybe this time, it would be father entering his head like momma sometimes did, guiding his thoughts away from the wrong and toward the right. Sometimes, it was like she knew just when he needed that guidance, like when he'd considered pushing the new boy at school who Ben swore had pushed him first. The boy, Felsin, was digging in a place for himself among the
pecking order, being the bully before he himself could be bullied. Ben hadn't realized that for himself, of course. But momma had. She'd found the thoughts buried deep one night just before bedtime, and had pried them loose without saying a word. Now, Ben prayed that the deep voice would do the same, taking up where mother left off.

But it wasn't father, like he hoped.

How long will you be like this? Left alone with nothing and no one. It was too deep to be his father's. And though Ben wished and hoped and begged for it to not be him – the strange, unfamiliar voice with no name – each time it returned, it always was. The voice in his head was not Ben, was not Han or Leia, was not anyone but the constant hum that watched and waited until everything was still. Waited until Ben's tiny chest hurt beneath the hammering of his heartbeat.

The lights flared above each picture, winking out with an audible pop. The breakable things Ben dared not touch shattered, one by one. He balled his fists and pressed his knuckles into his forehead, over and over in time with his gasping breaths. He'd have to apologize in the morning – to hope this time, momma would believe him when he said he'd been scared and couldn’t help it.

"I'm not alone. Momma is coming. I'm not alone."

Laughter echoed in his head, and Ben knew he was lying to the voice and to himself, as if there was a point to it. They will not come, it answered. But I... I am always here. You will always find me, here in the dark. There was no convincing it otherwise; it knew everything. Ben's thoughts were its thoughts. And it knew that Ben would lay awake, waiting for his mother that would come too late and a father who wouldn’t come at all. He’d lay there and listen to the voice that was becoming his only company.

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Present Day

The first morning after her arrival on Ahch-To, Rey was proven wrong. She was sure that she would never find a more uncomfortable place than her broken-down AT-AT on Jakku, but sure enough, she'd found it there in Luke's cave-home. Sitting up from the pallet Luke had kindly offered her, she craned her neck about, and then her arms, easing the kinks and the cracks from her joints. The adrenaline from her battle on Starkiller Base had finally drained and she was left with the aftermath. Soreness flooded her limbs. Her head ached and she blamed the nightmare that had made her toss and turn in the night. It was one steeped in recent memory, and she’d seen herself in the snow, sweating despite the cold. She saw Finn’s battered body behind her. She saw...
light – blue and red blending to cast a purple glow against her skin. She saw herself.

Mere days had passed since that night. After her battle there had been no time to waste. Rey was ushered off by the Resistance in the Millennium Falcon to follow Luke’s map before she could even enjoy a night’s recuperative rest. There in the silence of the cave, with her thoughts finally catching up to her, Rey felt the aches in her body far exceed that of her tiredness alone. She was grateful for Chewbacca’s accompaniment, but she missed her new friends, Finn, Poe and Leia. She missed the BB unit. She even missed the monotony and predictability of Jakku… although on second thought, she was happily convinced she would never return to it.

"Do not dwell on things that will only distract you from the future." Luke’s words startled her as he ducked through the cave's entrance. Rey hadn’t noticed that he was missing, still unaccustomed to reliable companionship. He set a basket of exotic looking berries, fruits and nuts on a table that stood only a foot or two off the floor. Kneeling beside it, he began rummaging through, popping a berry here and there into his mouth. "You will deal enough with your past to last you a lifetime." He seemed to speak from experience.

She’d been mindlessly rubbing the sleep from her eyes and Luke's declaration piqued Rey's attention. "What do you know of my past?" There wasn’t much to say about her life on Jakku, especially for her younger years. Though she couldn’t remember anything before the age of six, Rey always assumed she should remember something. As far back as she could reach, all Rey could remember was the day she was left on the horrid planet. Before that, nothing, and the holes in her memories haunted her for years.

Growing impossibly still, Luke regarded her sternly. He only moved to toss her a small, greenish-hued fruit from the basket. "I know what I need to know, to tell you what you need to know."

That makes absolutely no sense, Rey thought to herself, taking an appreciative bite from the fruit. Her stomach churned with hunger, instantly satiated by the new and decadently foreign flavor. Though she was tired of Luke’s riddles, she was grateful for his hospitality and the plethora of deliciousness he cultivated from Ahch-To’s land.

It will. Rey jumped, Luke's voice echoing in her mind. She had half a mind to launch the fruit at him, having had enough of mind-infiltration to last her a lifetime. "Why must you do that?" she demanded.

"To show you that you are vulnerable," he said matter-of-factly. "You share no bond with me, and yet, despite your apparently intrinsic force sensitivity, you cannot keep me out."
Rey felt defensive. Had she not successfully kept Kylo Ren out of her head when he pried so deeply on Starkiller Base? Had she not resisted, just to turn the tables on him?

"You've thought of his name again. You might as well invite him directly into your head."

“I have kept him out! He has not once entered my mind since I last saw him.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Defiantly, Rey sprung to her feet, gripping the fruit so roughly that it crushed beneath her fingers and spilled its nectar at her feet. The notion of it all, inviting Snoke’s fiercest mercenary into her head. "And why not?" She fixated on that very notion, ignoring Luke’s doubt. “I am not running. I bested him once, and you… you are supposed to be the legendary Jedi. The one meant to train me and rebuild the Jedi Order. The one to defeat Snoke and the First Order. Why shouldn't I lure Kylo Ren here and begin what is expected of us both?"

Luke regarded her firmly. “No, you do not run, do you.” His eyes never left hers save for the fleeting moments where his eyelids drifted shut, the pupils darting beneath the thin, wrinkled skin. When he opened them again, he spoke with new understanding. "You do not run, but you do wait. You wait for answers even if they do not come. You waited on Jakku. You wait here, for me.” His voice quieted. “What did Maz mean, there's someone who still could...? What did it mean to you?”

He was right about her vulnerability after all, adeptly plucking fragments from her memories. Rey's own eyes fluttered shut at the recollection of Maz Kanata's words and how she, too, chastised her for waiting. They're never coming back. She scrubbed at her eyes with the back of her hand the moment they started to prickle with tears. Angry at herself for whimpering like a child over something she had pushed to the back of her mind for years, she answered confidently. Luke was right. She waited for so many things that never came. She was done waiting.

"She meant you."

Luke knew better, even if Rey could not admit it. Luke was not returning, and his decision was steadfast. But if there were to be no more Jedi, and Luke was not who Maz alluded to when she told Rey “The belonging you seek is not behind you. It is ahead” … then nothing made sense anymore. All the puzzle pieces Rey so desperately put together were just as confounding as they’d always been; perhaps even more so, now.
“I cannot teach you what you want to know,” Luke said apologetically. Crossing the room to one inlet, he plucked the lightsaber hilt from the shelf. He regarded it solemnly for just a moment before tossing it to Rey. “But there are other things you should know, and I will show you the way.”
"One of these days, I'll take you to Naboo." Momma's promise was guilt-ridden, as if the idea of visiting a place that was no more exciting than Chandrilla would ease the boredom of accompanying her on a business trip. Whatever it was she was working on, Ben did not care. She'd explained it before in meeker words than were necessary: something about a resistance effort. She told him not to let it bother him and that there was nothing to be frightened of. He guessed she didn't notice that there was not much left that *could* frighten him.

A sense of obligation made Ben nod as he entered his mother's ship's modest cockpit. "I know you're busy, Mother." He pretended not to see her wince at the more formal name. When had he stopped calling her *momma*? She reached from the pilot seat to take her son's hand.

"I'm glad you'll be with me today."

Ben counted the seconds before moving his hand away to fiddle with his satchel. Deep down, he was glad too. Things were quieter when Mother was near. Not silent, but… quieter.

Settled into his designated seat in the ship, the noise of takeoff faded around him until there was nothing but silence. Silence, and the voice that never left him, even when everyone else did.
The world around Kylo Ren roared and shuddered as he lay in the snow, flitting in and out of consciousness. He’d caught his last glimpse of the scavenger, who looked back… for some strange reason, she *looked back*… before he fell flat against the cold ground. The darkness was so tempting, offering him an escape from the pain that coursed along his face and through his torso. He could feel his blood running, hot beneath his tunic and against his skin that grew colder and colder the longer he laid there. The shattering planet would swallow him whole if he did not move.

Wrapping an arm around his broken left side, bracing himself, Kylo rolled onto his right. The strain in his ribs was too much and he gripped with both hands, placing pressure to stop the bleeding. His chest heaved with the effort, the last of his adrenaline draining away. Gusts of his warm breath clouded upon their release and mingled with the snow that continued to fall. It was so cold everywhere – around him, inside of him – the only heat coming from his breath and his blood.

Bringing his shaking, gloved hand into view, his breath hitched at the sight of it covered in glistening red. It was his own doing. Saber wounds shouldn’t bleed. His tunnel vision and rage had commanded him, made him barbaric, made him pound at his wounds and hold tight to the anger that would guide him through the agony and torment. For so long, it was all he had. And all that it had brought him was failure. Failure, and the blood on his hands: his blood, his father’s blood… Kylo covered his eyes, indignant at the tears that threatened. The wound that ran the length of his face burned at his touch, but he only pressed harder. He deserved to burn… and he would until the darkness came, finally, graciously closing out the incessant brightness of the snow around him.

"There are only two ways this will end for the girl. She will either join us, or she will join the fate of the Jedi."

Snoke's command still rung in Kylo Ren's ears. He was found, broken and bleeding on the snowy banks of the base by General Hux and a rally of troopers. Kylo’s injuries were not what rooted him to the spot, but the clarity that emptied his mind like a fog clearing after a humid morning. In complete disregard of his physical state, Kylo was taken directly to Snoke's holographic chambers. Neither spoke a word; Snoke simply scoured the confines of Kylo's mind.

"There is so much of her here," Snoke hissed upon entering, his decrepit voice echoing as it had for as long as Kylo could remember. "Even after she struck you down and left you for dead, the compassion still remains?" Snoke was laughing, a raspy, hideous laugh. "You wish to be her teacher? Find her, then. Bring her to me, and we shall see what is left in her to teach."
In the midst of Snoke’s ridicule, Kylo let his eyes drift shut, breathing through the pain and willing himself to remain standing. The exhaustion and the throbbing of his wounds were nothing compared to Snoke’s intrusion, twisting and prying inside his head. Amid the creature’s claws, Kylo sensed it: a glimpse of thin red and the faintest sound of a single chord. It was familiar; the same thing he’d sensed while interrogating…

Swiftly, with every last ounce of strength he had, Kylo rebuilt the walls in his mind and abruptly forced Snoke to retreat. Snarling at the sudden defiance, the anger of the ancient creature filled the room so palpably, even Hux began backing away.

“Whatever you are hiding,” growled Snoke, venom on his tongue. “It will not be for long.”

Kylo was taken, then, to the med-bays for reparation. Medical droids swarmed around him, pulling and prying at the layers of his uniform and subsequently stoking the anger already churning inside. It was invigorating, the rage Snoke had spurred in him. One droid attended to his face, coaxing the skin to stitch itself together. Before it could finish, he gripped it in his fist. He relished the sensation of the synthetic material crushing in the palm of his hand, sparking and sputtering until it no longer moved. The other droids, mindless to the destruction of its brethren, continued working until Kylo detonated his lightsaber and rendered them to pieces, one by one.

From the effort, what little the wound at his ribs had abated in its bleeding was now undone, running furiously down the length of his side. All the better. It would heal, and he would savor the pain as it did. Being tended to and mended only perpetuated his feelings of weakness. He needed the scar the wound would leave. It would serve as a reminder of his failure, and of the realization he had made:

Snoke was no longer his ally.

Among the wreckage of the countless med droids, Kylo stood, his chest heaving. Snoke would not leave his mind. He was there, painfully present and incessantly searching for the single, tight red cord that led to where Snoke knew Kylo wanted to go. It was a tightrope, strung with impossible strength that, when plucked, reverberated a single chord drowning out all others. Even Snoke. But the chord was silenced. Kylo had to keep it silent. Just until Snoke tired of tormenting him and ridiculing him for his failure…

Kylo cursed himself for his carelessness and wishful thinking. What was he thinking? He knew better. He knew that Snoke would not stop. Kylo had revealed too much already about the girl. Rey. And Snoke wanted her. Badly. Almost as badly as Snoke had wanted him.
Kylo so desperately wanted the chord to return. To lull him peacefully, just as it had done in his interrogation room. Just as it'd felt when she crossed the threshold of his mind and took the reins. He'd seen it, then: the light, her light. A quick flash just as she'd wrapped her fingers around his thoughts and so effortlessly plucked them from him. There had been no prying. No struggle. She had simply taken what she wanted.

So few were they now: those sensitive to the force. Her mind had intrigued him so: a flurry of conflicting shades, both light and dark. And she did nothing to suppress it. Perhaps she didn't know how. She was not like the others that he'd found in his years leading the Knights of Ren under Snoke: young and old alike, sealing away their powers and cowering. Parents pretending that there was nothing different, nothing special about their children. They feared the return of the Jedi Killer, and so, they thwarted any fostering of their children's strength in the force. But not Rey. Her power was unbridled and her potential was aching to be groomed. How had she been missed? How had she gone so long without being sought out by the Resistance?

He had to preserve it. To make her in his likeness. More importantly, he had to keep her from Snoke.
Chapter Five

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: A nice long, important chapter. ;) Can’t wait to hear what you all think! Thank you to those who have read – I promise, the slow burn is heating up and will pay off nicely. :D

Extra special thanks to:

vivalamiia89 (ff.net) – I’m glad you are enjoying the flashbacks! We don’t have many more to get through (they won’t be throughout the entire story), but I intended them to be important to the central story. I think you’ll like where they lead! And you are spot on with your assumption: there is a definite reason why Luke is reluctant, and it becomes more and more clear as history plays out. Thank you so much for reviewing.

kwilson898 (ff.net) – You humble me with your kind words! I’m so happy to hear someone likes my writing style (I am fully aware that I tend to get wordy, but gosh, I love flowery, descriptive prose!) The prologue is my absolute favorite part. A little insight: I researched a LOT about the Red String of Fate and always felt like it was just so… bare. I loved the concept, but for such a grandiose thing as a string binding two souls/fate, I wanted more. Thus, my prologue came to be (and subsequently, this story). Thank you again for reviewing, I truly appreciate it.

And from AO3:

ReyloRobyn2011, PoorQueequeg, bluetoast, 1captainswan1, AliceMorte, and kyloreytfa.

I know I already responded to all of your comments, but again, I want to give you my thanks for reading and reviewing. Your comments are the reason I continue! Much love to you all.

Chapter Five

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15 ABY

Father was home, but Mother was not. That meant only one thing: Ben was going to board the Millennium Falcon.
He'd done it only a handful of times, but boarding the enormous, "classic" of a ship, as Father would say, was breathtaking. Father's mutterings about some unnamed people calling the ship a piece of junk always confused Ben, and he felt the same irritation that showed on Han's face. When that ship would fly in and Ben would see it for the first time in weeks – *months*, sometimes – it was the most beautiful, exciting thing.

Ben had counted those weeks that turned into months following his tenth birthday. His patience had been tried and tested, waiting for the birthday gift Father promised him: they were going to Naboo to visit Grandmother's home planet. Ben could think of more exciting places, but Han was insistent, appealing to his son with notions of appeasing his mother. He was no fool – Father had been gone far too long the last time, but the itch to travel was once again insatiable. If he were to scratch that itch with his son in tow, it might as well incorporate culture Leia would approve of. That, and Han undoubtedly had some unsavory dealings awaiting him with the Gungans.

The morning they were set to depart, Ben startled awake. The night before had been rough; countless times he'd drifted to sleep, his heavy eyes giving in to solace, just to be jarred awake by whispers that came from nothing. Before daybreak, all intentions of sleep had given way to the strange sensation fluttering in his mind. Ever-present loneliness that had become Ben's predominant emotion suddenly seemed distant. When he closed his eyes, not to sleep but to *feel*, he reached out as far as he could go. Felt for the strings that would lead him to something or someone… Usually, he found nothing.

This time, there was something there.

Ben found the holopad on the frontroom table blinking with a message. Pressing play, a twelve-inch tall Han sprouted to life, glimmering a translucent blue.

"*Ben, something came up. Too dangerous for you. Stay out of trouble."*

The hologram blipped out of sight, and Ben hastily pushed the button to begin the message again. And again. Then before the third replay could finish, he smashed his fist against the holopad with a satisfying crunch. A growl rumbled from his throat and he bit his lip, calling forth all the restraint he could muster to keep from backhanding the table's contents onto the floor.

He wanted to blame the Gungans, but Ben knew better. It was his father’s decision and, once again, Ben was left behind. Forgotten and alone.
Did you feel it?

Ben clutched at his temples. He didn't want to hear the voice that always seemed to find him when he was angriest. It was like it was summoned by his anger, or perhaps it preyed upon it. Ben knew what it was asking, and there was no denying it. It was already in his head, knowing his thoughts and seeing the truth.

The disturbance in the force. There has been an awakening.

"Yes." It was the first time he'd heard it speak that word. The force. Whenever Leia mentioned it, Han would roll his eyes. Han didn't like giving credence to the fact his son was sensitive to the force, let alone how Ben had surpassed his own mother's abilities at the age of ten. As far as he'd gathered from eavesdropping during his parents' innumerable fights, Ben even surpassed the few Jedi initiates Uncle Luke had found. Of course, that wasn't enough for Han to agree to indoctrinating his son, and Leia dropped the subject. Now, the only one to talk with him about the force was the creature in his mind. It knew so much.

But Ben had felt it. It was what had startled him awake, he was sure of it. The feeling was so sudden and so strong, like what he felt with his mother but... more. Somehow, it was more.

It seems that you would have an equal.

Ben's eyes widened. Someone like him? "I... I don't want to be alone."

Amid the crushed, defunct wiring of the holopad, impossibly, an image of a cloaked figure sprouted to life. From beneath a hooded cloak its wrinkled jaw protruded, lips twisting into an unnerving grin.

You won't be alone. Not anymore.

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Present Day
The dull hum had returned, but it would not distract Rey. Not when she was finally making progress with Luke.

Though she was the one wielding the lightsaber and he, her trusty quarterstaff, Rey was failing miserably. She silently cursed accepting Luke’s suggestion of which lightsaber form he’d train her: Form V. She hadn’t even known there were legitimate forms to master – it felt satisfying enough simply swinging the saber indiscriminately through the air. Rey couldn’t help but wonder if it was necessary, as she was already so adept with her staff. But just as quickly as the doubt entered her mind, she refuted it, remembering the clash of sabers on Starkiller Base and the exhilaration she’d felt in wielding such a formidable weapon. She remembered how he – the one she wasn’t supposed to think about – had so expertly handled his chaotic weapon, flourishing it in an arrogant bravado of twirls and powerful, arcing swings. There was reason for that arrogance, or rather, confidence. She’d seen it in him. It was the same Rey had always felt with her quarterstaff on Jakku whenever she was compelled to use it. It was an extension of her, like another limb.

“It is an earnest form,” Luke interrupted her train of thought from where he stood at the center of the mountain peak’s clearing. With closed eyes, he began lifting large stones around its perimeter. “It quickens the pace of a duel, focusing on a powerful offense and quick counter-strikes in its defense. It is especially useful in combatting blaster bolts. I am sure the First Order would utilize blasters before they would lightsabers.”

One by one, stones launched themselves toward Rey, pelting her from all angles and at all speeds. The first few collided, buckling the backs of her knees and nearly knocking the saber from her grasp. “You are relying too much on your eyes,” Luke chastised her over the incessant thwack of rock against flesh and her pained grunts. “Close them and feel for the attack.”

Luke allowed a break in the barrage. Rey righted herself and, breathing deeply, searched for her center. She called for that same confidence, borrowing it, and it flooded her like hot liquid coursing through her veins. No sooner had she exhaled did she feel a disturbance in the wind, aiming right between her eyes. Squeezing the hilt of the saber, the whoosh of its energy field cut through the air and a satisfying thunk sounded at her feet. Rey peeked one eye open and shouted victoriously at the still smoldering and severed boulder at her feet.

“That was nearly unfair!” Rey protested, kicking at the halves that rivaled the size of her head. In her success, she had to admit that Luke’s suggestion had paid off. “Why this form, anyway?”

“It works well for those of us who walk between sides.” Rey was confused by the statement, but had no time to clarify. Luke’s barrage was unrelenting. Still more stones came flying at Rey from every direction, no longer taking turns. Rey barely closed her eyes in time before sweeping the saber in a lifting arc, deflecting the high stones and sidestepping the low ones. The confidence was coming much more easily, now.
Luke was satisfied with her performance, a hint of pride in his expression. “I am skilled in this form, but more importantly, it was Anakin Skywalker’s form of choice. I am sure it would be his, too, albeit not in full. He never completed his training. At least not with me. But with this form, you’ll contend well against him and whatever army he brings.”

Cautiously, Rey opened her eyes and saw no more stones levitating. Still, she did not let down her guard, though it was more her memories than anything else that made her feel unsettled. When Luke first demonstrated the basic stances of said form, Rey could see the similarities from when she’d fought Kylo Ren. The focus on strength and power… it had been those very flourishes and the way he brandished and twirled his lightsaber, as if he’d been having fun.

Rey winced. She’d been distracted again, lost in thought. Despite Luke’s insistence that she focus on blockading her mind, she’d thought of Kylo Ren, again and again. When she searched within herself for confidence, she’d thought of him and it was as if she had channeled his rather than exhibiting her own.

It was a lot to ask of her, to not even think of the things that transpired just days before. Rey knew how important it was, especially with what little she understood of her apparent bond. But in the quiet, in-between moments, that deafening hum would return like an almost tangible figment in her mind. Rey was beginning to think Luke was right to be concerned, and that Kylo Ren could find her through thought alone, no matter where he was in the galaxy. Every time she thought of him, he felt more and more real. As if he were closing dangerously in.

It dawned on her, then, why she was so distracted. There was a reason the heavy weight in her mind felt so real – because it was. She’d utterly failed in blocking Kylo Ren from entering her mind, because in that moment, she knew he’d found her all the same. When she closed her eyes, she felt the same sensation as when he’d pried into her thoughts on Starkiller base. Pressure and warmth built the more she focused on it and it all seemed to stem from a particular image: a thin, red string threading through the darkness behind her closed eyes.

Fortunately, she could pry right back. When she did, she saw no First Order. No army. Nothing but him.

“No,” she murmured, drawing Luke’s attention to approach her. “No… he’s alone. The First Order is not coming.”

Luke immediately put two and two together, knowing full well to whom she referred. “How can you be sure of this?” he demanded, removing the lightsaber from her hands. By the look on his face, he was not happy at all that Rey did not heed his one order. Despite the embarrassment she felt
disobeying his instructions, Rey met him sternly, eye-to-eye.

“I can feel him, and only him, approaching.”

Luke grit his teeth. “So. He has found you. How much time do we have?”

Rey shook her head. Disappointment welled in her stomach. Had Luke not been so adamant for her to deny the connection between herself and Kylo Ren, perhaps she could have honed the skill. Perhaps she would have been able to pinpoint his trajectory and buy them more time. “I-I don’t know.”

With a sudden sense of purpose, Luke turned on his heel and proceeded down the mountain path. Rey scrambled to catch up. “Keeping him out has not worked,” Luke kept his voice even in an effort to not chastise her.

“No,” Rey insisted, pulling on Luke’s arm. “I’ve been the one thinking of him… seeking him out.” Halting his pace, Luke turned to her and Rey’s shoulders fell under his concern. It was true, and she had to be honest with herself – with them both. Her nightmare came rushing back to mind and if she closed her eyes, Rey was sure she’d see Starkiller base, plain as day.

“I try so hard not to, but… but my head. It gets so crowded. Like it’s filled with things I should remember but I just can’t. When I push through, it always leads to him. It’s like I see things through his eyes. It feels so real.” Rey looked to Luke with worried eyes. “Why is it so easy to get lost in his thoughts?”

Luke clutched Rey’s shoulder, looking at her as if the very thing he feared was materializing in front of him. “It’s because he has been letting you.”

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Luke’s words stayed with Rey long after their training concluded for the day. Afterward, she needed a moment to herself. A moment to breathe.

Rey was afraid. The noise in her head was rising again. The pressure at her temples made her stop every so often as she made her way through the woods, bracing against trees and boulders along the path. At first she thought it was the ocean in the distance. Ahch-To was covered in more water than
land, surrounding Luke’s island in every direction as far as the eye could see. She’d wanted to see for herself – wanted to see that the waves crashing and the rising tide was the culprit of the ringing in her ears. The closer she walked to the inland’s edge, the louder the sound roared… and yet, she knew it wasn’t the ocean’s fault. It couldn’t be.

Her toes peeking over the ledge, Rey closed her eyes and listened for it: the clarity of the single chord that sung above the horrible, unrelenting hum. Please, she silently begged, clenching her fists in wait. She needed it… and finally, it came. Starting with the quietest of notes, it grew in strength, leading her to the quiet. The endless red string rose above the din, drowning it out, and it was one she could cling to. One she could follow.

And she did. Rey closed her eyes and followed the string. The further she followed, the quieter the hum grew behind her. Pressing and searching for purchase with her mind, she found where the string ended. Whatever barrier that was there lifted at her persistence and she dutifully entered. There was darkness where she was headed. She could feel it. It surrounded her impermeably. But there was also the quiet she so desperately needed. She could breathe again, though she knew she was not alone there.

When she looked harder, Rey could see exactly what was hiding: the source of the noise that hounded her in the daylight and haunted her dreams at night. It grinned maniacally at her with its grey, melted face and warped smile. She could feel how badly it wanted to take hold of her and drag her deeper down with it. It was the same there, deep inside Kylo Ren’s mind, as it was in hers. And while she could run from it – following the red string back – she had the aching feeling that Kylo Ren never ran. Whether he didn’t want to or had forgotten how to, Rey did not know.

What she did know was that the hum that plagued her was separate from the warmth and the string. One would be her downfall, and the other, her salvation.

Describing the phenomenon to Luke was not an easy task. The hum was like a white noise that never seemed to fade. It was aggravating and seemed to grow louder as the days passed. It was like trying to listen with cotton stuck in her ears… Until she thought of Kylo Ren. When she did, she pictured that strange string. If she followed it, the hum went away. That’s all she could explain.

Finding him again atop the mountain peak, Rey was suddenly sure that the Jedi had lost his mind. How carefully he sought out an encampment that was perfectly concealed within that very mountain, and yet, here he was on display for the world to see. He sat at the cliff’s edge, his legs dangling over the side and a curious object in his hand. It was a covered block of countless thin sheets that Luke
sieved through with idle fingers. Rey had never seen anything like it, and she wondered what kind of power it held to hold Luke's attention so intensely.

"It is a book," Luke answered her thoughts without interrupting the pace through which he turned the pages. "An important one."

No stranger to high heights, Rey settled beside him and kicked her legs over the edge of the cliff, sending dust and grit flying over the side. Inspecting the book over Luke's shoulder, Rey frowned. "I have seen holobooks, but nothing like this. Seems laborious, doesn't it?" The images of the book did not even project, nor did the strange text that Rey could not decipher read itself aloud.

"It is just the way things were done before." Luke flipped to the first page. "This is the Journal of the Whills, and it holds both history and prophecy. You'll find my name in there."

Rey was suddenly itching to read the book, though she could not understand the language in which it was written. She couldn't help but wonder if her name might be listed somewhere inside its pages as well.

Luke heard. "Not yet," he chuckled. "But there are prophecies you must know."

"Prophecies?"

Scanning the page he'd flipped to, Luke cleared his throat. "A Jedi will come to destroy the Sith and bring balance to the force. This was my father, Anakin Skywalker... Darth Vader."

The name made Rey's blood run cold. The last time she'd heard that name, she'd plucked it from deep inside Kylo Ren’s mind. Taunted him with it. When she’d asked Leia what importance the name had and what it meant to Kylo Ren, Leia had been hesitant. The stories she inevitably told would be imprinted on Rey’s mind for as long as she’d live.

"He... he brought balance?"

Luke nodded. "So consumed was he by his own desires that the Jedi Order believed the prophecy was wrong; that Quai Gon Jin and Obi Wan Kenobi had been wrong. But they were right, Rey. It was my father who destroyed the Sith. He found the light he had worked so hard to destroy within himself and only then was he able to fulfill the prophecy."
Rey’s mouth was agape. "How? How did he escape the darkness?" It seemed impossible. How many times had the darkness found her, alone on Jakku and riddled with nightmares. She had no way of knowing what those dark feelings were at the time, but even then she shunned every potentially dark thought from her mind – even denouncing the idea that her parents would willingly abandon her on Jakku. And so, she’d convinced herself that there had to have been a reason, and a good one at that. She walked a path of goodness, serving Unkar Plutt without objection and even selflessly saving a BB unit. It was her goodness that brought her this far: to the Resistance and to Jakku.

Still, everything she'd done… she feared none of it had been enough. No matter how hard she tried, the darkness would come in the night, haunting her, staving off hopes of sleep more often than she cared to remember. And now, with that deafening hum. Yet somehow, someone as evil as Darth Vader could escape it when Rey could not.

Desperate to sleep…

"He found his children," Luke murmured, and Rey suddenly realized that he'd been watching her in silence for several moments. "He found the part of him that was missing. The very thing he wanted most, what he'd been afraid to lose, he found again."

Rey knew how the rest of the story went according to Leia’s retelling which, ironically, had originated with Luke. She shook her head dejectedly. "What good was the prophecy if there is no more balance? Darkness still exists – I've met it, face-to-face."

"Because a new prophecy exists, Rey. And it shows us the way." Turning the pages of the book, he handed it to her and gestured for her to look at the eight lines of gobbledygook. Frowning, she tried to hand it back to him, but he refused, closing his eyes. Rey's temples tingled and a flush of warmth like a dam breaking loose rushed through her mind. Slowly, the eight squiggly lines grew clearer the longer she looked at them, until finally, the words came to her.

First comes the day
Then comes the night.
After the darkness
Shines through the light.
The difference, they say,
Is only made right
By resolving of gray

Through refined Jedi sight.
Chapter Six

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: Part one of two updates today! Jumping right into present day in this chapter, but the next will return to Ben’s childhood in the first half – and importantly so! But for now, Rey is learning to take control of her visions, but it comes with a price.

Extra special thanks to:

kwilson898 (ff.net) – I love the prophecy! It’s going to play a big role on this story. Hold on to your seat my friend, because things are definitely speeding up. We’re at the precipice of something big, where something’s gotta give. ;) Thank YOU so much for reading and leaving such wonderful comments! It motivates me to continue.

vivalamiia89 (ff.net) – That is exactly how I envisioned Rey, so I’m glad you noticed that! As for the memory/prior meeting trope, I think it holds water. Regardless of when Rey starts using her abilities, there’s just something about a strong force sensitive going unnoticed her whole life that doesn’t make sense to me… Not to spoil anything, but I believe the force is such an innate thing, that it cannot go unnoticed (hence the ripples Snoke and Ben felt in her birth, or ‘awakening.’) I’d love to hear your thoughts on this! :)

Viktor2040 (ff.net) – Thank you for your kind words! I’m so glad you’re enjoying the story so far! It is a slow burn, but we’re at a turning point where our favorite heroes can’t just sit back and wait anymore. And I have to admit – Ben’s backstory has been my favorite thing to write. Keep an eye on it, because important parallels will be drawn from those flashbacks. ;)

And from AO3:
ReyloRobyn2011, kyloreytfa, bluetoast, ReadingInTheDark, and SerenityMeyers
The fact that you guys are sticking with me through the slow burn makes me SO happy and appreciative. I for one am not so patient, I must admit. I hope you enjoy the payoff, because we’ll be getting it soon. :D Our boy’s coming, my dears! Thank you again for reading and commenting, as always. Much love to you all.

Chapter Six

Present Day
The cold that Rey felt was not from the clammy interior of Luke's cave. This cold burned, chilling her to the bone despite the sweat that beaded along her forehead. Her chest heaved and her blood rushed hotly through her veins with each staggered breath. Fluttering snowflakes melted instantly when they kissed her skin.

*It's just us now.*

She had been there before, overlooking the yawning abyss that appeared as though it went on forever. The land jaggedly ripped apart and fragments of earth and snow crumbling over the edge, disappearing into nothingness. It was a familiar sight, the shadowed depths below. She saw it in her dreams when she closed her eyes and let the darkness come. It always came.

The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. She about-faced, swinging her arm ahead of her just before a beam of crackling red light met with her solid blue one. Beneath the cross of their blades, Kylo Ren’s eyes, dark and haunted, bore into hers. Rey’s heels skidded along the snow, bracing against his pressure and finding purchase where the crag parted at her feet. A hair, a breath more, and she'd join the perpetual darkness below.

*You need a teacher.*

He held her there, motionless save for the red and blue reflection glimmering in his eyes. Just one push, just one fraction of an inch and he'd send her off... but he didn't. Rey closed her eyes and felt the swell of the force mounting within her. Her tiredness slipped away. The aches in her arms, even as they held his saber at bay, dissipated. The din of her blood rushing in her ears quieted, as did the pressure pulsing at her temples. There was nothing but silence. Serenity.

*I can show you...*

Rey bolted upright on her pallet, drenched in sweat. The nightmare that continued to repeat itself each night, dissolved. She was no longer on Starkiller Base. The walls of Luke's cavern surrounded her. She was safe.

*He chose not to kill me.*

It was apparent, then. He very well could have sent her over the edge, but he didn't. And Rey did not know why; not for sure. Kylo Ren had seemed so intrigued by their connection. Wanted to be
her teacher… the very man who had destroyed the last of the Jedi, save for Luke, wanted to foster her force adeptness. Stranger still, Rey knew that in their locked stance, he had found his way back into her mind… and she’d felt peaceful with him there.

"How long have you had these nightmares?"

Rey startled, noticing finally that Luke was watching her from his own bed across the room. The starlight filtered in through the cave's entrance and washed over him in shades of grey. Even in the dim, she could see the concern etched across his face. She'd never talked about her nightmares to anyone… the nightmares that shifted from reiterations of her life to black nothingness, narrated by whispers. There had been no one to talk about them with; no one who would understand, until now. Now, she was ready.

"Since I faced him."

"What did you see?"

Closing her eyes once more, Rey recalled the fleeting images. "I was with him. Before I struck him down." She felt a disturbance in the air: Luke, rising from his pallet and moving to kneel beside hers, his expression encouraging.

Rey evened her breath into a slow, deep mantra and the images corporealized in her mind. The snowflakes – such a mesmerizing thing – were dancing around her in a swirling tempest of glittering softness. The white beneath her feet was juxtaposed against the darkness of the forest surrounding her. And Kylo, in all of his enormousness, stood solemnly mere feet away from her as if awaiting her command.

Luke's voice came like a phantom, but it wasn't beside her. It was echoing all around her, reverberating against the trees, the only sound to the scene. "What do you see?"

"The base. A forest. Snow." Rey chattered, as if her body was reacting to his question. She was not exhausted and sweating, weary from battle, as she had been in her memory. And to her surprise, neither was Kylo. He was statuesque, a shadow of himself, watching her.

"No, Rey. Take control of the vision and deepen your focus. Try again and tell me: what do you see? What do you feel?"
Frowning, Rey tried to make sense of the question. If what she was seeing was in her head, then logically, she couldn't truly feel anything. But the longer she stared at Kylo Ren's motionless form, the more she began to wonder…

The environment seemed to react to her shift in thought. She and Kylo stayed, but the snow melted away, leaving behind a long expanse of metal runway beneath their feet. The red of Kylo's lightsaber illuminated his face, his eyes glinting.

_I'm being torn apart._

"No…" Rey's voice cracked. "N-no, I cannot relive this, please…"

Luke did not respond, and the vision did not break. Rey's chest and temples throbbed. Her eyes blurred, and somehow, she felt lost. Confused. She felt a sudden confliction she had not known before, and she realized that what she was feeling were not her own emotions. They were _his._

_When he gets what he wants, he'll crush you. You know it's true._

Kylo's face was almost imperceptibly shifting. His gaze was bleary and unseeing, as if he were lost in the same thoughts Rey was now reading. She felt it – the shame and the regret. It was like she was being pulled between two sides: one flooded with anger and hatred, and the other, drowning in pain. Weak and yearning.

Rey's eyes snapped open, and the sight of Luke's face filled her vision. The inundation of torturously conflicting emotions immediately drained away, leaving behind emptiness in their heavy wake. She was safe on her pallet and utterly bereft.

Luke was helping her to foster her bond with Kylo Ren, and she had just endured the debilitating weight of Kylo Ren's emotions.

"Tell me what you saw."

Several moments of mouthing silent words passed before Rey finally found her voice. "I… I could feel… _everything._ I saw him, but… it was like I _was_ him."
Luke prodded her along. "And when you were him, what did you feel?"

When she was physically in the oscillator before the base was destroyed, Rey had hardly been able to make out the conversation between Han and Kylo Ren. She and Finn had been too far. But Kylo's words – the ones that mattered now – were clear as day. "I felt like I was being torn apart… torn between the light and the dark."

Luke was silent and still for quite some time, but his eyes were tortured. They, too, were glistening with unshed emotion. "There is good in him. There is still some light he has not been able to extinguish. Han was trying to pull it out of him.” He breathed, closing his eyes. "I've seen it, too."

“Something has happened.” Rey pulled her legs to her chest and rested her chin on her knees. “He is no longer keeping me out. Not even trying. I can sense he is looking for us, but why alone? Why without the First Order?” It couldn’t be that easy, that this ‘Jedi Killer’ would abandon ship and join their side. That the darkness in him had suddenly given way to light.

“We cannot trust him, Rey.”

Rey was unsure if Luke had simply deduced her uncertainty or had read her thoughts. Rey fixed him with a hard look. “You don’t think I know that? I’ve watched him kill. I’ve watched him maim my friends and attack me. I have seen what he is capable of.”

“And yet, the light persists,” Luke murmured to himself incredulously. He clutched at his knees and he seemed lost, the way he hunched over. Rubbing at his eyes, Luke sighed. “All that he’s become… it is my fault.”

"Why would you think that? Snoke—"

"Yes, of course,” Luke shook his head. “But I took something from him. Before he became this Kylo Ren. Before, when he was still Ben, he was sent to me – to the Academy. I was supposed to watch over him. I was supposed to keep him from this path. And when he tried to tell me, I didn't listen…”

He trailed off, the words choking in his throat. Rey squeezed his shoulder compassionately. "What was it, Luke?"
"He had nightmares. He saw things, and heard the same things you are hearing now." Luke was shaking his head, angry with himself. "I knew. Even before he came to me. Leia would tell me how he was haunted from such a young age, and it persisted, year after year. That is why she sent him to me. But I didn't know just how deeply he was plagued. That he was never alone. That Snoke was always with him."

"But why? Why would Snoke come to him as a child?"

“Because Ben was so strong with the force, and he only grew stronger as he aged. Snoke wanted him as an ally: an impressionable force-user he could bend to his will. I imagine that Snoke followed him and other force sensitives that he could sense.”

Rey’s heart thundered in her chest. “There were others?”

She didn’t have time to question Luke any further. “I was Ben’s last hope, and I failed him. We all did. But if there is light still in him, I will seek it out. And I need your help to do it, Rey.” His gaze hardened and in the dim of the early morning, Rey could see the determination in his eyes. “Since Kylo Ren is letting you in, I want you to do the same. Let him find us, so that I can find Ben.”
Chapter Seven

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: Part two – this one’s a long one, with more parallels than I can count! Luke and Rey have gone as far as they can go in keeping Kylo Ren at bay. It’s time for things to change, but can Rey be confident in taking the risk? Can she retain control?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Seven

Maybe there's a God above
All I've ever learned from love
Was how to shoot somebody who outdrew you.
And it's not a cry that you hear at night
It's not someone who's seen the light
It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah.

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16 ABY

Do it.

None of the children stayed to watch. None wanted to bear witness to the consequences of their actions. They'd been his friends once, before this new kid had come along. Felsin was the only one who rivaled Ben's height among the eleven year olds, stoking his self-esteem to where he was far from the nervous newcomer trying to stake his claim. And with his newfound sense of purpose, Ben was not surprised that Felsin nipped at his ankles everywhere he went. A constant shadow to remind him of his place. Even during free meditation period when Ben would wander the woods he knew so well, his corporeal shadow followed with his subordinates in his wake.

Now they were nothing more than cowards, running back to the school and leaving their leader to
sputter beneath Ben's hold. They'd sniggered when Felsin planted a firm shove between Ben's shoulder blades, nearly sending him into the river he'd knelt beside. "To join the other things that float," Felsin said.

Those words were what clicked the light on in Ben's mind, just as mother had said. *He's jealous of how special you are,* she'd said. Ben’s abilities. The sensitivity he'd been born with – battled with all these years. How could anyone be jealous of it, when Ben would have happily given it over to free his head from it. He'd have loved to stop the things from trembling around him, lifting into the air every time anxiousness crept beneath his skin. Or the incessant *hum* and the whispering narration that was far too insidious to be his conscience.

At one time, his friends had been impressed. Marveled at him, asked him to do tricks. Now under new influence, they swatted the floating things down for five points and aimed at Ben for ten.

*Show them how special you are.* They were once his mother's words, but the voice that now said them to Ben was not his mother’s. The friend that haunted his nights had come for his days now, guiding him when Leia and Han would not.

So he followed orders, and the light went out.

Felsin was in mid-swing when Ben gathered his wits and snapped to attention. He righted himself, his arm extending straight ahead to brace against the tree branch Felsin undoubtedly collected off the trail for just such occasions. Its trajectory stilled in midair, hovering mere inches away from where the back of Ben’s skull had been. The color drained from Felsin’s face as he struggled to pull the branch loose – to finish the job he’d begun – though the fear in his eyes was quickly replacing the courage he’d had to see the beating through. Even Felsin’s hands began to tremble and he pulled and writhed against his own grip. But Ben’s hold on both the branch and the bully were unwavering. With an almost imperceptible contraction of Ben’s empty fingers, the branch began creaking and splintering of its own accord. Shards of wood fractured from the top of the branch and split the expanse of it downward until all that was left was a pile of sawdust at Felsin’s feet.

But Ben wasn’t finished.

He didn't have to touch Felsin to send him careening into the river, his shoes skidding along the embankment before disappearing into the murky water. Within seconds, Felsin fought his way to the surface, gasping in a breath that was half air and half water before plunging back down.

Breathless himself, his arms outstretched and quaking, Ben laughed through his tears. "You can float too, Felsin," he shouted through his sobs. He swiped angrily at cheeks with the back of his
hand. He called to the children who had abandoned him once and were now repeating history. "Help your friend. Isn't that what you're supposed to do?" They didn't answer. "Where are your friends now, Felsin?" He didn't answer either.

Strong arms wrapped around Ben's shoulders and large hands reached from behind him to grip his wrists. Instantly, the haze lifted, the fuzzy but deafening hum in his ears fell to the sound of the water splashing, but it wasn't Felsin. It was his mother, the school guard, and other nameless faces pulling the boy from the river. The voice in his head was replaced by his father's voice in his ear, begging him to stop. Asking him what he'd done. Forcing him to watch Felsin's limp body fall against the riverbank and wait for it to finally twitch with life, water spilling from his mouth. Ben felt the shame in his stomach, and he was glad his mother was preoccupied with Felsin. If she'd been in his mind, she'd have known Ben's shame was not for his actions, but for his failure.

"Where'd he learn that from, huh? Sure wasn't Chewie!"

His parents had hardly laid eyes on Ben since the afternoon, though it wasn't uncommon. Whether Han had made his unexpected return or not, or whether or not Leia had worked late, no one would have laid eyes on Ben. Per the usual. Dinner went unmade. Ben's studies were brushed aside. The night cycle had begun and instead of turning in, Ben sat in the darkness of his room and listened, his cracked door the only source of light.

"You knew I would be fostering his abilities. Or else you would have known if –"

"Don't you say it," Han interrupted Leia, and Ben could picture him pointing his finger right in his mother's face. "You know I'm doing what I need to be doing."

"Gallivanting about the galaxy instead of raising your son," Leia finished for him, and Ben winced when Han growled, accepting the blame. It wasn't the first time they fought. The anchor that Ben was, was never enough to hold Han down. It was only enough to spurn on the fighting between them. Ben would feel their emotions swirl around him, inside of him, filling him up and forcing out the frustrated tears that threatened.

"He could've really hurt that kid, Leia. And you want to 'foster' it?"

There was no response, but Ben could feel the prowling of his mother at his temples, seeking the
answers Ben had not been ready to give. *Do not let her in. She does not understand.* Gritting his teeth, Ben tried valiantly to obey.

"Thankfully, he is alright. But you cannot blame Ben for reacting to a bully. He is just beginning to understand what he is capable of, and his powers aren't so strong that —"

"Strong or not," Han interrupted, "Isn't it the whole point for him to know better? To know right from wrong? To keep his emotions in check? Isn't that what your kind always spouts?"

"That is in the teachings, yes. But I am no Jedi Master, and he is no Jedi."

"No, but you'd have him as one!" Ben startled at Han's statement. His father had always vehemently rejected the Jedi. The stories – no, legends – their teachings and the rebuilding thereof… Han felt no good could come from it, or at least where Ben was involved. Everything felt reversed. Bullying was not something new that came to Ben. In the past, after much encouragement from his mother, Ben would confide in his father about that very same bully. And Han's response would always be to 'clock him one.' Yet, when Ben used his powers, suddenly Han did not approve.

"He is listening," Leia hissed, and Ben cursed her prowess in winding her way into his thoughts. He hated having her there. Before, she'd been a sense of security, but now she was just an intrusion. An incessant, blinding ray of light that crowded his thoughts. When she was there, there was no room for the other, the voice that understood him.

The bedroom door creaked open and the light flooded his face, jarring Ben from the confines of his mind. He had half a mind to throw himself to his pillow and feign tossing and turning in his sleep, but realized that sitting upright in bed still in his school clothes would have been too telling. His father's shadow fell across him and the door clicked shut behind him, filling the room with nothing but shadows and what little light came from his window.

"Scoot over, kid," Han mumbled, flopping onto the side of the bed Ben vacated. Leaning back, Han folded his arms behind his head and crossed his legs at his ankles, breathing a sigh of frustration. Ben watched his boots toddle back and forth in thought, not daring to look his father in the eye. The silence was overwhelming, and he remembered something his teacher had told the class once: it had been a particularly nice day and the outside had seemed too nice. The trails and the river called to the students to abandon their studies and *live.* Their chatter had drowned the teacher out until he'd waded through them and willed them to silence themselves. He'd said *Fools fill silences. Wise men create them.*

Ben was not yet wise. "I won't do it again, I swear it."
"Do what, son?" It aggravated Ben, the vague question. Though he had begun to learn how to join his mother in her thoughts – mostly because she ushered him in – he had no way of getting inside Han’s, uninvited. It was something Ben vowed to learn in that moment, because Han’s silence was infuriating. It was a test, he was sure, to see if he’d learned anything. To see if he felt any guilt at all.

"I'll push it all down," Ben said, sniffing and brushing his nose with the back of his hand. "I won't lose control again."

Han pushed himself up to sitting, his eyes level with his son's. For the first time, Ben held his father's gaze, eager to prove his newfound resolve. His strength. He had so little before that day. Now he felt like he could burst at the seams. He guessed he had Felsin to thank for that. All the pain the bully had caused Ben had been a useful thing. But Ben couldn't decipher why Han's face seemed etched with disappointment, as if he'd said the wrong thing.

It didn't matter. The twisted figure in the corner of the room, the one only Ben could see, was grinning its approval.

The next morning, instead of just Han's lone packed bag by the door, there were several. His and Leia's busied bodies froze in their tracks when Ben finally awoke, joining them in the frontroom of their modest Chandrilla house. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he stared questioningly at the luggage while ignoring the heated exchanging of looks between his parents.

Ben knew what was happening. Even at just eleven years old, he understood – years of solitude with nothing but his books and his thoughts lent to that. He'd been waiting for it after hearing the debate for years. Talks of training and guidance and futures… none of which landed within Ben's realm of choice. Future, he laughed inwardly. The very term suggested that choice was involved, but for Ben, there wasn't that luxury.

Ben fixed his eyes on Han, forcing himself to be that 'big boy' he was supposed to be. "You said you didn't want me to be a Jedi. Why are you going along with this?"

Han seemed taken aback, as if he were looking at a boy growing too fast and was headed to a place where he'd only continue to do so. His gaped mouth faltered at producing words that matched the maturity and challenge of his young son's. He looked to Leia and when her eyes avoided his, Han crouched before his son.
"Your mother… we're worried, Ben. About you. It'll be better for you…"

"Take me with you," Ben pleaded, his voice hushed to evade his mother. "I won't use the force… I'll just learn from you."

Han sighed, his hands going to his son's shoulders. "There aren't many like you left. Your uncle needs you. There are bigger things in store for you."

"You don't believe that." Ben shook his head and backed a step away. Han's arms dropped, heavy and futile. He could no longer hold onto his son.

"I believe a lot of things," Han persisted. "I believe that there's a right and a wrong, but there's also a middle ground. A balance. I've toed that line a time or two." His chuckle went unmet and morphed to throat-clearing. "But you have to choose that middle ground, Ben, and so do I. That's why I need you to go to the Academy."

No amount of Ben's headshaking could keep Han from standing then. His mind was set. His hands gripped Ben's shoulders again to pull him into an apologetic hug. Han lowered his voice and spoke just loud enough for Ben to hear. "For all the good they'll do… they'll also try to tell you what to do. What to think. How to lead your life. Just… don't forget who you are, son. And don't underestimate yourself. You're smart, and stronger than you think. They'll have you facing things much bigger than you, than me, than all of us. They'll have you serving the galaxy, but Ben… protect yourself. Do what you must."

Ben protested and shoved himself away. The tears that burned in his eyes were gone, and they would not be back.

Shooting Leia a tortured look, Han disappeared into the Millennium Falcon. Ben never saw it take off.

Present Day
Thin, temperate burns peered through torn slits in Rey’s tunic and hood. Fingering the shredded fabric of the cloak Luke had given her, Rey cursed at herself. She’d been careless in her training that day. Although it was only her third inconsecutive day wielding a lightsaber – and that was if she included the night on Starkiller base – she was disappointed in herself. Her thoughts had run away from her. The pressure and white noise in her head was growing stronger each day. No amount of meditation and centering and distraction would combat it. Even there, sitting cross-legged in Luke’s favorite spot at Ahch-To’s highest point, she could not find solace. The wind whipped about her, the sound of the ocean waves on its arms, and still, the roaring in her head was louder.

She couldn’t stop thinking of Luke’s admission the day before. Hearing of Kylo Ren’s past was disheartening. Rey did not like feeling remorse for the creature that hunted her, but it was difficult not to. She was beginning to see how he’d fallen so far. Still, he had no excuse – not when Rey experienced the same, if not worse, abandonment. She could not pity him when she had survived, and so had the goodness in her heart.

More so than his confession, Luke’s request of her was the most unnerving. Just after he admitted to Snoke’s stalking and control of Kylo Ren throughout the entirety of his life, Luke had asked her to lure his nephew to Ahch-To. It was much more than simply exploring his mind which now conveniently lay open to her whims. He was asking her to jeopardize her life by inviting not one, but potentially two of the most dangerous beings in the galaxy into her head. Yes, when she’d reached out, she felt only Kylo… but Rey was no fool. Wherever Kylo went, Snoke was sure to follow in some capacity.

Something still confused Rey about it all. Luke believed that Snoke sought out more force-sensitives than just Ben Solo, alone. Though Rey was only just now realizing her connection with the force, the ability had always been innately within her – such was the nature of the force, or so Luke claimed. Had Snoke simply overlooked her on Jakku? Would he be looking for her now, searching for any sign of her and attempting to sense her from across the galaxy? Rey: whose potential with the force rivals his own apprentice’s, and who found the Jedi no one else could find?

Rey pursed her lips and directed her thoughts to Luke’s lecture that morning. He’d asked again about her nightmares as soon as she’d awoken, and this time, Rey was not so readily forthcoming. She’d had another: one she’d experienced far too often on Jakku. In it, she was caught in Unkar Plutt’s grips, her feet stumbling through dense sand that kicked up and crusted in her eyes as she cried. She reached out, begging, her tiny body useless against the strength of her new keeper. It was the earliest memory Rey had, and it was maddening. She wished it were something different, like her parents’ names or faces or… why. The one thing she wanted to know above all else. Why did they leave her on Jakku?

She did not share with Luke, and she wasn’t sure why she lied. Rey knew he could see the truth if he simply delved into her mind… Yet he didn’t. Or… he couldn’t. That morning, by some grace of fate, he couldn’t. She was getting stronger. The will to uphold the walls and barriers in her mind
was fortifying more and more each day. If only those walls would keep the *humming* out…

Rey drew her knees to her chest and fisted her hands against her eye sockets, pushing back against the pressure that pulsed behind her eyes. She knew she could find the quiet. If she just reached for it, followed that red string, it would come… Luke himself told her she should. He told her to think of the prophecy and find the balance between the light and the dark. The *gray*, he’d called it; some sort of middle ground between Rey and Kylo Ren that served as a central point, giving way to his darkness while holding on to her light.

When she asked Luke how he could be certain of such a plan, his words were jarring: “If he’d wanted to kill you, he would have done so already.” She knew he was right, but his assumption had given him tunnel-vision. He was being reckless, determined to bring his nephew to either justice or salvation, and Rey would be his bait.

She hated to admit it, but Rey was scared. She was scared to have Kylo back inside her mind again. She’d never forget how it felt when he captured and interrogated her, and she couldn’t help but wonder if in turn, her traipses through his mind caused him pain. She was scared to see the man who killed and maimed her friends, face-to-face. She was scared to walk of her own free will back down the path where the red string led, regardless of the soothing and forgiving quietness that waited there. Or perhaps because of it. If she were honest with herself, she was scared of never wanting to leave it to return to the harshness of reality.

More so, she was ashamed to admit that it wasn’t difficult to find her way to Kylo anymore, or that it felt good there. Quiet. Whole. As good as it felt there, Rey feared that the pleasure was not worth the risk. The more she wandered to that place where the force blended, where their thoughts met and mingled and completed each other, the closer he would come to Ahch-To as well. And she couldn’t know for sure what the Jedi Killer would do upon finding the last two Jedi in the galaxy.

Nonetheless, Rey gave in. They came to a simple accord earlier that morning. She agreed to bring Kylo Ren to Luke, if Luke would return to the Resistance. Luke hesitantly agreed, and bit by bit, Rey tore down the walls she’d so steadfastly built. She opened her mind. Searched for the string. Cleared the way. It was both terrifying and freeing.

Luke warned her to stay close. It was only a matter of time before Kylo took the bait.

As soon as Rey laid down her defenses, that horrible *hum* returned like it’d been waiting for her. It droned, stronger and louder than ever before. Her eyes blurred from the pressure. Panic welled in her stomach. Where she wandered wasn’t the *same* – it wasn’t the safe place she’d come to know, where she and Kylo could go to catch glimpses of each other. And if it *was*, they were not alone. But she had to stay where she was; she had to bring Kylo all the way there, to her mind. To see through her eyes. To Ahch-To. She had to, for Luke. For *Ben*. 
But the noise… it was all just too much.

Again, she listened for the chord and followed more eagerly than before. There in the middle, the drone abruptly fell away and the quiet finally came. Nothingness materialized into *something*, and for a moment, Rey thought she’d opened her eyes again and was seeing Ahch-To.

But no… her physical form was meditating on the mountaintop beside Luke, waiting for Kylo Ren. What she was seeing in her mind’s eye was a dark, endless forest. Line after staggered line of trees disappeared into darkness the farther she looked, and as she walked, it grew more and more dense. The world shuddered around her and the sky rumbled and flashed, breaking open into torrential rain that the tree-cover barely mitigated.

For the first time since her nightmares had begun, she was seeing something other than her own memories or the endless darkness inside Kylo’s mind. Suddenly, the quiet was less comforting and more unsettling. Rey wanted to run back, to break from the reverie of her meditation and break the connection… but she felt rooted to where she stood.

Just ahead of her, a figure emerged from between the thicket of trees… a young boy, barely a man. He hurried along a path until suddenly, he could go no further. His dark hair lay plastered to his skin beneath the downpour. A little girl was clutched in his arms. She clung to him like a second skin with her face buried into his shoulder, hiding from view. The boy grit his teeth and, arms tensing, pressed the girl more tightly to his chest as if she were the most precious of cargo.

*There is no running.* The voice sounded above the rambling thunder, and Rey covered her ears. *I will find you all the same.* It resounded everywhere: from the woods and from the sky, even from within her mind. It echoed above the deafening roar of the rain. When Rey looked to the figures ahead, they, too, winced against the sound… even worse, the tall boy and young girl now stood side by side, staring into the eyes of a cloaked figure.

The voice was coming from it.

It took every ounce of strength to break loose from the vision. The moment Rey did, the voice from the forest gave way to the *noise* again. Or they were the same – Rey wasn’t sure. It had been the same voice she’d found in the dark corners of Kylo Ren’s mind. The same voice that was the source of the *hum* she could not escape and was now deliriously loud. She could hear nothing else above it:
not the rain, not the wind… So deafening, it inundated her like a thousand tons of steel. Beneath the pressure, she couldn’t catch her breath and her temples throbbed.

Rey wailed when her eyes opened and blinked against the downpour, sure that she was still lost in the woods. Had her eyes not registered the view from the mountaintop with the ocean swirling in the distance, Rey wouldn’t have believed she’d escaped the vision. How thankful she was to see the water roiling beneath the storm, though the bright morning sky had morphed into a dark, endless blanket of clouds. It bled into the horizon like a black, endless abyss.

She must have been gone, lost in the intangible forest, for hours.

Luke was calling to her, but his voice was a muffled void and tired, as if it had been calling for far too long. Rey tried to make it out… He said something was coming. He wanted her to run and hide. She tried so desperately to make sense of it.

But oh, the noise… it was making her ears bleed. And she knew what it was, finally. The thing in the woods. *Snoke*. He’d found her. Come for her, invited into her head through the link between herself and Kylo Ren. It was the only explanation…

She was on all fours, palms and knees and fingers digging into the dirt of the mountaintop. Gravel and rock lifted from the ground all around her, floating into the sky opposite the rain. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t break. She couldn’t escape it. Unless…

Her legs moved of their own accord, pumping in a frenzied pace and leading her down the mountain path and through the woods. She felt a familiar presence, pushing at the walls she desperately and haphazardly tried to reinstate. Luke… he was looking for her, but Rey could not hear it. She couldn’t hear anything but the noise. There was no escaping it this time. Even if she followed the chord that led her to the gray… led her to the place she found kindred with Kylo Ren… the quiet wasn’t there anymore. The noise, the voice, *Snoke* had found them there, too.

If Snoke wanted her, he’d have to follow her. She had to lure it away from Luke. She had to destroy it.

Rey only stopped when her toes were hanging over the cliff ledge, the ocean churning below. Bits and pieces of it broke through the noise, but even then she couldn’t be sure. It all sounded the same: far away echoes of the world around her. She wondered if she slipped *beneath* the waves if then… *then* the rivalry of crashing waves both inside and outside of her mind would cancel each other out. Maybe then, there’d be quiet and peace… *There*, she could hide, and she’d take Snoke down with her.
Her feet left the cliff edge and she was falling for an eternity. Rey thought the quiet would never come until finally, it did, her body cutting the surface of the ocean’s broken waves. She watched as a white plume formed above her, left in the wake of her dive. A new pressure surrounded her, but yes… the silence was there. It was finally, mercifully there, melding with the way the light began to slip away. And there beneath the waves, just before the world around her went black, another plume of white broke the water’s surface above. Hands found her. Arms wound around her. Though she begged for release down to the last second, the hands found her all the same.

Chapter End Notes

Who is it?? WHO?!! ... Oh come on, you know who. :P ;) Guess we'll have to see what happens!
Author’s Note: Small time skip! Part one of two updates (because I have to rectify that cliffhanger, after all). :) Hope you enjoy!

Chapter Eight

You say I took the name in vain
I don't even know the name
But if I did, well really, what's it to you?
There's a blaze of light in every word
It doesn't matter which you heard
The holy or the broken Hallelujah

21 ABY

(Five Years Later)

The dreams had all been true. Every single one. Ben began thinking he'd brought them to life somehow.

It was the turn of a new cycle, and there was much to think about. Another year at the Academy and another influx of force sensitives were en route. As usual, Ben beat his uncle to the temple doors where he sat and waited. Eyes closed and deep in thought, Ben was far from meditation. He quieted his mind and probed as far as he could reach, walking the tightrope and feeling for the other end. He hit a wall, stalwart and unwilling to let him persuade himself inside.

Push through. Force your way in. Ben hesitated but forged on, just to be met by a different voice.

Not today, my Padawan.
"Uncle… I-I mean, Master Luke," Ben's eyes startled open just as his uncle’s voice filled his head. As quickly and adeptly as Luke entered his thoughts, so had he appeared before him on the temple steps, chuckling to himself. The new title Ben would address his uncle with would take getting used to.

"You may be strong with the force," Luke clapped his nephew on the shoulder before tapping at his temple with two fingers. "But I should hope it would take a bit more practice before you broke into this temple."

Ben nodded hastily, all humor aside. "Forgive me, Master. I was merely testing myself."

Luke was nodding as well, his eyebrows rising at the word Master. "Is it that time already?"

"Yes, sir," Ben quipped, his voice eager. "Today is my birthday."

Luke's smile reached his eyes, though there was a sadness lingering behind it. "So it is." Five years ago on the day of Ben's induction, it hadn’t been an easy transfer. Taking in a student – his nephew, no less – who at the time was very much against the idea was not a promising beginning. Luke's academy had lofty goals of rebuilding the Jedi Order, so the thought of taking on an unstable force sensitive wasn’t at the top of Luke's to-do list. Leia's persuading did not take long, however, and Luke had to agree. Hearing of his nephew's tendencies – his inclination toward the darkness – was a story he particularly did not want to relive. Leia's fear was palpable. She knew how strongly her son's emotions roiled beneath his skin. How his emotions overtook him, time and time again. And then, Ben's demonstration of abilities had been astounding. Luke's twin sister was far from a Jedi, but the force in her was undeniable. Her strength coursed strongly in her son's blood, prompting Luke to proposition Ben: follow the teachings of the temple and invest himself, and by his sixteenth birthday, he would become Luke's Apprentice and begin preparation for his trials. In no time, he would become a Jedi.

Often, Luke couldn't help but wonder which course the strong blood within Ben would take. And since it was the same as what ran through Luke’s veins, he vowed to lead his nephew toward the right path.

"And you will declare me a Knight?" If Luke wasn't so practiced in controlling the boundaries of his mind, he'd have thought Ben found a way in.

"Once your trials are complete," Luke corrected, entering the temple and motioning for Ben to follow. "We'll begin this morning."
"This morning?" A hint of disconcertion lurked in Ben's voice. "So soon?"

Luke nodded, simultaneously addressing his new Apprentice and the temple keeper who awaited them. The young woman smiled widely and scuttled off in the direction they'd come. Today was everyone's favorite day, just as it was every year. The arrival of new potential younglings was exciting and encouraging. With each induction came the promise of new force sensitives, and the promise of a sturdier, tenanted Jedi Order. It meant fostering hope and determination. It also meant a lot of work and even more risk.

Just as quickly as she'd gone, the woman returned, a cluster of adults and children at her heels. Some whispered excitedly, their eyes darting everywhere within the temple. Others were silent, their uncertainty etched across their faces. All of them clutched their little ones, babies and toddlers and young children alike, in vice grips. By now, Ben knew the routine. Some of them were born to expectant parents and brought directly here, aged only to the congregational deadline. Others were tested recently, the task outside of their family's means until ages as high as five or six. Still others were only just found – nearly missed due to the secure nature of the search. The new Jedi needed to be protected, and none more so than the younglings themselves.

"Welcome," Luke announced. As it happened each year, each guardian's face brightened at the sight of Luke. He'd gathered them all, one by one, directed by Leia, protected by the Resistance, and assisted by the Church of the Force. As jarring as it was for the families to think of the road ahead, Luke's kindness and familiarity eased the tension that came standard with the temple. Though it was incredibly modest compared to the images Ben had seen of Jedi temples of legend, its domed center and perimeter of high-reaching pillars still projected a sense of awe. In the world of contemporariness, it was a beautifully antiquated image of hope. Ben remembered feeling breathless standing at its center and looking out to see the fields surrounding. There were no full-length walls, merely quarters – designed so that the world around them was their true temple, arranged in a village. Luke's ambitions were lofty: he endeavored to fill that village with as many force sensitives he could find.

Ben remembered what Luke had said in the midst of his wonder: that, if nowhere else, peace would begin there.

"There is much to do, and I know you all must have many questions," Luke addressed those gathered with open arms before settling a hand on Ben's shoulder. "Look no further than my Apprentice, Ben, who will be guiding you."

Ben's neck nearly snapped with how quickly he faced Luke, who sensed his uncertainty and, in turn, did not miss a beat. Luke's voice entered Ben's thoughts amid the murmurings of the crowd. You are prepared, Ben. You've witnessed the induction year after year and know what must be done.
Gratefully – and to an extent, politely – Luke opened his mind to Ben. *This is my task for today? To guide the initiates and break the hearts of their guardians?*

*It is what must be done. Consider it your first trial.*

Luke did not miss the disappointed sneer of Ben's lip and the downcast gaze, albeit fleeting as Ben stepped ahead of Luke and smiled to the crowd. "Shall we begin?"

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Ben was tired of the tears. Parents crying tears of relief that their child was destined for something bigger than them and bigger than the monotony of wherever they came from. Guardians crying tears of regret, handing over little ones that weren't their own and washing their hands. Children crying more than anything, clinging to legs and falling to the floor. And the worst: the crying when a child was sent away, not meeting the criteria and feeling as though their intended "greater purpose" was a light snuffed out.

*Go. Live a life that is yours. Can't you see the freedom that this gives you?* It made Ben bitter each year to see the hopelessness in the eyes of the rejected – more so the parents than the children. *Take them away from here and give them everything. Everything you thought they'd get here… give them more.* Sometimes he wished the rejected children would stay; perhaps be given a nominal job in sweeping the temple or working around the village. As much as he internally pleaded for more from their parents, the truth stopped him. What life would those children have, returning with the very beings who claimed to love them the night before they gave them away?

This year was different. This year, there was one child who did not cry.

"Well done, Ben." Luke's voice was appreciative and laced with pride as he joined his nephew in surveying the slowly dispersing crowd. Nearly half of them were leaving; some heartbroken, some angry, and some, deep down, relieved. Their greater responsibilities had come to an end. Ben could see the disappointment in Luke's face as well, hovering beneath the optimistic tones. Despite gaining another five younglings, the induction was consistently growing smaller each year.

"There will be more," Ben assured him, having noticed the same thing. "Smaller in number, but greater in promise."
"Oh?" Luke quirked an eyebrow at him. "You know this?"

Ben nodded, his eyes drifting to the stalwart six year old he'd noticed from before. She stood between two equally resolute parents, their eyes downcast in respect of those who were leaving so dejectedly. The child's eyes, however, were everywhere but in one place, scouring every inch of the temple as if taking note of all the things she could explore, climb, or maybe even break. The adventure pulsed in her, in the way she bit her lip and the way her fingers clenched and unclenched at her sides, untapped energy straining to be freed.

And there was something else… a sense of familiarity Ben recognized in the child. It was a feeling he remembered from a long time ago, though he had never before laid eyes on her. A figment from a dream come to life. All the same, he knew the child, or rather, he recognized the force that resonated within her. Ben was sure of it.

"That one, there," Ben gestured in the child's direction. "The force is strong in that one."

"You sense it?" Luke concluded, his fingers pinching his chin studiously.

Again, Ben was nodding. At risk of sounding pompous, he didn't say another word… but Ben could sense it. The little girl emanated a connection to the force far greater than any other youngling he'd seen during his Academy years from. It rivaled his own.

Changing the subject, Ben grasped his hands behind his back the way he'd seen Luke do while addressing peers. "Are there not more… intensive trials?" There had been nothing to the induction, and Ben was left feeling disappointed. Aside from force assessment, it invoked none of his abilities.

Luke chuckled. "We are just beginning, and you are still young. Your actual trials will come when you are ready. You are anticipating them quite early… earlier than –"

"Than how they used to be?" Ben scoffed, annoyed. "This is your academy, Uncle." He dropped the title out of spite and out of dejection. At the sight of Luke's disapproval, Ben sighed in defeat. "Early as it may be, aren't I needed? We are needed…"

"It is true," Luke agreed. "There is a great need for the Jedi to return. But as great as that need may be, I will not do it at the sacrifice of your training. We must not rush things."
Ben fixed his mentor with an earnest glare. "Please, do not underestimate me."

But Luke was done discussing it, and Ben was left with the haunting thought that yet again, he'd be left behind in one way or another.

The day ended and the remaining guardians were quartered in the village surrounding the temple. Though the newly christened younglings were the ones to be trained, that night would entail their first test. The parents were made well aware of the legends, of how prospective Jedi would be separated from their loved ones and forego attachments. They knew where attachments led, and they knew which path was led by selfishness. It wasn’t that of the Jedi.

What they didn’t know was how quickly their test would begin. All of the younglings would sleep in the temple nursery that night – the very place that would become their quarters for the foreseeable future – with only the temple missionaries to watch over them. Veteran initiates from the years prior would not join them, not just yet, giving the little ones time to learn the sanctity of solitude.

Ben remembered his first night. It had done its job for the greater good, or so they said. For most younglings, seeing their parents the next day made the night apart seem like a fun sleepover. The brunt of reality was harder on the parents than it was on the younglings. So then, the younglings would endure another two nights of solitude before joining their parents. Then the nights would turn into days. By the week's end, they’d be ready to part.

Ben had not needed a week. He couldn’t sleep, but the voice had kept him company. His slate was clean after the first night.

Night fell and Ben found himself at the temple, dismissing the missionaries for a well-deserved break. All of the younglings were sleeping except for one. Strange as it would seem that the calmest, least emotional youngling would find it the hardest to sleep, Ben was not surprised. After his assertion over the girl, he'd watched Luke single her parents out at the end of the induction. Overheard them discuss her strange abilities with no glimmer of pride or excitement. Instead, worry was etched in their faces.

They said she heard a voice that they themselves could not hear.

It was obvious to Ben why the child could not sleep.
All lights were tapered so that the starlight could creep in from between the outer pillars, but Ben had no difficulty finding his way to her. He could walk the temple with his eyes closed, and yet, it still felt so foreign. So unwelcoming. He felt empathy for the younglings who slept, worn from excitement and unaware of what the days ahead would bring. They had no way of knowing the sacrifice they were making.

The girl's eyes met his before he even reached her. She was sitting upright in her cot, her blanket still not turned down and her pillow cold from lack of use. Kneeling beside her, Ben offered a hint of a smile. He wished he could offer her some comfort, some sort of familiarity that would ease the tension that prickled in goosebumps along her olive skin. But names were not used. Not for the initiates. Nothing that would foster any sort of attachment – a necessary training facet that his uncle insisted upon. As far as the missionaries were concerned, she was Youngling Number Five of the Tenth Cycle.

The girl waved, happy to see another soul awake in the middle of the night. She opened her mouth to speak, and Ben quickly raised a hand. "No, no little one. I cannot know your name."

Her shoulders sunk and her cheeks blushed, sheepish for already making a mistake. Ben ruffled her hair which elicited a quiet giggle. It seemed almost alien coming from her serious face.

Ben sighed. "Can't you sleep?"

She shook her head.

"Are you frightened?"

She looked thoughtful, turning the word over and over in her mind as if to test how well the word fit. Slowly, she nodded her head.

"Don't worry, you'll..." Ben searched for words. He couldn't lie to the girl. He couldn't tell her she'd grow to love the temple, or even call it home. How could he, when he couldn't do such things himself. "You will do well here. I can tell."

A frown unfitting of a six year old crossed her brow, and Ben understood. It was not the temple she feared.
"Don't worry, little one," Ben began again, his voice hushed as he took her tiny hand in his. "I hear it, too."

"Why does no one else hear it?"

Their first meeting had turned into nightly rituals through no coercing of Ben's own admittance. In fact, had Master Luke known, Ben was sure he'd disapprove.

Though no formal announcement had been made – nor would there be, seeing as how Luke was in charge of the organization and hence forwent all requirements – Ben's impending apprenticeship would give him more than a mere title and discipline change. Adjustments were already made: Ben no longer stayed in the nursery with the rest of the initiates so as to focus without distraction on what was ahead of him. He was free to take his own dwelling in the village and had almost chosen the one nearest to Luke's. As convenient as it would seem to be close to one's master, Ben opted for the one furthest from the temple and village itself. He'd come to know and prefer privacy. It was something he'd lived with and adapted to, after all. Whether he'd wanted to or not.

Despite not yet having completed any real trials, Ben was expected to follow the code and play the part; not break the rules. But each evening after the younglings and older initiates turned in, he'd wait until the last ebbs of light left the sky and would find his little one waiting patiently on her still-made cot. That night, her hair was mussed from the day's exercises and she wore the same downtrodden expression she had the day he told her he would no longer be in the nursery.

Ben was pensive, flexing the question in his mind. Why didn't anyone else hear the voice that followed them? He didn't have the answer. He hadn't asked himself that very question in a long, long time. The question had lost its importance over the years, only resurfacing now that he'd found someone who truly empathized.

Ben's chuckle made his little one frown. "Why are you laughing at my question?" she muttered, earning a shushing to quiet her amid the sleeping initiates. He felt sorry doing it; he enjoyed her little voice that was too mature for her age with its lilting, rounded accent. He couldn’t help but wonder where she’d come from with her interesting accent, but he didn’t dare ask. They’d grown too attached already in such a short time. He didn’t need to know any more personal details. What haunted her in the darkness was personal enough.
Leaning back and resting his elbow along her cot, Ben shook his head. "I simply think it strange that you ask *that* question."

"What other question would I ask?"

*There it was.* The teaching moment. "Well… why ask 'why not them,' when you could ask 'why us'?"

Little One's mouth snapped shut before she could spew a reply that even she knew would be more of a retort than an honest, thoughtful answer. "That is what momma would say," she admitted after some time, longing evident in her murmur. "She does not like it… *any* of this, really."

Sighing, Ben mentally berated himself for wanting to divulge his own experiences… to a six year old, no less. He wanted to comfort her. To explain how his own father hated what he was. But that wasn't what Little One needed at the moment. Pursing his lips and scanning the room, Ben picked out the closest sconce on the wall, its lamplight so low it could have been mistaken for starlight spilling into the room.

"That right there. I want you to put it out."

Little One looked at him quizzically. "I can't… I have not done anything like *that* yet."

"Have you tried?" She shook her head. "Then who is to say that you can't?"

Nearly two weeks as a new youngling and her talents had not yet been flexed during the daily teachings. Though the teachings had evolved since Ben's first year, their structure was similar: memorize the code, master your weapon, and finally, learn to manipulate the force. The Jedi mantra was studied and recited through open discussion that often led in circles – it was a difficult topic that Luke alone conducted. Veteran Jedi were hard to find, and even rarer were those who experienced the old ways firsthand. There were plenty of lecturers who witnessed – most from the Church of the Force – but few who truly felt the force within themselves. As for weaponry training, lightsabers were scarce, so staves were used with far less efficacy in Ben's opinion. The compromise of Ilum's Crystal Cave made the initiate trial of finding one's own kyber crystal obsolete. Then, nothing beyond meditation engaged the students with the force. Even in as little as a week, it was easy to see whose midichlorian counts were higher. Without all the bells and whistles the original Jedi academies utilized, the younglings' potential was measured by their self-influenced progress. Little One just so happened to be one of them, just like Ben had been. And he couldn't help but want her to excel as quickly as he did.
"Go on," Ben encouraged, sitting forward. “Even if you put it out, the light will come back. It always does.” He knew she was capable, with or without formal training. Just that morning Ben had joined Luke for the day's lecture – something he would soon learn to lead himself – and he watched as Little One gradually lost interest in the ramblings on the nature of harmony. It didn't take long before pebbles began rolling to where she sat in the back, gathering and climbing atop one another to form a tower. At the end of the discussion, she knocked it over before anyone took notice.

Chewing her lip, Little One straightened in her cot and fixed her eyes on the sconce. She shyly lifted her arm and curved her fingers as if to hold it from afar. Ben smiled earnestly when the encapsulated light inside the sconce timidly swelled, brightening as if its power amplified. The light trembled as it grew, struggling against the surplus of energy. Just when it seemed it couldn't take anymore, her hold released and it returned to its dim existence.

Ben frowned, eyeing her cautiously. She wouldn't return his gaze, so he softened instead. “This is ‘why us.’ I believe even ‘he’ sees your strength more than you do.” He tickled her shoulder, hoping to coax the smile back to her face. “I know I do.”

She didn’t seem convinced as she continued to stare at the sconce. "I just… I didn’t want to…"

Was she afraid of her own powers? Did she not want to finish what she started? Or was it that she simply did not want the light to go out? "Are you afraid of the dark, little one?"

She looked thoughtful, and Ben was once again marveling how such a young little thing could be so careful with her words. She shrugged. "I used to see the light. All the time, I saw it. Until He came."

Ben knew what she meant. "The voice."

"He brings the dark. A little at first, but then, more and more. I was beginning to think I wouldn't see the light anymore." She spoke so evenly, like she’d grown used to such a fate.

"Do you see the light now?"

Finally, she met his eyes that glimmered with unshed tears. "Yes.” The word trembled. "When you’re here, I do. But it goes away when you leave."
Guilt riddled Ben's expression and there was no hiding it from her. She leaned her forehead against his bicep as if to comfort him, though she sat in tears thinking of the thing that haunted her. Haunted them. The very day she was born, He had found her just as He’d found Ben – and Ben knew it to be true, because that same day, he’d felt Little One’s awakening in his dreams.

He couldn’t take seeing her cry. Wrapping his arm around her shoulders and giving her a comforting squeeze, Ben forced a smile to his face. He leaned down to whisper in her ear. “I’ll tell you a secret.” He could breathe again when finally, she smiled too, holding perfectly still as though moving would make her only friend change his mind. He wanted so badly to lift her spirits, to do something for the child who deserved a childhood and deserved to not have her days and nights tormented. And so, he gave her what he could give no other Padawan in the temple. “… My name is Ben,” he whispered.

Gasping, Little One shifted sharply to stare at him with wonder in her eyes and a big, toothy grin on her lips. Her little hands clapped to her cheeks, knowing full well that he’d broken a rule just for her. Suddenly her eyes dropped away, looking to and fro as if searching for something she could give that was just as valuable.

“I’ll tell you a secret too,” she whispered, though her smile weakened. Ben lifted his eyebrows expectantly, comically cupping a hand to his ear to aid in the secrecy. Drawing a deep breath like it would take all the resolve in her tiny body, Little One leaned in and murmured under her breath. "His name is Master Snoke.”
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Ben could not shake Little One's words from his mind, and his distraction showed even in the presence of Luke. Her words humbled him… he was her beacon of hope. He who brought the light and cast out the darkness. Before he’d left, tucking her in and urging her to sleep, she’d whispered his name so quietly but urgently, calling him back. She asked him if he would visit her in her dreams again. *Again.* As if Ben had done it before.

"*I like when you visit me in my thoughts. When you do, there's no room for Him.*"

Him. Snoke. Finally, he had a name. Ben was speechless when she’d said it in the saddest of voices. Saying it made it *real.* And Ben did not care to know why Snoke had never told *him* His name. It made no difference; He was present all the same.

Little One was frightened, and Ben was reminded of how he felt at the same age, before he’d gotten used to the comings and goings of His narration. He remembered a time when the voice chilled him to the bone. Brought him to tears. Made the shady corners of a room seem like abysses shrouding sinister things that never showed their faces. But He, the voice, persisted, until there was nothing left to fear but its absence. When it wasn't there, Ben truly felt the loneliness.

He wondered if Snoke had revealed himself yet to Little One, or if He chose to remain a mere voice and name. Anger welled inside of him: Snoke had her call him *Master.*

Brushing aside the conflicting thoughts, Ben mustered his courage and closed his eyes. In an empty wing of the temple, one that faced the hills he liked to climb, Ben knelt and searched for his center.

*I know you are here, and I know who you are.* His thoughts were much bolder than his words would have been, calling out to the effigy that served as his shadow for as long as he could
remember. It followed his every move, heard his every word and dissected his every thought. Ben had never confronted it before. He’d only ever listened and answered. But seeing the fear in Little One had given him resolve.

_I know you can hear me and that you are not just in my head. You are real, and you want something from me. With me… but you will leave the girl alone. Take me, whatever it is you want, but you will not have her._

As confident and brave as he sounded, Ben was met with nothing but a slow, empty laughter echoing in his mind.

"It is quite early to be selecting a Padawan for yourself, isn't it?"

Luke's voice startled Ben in the darkness just outside of the temple. Regaining composure, Ben inwardly cursed himself. In his distraction – or rather, his focus – he had not sensed his uncle's presence.

"I don't understand," Ben said slowly, rising to his feet and re-erecting the barriers in his mind as best as he could. Luke would find a way in regardless, but Ben could at least try to withstand his uncle's prying.

"You believe that you can teach her more than what comes with her lessons." It wasn't a question. Studying his soon-to-be apprentice, Luke frowned. He had found Ben's walls, pushed against them ever so slightly before respectfully falling back. "And on your own?"

When Luke stepped back inside the temple, Ben obediently followed, sheepishly pushing his hair back against his head. "She is like me, Master."

"In what way?"

"In the way that she is more… advanced than the others."

"Watch your pride, Ben."
Ben nodded with exasperation. "I just think that the pace you have set in her training is holding her back –"

"Like it held you back?" Luke stopped in his tracks and faced his nephew, and Ben knew instantly that he’d lost the fight in barricading Luke out of his head.

"We don’t…” Ben worked his thoughts in his mind, testing their weight and licking his lips in concentration. "We don’t have to do everything as they did before. The old Jedi… they failed for a reason. Why should we follow in their footsteps?"

Luke was quiet, his eyes sweeping from his nephew to the line of busts before them. Ben realized then where Luke had led him: they faced the memorial of The Lost Twenty. Ben had never given them much thought outside of their discussion during early youngling lectures. The original busts were kept in the Jedi Archive of the temple on Coruscant before the temple fell. When Luke had asked for sculptors to recreate the busts, Ben guessed it was a sentimental thing.

"There was an unofficial twenty-first member," Luke started. "Added in memory after the busts were already lost. Do you remember why these busts were made? Why we teach the younglings their importance?"

Ben could not, for the life of him. The busts were recreated after he’d become a youngling, and all he could remember was that the Jedi depicted were failures.

"Not failures," Luke corrected. "But those who had left the Jedi Order. They serve to remind us that the Jedi are imperfect beings from an imperfect organization. We fail. Despite the great deeds we, and they, had accomplished… we still fail. Yet, we also succeed. You would do well to remember that. To find that balance."

*Failure is for the weak.* Ben was no longer unsure if the thoughts were his own. They were *His*, taunting him now with His derisive, compulsory wisdom. The longer Luke's silence lingered, waiting for Ben to respond, the more Ben believed that they were *his* thoughts, also. The more they made sense…

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*Present Day*
She was lifted from the sea, the cold of its endless waters and the torrential rain replaced by a heat that radiated like fire against her skin. The freedom her limbs felt in the water, flowing and fluid and suspended in nothingness, gave way to a nearly crushing grasp, pressing her body tightly against some immovable surface… but she was moving. She was swaying, carried in vice-like arms and they were leaving the water behind them. Leaving behind the solace and the quiet and the darkness that had washed everything away…

No… there was quiet here, too. Finally, there was quiet, and better yet, Rey could breathe. Even as her body descended to the ground, painfully slowly. Even as the heat lifted away. Even as she sputtered up water with each wet cough. She felt the pain and the deafening roar in her mind finally, mercifully fade. When she willed her eyes to open, Rey caught a glimpse of a tortured, pale face just as it turned away, and heard Luke's voice call through the downpour.

"There is still good in you, Ben. Let that be proof, what you have just done."

Someone was roaring… the dark figure that stood over her like a beast guarding its cub. His arm moved in one fluid motion, as if the gesture itself ignited the lightsaber in his hand. "You… You will not call me by that name."

Rey forced herself to her knees, the world spinning around her. Lightheaded, she clawed at her temples, closing her eyes to find her center. Instead of the blackness, the world behind closed eyes shifted to a landscape on fire. A temple in the distance crumbled, red and orange flames licking at its façade. Bodies littered the ground, wounds and severed limbs bloodless from the cauterizing blade of a lightsaber. Her arm felt uncomfortably heavy until she flexed her fingers, the crackling red lightsaber disengaging. Lifting it in her leather-gloved hand, Rey gasped and let it fall unceremoniously to the ground. She crumpled to her knees and watched her tears wet the burnt, dry earth beneath her.

But her movements were not her own. She was merely a pawn in a play already enacted; reiterating history… and the narrator was coming for her.

"I will not kill you, Ben," Luke's voice pulled Rey back to the clearing – back to Ahch-To. She squinted through the rain, finding him, his face illuminated blue by the lightsaber engaged in his hand.

And there was Kylo Ren, his parallel, leaving his stance over her and circling the older man. The point of his lightsaber dragged along the ground, leaving a smoldering trail in its wake. He spoke, his voice all gravel and hatred. "Then you will not survive this." In one impossibly large step, Kylo closed the gap between them, the chaotic red beam of his saber clashing with Luke's. They condensed into a fury of flashes, Luke at the center of an orbiting Kylo Ren.
The world slipped away when Rey blinked, and she could see nothing but the oscillator chamber on Starkiller base. She was looking into Han’s eyes as he called the name Ben. A memory spurred on by Luke’s use of the name… Rey's chest ripped apart and again, her emotions were not her own. There was yearning there, above the pain. Yearning to hear the name again… but in her head were whispers, castigating the want. Your son is gone.

The barrage of Kylo’s memories were coming quickly and insistently, as though she was experiencing them simultaneously while they flitted through the real Kylo’s mind.

Forcing her eyes open again, Rey cried out just as Luke nearly missed deflecting a great, arcing swing of Kylo's saber. Luke responded on Kylo's downswing, thrusting the hilt of his saber between Kylo's shoulder blades. His stumble was almost undetectable as he used the momentum to spin behind his uncle and return the favor, the spitting crossguard of his hilt digging into Luke's shoulder.

"No!" Rey cried out, but immediately she was silenced by Luke's cautioning look. She forced herself to focus, to remember Luke's instructions. He’d told her what to do as soon as she’d agreed to be his bait: when he comes for you, you will need to gain the upperhand. You will need to take control of your connection: subdue him. If you can’t, I won’t have the chance to try and save him. If you don’t succeed… do what you must. I will as well. It is kill, or be killed.

And somehow, despite everything… Rey knew she did not want that to happen.

Desperately, she tried once more to close her eyes and brace herself from what she would see. This time, it would be her who would take control. She felt for Kylo’s mind. So far, she'd done nothing but permeate his memories, stepping into his shoes and seeing what he saw. He was incapable of keeping her from them, and in the fury he radiated at arms with his uncle, Rey was unsure if he was even trying to. And yet, he would not accept her invitation. He refused to meet her where she reached, where she mentally held out her hand for him to take. He would not meet her in the middle.

Finish it, and you will be free of this pain.

Again in the oscillator room, and Han was gone. Though she did not look up, she knew she would see them far above where she stood: Chewbacca, Finn, and her other, original self. She could hear her own cries, could hear Chewbacca moaning in anguish.

Look what you made me do.
She could sense Chewbacca before he even lifted the arm that held the blaster. In this form, her senses were so much more finely tuned, as if everything around her was in slow motion. Every single thing that emitted a life force called to her like a droning audience and it was maddening. Yet no matter how hard she tried to raise her arm, to use that innate sensitivity to stop Chewbacca in his tracks and protect herself from what she knew was coming… she couldn't. Or rather, he wouldn't.

I destroyed him.

Rage engulfed her as soon as the blaster beam struck; rage that morphed into penitent pain. She felt as though she welcomed it, wanted it, deserved it...

"I can help you, Ben," Luke's voice could not call her back to the clearing, because this time, she was hearing it from ears that were not her own. She could feel the hesitation in Kylo's predatory movements; could feel the want for salvation… but she wasn't alone in Kylo's head. There was a sickeningly dark presence that abated the light.

Though his mind was a tortured milieu of wavering uncertainty, Kylo's body was a deadly and menacing thing. His tall frame towered over his gradually subduing uncle. Bits and pieces of singed, black fabric fell away from his body to reveal pale, luminescent skin; telltale signs of where Luke's blade had gained the upper hand just to hold back... But his nephew would not do the same. He was unrelenting. He was like a flickering sound lost in the din of the rain, struggling to be heard and failing beneath the crushing force of the downpour. And each time Luke would show compassion through their crossed blades, it would spur Kylo on. He was wearing the elder down, bit by bit, beating at his side to refresh the pain and maintain focus.

Beating at his side...

Realization flooded Rey and she let go of the string that anchored her there. Ahch-To reemerged around her and she leapt to her feet. "Stop this!" she screamed, and for good measure, she reached once more with her mind. You must stop this!

Luke was on his knees. His lightsaber had skittered away. An expectant expression calmed his face. And Kylo was approaching, the red of his saber the only light and his large gait purposeful. Suddenly… impossibly… he stopped. The air filled with nothing but the sound of the rain, his breath, and the unhinged light. After what seemed like an eternity, his lightsaber disengaged and darkness seeped into the clearing.

Leaning in closely to the man on the low ground, Kylo mimicked Luke’s earlier admission. "Let this be proof," he growled. And then, he was gone.
Chapter Ten

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: I like to think Kylo needed a moment to cool down. Maybe chill with some porgs. Who knows. But we can’t just leave it at that, can we? :)

Thank you so much to everyone who continues to read.

Extra special thanks to:

eyreheights – Okay, I’ve gushed about you and TO you so much, that I don’t want to come off as creepy, so I’m just gonna say I LOVE YOU and go spam your inbox on Tumblr. :3

ReyloRobyn2011 – What can I say? You’re amazing and a great friend, sticking by me through each chapter. Then, we have Tumblr, and our husbands and ex best friends who are practically the same people. What would I do without you? Can’t thank you enough, love.

vivalamiia89 – As always, thank you for your incredible comments! I appreciate your investment in and review of the story so much. I loved those same dynamics you mentioned and was excited to include or at least parallel them in this! I’m also excited that you picked up on that confounding jealousy Ben experienced between himself, Snoke, and the girl (Rey). To answer your questions: it’s safe to say that Rey was able to wake up on her own, since she wasn’t in the water very long. Kylo’s POV is definitely coming, but not quite yet (I promise that when it does, it’ll be very pertinent to the story and you’ll like where it goes!). And as far as Snoke finding her, that question will also be answered. ;) Thank you again and can’t wait to hear what you think next!

Angelique Sauvegarde – My mistake! I re-edited that line so many times that I pulverized it. Originally it compared the traits of the dark side against the Jedi, and that’s how “altruism” came into play. Altruism is absolutely a Jedi trait. Thanks for catching it, and thanks for reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Chapter Ten

Baby I've been here before
I've seen this room and I've walked this floor.
You know I used to live alone before I knew you
And I've seen your flag on the marble arch
And love is not a victory march
"Oh, you can do better than that, Little One." Ben rolled his eyes but couldn't mask the chuckle that contradicted his stern stance. Staff in hand, Little One was alone and unaware of his presence on his favorite hilltop – the one that could see as far as the dense woods to the east and the aquamarine waters to the west. At the center of it all were the temple and its surrounding village, a rough visage to match its neighboring wilderness. With only the quiet wind whipping about, whistling its high key, there was nothing that could distract from his meditations. Many of Ben's questions were often answered upon that hilltop, and he hoped the girl would find the same clarity there.

The numerous stones Little One was shakily holding aloft – circling as she knocked them out of orbit one by one with her staff – dropped instantly to the ground. She jumped, her expression riddled with anger and frustration. She couldn’t sense his approach, although he did not expect her to. He hadn’t visited her in more than a week. They had not continued their secret lessons, and he had not helped her to hone her skills further than where they’d left off. If anything, she was regressing without his tutelage, and her downhearted face showed it. He understood her frustration. She wasn’t the only one who felt stronger with the force when they were together.

Ben circled her, tapping her at her shoulder and again at her elbow to correct her stance. She complied, but not without pouting. After Luke's interrogation, Ben reluctantly distanced himself. He knew his Little One was growing attached to him, and vice versa: breaking the number one rule. Uncle Luke said it was difficult, even for him, to follow that rule. That too many good Jedi had faltered beneath it, lost their way or even turned to the dark side at the hands of it, and henceforth proven its importance.

Still, he couldn't help but return to her. "Little One…"

"Don't call me that." Her voice was weak, and Ben winced inwardly. She’d never minded the epithet before. In fact, the few times he would say it, her face would light up and her eyes would nearly disappear beneath the spread of her smile. Ben sighed and cocked his head to one side, drawing a sheepish look from his Little One from under her eyelashes. He accepted his punishment for leaving her, in the refusal of the nickname she adored, deep down.

She toed at the stones that had scattered at her feet. "My momma used to… used to call me sweetheart." She sniffed once, allowing herself to feel the memory and miss her mother – then she let it go, changing the subject. "Did you find another youngling to talk to?" Her question was pitiful, making Ben chuckle.
"Of course not."

One by one, she began lifting the stones back into the air. "He spoke to me a lot while you were gone."

"To me as well," Ben admitted. In the past week, His voice had filled every moment of quiet. It seemed surreal to put a name to it, and though long ago Ben had seen his face, Snoke had never seemed so real. Until then. He had to be real, corporeal, and perhaps that was the reason He did not reveal his name to Ben. Perhaps Uncle Luke would have heard of Him…

"He says we should leave this place. That out there…" her eyes drifted to the vast waters in the distance. The stones continued to lift, their orbit quickening. "There is more to learn away from here. That He could teach us."

Ducking around the floating stones, Ben knelt in front of his Little One and gripped her shoulders. The stones stilled their courses. "Do not listen to Him," he warned protectively. He could kick himself: when she thought he had abandoned her and their private lessons together, she swayed to the only other constant she had left. "If you do not like what Master Luke and the others are teaching you…" Ben racked his brain, worry churning his stomach. The thought of this little thing – a youngling he'd known for mere weeks – leaving him… She needed more than the emotionless teachings of the Jedi, asking far too much from her. "If you do not like it, then I will be your teacher."

The stones fell. Her face no longer pursed with uncertainty and rejection, Little One threw her arms around Ben’s neck and held on for dear life.

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Present Day

"He was doing the same thing he did when I battled him on Starkiller," Rey explained enthusiastically to Luke back in the cave. She dropped the bandages she was using to tend to Luke's wounds and demonstrated Kylo's motions, mimicking a pounding motion with her fist against her ribcage. "It was like it riled him up in the fight. Like to keep his focus, or-or to –"

"Maintain his resolve. He was keeping the light from coming in," Luke finished. It was obvious
now that Kylo Ren was shaken by his own actions that night. Or perhaps shaken by her. She’d undoubtedly been a distraction, rummaging around in his memories. She saw what he wanted: for it to be easy to commit such an unthinkable act as killing his own father. For it to be easy to embrace the unspoken initiation into the dark side of the force. When that didn't happen, he clung to what little darkness remained, inciting himself through pain and anger and regret. But Rey knew the truth. She knew what it felt like to be lost in the middle; in the gray. She knew the torment of being pulled to both sides, wanting so desperately for one to win over the other.

"And he didn't kill you," Rey sputtered, her thoughts running more quickly than her mouth. Luke took up the bandaging, allowing Rey to work through her deliberations uninhibited. From what she’d learned of Luke and what little he had shown her, Rey knew he was powerful. Arguably one of the most powerful Jedi that ever existed. And yet, even while carrying an injury that was several days old, Kylo had gained the upper hand. It was an injury that, through the supposed form he’d chosen under his obsession of Vader, he should have easily dodged... but Kylo Ren had allowed Chewie’s blaster bolt to hit. Traipsing through his memories had proved that fact. And despite it, just as he’d nearly done with Rey on Starkiller, he’d overpowered Luke Skywalker. It didn't seem possible.

Luke’s expression said it all. His eyes fell shut with a sigh and his head bowed. His resolve to kill or be killed had broken. He let the emotions slip through, and he faltered against his nephew. On purpose.

Rey chewed her lip, wanting to change the subject. "I don't think they healed him... the First Order. They did not heal him and they did not accompany him. Why?"

Luke winced as he pressed the gauze to the burnt flesh across his bicep. If only they had bacta... but being alone on the peaceful island, he did not expect a dire reason to need it. Kylo landed a deep strike there, and had Luke not been on his toes, he was sure he'd have lost an arm.

"He wasn't going to kill me. It did nothing for him to kill Han. And you were right from the start – he is here alone. I cannot sense anything other than him." Satisfied with his acceptable, albeit sloppy work, Luke passed Rey the remaining bandages. "He listened to you. So find him."

When Rey didn't answer, Luke stood shakily and pressed his lightsaber into her hand. His face, inches from hers, was seething with an unkempt disappointment. "It seems that he needs this bond as much as you do.” His only movement was the fluttering of his eyelids over his tired eyes, and Rey knew that in his stillness, he was inviting her in. His mind was bright and the images were clear. She saw through his eyes – saw herself running toward the ocean, and Luke was hardly able to keep up. She disappeared through the trees and when he looked to the sky, a small, strange ship was lowering itself to the island. Panic – such a foreign sensation to the usually stalwart Jedi – rushed through his veins. But he continued on until she could see herself again, leaping from the cliff. Luke scrambled to the edge, extending his cybernetic arm ahead of him in an attempt to freeze
her mid-fall. All he succeeded in doing was slowing her descent mere seconds before she disappeared beneath the water’s surface.

Luke had seen everything, and Rey was ashamed. In all of her years of surviving on Jakku, a moment of delirious madness almost did her in. In mere days beneath the pressure, she’d succumbed. Kylo Ren had felt the pressure for thirty years. Luke was right… she needed the bond, the quiet, and she was sure Kylo had gotten a taste of the same serenity. She was sure that he needed it, too.

*Find him.* Luke repeated, his voice carrying through their connection. Rey’s grip tightened around the bandages in her hands. *I am responsible for the death of Ben Solo. I see now that he is lost. I will not be responsible for the death of Kylo Ren also, and neither will you.*

The rain was still bearing down on Ahch-To like nature's answer to a drought. Winding her way through the dense woods, Rey could hear the ocean in the distance – its roar a rivalry against the downpour. She shuddered at the thought of what she’d done.

A thousand questions coursed through her mind, not least of all the question of how and why Kylo Ren hadn’t killed Luke Skywalker when he had the chance. Luke’s reasoning wasn’t enough, she feared. How could the creature that mercilessly killed learn compassion so quickly? Wasn’t it Kylo’s sole ambition to destroy him? Wasn’t it the reason he’d sought the map and why he’d taken her captive to probe her mind? Or was he just Snoke’s pawn, doing as he was told?

The answer was there, but Rey danced around it as though it would pull her in and drown her for good.

And Luke… she couldn’t make sense of what he intended to do. He either wanted salvation for his nephew, or to be the one to rectify his mistakes. But what would that entail? Luke understood what the Resistance expected of him. They wanted him to rebuild the Jedi Order – their last shred of hope for putting an end to Snoke’s tyranny. But that’s where Rey’s knowledge of the Resistance’s expectations ended. She assumed that, outside of General Organa, the Resistance was not privy to Luke’s compassion for Kylo Ren. To many, Kylo was just an extension of Snoke. A war criminal. They weren’t wrong.

Things were suddenly and unimaginably different now. Deep down, Rey couldn’t help but wonder if there was hope for both Luke and Kylo Ren… *repentance* for two men who suffered for very different reasons. And if there was, she had to believe that it would serve a purpose; that it would be
the key to finding and defeating Snoke. The thought of going to Kylo Ren now, bandages in hand, was not so unsettling. Rey was sure Han would have wanted someone to help his son, and she would honor his memory by doing so. But the idea of enlisting Kylo Ren’s help sounded preposterous, even to Rey who was privy to Luke’s plans – at least as much as allowed her to know.

It was still obvious to Rey that Luke was not telling her everything, but in all fairness, she could not do the same. Because Luke was wrong. Ben Solo was not dead. Rey saw him in the forest, in the gray of their combined consciousness just before she’d hurled herself into the ocean. He’d been just a figment of memories that were Kylo’s and not hers, but she knew it was him. Even from afar, she recognized him: pale skin that glowed beneath glistening raindrops; thick, black hair that seemed stark against his pallor; tall, even in his youth; and eyes that revealed years of torture and turmoil far beyond any boy or man should endure. So distracted had she been by Snoke’s presence in the vision, that she almost missed the heavy, tangible sense of pain that hung in the air. Outside of the vision, she could remember it, and it had emanated directly from him: Ben Solo.

As hard as it was to imagine forgiving a monster, everything she’d done so far… Rey couldn’t let it all be for nothing.

She found Kylo Ren in a clearing not far from the cliff’s edge. A small, single-man ship, reminiscent of a TIE fighter but with narrower wings and an elongated body, filled the space. His back was to her where he stood at the apex of a path through the woods, and beyond his shoulder Rey could see the ocean and the ledge from which she’d leapt. Rey chewed at her lip. Kylo must have acted quickly after landing, diving after her and pulling her from the sea. If she closed her eyes, she could see the white plume separating as his body speared through the water; could feel his arms wrap around her before everything went black. She wondered if he’d sensed her madness before diving into the churning water… If he’d felt her slowly but surely losing her fight against the pressure and the noise and the presence of pure and utter darkness in her head.

“Yes. I did,” he answered, his back still to her. Shoving aside the reverie, Rey abandoned her short-lived reserve and could not deny the anger that welled in her gut. She was sick of having her thoughts read like an open book.

“Was it you?” she demanded, balling her fists and inching closer to the cloaked creature. “Was it you in my head this whole time? Driving me crazy? Driving me to… to the darkness?”

Kylo Ren turned nothing more than his head, and Rey was relieved that he still did not wear his mask. He seemed like more of a man and less of a monster without it. In its stead, a long, faded scar crossed over his eye and followed the contour of his cheek to his jawline. One wound healed, but not the other.

He spoke with grit in his voice. “It was you who sought me. It was you who would not get out of
Rey’s eyes darted to Kylo’s fist tightening around the hilt of the lightsaber still clipped to his waistband. The sight of it sent chills across her flesh, envisioning how it sparked and crackled in its instability. He was right. She remembered how she’d wanted nothing more than to run from him, over and over, yet here she was, seeking him out.

“If not you, then who?” She knew the answer already; she just wanted to hear him say it. Wanted to hear that he was not the one tormenting her. That she wasn’t alone in her suffering. Rey closed her eyes and was relieved that the pure quietness still remained. Still, she could not forget the sound. “It… it was just a small hum at first, but it grew so strong, so quickly. Every time I opened my mind. When you found me, I… it was all I could hear.”

“Snoke.” Kylo answered immediately. He was motionless, watching her through his peripheral vision and he seemed darkly amused. “He nearly destroyed what he wants so badly. But he can’t find you here; he’s weaker than I thought, and so are you. It is interesting what fear and darkness drives people to do. Even you. A scavenger… the new Chosen One.” The title was spat with anger and resentment.

“You may wish to follow in Vader’s path, but I do not.”

His grandfather’s name seemed to spur Kylo to life. About-facing on his heel, he strode in large, thundering steps to close the gap between them. It took everything within Rey to stand her ground; to remind herself that the last time she’d found herself in Kylo’s crosshairs, she had struck him down and left a scar…

Rey was taken aback. His face was not calm like during the interrogation, but not chaotic either as it was during their battle. It was somewhere in the middle, laced with pain. In spite of his bravado, it looked as though it took everything in his power to remain upright. His hair was glistening, wet from the rain and so much like her vision from the forest – the last one she saw before throwing herself to the ocean. His expression betrayed confliction and longing. But he spoke in an impossibly deep voice, hushed in anger, and Rey could no longer find him pitiable.

“You are just another pawn in the Jedi’s game,” he hissed, leaning down just enough to bring them nose to nose.

Rey’s lips curled in anger and she bared her teeth with each word. “Better a Jedi than the spawn of Snoke.”
Kylo Ren could not hide his emotions. They showed, twisting beneath eyes that drilled so deeply into her, Rey thought he’d see clean through to her core. Just like on Starkiller base from behind crossed lightsabers. She couldn’t forget those eyes, not for a second.

“If you were not so blind, scavenger, you would see that we are not different. You, so righteous in the light, but the dark is always there. I can see it. It is always. There. Lying dormant. And it is the light that you struggle to maintain.”

He spoke the truth, and Rey felt it crush her. Her chest ached. Ever since she was a child, she’d felt it. It was always a struggle to stay positive, to push forward and think of her future. She lost count how often she’d felt the anger well up within her where it felt so at home, manifesting into nightmares. It was a struggle to push it down. It always had been, and he could see this in her head.

But Kylo Ren had forgotten something. She could see him for everything, too. And she would finish the plan Luke started. “You’re wrong,” Rey said through clenched teeth. “We are different. Because you struggle to maintain the darkness. The light pulls you, because it is what you are. It is where you belong. You were Ben Solo, once…”

A sudden rush washed over her as if a heavy weight had been lifted. Like her mind was finally vacated from every single thing trying so desperately to get inside of it. Kylo faltered, subdued by her insistence and stiffly stepping back. She’d willingly stoked the flames by using the name he hated so much: the same name and person he’d claimed to destroy before murdering his father beneath an evil dictator’s will. And yet, he had called her friends murderers, traitors and thieves.

Perhaps, from his view, they were.

From beneath his torn cloak, Rey could see where Kylo gripped his side. She thought of Han. Felt the compassion stir within her. The bandages in her hand felt ridiculous and out of place.

“You helped me,” Rey conceded, taking a cautious step forward. She was almost proud when he stepped back in response. “Now you have to let me help you.” She could feel his distrust. It was palpable and his eyes fixated on the bandages in her hand before turning to the ground. Sure enough, blood continued to drip along the path he’d taken, his wound aggravated from the exertion of combat.

“You saved me,” she reiterated, calling his eyes to snap back up to hers. “How did you know that… I mean, how did you find…”
His stare was hard, like he was still working it out for himself as well. “Don’t you remember? You’ve been in my head, scavenger. You wanted in; forced your way. You wanted me here.” His eyes drifted away, staring off into the thicket of trees and shadows but focusing on nothing in particular. In his distraction, Rey slinked in, pushing back his cloak with light, careful fingers. He continued, seemingly oblivious to her prodding. “I didn’t realize that it was you who drove out the noise – how quiet it was with you there – until it was not.”

“You hear it, too?”

Rey froze, and ironically, so did Kylo. He was staring at her again, suddenly very aware of her hands on his torso. Her fingers were poised at the band around his waist as they searched for entry. She was now the one lost in thought. Noise… He did hear the same noise. And there in the clearing, with her hands on the man who’d once nearly killed her only to save her life, Rey heard nothing but silence. The sweet, merciful silence she’d chased time after time, just to find herself inside his head.

“If I’d wanted to kill you, I would have.”

Rey clenched the fabric of his jacket in her fist, eliciting a pained jump from Kylo. He’d so easily crept right back inside of her, stealing her thoughts. He could see that, despite her boldness, she was still afraid of him.

If the man could apologize, he did so by unfastening his cloak and letting it pool at his feet. One by one, each piece of clothing followed suit, leaving a dark mass of fabric on the ground. Rey’s eyes swept over Kylo’s bare skin as he pulled the last bit – his tunic – over his head. All that was left were the harsh band lines of his arm guards crossing over his chest, stark against his flesh.

Rey had to distract herself, and there was still one last question burning in her mind. “Why hasn’t Snoke been able to find me?”

He wouldn’t answer. But when Rey timidly pried at the connection between them, he didn’t resist. She could hear his thoughts, clear as day. Because I won’t let him.

Clearing her throat, Rey focused on the now exposed wound and swallowed back a gasp. The wound spanned the length of his side, cascading over ribs and muscle and revealing wet, red tissue beneath it. The blaster wound should have been cauterized, just as any light-induced laceration would be. It looked like it was at first, but the edges of it were bruised and ripped open, left to tear at itself with every ministration. The image of him beating at his side in his duels with Finn and Luke
once again replayed in Rey’s mind. Suddenly the bandages she carried seemed futile.

“You have to have medical supplies in that ship, don’t you?” Kylo didn’t respond, and Rey sighed in frustration. “Fine, I’ll go look for myself.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Kylo growled. Why did he have to resist everything? Rey could see how much he hurt by how still he held, not daring to move as though the slightest inch would send flourishes of white hot pain through his body. That same pain that incited him and could send him flying off the handle.

Throwing her hands up in the air in exasperation, Rey wagged the flimsy bandages in front of his face – which had returned to refusing to look at her, quite possibly out of embarrassment. “This is all I’ve got!” Yanking a length of it free, she began winding it around him in quick, irritated pulls. When he flinched, his skin tensing beneath her fingers as they brushed against him, Rey felt guilty. Slowing her pace, Rey continued, winding and winding until the blood no longer seeped through. Here and there she pressed her palm to smooth out the gauze, relieved when she felt him soften just a bit more with each subsequent touch. Taming the monster within.

“You’d have bled to death,” Rey scolded, tying off the end of the wrap.

His words filled her head, and Rey wasn’t sure if he’d entered hers or if she’d entered his. *I have been,* he thought, traces of self-loathing in his voice. *I’ve been bleeding for thirty years.*

Chapter End Notes

**Author’s Note:** So Rey struggles with the dark and the light… I think there’s more to that story. :) We shall see!
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: In this chapter, Rey begins to gain a better understanding of Kylo Ren. Though their bond is still unsettling, it has its merits. Will she give in to it?

Sidenote: you can find me on Tumblr! @reylovesren or @renlovesrey

Extra special thanks to:

eyreheights – you know I love you.

ReyloRobyn2011 – As always. So grateful for your support, love.

Karla_shadow – Thank you again for reading!

Duarte89 – Thank you again for reading!

vivalamiia89 – Your comments give me life! I have been toying around with the idea for a fic, where Ben Solo and Rey actually make it out of the Academy together. They are definitely each other’s salvation. It was SO important in this story to show that, without Ben, Rey WAS as susceptible to the darkness as Ben ended up being – SO excited that you noticed that! I agree about Luke. I would assume he was a humble man, even going as far to blame himself for Kylo Ren’s wrongdoings with the slaughter at the Academy. It just seemed to make sense! Thank you, as always, for reading and commenting. You’re the best!

Revanite201 – I was SO excited when Rian Johnson said that!! I finished this story entirely in June (made first post in July), and have simply been making final edits as I post the chapters. So you can imagine how validated I felt when Rain said that! Made me feel like I was going in the right direction with this story. Thank you for pointing it out, and also, thank you for reading and commenting!

kwilson898 – Thank you for always leaving such nice comments. I appreciate it so much! My only hope was to write the characters authentically, so thank you for that! There is a LOT that needs to come to light – a lot that the two of them still have to learn about each other and about the truth. Can’t wait to see what you think when it all comes to light! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes
21 ABY

Frantic pounding at the door of Ben's quarters jarred him from his sleep. Someone called his name again and again, and when he flung the door open, the desperate face of the temple's nursery missionary looked back at him.

"Please come," she begged, and took to running back through the woods before Ben could ask why. With his long gait, he easily passed her along the path to the temple and, reaching it, took the steps several at a time. The wails reached him before he even entered the nursery. Inside, every youngling was crowded along the walls, wide-eyed and pale faced in fear. Luke stood ahead of them, his arms outstretched to shield them. His eyes found Ben as soon as he entered and his scathing question entered Ben’s mind. What have you done?

The cots were suspended in midair, shuddering and threatening to projectilize themselves. The lights were flaring and bursting, one by one, at the influx of excess energy. Eroded debris, broken free from the fresh cracks in the temple's stone façade, circulated around a central point: Little One, fallen to her knees and hands clutching at her ears as she howled.

Just as he'd done that morning on the hilltop, Ben darted through the orbit of rubble and furniture, dodging the cots as they whipped past. The glass from the broken sconces joined the ring of debris, invisible in the darkness and finding purchase along the exposed skin of his arms and face. Growling, Ben lunged forward as one particularly large shard dragged along his cheek, spilling blood in a hot, red stream. He collapsed into the small eye of the vortex where Little One finally opened her eyes. Ben gathered her into his arms and she buried her face into his neck, mindless to the blood dripping there. He pressed into her thoughts and spoke to her alone: Stop this.

For the first time she responded in kind, her voice answering in Ben's mind. He is here. He says He will take me. Please don't let Him take me.

Ben panicked. Was Snoke angry that Ben had instructed Little One to defy Him? That he had told her not to listen and offered himself instead as her teacher? He clutched her tighter to his chest, drawing all the strength he could muster to fill her mind. It was just as his mother would do when Ben was younger, when he'd call to her after waking from nightmares. The nightmares that Snoke narrated. She would go to him, hold him just as he did now with Little One, repeating her mantra about finding the light until there was nothing left but the sound of silence.

I will not let him take you.
Everything Little One held aloft clattered to the ground in a resounding crescendo. Finally, the night was still with nothing but the fading echoes of the crash.

"You have a bond with her. I dare say it is stronger than even our own." Luke was perplexed. He'd summoned Ben out of desperation to calm the youngling that night and afterward, had scoured Ben's brain for answers. But it was to no avail. When all was calm, Luke separated the girl from the other younglings and, more importantly, from Ben, and his nephew locked his mind away in response.

It was unlike anything Luke had ever seen before: a bond forged so instantaneously and so strongly that it rivaled that of a Master's with his Padawan. To him, it only meant trouble.

Ben disagreed, but knew Luke was right about one thing. His bond with his uncle – made stronger through both his training and their relation – was nothing like what he and the girl shared. Theirs was open and mutual, whereas Luke placed limits. Ben knew his place and never asked why Luke would not allow him deeper. Not even when Luke took advantage in searching every last recess of Ben's mind. So Ben responded in kind, and it was not Luke who taught him how to build the walls that would keep his uncle out of his head. That was Snoke's lesson and Ben's own doing.

Regardless, it was something Ben was determined to teach Little One as well.

Anger coursed through him at the thought of her, forced apart from him for days after he'd promised to protect her. Luke was forcing him to be a liar, for one. But also, he could not deny the emptiness he felt in those days. Snoke's voice returned, challenging him, telling him that he needed to strengthen their minds against infiltration and promising him that there was a way. Not just for Ben, but for Little One, too. There was so much she needed to learn. Ben needed to reinforce those walls so that they could reside in their own – and inevitably, each other’s – minds in peace.

"I cannot explain it either, Master," Ben muttered, rubbing his eyes warily. "I did not forge it. It was simply there."

"What is it like?"

Luke's question both startled and puzzled Ben. It was a heady feeling, to have access to some facet of knowledge that his uncle did not. Thinking carefully, Ben pursed his lips into a straight line and closed his eyes. Searched for the answer. "It is like… a light switch."
Luke's eyebrow quirked at the metaphor.

"It was never on," Ben continued, using his words carefully so as to be sure of his understanding. "Not because I refused to turn it on, but because I did not know how. I've known it was there for a while now, I just didn't know how to use it or what it was for.

"Then she came to the Academy, and it was like she knew how to turn on the light for me. She could not turn it on for herself, either; I had to do that for her. And when we are apart, the light switch turns off, and there is nothing we can do by ourselves to turn it back on. We need each other to see the light."

Ben could tell by Luke's concerned expression that what he described was still nothing his Master had heard of before. "This sounds dangerous, Ben. Toeing the line between attachment is one thing, but this… this dependency is something else."

"It is not dangerous," Ben insisted, bridling his anger. "What is dangerous is the thing that is there without our connection."

"What is it, Ben? This ‘thing’?" When Ben didn't respond, Luke gripped his shoulders, forcing his nephew to look him in the eye. "I fear this will interfere with your training. I fear it will lead you down a dangerous path."

"You have to believe me… you have to trust me, Uncle," Ben pleaded. "There is something that plagues us. Something that has been with both of us for as long as we can remember. I have learned to live with it, but… but without me, she won't have any defense against it. It is too strong with her."

Sighing, Luke released his nephew's shoulders. His expression was grave, losing hope that his words would get through. "If you learned on your own, then she will have to as well. She is leaving this academy, Ben."

The blood drained from Ben's already pale face. "What? Why would you do that? She is safest here!" Ben closed the gap between himself and his uncle. Even at the young age of sixteen, he was already nearly a head taller than the elder.

"Her parents disagree. They knew of the voices in her head, Ben. They say it was never more than a figment of her imagination until now. Now, it has become something fostered by your
encouragement."

"That is a lie," Ben hissed, his voice matching Luke's in disappointment. "She has told me otherwise."

"A six year old youngling? How much stock have you placed in a child's imagination and bad dreams? In your own?"

Ben clenched his jaw tightly and gritted his teeth. Balling his fists at his sides was all he could do to restrain himself. In an instant, he was six years old again, crying to his mother about the darkness that she failed in keeping away. He was eight, begging his father to stay and not leave him alone with the nightmares, just for Han to tell him to grow up and be strong. He was ten, alone with the voice, his only company in an empty house.

And now, he was watching another innocent be discarded. Just like him.

"Regardless, it is what’s best for you both," Luke finished, turning his back to his nephew so as to hide the pity and disappointment in his expression. "Maybe then, you can leave behind your distractions and rejoin the correct path. Your trials await you."

Luke didn’t see that Ben's trials had already begun.

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Present Day

Rey’s dreams that night were more vivid than they’d ever been, and she knew she had Kylo Ren’s close proximity to thank for that. It felt strange trying to convince the dark warlord to follow her to Luke’s home – such a considerate, hospitable notion, she thought, despite everything that happened between them. But it was of no use. He’d wrenched away from her hands still meticulously attending to his bandages and told her no… that if he saw Luke Skywalker, he’d finish what he started. And since Rey could trust Kylo about as far as she could throw him, she left him alone.

Luke was already sleeping when Rey returned, and she wondered what bizarre world she’d stepped into in the course of a day. Two men who’d faced death at each other’s’ hand were being kept apart by nothing more than willpower alone, and Luke was sleeping as if nothing had happened. Or so she thought.
“It is quiet. Nice…” he drawled tiredly from where he lay in his bed across the room, eyes closed and arms crossed. “Nice that you both are in your own heads and no longer in mine.” Nothing more was said, and Rey joined him in sleep when she could no longer stave it off.

Rey knew better than to call them nightmares anymore. She knew exactly where she was when the darkness came, just as it did every other night. It was completely silent, and though at first she could see nothing, Rey wasn’t sure she wanted to leave. It was fascinating there in Kylo Ren’s mind, searching and solving puzzles of the complexity that he was.

Black bled into brilliant colors: green grasses and blue skies and endless purple wildflowers in all directions. Daylight broke and she was on a hilltop not unlike the one on Ahch-To. Yet it was different. It felt like home and belonging. Stones drifted around her as if there, held aloft in midair, was their natural environment and not the ground below. And he was there – Ben Solo – standing at the perimeter and smiling at her with approval.

You can do better than that, Little One.

That name… it instantly roused Rey from sleep. It was so familiar, and it was the same thing Luke had nonchalantly called her just days ago. And Ben Solo set it to the girl – the same child as the one from the woods.

Bolting upright on her pallet, Rey stood in one fluid motion and ran out the cave’s entrance. Her shoeless and tired feet carried her right back to where she’d just left. In the seconds it took her to awaken and leave the cave, the silence of her vision flooded with the white noise, threatening to return. The closer she got to where she knew Kylo would be, the quieter it became. She found him, awake and leaning against the hull of his ship, his head tilted back. Although darkness surrounded them with nothing but the faint starlight to illuminate the clearing, Rey could see his eyes searching the stars, the skies finally clear of clouds and the storm a distant memory.

“Who is she? The little girl in the woods?” Rey stood over him, and for once she felt tall in his presence. His eyes drifted from the sky to meet hers. Rey was crestfallen to see the confusion in them. How could he not know? She’d found it in his thoughts.

“I don’t know what you are getting at, scavenger,” he replied, his voice as tired as her body felt. Still, she bolstered her resolve.

“You know my name, and you owe me the respect of using it.” She seethed, and she took his lack
of response as acceptance. Or so she hoped. “I saw you with her. You were young and she was just a girl. You were running with her in the woods. Running from something…” Rey squeezed her eyes shut, calling upon her memory for the rest of the visions. “Running from a temple, the Jedi, from Snoke…” she offered him options, hoping one would stick. Her words trailed off when Kylo’s face lowered, just his nose and lips visible beneath the fall of his hair. How he seemed to glow, even in the darkness, was intriguing to Rey. She couldn’t help but think it was his pale skin, made paler by blood loss. The same skin she had touched so cautiously earlier…

Shaking her head and forcing away the strange thoughts that always needled their way back in, Rey sighed. Kylo was not forthcoming in answering her questions, and she was beginning to believe he was telling the truth.

“I am.”

Rey kicked the boot of his outstretched leg. “Get out of my head!” It was pointless to demand such a thing. With him there, so close, it was easy to flit in and out of his thoughts. Obviously it was for him, too. “We’re missing something, here,” she insisted, but Kylo was already checked out, unmoving save for his deep, ragged breathing.

The more Rey’s resolve drained away at the sight of him, the more tired she felt. Her limbs were heavy and her eyes were blinking far more than they should. But the questions she had would never let her sleep. This anomaly of a man was there and his mind was as open of a book as Rey imagined he would ever be. Although he held his tongue under a guarded distrust, she could easily delve into his thoughts and see for herself if he was telling the truth. She could just take what she wanted…

Giving in, Rey ungracefully plopped beside him, resting her back against the ship’s hull. She ignored his bewildered stare that looked at her as if she’d bedded herself with a monster. With the storm’s aftermath, the humidity was driven out and the dry heat of the air felt like Jakku. If she closed her eyes, Rey could picture a broken down AT-AT at her back. It occurred to her that someone like Kylo Ren had probably never slept in such crude quarters, and she imagined that he wasn’t used to making do.

“How can you sleep like this?” Rey dared to peek at him beside her. Even slouched, he was still a head taller than she was. He hadn’t bothered to put his tunic or cloak back on – perhaps it was too difficult to do so – and his opposite arm was curled protectively around his bandages. His chest rose and fell evenly but deeply. The pain and discomfort was catching up with him.

After a long, tedious pause, Kylo answered. “I don’t sleep.” He breathed the words like a sigh, and his eyes shut as he said it, as if longing for the very thing he denied.
“That’s ridiculous,” Rey scoffed like she was speaking to a petulant child refusing his bedtime. In all honesty, though, she knew what he meant. Countless times Rey had given in to sleep, even when the darkness awaited her there. Even when the visions would find her and startle her awake, she’d still give in the next night.

“Will he follow you here? Will Snoke find us?”

Kylo’s lips pursed and the tick in his jaw flared. “That is why I don’t sleep,” he answered. “Because when I do, he will find me. If he finds me, then he will find you.”

Rey swallowed forcefully, speechless at Kylo’s confession. She couldn’t explain why her heart fluttered for the way his voice hardened at the end. For some strange reason, he was protecting her. And Rey knew what he meant, because she experienced the same thing: right before falling asleep, when her mind would begin to drift, it was like a door opening – susceptible and open to anyone who cared to enter. There was no resistance in those moments. It made her feel weak, and judging by the way Kylo’s jaw clenched, it did the same for him.

Someone, for once, understood her. And not only that, but it had been Kylo keeping Snoke out of her head. Through their bond, he’d kept her from being found despite Snoke’s prying.

But Rey couldn’t deny the nagging question at the back of her head… why did Kylo Ren want her alive? Yes, he’d offered to teach her. And yes, she found comfort in their apparent bond, or rather, the quiet it produced. It was as though everything was finally balanced in her mind by his presence alone. She was alarmingly aware that in that balance, she felt a calm that, days ago, she couldn’t imagine feeling in the presence of Kylo Ren. Before, she figured that one day she would confront him, avenge what she had lost by his hand, and strike him down… but in that calmness, she realized that she believed him. He hadn’t wanted to kill her on Starkiller Base. And by some strange twist of fate, it was thanks to him that she was alive and safe.

Rey shook her head. She had to be sure. “How can I know that everything you say is not a lie?”

No epiphany – no façade of chivalry – could change what Kylo Ren had become. It did not take away all that he had done. There had to be more to the story.

“What is the point in lying, when you can so easily see the truth for yourself.” Kylo muttered, finally turning his head to look at her. His eyes were so reflective; so lost. “… Isn’t that what you want? Not to let the darkness in?”

He was right. If she doubted him, she could climb right into his mind, and he would let her. Even if he didn’t, she knew she could force her way in. The thought made Rey’s eyes water. Not only
could she force her way in, but she wanted to. She wanted to listen for that single, uplifting chord that struck between them and follow it until she found him there, where things made sense. Luke’s words were haunting, but right: Rey needed the bond just as much as Kylo did.

Her voice cracking, Rey nodded. “I feel it, too.”

On cue, Kylo accepted the invitation, and Rey met him halfway. From where they sat, Kylo reached across and firmly grasped the nape of her neck, guiding her forehead to rest against his. She watched his eyes drift shut before hers followed suit, and instantly, their minds were flushed with light. It was warm, quiet and still, and Rey could feel her body relaxing in the serenity that was their connection. His did the same, a ragged, breathy sigh leaving his lips. All she could feel was Kylo’s skin against hers and his hand at her neck. When his grip tightened, she felt him pull her along. Guiding her to what he wanted her to see.

The light fell away into shadow and suddenly, she was seeing through Kylo’s eyes. Before her, daylight streamed into the cathedral-esque room, illuminating a monstrous, disfigured thing that rose high into the air. It was the same face she’d seen in the darkness the second time she entered Kylo’s mind. It was hideous, and it pinned her so steadfastly with its stare that Rey swore her feet were nailed to the floor.

“You have compassion for her.”

Rey could feel her stomach clench and her heart race at the coldness in Snoke’s reprimand, even as she listened to her voice – no, Kylo Ren’s voice – deny it.

Snoke spoke again. “It isn’t her strength that is making you fail. It is your weakness.” And oh, how her chest ached with each breath she felt forced into natural cadence. The urge to lash out was held back by the flimsiest of reins, and conflictingly, she felt Kylo’s shame and self-hatred push everything down deep. It all seemed to lock away just in time, because even as the hologram disappeared and the room went black, Snoke was suddenly there, all around, everywhere, filling every corner of her mind... Kylo’s mind.

“It is sentiment that led to Darth Vader’s failure. Sentiment that weakened you and allowed the girl to escape. It is time to complete your training, Kylo Ren. You will find the girl. She will lead you to Luke Skywalker. You will destroy them both, or you will take their place in their fates.”

Gasping, Rey stumbled backward in the darkness.
Kylo’s thoughts now permeated the endless and empty room, and when Rey looked up, she found him. He stared off into nothing, but she could see him trembling, the blood coursing from the wound at his side and the long, jagged line of red across his face. The wound she’d given him, not yet healed.

Everything he promised was a lie.

The thoughts, the *images*... they all came like a whirlwind, then. A visible battle of wills that warred within Kylo Ren. There was no way for Rey to sort them out, they came so rapidly. Snoke’s promises of strength and absolution from those who’d hurt Kylo in the past. Promises that, if he’d only submit to the Supreme Leader, then he would no longer have to feel anything; he’d be free of the pain and disappointment of abandonment. Freed by the dark side. With the dark side of the force, he would no longer be weak, sent away by parents who thought of him as a monster and wouldn’t protect him. If he just submitted and did what Snoke asked, then he’d be free from his conscience. Killing Han Solo would be his right of passage, and it would stop the light from pulling.

But that freedom never came. The war still raged on, even after the deed was done. And once again, the oscillator room materialized around her. She looked into the eyes of Han Solo and felt the heat of his hand against her face. Her heart – Kylo’s heart – was wrenching apart as the lights left his father’s eyes. Han’s touch still burned on her skin long after the room disappeared again, leaving nothing but hollow emptiness.

*It did not free me. But it did give me strength... strength to end Snoke. No one will ever again rule over me.*

Rey was breathless, gasping for air when Kylo abruptly released his hold on her and turned away. As he did, Rey thought she saw the sheen of tears glisten in his eyes, but she couldn’t be sure. What she *could* be sure of, however, was that Kylo Ren wanted Snoke dead as much as she did.

Chapter End Notes

**Author’s Note:** YAY. I felt it was important for Rey to learn what went down after Han’s death. She needed a better understanding of Kylo’s actions. Will it lead to forgiveness? Also, I had to stick it in there somewhere: the obligatory “You better call me by my name!” trope. We’ll see if Kylo listens. :)
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: Hey guys! Sorry it took so long to update. I was on vacation last week. Did some Rey cosplaying with the kiddos at Sleeping Bear Sand Dunes and will be posting those on my Tumblr in the near future. :D Speaking of, check me out on Tumblr where we can spazz about Reylo and Star Wars together! @reylovesren or @renlovesrey

My deepest thanks to the absolutely incredible eyreheights
She put together a playlist and gorgeous esthetic for The Red String that perfectly and, dare say, prophetically defined this story. I am beyond humbled and awed. If you like this story, I emphatically encourage you go find me/her on Tumblr and check it out. Honestly, it was perfection.

Duarte89 – I think your question is about to be answered! Excellent insight, my friend!

ReyloRobyn2011 – Always an amazing friend and supporter. Thank you for sticking with me.

kwilson898 – I believe you won’t be disappointed when Rey (and Kylo, for that matter!) learn about their history together. ;)

evangeline92w – Thank you so much for your kind words and for reading! I only hope I can do the story justice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twelve

Present Day

Bright light beckoned, burning against Rey’s eyelids, and her neck felt stiff and awkward when she finally awoke. Moving to crane it the other way and ease the tension, she felt her head pinned heavily against some hard, warm surface.

It’s broken… my neck is broken… He broke my neck, that son of a… Rey panicked, her fingers digging into the dirt beneath her… But the panic immediately melted away at the sound of slow,
deep breaths and the feel of them tickling her skin. Her cheek was ungracefully pressed against Kylo’s shoulder, still bound in his arm guards. To her dismay, she’d fallen asleep there beside him, and even more strangely, so had he.

So much for ‘I don’t sleep,’ Rey muttered inwardly. Sometime during the night, his head had fallen against hers, and Rey was sure he hadn’t intended it to. Not the infamous Jedi Killer, succumbing to sleep and thus, complete vulnerability. His state of undress was uncanny and intriguing in its innocence. She had never seen him in such a way. He’d always appeared as a gigantic, foreboding monster, and yet here he was, snuggled against her with his broad shoulders slumped and his still-gloved hands limp in his lap. The layers of his heavy tunic and cloak had always hidden away his frame which was muscular yet lean. The lines of his body were hard and angular as if he hadn’t eaten in days. Yet he still had a softness to him beneath the cross-hatched pattern of scars littering his ivory skin. There were too many of them to count, rising and falling with each breath, pulsing in time with… she could feel his heartbeat where their skin touched. He was human after all, and in the sanctity of sleep, he betrayed a gentleness Rey assumed no one had seen in years, if ever.

As unsettling as it all was, Rey would have stalled in disturbing his obviously much-needed sleep, had Luke not beaten her to it.

“Good morning.” The two harmless words jolted Kylo awake so brusquely that Rey was shoved aside in his alarm. He was on his feet more quickly than such a gravely injured man should have been and his eyes immediately pinned to the Jedi standing in the clearing’s entrance. If not for their silence, Rey was sure they’d pick up where they left off the night before.

Kylo had no time for niceties. “Why is she seeing the old temple,” he rasped, gesturing toward Rey without breaking Luke’s stare. “She is seeing things that I know nothing about. Myself and some child.”

Rey watched Kylo flinch, his face twisting in anger and resentment. Luke’s eyes were closed and his expression, concentrating. Rey felt resentment as Luke tried to speak only to Kylo, filling his head with words that he did not want Rey to hear. Kylo voiced her disapproval for her. “Don’t lie to me!” he screamed, his voice all growl and grit. “I know you’ve done something. I know that you know.” He began to pace, his anger overpowering the pain and his fingers flexing over the hilt of the lightsaber still strapped to his waistband.

“It was for your own good,” Luke spat, his own anger besting him. “The both of you! Where would you be now, had we not?”

So Kylo was right – Luke did know. Visibly struck, Rey felt lightheaded as she approached Luke, forcing him to face her. She feared the answer that would come with her question, and hoped upon hope that he wouldn’t say what she feared to be true. “What is it? What have you done?” she asked, her voice just above a whisper.

“Tell him what you’ve seen,” Kylo instructed, and she felt him behind her, an immovable force that somehow strengthened her resolve. Rey closed her eyes, willing the vision to resurface. She jumped when a large hand engulfed hers, and when it squeezed tightly, the vision came more vividly than ever. She was tethered to the source. Touch strengthened their bond – Kylo proved that when he showed her his vision the night before. Easily, she found the forest again; found the young Ben Solo there in the rain, clutching a frightened and whimpering girl to his chest. She watched as he set her down and Rey’s heart ached for the child as she desperately clung to him, not wanting to let go. She watched as a middle-aged Luke Skywalker approached them alongside two others, a man and a woman with wet and fearful eyes. When Rey opened her eyes again, hers were as teary as theirs had been.
“You wiped something from my memories, didn’t you,” Kylo spat, unceremoniously releasing Rey’s hand with a jerk. His touch still tingled against her skin and she clasped her palm tightly, wishing he hadn’t broken their connection. She so badly wanted to see the child again, as well as the faces of the man and woman who’d obviously been searching for the little girl…

“Apparently, I was unsuccessful,” Luke challenged, a hint of guilt in his voice. Threads of the wiped memories clung to Kylo’s subconscious, and like a key finding its lock, it had taken their bond to draw them out. “You must understand, Snoke had you. He’s had you both for as long as any of us can remember. Together, it was worse.”

“Together…?” Rey’s mind was reeling. “You mean that little girl was… she was…”

Luke nodded solemnly. “He wanted you both. He wanted to use you and your strengths to do his bidding.”

“Just as the Jedi did? And your Resistance?” Kylo roared, storming away to pace the clearing again as his hand clenched and unclenched over his lightsaber. He was like a caged animal stalking his prey, his eyes never leaving Luke. “You’d have done the same!”

“I was trying to save you, Ben!” As if he knew it was a lost cause, Luke turned from Kylo and grasped Rey’s shoulders instead. “You must know your parents only wanted to protect you. They saw the darkness inside you, and it grew horribly stronger when you two were together. You were a vessel for Snoke. They saw what Snoke had done to Ben, and they did not want that for you.”

“My parents?” Rey shook her head, tearing free from Luke’s grip. “Or was it you who took me to Jakku?”

Luke understood her rage, but could not give up. “We all feared that Snoke would not relinquish you. You were so young… I could wipe your memories of everything; suppress your urges and inherent abilities with the force. We hoped that would keep Snoke from finding you again, and we were right… until now.”

“And what of him?” Rey gestured behind her to where Kylo continued to pace. “All you took from him were his memories of me? No more?” The answer was no. So much more than mere memories was taken from Kylo Ren.

His face falling, Luke nodded. “My sister…” He called directly to Kylo. “Your mother sent you to me because she believed you. She believed that you were haunted, Ben. She feared there was too much Vader in you, and she did not want to see you go down the wrong path. Did not want to lose you. But she refused all else, because she knew that there was good in you – that you had Anakin in you, as well.”

The air around them was thick with anger, all emanating from Kylo Ren. His lightsaber was in his hand now, and he gestured forward with it as if the motion itself brought it to life. He slowly advanced upon Luke, his saber twirling dramatically at his side. Luke stood his ground, though no lightsaber engaged in his hand. Mere feet away, Kylo faltered, roared, and reared back, turning instead to the First Order’s ship. Reeling, he slashed a gaping hole in its side. Again and again he hacked and ripped at its steel, leaving nothing but sparking and fuming metallic remnants. When he was finished, he stood, his back to the person he hated most in the world, and glared at his weapon. He waited… for what, Rey did not know. What she did know was that inside Kylo’s mind, there was nothing but visions of him completing what he failed to do at the Jedi Academy all those years ago: running his saber through Luke Skywalker’s heart.

When Kylo finally moved, Rey held her breath as he again strode defiantly towards Luke.
Disengaging his lightsaber, Kylo continued right past him, down the path, and out of sight.

Rey was at a crossroads, both literally and figuratively. She stood at the apex of the clearing, staring off in the direction Kylo had disappeared. Again. Luke had yet to move himself, and even in her disappointment, she was grateful for that. She felt in that moment that if anything else were to move, the world would collapse around her. The thin pillars that were holding everything up would crumble and fall, as they had been doing all her life. One by one. Bit by bit. Nothing was stable anymore, and nothing made sense. She was finally given the truth, and to her dismay, the most honest person involved was the last person she ever thought she could trust.

“What do I do now?” Her voice was a whisper, beseeching the galaxy as much, if not more, than Luke.

“Continue your training,” Luke answered cautiously. “The Resistance’s mission still stands, and I will serve it by readying you. I will help them to defeat Snoke and avenge my nephew. Avenge you and your family. You may join me, continue your training…”

Rey felt bitterness toward Luke’s sudden implied sense of honor. His end of their deal seemed trivial now. *Avenging his nephew. Avenging her and her family.* “That does not sound like the Jedi way I’ve been led to believe.”

Luke’s expression was grave, but acquiescent. “I would agree. The Jedi are flawed, yet so were the Sith. But focus on the prophecy, Rey. Snoke was smart to have chosen Ben. He walks the line between light and dark, and I believe that is where his strength lies. It is where *your* strength lays, too: in the balance, unhindered by righteous Jedi rules and untainted by the dark side. It is where I have been honing my own skills.”

“And yet, your selfishness keeps you on an island where you can do nothing but train one lone soldier,” Rey spat.

Luke did not back down. “No, I was right to evade the Resistance. I was *right* to resist my sister’s plea for so long. She was sure that the only way to bring down the dark side for good was through the light – through the Jedi way. But she is wrong. The only way is through the *gray*. You’ve seen that for yourself, haven’t you? How strong you are in resisting Snoke when you are there. *That* is what we must foster; not a new Jedi Order. It’s time for the Jedi to end.”

At last, the tears came. It was difficult to listen to Luke’s virtuous speech. She could not forget that these people who were so desperate to rid the galaxy of evil, had conducted evil themselves. They had given two parents hope in a higher purpose for their daughter. They had tried to indoctrinate a son in that same purpose, but failed to protect him. They had separated two souls who’d found solace in each other – who’d found answers for each other – just for their connection and those answers to be ripped away. They’d taken hers and Ben Solo’s memories from them, convinced her parents to leave her behind in some supposed sense of safety, and left Ben with no shred of light to hold on to. It was *them* – the Jedi and the Resistance – who’d set Rey and Kylo Ren on their paths. Who knew if things could have been different for them, another way.

“I cannot train with you,” Rey decided in as even of a tone she could muster. Inside, she was shattering right alongside her sense of hope.
When Rey and Luke returned home, their stomachs collectively sunk. Kylo was not there. He had to have known it was there, undoubtedly seeing the cave and the mountainside through Rey’s eyes. Just like he’d seen the island and the ocean, once upon a time. Where else could he have gone? There were not many places on the island – if any – for him to go...  

Panicked, Rey’s loud curse startled the birds into flight. She ran to the entrance and peered in the only other direction he could have gone: the gravelly beach where the Millennium Falcon was parked. Having destroyed his own vessel, if Kylo opted to take his father’s ship, Rey would be left stranded on Ahch-To. Abandonment on yet another island was the last thing she would allow.

Closing her eyes, she reached, feeling for the now nearly tangible walls of his mind. She sighed in relief when she found him, still close, yet stubbornly resistant to her prodding.

“He is here, can you feel him?”

Luke shook his head, and Rey was glad for it. Perhaps he wasn’t trying hard enough to break through Kylo’s barriers, but Rey secretly hoped that Kylo was becoming more adept at keeping the elder out. Though Rey anticipated that in time, she at least could eventually forgive Luke, he would no longer be welcome in their heads.

“I will go,” Luke started, but Rey stopped him at the door.

“If you go, you go to your death.” Rey was sure of it. He evaded it twice, but she could feel Kylo’s anger pulsing along the thin red string, and she knew there would not be a third chance for Luke.

Several moments passed before Luke sighed in defeat. “Make sure he stays here,” he insisted. Rey turned to leave, but Luke caught her by her shoulder, turning her to face him. Unclipping it from his belt, he pressed his lightsaber into her already full hands, having picked up Kylo’s tunic and cloak from the clearing. “Do not forget that he is unstable. Bond or no bond, he cannot be trusted. Not yet.”

Hesitating, Rey conceded and took the lightsaber. “There is much that we all cannot trust, I’m afraid.”

Rey had not traveled the path that led from the falcon to where she’d first found Luke in days, but nonetheless, it was familiar. It led through sparse foliage, glimpses of the ocean peeking from between groves of short trees. It wound along hillsides with ancient, stair-stepped paths put in place by the island’s natives. It was beautiful in its rural-ness and freedom of nature. Rey could see why Luke would choose such a place to live and hide, though she was sure there was much more to it than that. Upon assembling the map, Leia recognized the planet as the location of the first Jedi temple. Long since abandoned, Rey had hoped in her rosy vision of finding the last Jedi that he would take her to see it. The last Jedi: the last hope of the galaxy, who now resigned himself to the salvation of his nephew that he couldn’t even approach.

Sure enough, Rey found Kylo Ren beneath the Millennium Falcon, staring up at it with an unrecognizable expression. He pressed a hand to the underside of the boarding ramp, as if touching it like Han had touched him. From what Rey understood, until Han’s final day when they met face to face, Han had not seen his son since before he was left to Luke.
It dawned on her, then, that she was not the only one to have been abandoned.

Yes, she’d heard the stories, and they were all coming together with the visions… but none of it truly registered until then. She and Kylo Ren had both been abandoned, in every sense of the word, and it was orchestrated by the same people. The only difference was that she was given a clean slate, while Ben Solo was left to fester. He’d been as alone, surrounded by people who stole away his choices and his future, as Rey had been on Jakku. She couldn’t help but wonder where he’d be if he had his mind completely wiped, as hers had been. He’d be free from Snoke, and they would never have met…

“You can’t leave now,” Rey croaked. It surprised her, how hoarse her voice had become. Embarrassed, she swiped at her cheeks, still wet from her conversation with Luke. He couldn’t tell her much more about her parents in their trek back to the cave. They were from Chandrila and were found by General Organa. It was through her that they were put in touch with Luke. They were concerned over their daughter’s sensitivity to the force and the nightmares she had. Through Luke, their daughter was to be taken care of and guided by the light; through Luke, the darkness would be ousted. That was the promise. Rey needed to know more, and she believed she could, through Kylo.

Guardedly, Rey joined Kylo’s side, offering his jacket, tunic and cloak with outstretched arms. She could feel his eyes boring into her like sunlight amplified through a magnifying glass. After several pensive moments, he took the tunic first and pulled it over his head, easing it down over his aching side, and then again with the jacket. Rey lost herself in watching his fingers meticulously fasten each closure and then, adeptly, his belt – all he needed was his mask and he’d reclaim the façade he insisted upon hiding behind. Her reverie broke when he reached for the cloak and stopped, the hilt of Luke’s lightsaber peeking out from beneath the generous expanse of fabric. Chewing her lip, Rey pushed the cloak into his hands and then regarded the saber as well. Before she could change her mind, she stretched out her arm, solemnly offering the inactive saber to what was once her enemy.

If not for his gloves, Rey would have seen Kylo’s knuckles turn white with the intensity of his grip on the cloak. “It is not mine.”

Pursing her lips until they disappeared into a straight line, Rey dropped her arm. She couldn’t tell if she were anxious or relieved, or if she’d even tested him at all. He was watching her again, his eyes dark and inquiring, yet somehow patient. She knew what she needed to do: glancing at the stone-ridden coastline behind her, Rey unceremoniously tossed the lightsaber aside. “Nor is it mine.”

When she turned back, Kylo Ren looked as he ever did. Clad entirely in black from just beneath his chin down to his fingers and everything below, he was the living effigy of darkness. His jacket and the tunic beneath were as domineering as ever. Maybe more so in its current state: torn along the chest from where that very lightsaber had struck him and again over the side from Chewbacca’s blaster bolt. He raised his cloak in his fist and pored over the thing that had helped him hide. Moments later, it fell beside Luke’s lightsaber.

Rey was finally sure. “I need a teacher.”

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: And so it begins!! Rey has made her choice – wonder where it might lead. :D
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: Aaaaand here’s another, just because I didn’t update for so long. :)

Chapter Thirteen

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21 ABY

Ben began to think that the temple wasn’t as safe as he’d once believed.

Another failed petition to his uncle left Ben frustrated and empty handed. He’d been lectured again on his overarching compassion and the liberties he’d taken. He was told to separate himself from the child during her last days in the Academy and to focus on the Jedi code he seemed so adamant on ignoring. And though Ben had argued that their implied duty was to protect others, Luke merely shook his head in disappointment. They could not see eye to eye.

While Ben was forgotten – left to suffer on his own with no one else to turn to but the voice – he would not allow it to happen to her. With or without his uncle’s approval.

His quarters were as dark as the sky outside, the lights of the stars shrouded by storm clouds that had threatened since sun-up. Now, they were beginning to break free, raindrops pattering to the earthen village in a slowly building crescendo. When the nighttime sounds were drowned out by the roar of rain, Ben knew it was time.

Call to the child.

Ben closed his eyes, silence surrounding him on command. His mind was clear save for the chord that, when plucked, resonated with the soft clarity of a single, steady note. He reached, searching,
and the closer he drew to his destination, the stronger the chord sounded. It was practically
deafening when he found her. She resisted his prying at first, uncertain, and pride welled within
him. She was learning quickly, and all on her own. It gave way to silence as soon as she reached
back, and he whispered to her; told her to follow. Before long, the quiet of his room was interrupted
by a tapping at the door.

*Take her away from here.*

Donning his cloak and turning up its hood, Ben joined Little One in the rain. He was sad to see her
standing so solemn and still, when any other child her age would have joyously pranced through the
rain collecting in puddles along the path. Then again, he had never been one to jump in puddles,
either. There was always too much on his mind.

Ben crouched beside Little One and smiled reassuringly through the downpour. He was relieved to
see no semblance of fear cross her features. Only trust. He was grateful for it, because if he were
honest with himself, he was unsure of what was next for them. At sixteen, he had nothing to his
name. All he knew of the world was from his holobooks. There was no home to return to – not one
that wouldn’t immediately return them there, to the place where they were both unsafe. All Ben
knew was that together, they were free. Continuing down the path their family wanted for them –
one where they’d be wrenched apart – would only lead to one thing. The voice and the nightmares
would return. Without him, Ben was sure Little One wouldn’t resist it on her own.

*Do what you must.*

Ben hadn’t noticed that all of his thoughts had long since become Snoke’s voice, directing him,
telling him what was next, and urging him forward. But that couldn’t be…

Taking Little One's hand, Ben headed toward the west in a hurried pace. The plan was simple,
because there was nothing to support a more complex one. They would lose themselves under the
shroud of the forest and the storm and make their way to the ocean. It was the night before the first
month’s cycle's end, and the new younglings' parents would be arriving for a reunion scheduled the
next morning. Failing initiates would be allowed to leave. Succeeding ones would celebrate their
accomplishments with their parents one last time before saying their final, ultimate goodbyes. He
and Little One would take one of the visiting carrier ships, set an autopilot destination and wish for
the best. Perhaps, thanks to his towering height unfit of such a young man, he could pass as her
guardian. And then… then they could train. They could realize their true potential, together.

"*And then what, Ben?*"
Ben stopped so suddenly that Little One collided with his back. Luke's question seared through his mind, and Ben cursed himself. How long had Luke been watching? Ben had taken such care in closing off his thoughts. Meticulously built the sturdiest of walls. At first, he blamed his trailing imagination, realizing how panicked his breaths were coming and falling. He was committing a treasonous act, to defy his uncle's new Order. Stealing a pupil – a child, no less – in the night. But then, it dawned on him. Luke always had the strength and ability to overcome Ben’s defenses. He just refused to share that fact with him, let alone teach him how.

Never again, Ben vowed. If he escaped – if they made it out of that cursed Academy – Ben would teach himself how to keep Luke out, once and for all.

Little One pulled at his hand with a confused whimper. Kneeling beside her, he brushed back the wet bangs that plastered against her forehead. “It’ll be alright,” he assured her, his resolve strengthening when she smiled, believing him. He pulled her into his arms and lifted her, her small hands wrapping around his shoulders. “I’ve got you.”

Still, Luke was pushing, forcing himself in, attempting to break the connection that so easily came between Ben and the child. Ben felt the bitterness well within him. "I am doing what's right, M-…" He stopped himself before honoring his uncle with the title Luke did not deserve. He was shouting into the night, to no one it seemed, and Little One watched him with worried eyes. “I won’t let what’s happened to me, happen to her, too.”

"Do you realize what this looks like?"

"Don’t be sick," Ben spat, relinquishing Little One to the ground and wrenching his arm free from her as if to punctuate his point. "You would have her suffer just as I did, all these years? Simply because you don't believe what I say?"

"You must be honest with yourself, Ben," Luke insisted, and it was evident in the rumbling of his voice how difficult it was for Luke to keep his own anger in check. "Don’t be so blind that you cannot see you are doing this for yourself. Not for her."

"Lies!" Ben growled in response, finally answering through their telekinetic connection. "Just because you cannot fathom doing such a thing as showing compassion and caring for others more than yourself. You are just like them." Images of Han and Leia flooded his mind, and by his defeated sigh, Ben knew that Luke was seeing the images as well. "They abandoned me. Washed their hands of me. Left me to suffer with this… this nightmare. I will not let it happen to anyone else."
"I'm afraid you have no choice." Luke’s voice was no longer in his head, but behind them. His fists balling at his sides, Ben refused to turn and meet the eyes of his uncle… because something else had appeared, too. Something only he – and by her gasp, Little One – could see. Something in a dark cloak and warped grin that was more a part of the shadows then it was with reality.

It spoke directly to Ben. _Your weakness led the Jedi straight to you._

Out of the corner of his eye, Ben could see the girl's parents rush into the clearing, soaked from head to toe. She willingly ran to them and they gathered her into their arms, adding yet another ache to Ben's heaving chest.

"We will wipe her mind of this."

Luke was no longer addressing Ben, but Little One's parents. Ben whirled on his heel just as Luke passed his hand over the girl's face. "No!"

_See what you have done? She is lost now, to us both._

Without another word, her parents approached Ben with angry, frightened eyes. Her mother's mouth quivered, searching for words of undoubted accusation. Faltering, she and her husband brushed past him, heading toward the ship docks. Ben turned to watch them, his arm raising to stop them in their tracks. He knew he could do it – he could make their entire bodies halt, freezing mid-step and controlling them just as he'd done Felsin years ago. But over her mother’s shoulder, Little One's eyes locked with his. There was no recognition there, and her hands did not reach back for him. There is still hope for you. Through me, there is another way.

Ben squeezed his eyes closed and felt for the string that connected him to her. He could visualize it, the red length of cord that had once tied them together. Yet, as far as he could reach, he could not grasp it. Not anymore.

_I will show you._

Once they were out of sight, Ben sunk to his knees, flinching when Luke's hand gripped his shoulder.
"If what you said was true… if she was suffering as you had, then she won't suffer any longer." Ben knew what Luke had done. He’d erased every fragment from the child’s mind that she’d come to know in her short six years, including the Academy, and especially Ben. The thing her parents carried was no longer their child. She was a shell, fresh to remold into whatever they chose for her to be.

It seemed as though the voice, Snoke, was right. She would be lost to them both.

"Could you…” Ben’s voice cracked, his head bowing in shame and defeat. "Could you at least tell me her name?"

Luke's grip fell away from Ben’s shoulder. "You know that I cannot.” With that, Ben watched as Luke's hand waved in front of him. His words were soft, but for the life of him, Ben couldn’t remember what his uncle said. All he could remember was the emptiness those words left behind.

Present Day

The agreement was simple. He would show her what he knew, and she would do the same.

R2 and C3PO were not entirely sure of Kylo’s presence on the Millennium Falcon. Had Chewbacca been there, he would have undoubtedly agreed with the droids’ sentiment, and that road would have gone both ways for Kylo Ren. When he asked about the Wookie, how had Rey put it… he’d left to “find nature.” Admittedly, Kylo would have been none too pleased to come face to face with the vile thing that blasted him – let alone served as his father’s secondhand aboard the Falcon. All patricide aside, no matter how much Kylo hated the ship, he felt a kinship to it. It was something Han had cherished, no matter how old or damaged it became. Kylo respected that, if not much else.

He couldn’t bring himself to the cockpit. Not just yet. Instead, he followed like instinct to the crew’s quarters. It seemed so much larger when he was a child tucked away in there when he would wander too much for Han’s liking. He tried to remember how many times Han had taken him aboard, but stopped when the count of broken promises exceeded the number of times. Recalling such childish memories disgusted Kylo. A part of him despised the comfort he sought there… but of every location on that retched island, inside the Falcon’s quarters was where he felt the most secure.

The scavenger… no, Rey… brushed past him and plopped down on the bunk, well at home in the ship she’d commandeered. He was not interested in that particular backstory: how Han had lost the ship, or how Rey had come across it, was undoubtedly due to his father’s weakness and ineptitude. What he wanted to know was locked away inside his head, and she was the only one who could access it.
There had always been something missing. Something from his time in Luke’s Academy. That sense of loss persisted throughout Kylo’s entire life thus far, until he found the scavenger on Takadona. That’s where he’d sensed it – a bond with the strange girl that felt so familiar. When they’d traded off penetrating each other’s minds during the interrogation, Kylo saw the thin, red string. It was familiar, too, and it seemed to lead right to those missing pieces he’d carried since the Academy. He just had no way of knowing what those pieces were; not without Rey.

She waited for him to be ready. She seemed so small before him, a bundle of nerves with her foot tapping and her eyes everywhere but in his direction. Such an infinitesimal being, and yet, she had overpowered him in every sense. When he’d called her weak, it was just a front. Her potential was unnerving. Captivating. Even when he resisted, she’d found a way in. She made him feel weak, like he was her prey and not the other way around like she liked to make it seem. It frustrated him all the more that he wanted her there, filling the emptiness and quieting the noise.

There were not many places to go on the island, but the further he distanced himself from the scavenger, the louder the noise got – the more pressure that clutched at his temples. Snoke was always there, beating down the door ever since Kylo left the First Order base. He grew more insistent as Kylo braced himself against it. Rey had been the final piece that helped bar Snoke from Kylo’s head entirely – a feat he didn’t think was possible. When she was near, she fortified the walls and drowned out the white noise that was Snoke himself. With her near, he had finally slept. He’d nearly forgotten what peace felt like, until then.

It was strange sitting beside her like it was something they’d done casually for years. Everything suddenly felt so simple. There on the bunk, sitting beside a simple girl who was honestly not simple at all, he did not feel like the Jedi Killer or the feared warlord of the First Order. It was a foreign feeling, to be so unguarded. Exposed. He had to be in order for her to work, he told himself. If she dove too deeply, he could stop her.

Deep down, he knew he wouldn’t stop her.

“I-I don’t know what would work best,” Rey stammered, her hands prodding at the air like she couldn’t decide where to put them. Kylo flinched away from her. They had successfully connected over the bond over extensive distances; withstood his trajectory’s shift into hyperdrive; could feel each other’s presence across the length of a planet. Still, she wanted to touch him.

Rey read the derision in his eyes, sneered back at him, and scolded like a mother to a child. “It’s stronger when we do. The visions. You know this...”

“Memories,” Kylo corrected, and Rey flung her hands up in frustration.

“Yes, that.” Kylo nearly smirked at her exasperation, but bit his lip instead – a mindless habit he’d had since childhood. She’d touched him more in the last day than anyone had in years. It had been that long – his childhood – since the last time he’d embraced another human being, and that thought alone made him nauseous over his softness. Nonetheless, it was true: he’d hugged his mother to say goodbye to her before she left him at the Academy. It had been an obligatory hug, one that he’d done out of duty and not out of love. His anger had made sure of that. Kylo wondered if he’d stopped loving everything, then. For the life of him, he did not know, and wondered if he ever knew how to love anything in the first place. But the thought of someone touching him... of her touching him again, sent panic and want through him simultaneously.

He already knew what she felt like. He’d carried her across Takadona, her body warm and heavy in his arms. Kylo cursed himself for wanting to feel it again, just without the lifelessness.

It was hot in the quarters, the air made warmer by their close proximity. On the bunk, there was
barely enough room for them both to sit comfortably. She curled a leg beneath her to face him more evenly. A sheen of sweat was forming on her brow and she was glowing just the same as she did in the starlight the night before. Her resolution to their agreement was unwavering, and Kylo had to comply. He *wanted* to comply. So he turned to her as well and willed himself not to flinch when her hands gripped his shoulders.

Instantly, her eyelids closed and her eyes began darting beneath the thin, fragile skin. Her eyelashes were dark and long against her tan cheeks. Pink lips parted and the tip of her tongue swiped along the bottom of her pout, a sign of her concentration. So distracted was Kylo that he almost forgot to close his eyes, and when he did, he wished he hadn’t. There was nothing there for him to see. Nothing but blackness. All he could do was wait and listen to the way her breathing rose and fell and sometimes hitched in surprise. Her fingertips dug into his armguards, the heat of her palms sinking through the tough material. At times she would sway, as if acting alongside the vision. An eternity seemed to pass before she relinquished him, and when his eyes opened, he found her gasping for air.

“I found them… your memories. You were trying to save me,” she choked out between breaths, and she looked at him with hard, scrutinizing eyes. “Snoke… He was taking over my every waking thought. You felt it too, and you… you were trying to help me resist him. But when he got too strong, they blamed you. They thought you were forcing an attachment and that was catering to the dark side. They didn’t understand that you were what kept Snoke away. For both of us. We tried to run before they could take me away. Before I was left on Jakku. They thought they could hide me from Snoke there, but you knew it wouldn’t work. You weren’t going to let them…”

“But I failed,” Kylo concluded for her, and Rey hesitated a long, heavy moment before nodding. She’d been yet another thing that had been taken from him. Just another thing that was destroyed and kept him from finding peace. It was all he’d wanted in the beginning, and when it was dangled in front of him just to be stripped away, it all made sense to Kylo – it made sense why for seven years following, he could do nothing but hide his hate until he couldn’t hide it anymore. He had made his choices, yes, but *they all* had led him to the water to drink.

He suddenly felt as if he were suffocating. He needed to leave, needed to be away from the implied tomb of his dead father. To his surprise, Rey would not allow it.

“No,” she insisted, jumping from her seat on the bunk and gripping his arm. “Don’t you see? Didn’t you learn anything from the memory? When we…” she seemed to falter beneath the words, as if it was strange and terrifying to believe it herself. “When we are *close*… that’s when Snoke can’t get to us. That’s when we’re safe.”

The fear was getting to her. She couldn’t hide it anymore. Her hands on his arm seemed to drive away the storm in Kylo’s mind. She wouldn’t surrender, and for once, Kylo willingly complied. He sank back into the bunk and leaned against the framing, watching with curiosity as Rey did the same. She swiped languidly at her brow and plucked at the collar of her tunic, fluttering and fanning it from the heat. Out of instinct, Kylo reached above the frame and pressed a button, the fan kicking to life. It was mesmerizing how the stray strands of her auburn hair fluttered along her hairline and over her warm, blushed cheeks. Her eyelids drifted shut and she smiled with the cool relief. She was unlike anything he’d ever seen.

She, of course, had not forgotten their deal. “My training starts tomorrow?” she murmured, her voice tired and drifting. He’d forgotten how draining using the force was for fledgling padawans. Guilt churned in his gut.

“Yes. Your training starts tomorrow.”
Author’s Note: Warning: Time Jump! This chapter takes up seven years after Little One is taken from the Academy. For the all-important canon timeline, this also marks the time around when Darth Vader’s identity is revealed, causing the scandal with Leia in office; when Ben learns the truth of who is grandfather was; and where the infamous Academy slaying occurs. You’ll see how this all progresses. It is also the last time we see the “past” of Ben Solo in its own sections each chapter.

Honestly, this was my favorite chapter to write thus far. From the culmination of the “past” scenes, to the evolution of Ben to Kylo Ren, the quote inspired by my beloved Chester Bennington / Linkin park, and the nod I wrote to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s The Yellow Wallpaper (you’ll know it when you see the bit about the walls. If you don’t, I highly suggest reading it! You can find it free online. Incredible short story). I hope you all like it!

As always, I have a few amazing reviewers to thank:

Eyreheights – You’re an angel. Can’t thank you enough. Can’t wait to hear what you, especially, think of this chapter!

Robyn, Blackeyedlily, AODSK96, and Karla_shadow from AO3 – I replied to all of your comments and they are so appreciated! Thank you for sticking with me!

From FF.net:
vivalamiia89 – I’m always excited to see your reaction to the chapters!! As always, thank you for leaving such fantastic reviews. FORGIVE ME for the constant cliffhanger overuse, lol!! I just can’t seem to help myself. You worded it perfectly: “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” So very true. Similarly, I always think that some of the worst things are done with the best intentions. This will definitely come into play for Luke as we learn more in future chapters. There’s always more to the story! You’ll notice that, throughout the story, the moments when they sleep are often important. Their minds are vulnerable to the enemy and to each other… so plenty of room for lots of trouble! :) I like your take on Luke’s teaching. Can’t wait to hear your thoughts on what’s coming!

superstarem – I’m so glad you are liking the story! Thank you for reading and taking the time to comment!

GoDrinkPinesol624 – Thank you so much for reading and reviewing!
28 ABY

(Seven Years Later)

*They caused this.*

Snoke’s voice was a constant reminder, pushing Ben forward, year after year. Seven years ago, in the wake of his actions the night before the Tenth Cycle Youngling Graduation, Ben's trials were annulled. There would be no Jedi trials for him; no graduation to apprenticeship or Jedi knighthood. After six years of study, he had proven that the Code meant nothing to him and that he could not abide by the Order. And though the accusations rang true and Ben could not deny the feeling, there was a missing piece that he did not understand. He didn’t know what he’d done to deserve such a harsh ruling, and no one seemed willing to tell him.

It didn’t matter much, anyway. Ben’s decision to stray from the Jedi would have come, with or without the trials.

Ben could only assume that Luke had broken through the most fortified barriers of his mind and found the darkness for himself. Though the light was still there, hanging on by a thread, Luke must have seen how hard it was for Ben to follow it… But Luke did not see Snoke. Ben wouldn’t allow it. Snoke was the only one who understood the doubt and disdain he held for the Jedi.

*They took something from you,* Snoke reminded him, day in and day out. Year after year. *One day, you will get it back.*

He was never clear on what that was, exactly, but Ben believed Him. The hatred he felt was the only proof he needed.

According to the makeshift council that judged him, there was no more purity left in Ben Solo. There was no more respect. There was only ego and the belief that he could be better without the Jedi. Ben agreed – they’d done nothing for him except take him from everything he knew and loved. So when he was told to focus on the light, Ben secretly decided he would drive it out, instead.

Nonetheless, he was reduced to infantry. Reduced to spending the next lifetime in mindless subservience to an army that was never meant to exist. The legends themselves said that the Jedi were not meant to be an army, but a means of peace. Even his pathetic uncle was hypocritical, twisting and picking and choosing what he would abide by. What he would teach. There was something sinister for which the Resistance was made to oppose, and it was *their* army that would be flanked by force sensitives.
Obviously, Ben had to take his training into his own hands.

_Through me, you will ensure no one takes anything from you ever again._

There was no reason to submit the vulnerability of his mind to his uncle. Luke was no longer his Master and never would be. In accordance with his demotion, Ben's studies had shifted to the most mundane of tasks reserved for basic infantry. As mindless as it was, it allowed him to focus on rebuilding the very walls around his thoughts that Luke so easily deconstructed at one point in their bond. Ben scoffed at the word. _Bond_. There was nothing left between them to deserve such a definition. Luke had long ago abandoned the insistence of entering Ben's mind and the interest of understanding him. It didn’t matter, anyway. There wasn’t anything left for him to take – not when all that was left was emptiness and anger.

_You will make them pay for what they have done._

The voice had also evolved. No longer was it a nightmare that haunted his dreams. Now, it was his only confidante. Snoke. His guide. The night Ben had lost … _something_… something that he was sure Luke had taken from him… Whatever it was, he’d thought that his head would never again feel complete. That he was doomed to live with some inexplicable emptiness in his being and the loneliness he’d felt his whole life. But Snoke filled the vacancy that was left, and though Ben could not fit the pieces together no matter how hard he tried, he inevitably welcomed it. More than that, the promises Snoke made renewed Ben's purpose. He promised him strength. He promised him training that would far surpass anything the Jedi could ever teach. Most importantly, He promised him answers and vengeance.

_You know what you must do._

The temple was empty, and Ben found himself standing amid the busts of The Lost Twenty. Except it was now The Lost Twenty-One. At the end of the row, a new bust had recently been placed. After Leia Organa-Solo's scandal – and subsequently, Luke Skywalker's – was released for the galaxy to hear, Luke had commissioned the piece. There was no reason to hide the truth from Ben any longer. At the bust’s private unveiling, Ben’s had been the only presence Luke requested. Explanations were unnecessary. He recognized the face from the family holobooks Leia showed to him as a child.

Luke pressed the nameplate below the bust that read _Anakin Skywalker_, a door to a hidden compartment sliding free. From his robes he pulled a red kyber crystal, a single crack marring its perfect surface. A distant sadness enveloped him as he turned the crystal over and over in his hands. Finally, he tucked it into the compartment and somberly closed the door.
"Your grandfather," Luke started, his voice pained, "was two men. He was both Anakin Skywalker and Darth Vader, and the galaxy deserves to know that. You deserve to know that."

Ben could not offer any words, even when Luke beseeched him for a reaction. Any reaction. He could see the yearning in Luke's eyes, both for the father he never truly knew and for his nephew that seemed to pull further and further away as the years passed. But Ben had nothing to give. His uncle didn't deserve the compassion.

"You will hear stories… unthinkable stories. Ones you have not yet heard from the given history of Vader. You will hear how he sought to destroy the Jedi. To destroy all that was good. You will hear how Anakin followed a path of self-subservience, and how his love for your grandmother drove him down that path." Luke studied Ben's face, his expression hard versus Ben's unreadable one. "What you must know, Ben, is that I was with him when he died. I was with him, and I saw the light in him. That is what you must remember."

They'd parted ways, then. And there was just enough time, before the day's lessons began in their endless cycle of monotony, for Ben to take what was rightfully his from his grandfather's bust. He was, after all, the only one willing and capable to continue his ancestor’s unfinished work. And the time for it had finally come.

Through Snoke, he was given direction – something Ben had not had in the past seven years.

Through Snoke, he built his own lightsaber – something that very few in the galaxy possessed.

Through Snoke, Ben was the only one left standing among the entire village. The temple burned in the distance, the village decimated, and the desolate battleground was reduced to nothing but rubble and crumbled stone and twisted steel. Alone he paced through the corpses, looking upon each lifeless face as he walked and searched to no avail for his uncle. Dead or alive, he wanted to look them all in the eye, but none more so than Luke Skywalker. They all deserved to see the face of their destruction and to know the name of the man they’d forsaken.

The Jedi Killer, Kylo Ren.
Rey slept as if she hadn’t slept for days, and Kylo was beginning to think she was making up for years of sleeplessness.

True, Kylo had promised Rey that he would stay, but the confines of the crew’s quarters were closing in. Ironic that he felt so claustrophobic there, when he spent years behind a mask. The more he stared at the walls, the more they drove him mad, haunting him. No longer was he the little boy who yearned to see those walls, because it meant he’d be with the father he once idolized. Nor was he the man he’d spent years forging, pursuing the dark and shunning the light. The being from the memories Rey plucked from his mind – not a boy but not yet a man… that was where he was again. Stuck somewhere in the middle.

Everything was stifling him – the walls, his thoughts, her… In very little time, he’d become a glorified safety net for her, and far were they from the times she thought of him as a creature in a mask. Or so he assumed. She’d slumped against him just as she’d done in the clearing. The smell of her, so close, was intoxicating, like earth after it rained. The deeper she fell into her sleep, the heavier she melted against him until her cheek was pressed against his chest. Kylo had nowhere to go but back, inch by inch, and the further he escaped from her, the further she crawled into him like an animal seeking warmth from the cold. But she was anything but cold. No, she was a burning, heady heat that seared through his clothes and made his skin ache for it. He wanted to know what it felt like, that heat against his skin…

Snapping himself from the reverie, a thought dawned on him. Wrapping his large hand around her shoulder, Kylo took a second to count the freckles there – souvenirs of the devastating Jakku sun. He closed his eyes and felt for it: the bond. The walls were open to him and her guard down in their proximity. She had nothing to fear of Snoke finding his way in. Not with Kylo there. He had to see for himself – he had to see the uninhibited memories that were once his, but had now become hers.

They came to him easily. Without warning, the emotions hit him. The weight of them felt unbearable, heavy, and stifling, all at once. It was too much and Kylo was desperate to open his eyes, but when he did, he saw an endless forest instead of the crew’s quarters. The same forest he’d walked in his teenage years, avoiding the lessons that he felt were beneath him; avoiding his uncle who was torn between showing him love and withholding it, per the code. He remembered not wanting any of it, and the emotions that inundated him now were familiar. In all honesty, they never left him. They simply paraded along, finding replacements in the hierarchy to fill the void…

A void, he realized, that only Rey had any success in filling.

Suddenly she was there, as if answering his call. Rey walked ahead of him on the path alongside his teenage self and the girl… her. She stood like a shadow behind the child, mimicking her movements like history replaying within the memory. When the little girl – what had he called her? Little One? – wrapped her arms around Ben Solo’s neck, so did Rey. Kylo felt the intense longing rise within him. He could feel the care and nurturing for the girl emanate from young Ben Solo; could feel how
he worried for her and wanted to protect her.

What he felt now, watching Rey press her face into the crook of his pseudo’s shoulder, was nothing like that. Something roiled beneath his skin. And when *they* came, Luke and the bastard parents, he felt nothing but contempt as he watched them pull the children apart. Because that’s all he had been at the time: a child, more willing than any of the adults to put another innocent before himself. But they would never see it that way…

“I do.” Rey answered. She spoke to him though she looked to her parents, frozen along the path as though the memory had been paused. She circled them, drinking in every detail and committing them to memory. She had her mother’s eyes and slightly upturned nose, and her father’s cheekbones and auburn hair. Quietly and tenderly, she touched their faces.

Suddenly, Rey was beside him. He hadn’t seen her move, and he wondered for a moment if he had willed her there. She shook her head, answering his thoughts. There in her dreams, words were unspoken yet still heard. “I can see the truth.”

Kylo fixated on the shade that was Ben Solo, and his jaw clenched and unclenched. “He and I are not the same person anymore. I will never follow the light. Not entirely.” His admission was gruff but honest, his voice thick though he tried valiantly to bury the emotions beneath the words. Oh, how the light pulled even then, from the clawing grasp of the darkness. “I… I’m lost somewhere in the middle, and I can’t break out of it.”

Rey smiled, stepping closer. She was impossibly, heartwrenchingly close, and she saw right through him. Saw the flicker of a glow that fought so valiantly to surface. “It’s alright. I am, too.”

“Then you trust me?” He hated how desperate his question sounded, but it came of its own volition. With her eyes penetrating him so deeply, so steadfastly, he could sense her forgiveness. She nodded. Her hands reached high, straining against his tall frame, and she pressed her palms to either side of his face. Closing his eyes, he focused on her touch, felt its burn and the callousness her young hands did not deserve. Bit by bit, the emptiness in his mind filled and the once stolen memories restored themselves.

Kylo startled awake and was met by wide, shining brown eyes. Rey was above him, still curled against him from her slumber but now with her hands fisted in his jacket. She seemed breathless, betraying the state she had just left. With quivering fingers, she loosened her hold on him to brush away his black bangs, damp from perspiration. He mirrored the action, his thumb gliding along her temple and brushing the beads of sweat that glistened there. The exertion from their connection winded them, the fan barely a whisper against the heat between them. If he could hold his breath, he would have, but it came in heavy, labored gasps.
He had to quiet them. The ardent and seemingly inherent purpose of wanting to protect her thrummed through his veins. She was not safe there. Not when he was so close to losing control.

“Go back to your Jedi.”

Instantly, Rey released him, her expression confused and caught off guard as though she hadn’t realized what she was doing. The contact, her proximity, it was all too much. When she didn’t move any further, Kylo wrapped one arm around her waist and stood, bringing her with him to lower her to the floor. He released her and waited for her to obey his command – to give him room to breathe – but she didn’t. She rooted herself to the spot defiantly. Growling, Kylo took her by the arm and began escorting her from the quarters.

“Hey! What are you doing?” He could hear the desperation in her voice; she was learning so much, finding answers for every question she ever had. And he, the source of those answers, was suddenly denying her. She clawed at his grip, her feet stumbling as he dragged her down the corridor toward the boarding ramp. The wind from the ocean whipped through the opening and, stepping through it and onto the coastline’s gravel, Kylo could see the sky darkening over the water’s surface. Finally, he released Rey’s arm, but not before giving her a little shove toward the path leading up the mountain.

“Run to your master,” Kylo hissed as adamantly as he could. He didn’t know anymore why he was doing it – for himself, or for her sake. He needed her away from him. The moment they’d met in their dreams and she looked at him with trust and forgiveness in her eyes, she’d filled every single hole that was left to be filled. The sense of completion was overwhelming and intoxicating and terrifying. She took hold of his mind in a way Snoke was never able to. She’d stolen away his control, sending heat and lust to spark every single nerve in his system. She was the missing memories, the lost pieces, and she singlehandedly was putting him back together…

No… he was wrong. There was one more thing still missing, and it burned him with an incessant, carnal, immoral need. If he did not send her away, he would satisfy that need with or without her approval. Kylo couldn’t let that happen.

But Rey wasn’t having it. She stomped right back toward him, stopping just a moment to pick up the lightsaber she’d left on the beach. “You’re telling me to run?” she asked, her tone bewildered with a touch of indignation. “You know that we need to –“

“We don’t need to do anything,” Kylo spat. He knew what she was going to insist upon. She was scared of being apart and the noise returning. Of Snoke finding her. She wanted to stay, but he could not trust himself. “I won’t let him get to you.”
Rey shook her head incredulously. “You’re telling _me_ to run,” she repeated. “When it is _you_ who is running.”

He turned his back to her, heading back into the Millennium Falcon. “Go to Skywalker.” _It’s safer this way._

Rey called after him. “He is not my master. You should know that by now.”

Kylo slammed his fist against the switch that activated the boarding ramp. She didn’t understand. She didn’t realize what would happen if she stayed, and Kylo knew himself too well. He saw in the memories what no one else did: the selfishness above the nobility. The _want_ to have her all to himself, even if it meant solely as a companion. Rey was giving him everything he never had but always wanted. If she stayed, he’d clutch her like a cure, his last hope, and he would lock the world out. He wouldn’t let anyone take anything from him ever again. Worse, he wouldn’t allow her the opportunity to abandon him like everyone else did.

If she stayed, he’d never let her leave.
Rising before daybreak the next day, Rey did not know what to expect. Luke had seemed glad for her return, but unsurprised at her reasoning. He’d tried to reassure her, claiming that his nephew had “no capacity to care for anyone but himself.”

She didn’t dare tell Luke what happened - at least not fully. Simply put, she described finding Kylo and agreeing to work with him, just to be subsequently rejected.
Luke hesitated in taking back the lightsaber Rey so readily gave back. “Are you sure you will not need this?”

Fighting back the way her eyes burned, more in anger and embarrassment than anything else, Rey left the cave without answering. Honestly, she did not know. One moment, Kylo was promising to train her. Had crossed the galaxy to hunt her down. Had insisted upon being her teacher, once upon a time. And now, when she agreed to give him what he wanted, he was shooing her back to the Jedi. Kylo had no way of knowing that even Luke denounced the Jedi training, though he was still ready to train her in some capacity: in the gray. Luke was the logical choice. The safe choice. He was far more skilled and controlled and exceeded his nephew in experience... But in the end, Rey could not deny the bond. The memories did not lie: Kylo had been her Master since she was a child, and through him was the only true way she would achieve her potential. Through him, and the gray.

Rey felt bitterness creep its way in as she climbed the countless stone steps up the hillside. She couldn’t explain why she’d done what she’d done. When Kylo had entered her dreams, she’d nearly drowned in his pain. But it seemed like he was rejecting all that the memories were telling them… They were things that Rey could not reject, and she felt selfish for it. Despite all that the Resistance, General Organa, Han, and even Luke had done for her, she could not forget what they had done to her.

The only one who had fought for her all along was supposed to be her enemy. And as long as he agreed to fight with her on the only side that was right, she didn’t care if he was light, dark, or lost in the middle right alongside her. He was the only one who understood.

Swiping at the sweat that was beading along her forehead, Rey was grateful that the higher she climbed, the quicker the winds kicked up. She left the humidity below and turned her face to the dry heat of the sun. The farther she walked, the more she stripped away, shoving her arm guards and vest into her satchel and enjoying the sensation of the sunlight bathing her skin. She was surprised how much she missed it, albeit the heat on Ahch-To was nowhere near as unbearable as it was on Jakku. If nothing else, she would find peace on the mountaintop and would enjoy the sun.

Rey nearly tripped on the last few steps to the top when Kylo Ren came into view. He stood on the high ground – a vision – wearing nothing but the same black pants and belt he always wore, standard issue generals’ boots, and his gloves and armguards. Rey berated herself, for she never tired of letting her gaze run the length of those bands; the way they crossed over his chest, stark against his pale skin...

There was no time to be distracted, losing herself in the sight of him. Nothing to gain from letting her guard down. “You’re here.” Rey’s hand idly gripped the staff slung against her back. On cue, Kylo pulled his lightsaber from his belt and ignited it. Its long blade crackled into being, shortly followed by the crossguard through its exhaust ports.

“You will show me what you know, unrestrained,” Kylo instructed, starting on a slow, circling path around her. Rey slid her staff and her satchel from around her shoulders and moved, keeping him parallel.

“That seems a bit unfair,” she stammered, though she wasn’t sure if she meant for her lack of lightsaber – kicking herself for refusing Luke’s – or for Kylo’s still-wounded state.

“If you are as strong in the force as you think you are – as you should be – then you would not need a lightsaber.”

He was taunting her. Provoking her aggravation and anger. No, she seethed to herself, harnessing the fiery emotions that threatened and pushing them back down. That is not how I want to be. This
is not how I will fight.

You fight any way that you must. He slipped into her thoughts, and Rey didn’t know if she felt relieved to have him return there or annoyed that he was taking advantage. He already had the upper hand.

“Do I?” Kylo questioned her last thought, gesturing with his chin to where she stood. She had taken his place on the high ground where he’d originated. Extending his arm toward her, he held his lightsaber level as he peered down its length and slowly, menacingly, turned it. “You’ll do well to remember that the high ground is everything.”

“I will,” Rey agreed before launching her satchel like a cannon at his face. It sliced along the beam of his saber yet still made contact and, caught off guard, Kylo stumbled back. Taking the opportunity, Rey charged, ducking low and sweeping her staff behind his knees. Kylo fell backward, but to Rey’s dismay, she’d left her arm open on the forward swing. He seized it as he went down, landing hard and flat on his back but using the moment to swing her overtop of him. Using his knee for extra push, he propelled her over the cliff side, her scream silenced through the rush of it all. She felt her elbow pop from its socket and Kylo skid along the edge with her momentum. Rolling to his stomach to bear her weight, his grip held tight around her wrist and he gritted his teeth. For a moment, Rey wondered if he would pull her back up – the look in his eyes radiated with disappointment, and she did not know if it was for her or for himself.

After an eternity, he pulled her up high enough to where she could grapple at the cliff’s edge with her other hand. Her dislocated elbow and the length of her arm throbbed against his hold, but he would not let her go. He pulled her fully over the ledge and to her feet where finally, she wrenched away from him, cradling her arm. She didn’t care if he was disappointed in her, she decided. She was disappointed in herself: for her brash and mindless attack, and the fact that she’d trusted him. How could she have been so blind…?

But she wasn’t blind. She could see clearly, and her vision was overflowing with the sight of Kylo Ren. His chest and the underside of his forearms bled from angry scrapes gained from skidding along the gravel. He wrestled with his heaving breath, struggling to steady himself, and it wasn’t from the exertion… His expression moments ago as he’d looked over the ledge hadn’t been one of disappointment – it had been panic. Ignoring her protests, he approached her, taking her forearm in one hand and her elbow in the other. He twisted it slightly to inspect it and elicited a pained gasp from Rey.

“Close your eyes and breathe,” he said, his voice quiet and low. Rey hesitated, watching him, but Kylo was patient. Waiting for her to comply, he didn’t move an inch – simply watched her back with stern but worried eyes. Reluctantly she gave in. As soon as her eyes drifted shut, Kylo popped her elbow back into place. White hot pain rippled through her limb and Rey screamed, her knees buckling. Kylo braced her before she could stumble, holding her injured arm steady. Panting, she pressed her forehead against his chest and squeezed her eyes shut. As the pain dissipated, she timed her breaths with his heartbeat. It was so loud, and she was so close…

He released her, and reality fell back down around her. Striding back toward the cliff, Kylo bent to pick up his saber and her staff, eyeing it inquisitively. He tossed it to her on his way back.

“Until that heals, we will forego combat training.”

Rey had dislocated joints before, and she wanted to protest. “Do we have that sort of time?” Sure, it would be sore for a while, and a sling would be helpful, but she’d done far worse with past injuries. Unkar Plutt would not be kept waiting, and she would have had to forge on in her scavenging, injured or not, if she wanted to eat. Perhaps what Kylo had in mind for her would be more
Kylo fixed angry, offended eyes on her as he knelt, pinning his saber to his belt as he went. “I’ve already told you, I will not let Snoke find us. We have as much time as we need.”

“But does the Resistance? Do my friends have the luxury of time?”

Kylo seethed. “What good are you to your friends without your training?”

“I’ve bested you!”

“Because I allowed it!”

It was Rey’s turn to seethe. She wanted nothing more than to retrieve her satchel – or what was left of it – and throw it in Kylo Ren’s face again. How could he be so cocky to say that he let her win on Starkiller base? Did the scar on his face say nothing about her skill?

… Rey’s heart sank as she listened to her own thoughts. Kylo’s scar seemed to beam at her then, a reminder of how the darkness had found her and crept inside. That’s what it had been: the dark side. She knew it was true, but no one, not even those closest to the light, seemed to care. They’d justified her actions as a means to an end, and it was suddenly obvious to Rey that those who dwelled on the light side were not so different than those on the dark. They all believed in their own causes. They all justified their actions as the “greater good.” What was unclear was which “good” was the right one.

There were no clean consciences – there was gray in everyone.

A pensive sigh left Kylo’s lips. “Trust me. Snoke is without his best mercenary and he does not know where to look. We have time.”

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Rey knelt in front of Kylo, assuming the same pose. Her eyes drifted to the bandages still wrapped around his ribs. Her work. Realization flooded her: he’d bested her in seconds on the hilltop, despite that wound. Just like he had with Luke. How, then, had he not won on Starkiller base? How had she managed to gain the upper hand?

What he’d said the first night still resonated with her. If I’d wanted to kill you, I would have.

“What was the point of fighting me if you weren’t going to kill me?” Rey asked, daring to guide his thoughts back to Starkiller. His words during the interrogation – Don’t worry, I feel it too – proved that he’d felt their bond even then. But without the memories of their past to foster any kind of connection, how had that single moment been enough to deter him? How had that been enough for him to defy his Master and keep her alive?

His expression was stalwart save for the way his lips and the tics in his jawline moved as he swallowed. It was always the little details that drew her eyes and threatened to drown her in him…

“You were strong with the force. Stronger than you knew. I had to test you.”

“You … you wanted me to kill you? Or at least to try?” Bitterness and disbelief dripped from Rey’s words. “You wanted me to fall to the dark?”

“No,” Kylo insisted, looking away and visibly struggling against her accusations.

“You wanted me to be just like you and what, kill my friends? Join Snoke?”
“I will *not* let Snoke have you,” he growled, suddenly leaning forward, inches away from Rey. His expression was the same as it was that day, peering at her between crossed saber beams. The sunlight reflected in his eyes and somehow, they did not seem as dark as they were before. Rey could not bring herself to speak. Instead, she held her ground and returned his stare, waiting for Kylo to regain control.

Eventually, he sat back on his heels and breathed deeply. Rey followed suit.

“You must strengthen your control of the force,” he started, changing the subject and working valiantly to keep his voice even. “You have already exhibited some control. Telepathy. Precognition…”

“Precognition? When? How?”

Kylo looked confused. “When we battled on Starkiller base, I *watched* you attune yourself to the force. From there, were you not able to sense my movements before they happened?” When he saw awareness flit across Rey’s expression, he continued. “That is battle precognition: sensing the flow of the force and perceiving the disturbances and variances within it. You did not use it today, obviously.”

Rey sneered, but agreed.

“Find that same center that you found on the base. Your center of being.” Kylo demonstrated, pulling the disengaged lightsaber from his belt. Holding the hilt in two hands, he brought it level to his chin and held it horizontally, closing his eyes. The air around them suddenly quieted as though he controlled the atmosphere. His presence was so strong that it roiled around him, pulling Rey into its orbit until he chose to release her.

He opened his eyes and presented his lightsaber to her. “It is not something that is used in all forms of lightsaber training, but for you, it works.”

Rey bit her lip, her eyes transfixed on the saber hilt. She had seen this before. Could clearly imagine what might come the moment she took hold of the hilt. He watched her, patient and unwavering; waiting as long as he had to for her to accept it. Finally, she did and quickly mimicked the stance.

“Is this better than your style?” Rey questioned, closing her eyes and searching for the center Kylo told her to find. She recalled Luke’s assumption that Kylo’s form would be reminiscent of Anakin Skywalker’s, albeit not as diligently trained. But Rey couldn’t imagine anyone being quite like Kylo Ren. Not in the slightest. His form was all his own and she could picture his movements: the twirling of his blade, his impossibly large gait, the way he spun and led with his swings in a lethal dance… how he seemed to enjoy the thrill of the fight. The *chase*.

“The form you choose must fit your strengths. Now, you are not focusing.” He chastised, and for a moment, she thought he might be teasing her. He almost sounded like his uncle, not that she’d ever tell him that. Regardless, she did as she was told. Breathing in deep, measured breaths, Rey calmed herself. She blocked everything out around her and listened for it: the quiet. She hardly had to search for it now, with Kylo so near.

“You must keep me out of your head if you are to focus,” she heard Kylo say, and Rey frowned in response. Sure enough, she felt him on the other side of the quiet, pushing in, testing her resilience and listening to her thoughts.

“What if that is not what I want?” she murmured before she could stop herself, and she felt the blush rise in her cheeks. On cue, Kylo ripped himself from her mind in a jarring pull, and Rey’s eyes
snapped open in the headrush. When the dizzying image of him in front of her settled, she sighed at the sight of his perplexed expression. He was still resisting. “It is the gray we must find and master, isn’t it?” Rey said carefully. “So I must let some of the darkness in…”

Kylo snatched his lightsaber from her hands and was on his feet before Rey could finish her sentence. He stared down at her, longing marring the anger that etched across his beautifully pale face. His mouth opened, aching to say words that fought against him, but something betrayed his will.

“Come. You and Skywalker will explain this gray to me.”
Author’s Note: I think you’ll like this chapter. :) Pulled dialogue from the TFA novelization.

Thank you endlessly to those who reviewed. It’s unbelievably encouraging and I appreciate it more than words can say.

Special thanks to those who were so kind to leave a comment! Robyn, soupyup, Beholderseye, Woodwork, and superstarem – you guys are wonderful!

Chapter Sixteen

Luke did not offer a warm reception when Rey returned. His worry mingled with cold reticence, though deep down, he was encouraged to see Kylo Ren in her company. Progress had to be made somehow, and it was being made by Rey’s hands.

“Where have you been?” Luke demanded, knowing full well how old and fatherly he sounded. Amused but apologetic, Rey smiled to her friend. There was a sense of dejection in his question that sunk her heart with guilt. She’d chosen another Master, after all.

“Training,” Rey admitted honestly.

His expression shifting from concern to suspicion, Luke challenged Kylo. “What have you been teaching her?”

“Much more than you have, Jedi.” The venom on Kylo’s tongue could have killed them all.

A silence as thick as Ahch-To’s humidity settled between them. Whatever fragile balance that kept
the two men from destroying one another threatened to tip with a single breath, and Luke was the one to take it. He spoke directly to Rey without breaking his nephew’s stare. “Be mindful of what you learn. Tread lightly. The dark side weakens you. It does not strengthen you like he may say. It is consuming.”

Kylo spoke for her. “I have protected her from it. I have done what you and the Resistance could not.”

The men were nose to nose by then, and it took all of Rey’s strength to shove Kylo away. Hiding her wince from her aching elbow, she stared him down into submission… and it was more than pain she was hiding. It was also the relief that she had successfully, albeit only momentarily controlled the beast. “It’s alright, Luke,” Rey said, the tension in her voice imperceptible beneath valiant hope that she was right. “My will is strong… both of ours are. Snoke has not been able –”

“I have no doubt of that, Rey,” Luke interrupted, finally regarding her instead of his nephew. “But know this: you are still a fledgling in the force, no matter how strong your will may be. Snoke may have not found you here – either of you – just yet, but allow a momentary lapse, and he could. With you two in one spot, I imagine you might as well be a homing beacon.”

Rey could feel Kylo seething behind her. “You underestimate my abilities, Skywalker? Face me. Do not hold back again, and I will erase your doubt.”

“It is Snoke’s abilities that I do not underestimate,” Luke corrected, and Rey had never before felt such anger from him. Such panic. “It seems that you underestimate your own Master. He has been inside your heads for years. Sought you both before you could even speak and has been in existence much longer than that. He knows what strengths and weaknesses you possess and has already exploited them.” He looked pointedly at Kylo. “Trained them. Filled your heads with ideas and hatred.”

“My hatred has come of its own accord, Master.” The slight made Luke wince, reminding him of his own failure as he lectured on their potential of failing just the same.

“Yes,” Luke conceded, abruptly calming himself. His sadness evident. “And that is why he won in the end. Because he knew you would let him in, over and over. You would let him win. He played to your weaknesses – to your emotions – just like Sidious did with your grandfather.”

Retrieving a walking stick and satchel that was placed out of sight, Luke slung it across his back. Pushing past them both, he looked to the sky, gauging its weather. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a Wookie to retrieve before the weather turns.” With that, he was gone.

They sat in silence watching Luke descend the hillside, neither daring to move until he was out of sight. Rey felt nothing but disappointment in them both. Luke’s noble ambition of saving and redeeming his nephew would never come when they continued to fight like cats and dogs. She could not forget the risk she took to aid him in that endeavor. She could not deny the truth she was learning, or that she was beginning to believe that Kylo deserved to be saved.

“Go,” Rey said abruptly, giving Kylo a hearty shove away from the dwelling door. “You shouldn’t be here when Chewbacca returns.”

“I do not fear the Wookie,” Kylo growled, but reluctantly complied. He took a few steps toward the path, then stopped to look back at her expectantly. Waiting. He wanted her to go with him; to leave the temporary home behind her. Though common sense told her no – to wait for Luke to return – Rey followed.
They had no destination in mind, and they walked aimlessly throughout the small island. It was something so simple. Something Rey would never have imagined doing with Kylo Ren: taking a walk in the dusk. And this time, he did not walk ahead of her, but beside her.

She understood on an emotional level why Luke had been so upset and apprehensive. He knew Kylo far better than she did, but Rey also knew that would not stay true much longer. Not when every time she followed the red string, she learned something new. She knew the deepest recesses of Kylo’s mind; had explored the nooks and crannies and even pried unknowns from the darkness. Luke had to understand that their being together made keeping Snoke at bay much easier... but it was more than that. Rey was stronger with the force when she was near Kylo, and she dared to imagine that Kylo was, too. Their bond was at its peak the closer they physically were.

Kylo was listening to her thoughts again, and he was going to answer her suspicions. “While under Snoke’s control,” he started, his voice dripping with disdain. “I had to learn how to keep him out of my head. It took years. He would so easily find his way through every attempt I made to stop him, but I found a way. It took the utmost concentration and it would often hinder me, having that distraction. My mind was constantly in two places at once, and only when I gave in to my anger could I focus.”

Rey could hear the thoughts Kylo was too proud to say: the anger he stored away would only go so far. Because when he was vulnerable, when the light crept back in, Snoke always returned, filling the empty space. But now... now, he could be vulnerable. He could let down his walls, because the only one getting inside of them was Rey.

Rey realized that it was then, perhaps the first time since he could remember, that Kylo could speak freely without Snoke listening. Truth would come willingly with no dictator looking over his shoulder. No one looking for a reason to punish him.

Rey could trust him.

“How could you leave your Master so willingly?” It was as much a question of mechanics – the binding ties in the force – as it was of resignation. Bonds were not easily broken, from what she understood. When she and Luke had first discussed the bond, he’d said it could only be broken by death: a wound or irreparable hole left in its wake. She secretly hoped that the bond between Kylo and Snoke was faulty and that he was not suffering as he should. More so, she hoped that their bond was stronger.

“Skywalker is right.” His admission nearly made Rey choke on her own spit. “Snoke has tortured me as long as I have known. And I followed him... for many reasons. At first, he appealed to me because he was the one there. When everyone else left, he was there, and what was once terrifying and intimidating became comforting. Someone to talk to.”

Rey’s heart wrenched at the thought of Snoke manipulating Kylo as a young boy, luring him into the darkness by preying upon his loneliness. In her early days on Jakku, she imagined she may have done the same if given the opportunity. Though she despised Unkar Plutt and his goons, she still served him; worked with them. Decisions had to be made when faced with inevitabilities and the burden of survival.

How alike they were, after all, if she dared to look closer...

Kylo continued, unfazed. “As I grew older, I knew better. Loneliness was just a weakness I could bury. But Snoke had knowledge. He had power. And he showed me that I could have it, too. I believed him for one sole reason: if I had such power, I could someday be rid of him. I followed him in hopes of gaining all that he boasted and with that power, I vowed to destroy him. To free myself.
I may have turned to the dark side, and I may have been blinded by my hatred and resentment, but that goal has always been true.”

Rey believed him. For the life of her, she did. He did not deny that he also vowed to destroy his own lineage in effort to break free from the light. In his mind, right or wrong, he did what he had to do to gain the strength he needed - to oust Snoke’s control over him. Han, his own father, helped him with that.

“And what of the Jedi?” Rey asked, stepping ahead of him as they neared the end of the trail. A spread of rocky beach extended before them, the ocean lapping at its coast. Facing him, Rey stood tall with all the hope that was left inside of her. “If you’d found a Jedi army, would you have killed them? What of Luke? And your mother? Do you still want them all to suffer?

Kylo’s expression was grave, but honest. He offered his hand and, eager for an answer, Rey took it. Immediately upon closing her eyes, a vision materialized of Snoke, enormous where he sat upon a throne.

“Prepare the weapon.” Snoke’s voice boomed. It sent a shudder along Rey’s spine. “I want the entire Illeenium system destroyed.”

Rey’s hands balled into tight fists. Snoke’s order to destroy the system would have included D’Qar. Had the weapon fired, Han would not have been the only casualty: the entire Resistance base would have joined him.

“No.” The sound of Kylo’s voice made Rey jump. He stepped ahead of the other man – the one Snoke had called General – and he faced Snoke head-on. There was a desperate urgency in his voice and he looked as though it was taking everything he had not to panic. “Supreme Leader, I can get the map from the girl, and that will be the end of it. I just need your guidance.”

He’d tried to thwart the order, but the weapon was readied anyway. His defiance did not go unnoticed. “Kylo Ren,” Snoke hissed as the General took his leave. “It appears that a reminder is in order. So I will show you the dark side. Bring the girl to me.”

Rey snatched her hand away then, relieved when Ahch-To reemerged around her. Kylo had tried to save not only D’Qar, but the entire system in which his mother resided. He’d questioned his Leader, and his punishment was to bear witness as Snoke intended to ‘show him the dark side’ … Where Kylo had been gentle in his interrogation, Rey was sure Snoke would not have been. The monster had seen compassion in Kylo Ren, and he meant to destroy it.

Above all else, Kylo’s following pursuit of Rey was in effort to save his mother’s life.

“I wanted Snoke to find them all,” Kylo confessed. “Any remaining force-sensitives. I endeavored to defeat Snoke and then train them all on a path that was not Jedi. On the right path.”

Silently, Rey regarded him before conceding with a slow nod. Leaving him in the shade of the forest, she wandered to the clearing, marvelling at the thick, dark clouds rolling in. Just as Luke predicted, the weather was turning, and she sent a wordless prayer into the wind that his travels would be safe. She closed her eyes to listen to the rush of the waves and breathed in the salty air. A single droplet escaped the clouds above, breaking on her upturned cheeks. One by one, more fell, and it felt different than the downpour mere nights ago. This rain was cleansing, and Rey would never tire of the range of precipitation that had been foreign to her for most of her life. From snow to rain to dense fog, it all felt so purifying, and Rey could finally appreciate it there.

At last, the balance was beginning to make sense.
A full day of torrential rain passed, and Rey was officially tired of the weather.

Kylo returned to the Falcon that night. Though she did not know whether it was for or against her better judgment, reservedly, Rey returned to Luke’s home. Gratefully so, because by the morning, a winded and drenched Luke tramped through the doorway, leaving a river in his wake. He’d had to leave a message with the village Chewbacca found solace in, for the Wookie had gone hunting to provide and repay his gratitude.

Rey quickly stoked the fire higher, warding off the chill, and took Luke’s cloak to hang on the hooks that bordered the pit. Averting her gaze, she leaned in the doorway and watched the rain fall while Luke changed into dry clothes. When he was finished, he pulled a med tube from his satchel and tossed it to Rey. Smiling, she knew exactly what it was for.

“Surely the villagers did not have this?” Rey questioned knowingly as she turned the tube over in her hand.

“I took it upon myself to visit the Millennium Falcon. I found it there.”

“A brave ambition,” Rey nodded thoughtfully. Luke had not yet brought himself to see the Falcon; she imagined the memories were painful, or perhaps the longing was.

“He was not there,” Luke answered.

She sighed heavily, watching her breath fog at the conflicting temperatures in- and outside of the dwelling. If Kylo was not on the ship, she wondered if he was waiting for her on the mountaintop. She cursed the rain through the dwelling door. “I don’t need this kind of interruption,” she muttered. It was exasperating. First, her elbow, and now this. It was as if the universe held her at bay.

Luke chuckled behind her, stretching out on his bed and groaning as the aches in his joints settled. “You shouldn’t let a little rain stop you.”

Rey gaped at him, flinging out an arm to gesture outside in defense. “It’s a blasted tsunami out there!”

It only served to humor Luke more. “Maybe it is you who should not underestimate your strength.” Luke’s entire demeanor apparently shifted on the topic of Rey training with his “lost” nephew. For that, Rey was surprised and grateful. She wondered what it was that had changed his mind...

Smirking back at him and accepting her defeat, Rey was relieved for the lift in mood. There had been enough angst for many, many days. A lifetime, even. Retrieving her cloak from its hook and Luke’s lightsaber from its shelf, she nodded goodbye to her friend just before he drifted off to well-earned sleep.

The trek up the hillside took much longer. Mud and debris sent her skidding back down every few steps, rendering her to her hands and knees in the steeper stretches just to make progress. The dull ache in her elbow did nothing but urge her forward, the pain an adrenaline boost. Scaling the mountain, she felt like she was back inside an old, dilapidated ship, climbing to new heights in search of treasure. It was one thing she enjoyed on Jakku – the exhilaration of seeing how high she could climb, to feel her muscles work and her strength grow, day after day. It would never be home. But she was ready to acknowledge that, at times, she missed the simplicity of it. Entrenched in this new world, everything was challenging and emotionally draining and confusing, and nothing more so
than her relationship with Kylo Ren… if she could call it that.

Reaching the top, Rey thanked the force that her intuition was right. Kylo was waiting for her. He seemed pleased that she had come, and part of her wanted to admonish him for doubting that she would… although, she almost hadn’t. Instead, she scolded herself. She was stronger than that. The thought of him - and Luke, for that matter - losing faith in her potential gnawed at her, and Rey decided she wouldn’t let that happen. No one was going to doubt her ever again. She was going to show what she was made of.

Kylo stood, a stoic form against the tidal wave of weather beating against him. Already he had the upper hand. He had the high ground and his vision was not hindered by the storm, for he wore his helmet for the first time since he’d arrived on Ahch-To. Every inch of his skin was covered while Rey was clad in her usual lightweight outfit and an already drenched cloak. The fabric clung to her like a second skin and it did more to impede her movement than warm her. Peeling it off and tossing it aside, she closed her eyes to find her center, just as Kylo had shown her. There, she found warmth despite the cold rain biting at her exposed skin. Taking her lightsaber in hand, she held the hilt horizontally and level, feeling for the disturbance.

It came quickly with the hiss of Kylo’s lightsaber igniting. The air around her shifted as he charged, abandoning the high ground to meet her in the middle. At the last second, Rey’s saber sprung to life and their beams collided for a fleeting moment. Just as quickly, he broke away, whirling around her to strike at her shoulder blades. Rey’s saber arced behind her, deflecting his attack and buying her a moment to duck beneath his counter swing. Responding with a targeted thrust of her own, she aimed errantly, missing wide and stumbling due to the strands of wet hair plastering against her eyelids. Cursing, she knew her flank was open, yet Kylo’s victory strike never came.

Clearing her vision, she righted herself to find Kylo waiting patiently behind her, the crackling of his weapon barely audible over the rain. Disengaging it, he clipped it to his waistband. His hands hooked beneath the jaw of his mask and lifted it to reveal his perfectly dry face. Approaching her, he took it upon himself to smooth back the strands of hair Rey had missed, his touch almost tender. Satisfied, he clamped his helmet over her head and bent to meet her eyes through its visor. He lifted his eyebrows expectantly and, torn between embarrassment and appreciation, Rey offered a thumbs up. Satisfied, Kylo retreated, brandished his weapon once more, and somberly motioned for her to come.

It was fair, now, each with their own advantage and disadvantage. Rey almost did not want to accept his charity; she wanted to prove that all she needed was her strength and her will alone. But deep down, she knew it wasn’t true. Only those who had nothing and no one to live for depended on nothing but themselves. Rey had and needed so much more: her friends, guidance, faith, belonging… It was clear to her now. She needed Kylo Ren.

They sparred for what could have been forever, but in her exhilaration, Rey could not tell. It was exciting and encouraging each time she gained the upper hand, but Kylo always found a way to respond – to force her back and find second wind. Of course he gained the high ground countless times, but she held her own against him. Unlike on Starkiller Base, their minds were clear, both fortified by the strength of their bond. They were evenly matched and they remained so until they were left panting and spent from the relentless exertion.

In the final lull while catching their breaths, Rey could feel the cold catching up with her. Goosebumps riddled her limbs and her fingers were white and trembling. Kylo fell out of his stance and extinguished his saber, Rey following suit. He looked as cold as she did with his hair slicked against his skin and his lips nearly blue. Again he motioned for her to come, but this time, he led her down the hillside’s opposite path. They descended as fast as they could in their exhaustion, he
gripping her elbow when she stumbled and her pulling him back when he stepped too close to the narrow ledge.

Finally, the Falcon was in sight, and they each rallied the last of their strength to sprint full speed toward it. Inside the sanctuary of a ship, they stumbled to the crew’s quarters and relished the warmth. Still, Rey shivered, soaked to the core everywhere the mask did not cover. Searching the rim for the releases, she pulled the mask from her head and turned it to and fro in her hands. Her reflection stared back at her from the shinier segments of the visor, the wet strands of her hair a latticework of disarray all around her face. Her typical three loops at the back of her head stuck out every which way and she couldn’t stop the giggling that bubbled in her hoarse throat. She remembered when the sight of that very mask had chilled her to the core – colder than she was now. It seemed so trivial now. It was just a mask; something to hide the tortured human being inside of it.

Kylo couldn’t hide the smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth, either. Pulling the thin blanket from the bunk, he draped it around her shoulders. Every wet, black inch of him glistened. And with his hair pushed back save for a few tendrils that fell over his forehead, Rey could see more of his haunting face and dark eyes than she ever had before. She could no longer deny it. He was beautiful, and even more so now that she had finally seen him smile.

Pursing his lips into a line and denying Rey the smile she was beginning to enjoy so much, Kylo stepped back and started working at his jacket’s clasps. One by one, he剥 each soaked layer away until she could see nothing but the bandages. They were dry but haphazard, obviously having tried to change them himself. He paused at his belt buckle and visibly decided to make do with his wet pants.

Rey waited, mesmerized, her eyelashes fluttering over heavy eyes. She knew she shouldn’t stare, but there was hardly anywhere else to look. Kylo caught her glances and hesitantly approached her, reaching up to smooth her hair back. And then there it was again. His smile; this time unrestrained. Starting at the bottom, he tugged at each tie of her haggard loops, letting her hair tumble out of the strange hairstyle he’d always seen her in. His stare lingered far too long at the way each damp strand fell around her flushed cheeks.

“You should too.” Kylo murmured after clearing his throat and gesturing to Rey’s dripping clothes. He was right - if she stayed in them, she’d get sick, just like the time she’d fallen into Niima’s watering hole and opted not to change out of her wet clothes, even as night fell. Biting her lip, Rey nodded, and on cue Kylo turned away to give her privacy. She didn’t want to leave the warmth of the blanket – it smelt like him, she’d noticed – but as she peeled away her tunic and her pants and her squishy, mushy shoes, she felt warmer in the nude than she did in her clothing. It was like shedding the cold of a Jakku night for the warmth of the sunrise.

Meanwhile, she couldn’t help but fixate on his bandages again, hints of pink still bleeding through the white.

“Why didn’t you have that repaired at your base? I imagine it would have taken no more than a few seconds to do, just like your…” she stopped, kicking herself. She couldn’t bring herself to mention the scar she’d given him.

Kylo remained faced away. “I did not want it healed,” he replied matter-of-factly, as if that was a logical answer.

Rey laughed a singular, incredulous laugh. “You’re as crazy as I thought.” Finished, she rewrapped the blanket tightly around herself and tapped Kylo’s shoulder. She was relieved to see his smirk at her chiding.
“If they healed it, it would be gone and nothing left.” His voice was serious and his grin, fading. “Scars are meant to remind us of our weaknesses… among other things.”

The way he looked at her – with eyes so full and deep that it was impossible not to get lost in them – Rey wondered whether he wanted the scar to remind him of his failure, or of her.

“There are many things to remember,” Rey agreed, thoughtfully. Picking up his helmet she’d set aside while undressing, she scrutinized it. It seemed so out of place there, held between them like a final barrier waiting to be broken. “But there are just as many things we’d do well to forget.”

The smile faded from his lips entirely – it was torturously fleeting, and she missed it already. He looked different when he smiled… like all that he was and everything in his past was suddenly far away and inconceivable. She’d forget it all, if the others would let them… if the galaxy would allow it.

Gently, he took the helmet from her hands, his eyes never breaking from hers. Letting it fall to the floor, he closed the space between them. He touched her then, in a way that was foreign to Rey and sent goosebumps cascading over her skin. His fingers trailed from her collarbone up to the nape of her neck and tangled there; his thumb tracing the contour of her jaw. That is where he stilled. Frozen and burning, all at once. The want rolled off of him in waves, but it was like he couldn’t understand it. He couldn’t be the one to give in; wouldn’t let himself… he’d already taken too much.

“It is time for you to heal, Ben,” she whispered.

Kylo breathed a shuddering breath. “You will be my undoing,” he whispered back. He barely finished the last word before bringing her lips to his, crushing them with a hunger and insistence that surprised them both. He tasted like the rainwater that still dripped down their skin and Rey drank him in. Listened for his heartbeat. Followed his lead. And as quickly as they began, they parted for breath after ragged breath. The room was spinning but the red string pulled tight, anchoring them there in a moment where nothing and everything made sense.

Rey needed more. Her hands abandoned their purpose of holding the blanket closed, instead gliding along Kylo’s bandaged torso to rest at his waist. This time, he did not wince at her touch. He leaned into her invitation, the heat of his bare skin pressed against every inch of hers and the cold was suddenly just a memory. She stood on her toes to meet him eye-to-eye; saw the need that defied the apprehension. Saw that it mimicked her own, rushing in her veins, boiling hot and unsatiated from within. Her kiss was urgent, clumsy - something she had never done before but could get forever lost in. Lips parting in mercy, their tongues danced and tasted as if they’d found water in the midst of a desert.

It was too much and not enough, all at once.

Kylo’s wandering hands collected themselves, gripping her biceps and pulling free. She was a vision looking up at him through thick, heavy eyelashes - her lips swollen and the blue hue from the elements replaced by a healthy, flushed pink. Her gasps warmed his cheeks as he leaned his forehead against hers. Torn between the last thing and the only thing he wanted to do, Kylo gripped the nape of Rey’s neck and held her still. In return, Rey held on for dear life.

Kylo took one last unsteady breath before closing his eyes, once again at war with himself. “Run back to Skywalker. Before I do any more regretful things.”

But Rey had already heard that one before. She wasn’t about to listen.
Author’s Note: This was a difficult chapter to write. It contains a lot of symbolism that keeps the gears turning in the plot. I’m not 100% happy with it, but here goes nothing!

Special thanks to Stiletto Ren, Beholderseye, Karla_shadow, soupyup, Robyn, and eyreheights from AO3 // shiitakehero, kwilson898, and vivalamiia89 from FFdotnet! Your kind words truly motivate me and are so appreciated. I will be doing my replies at the end of chapters going forward, so check out the notes for chapter discussion and shoutouts!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The med tube Luke had given Rey wasn’t enough, prompting her to retrieve some of the bacta stores from the Falcon’s storage bay. Kylo’s wound had only gotten worse and Rey meticulously tended to him, just as she’d done when he first arrived. She tied the thin blanket in knots around her body and struggled between modesty and fluidity of motion, but eventually the job was done. Albeit slowly due to the extent of his injury, they watched as the muscle hardened, the wet expulsions dried, and the skin knitted itself back together. The faintest of scars were left in its wake, and Kylo was relieved at the extraordinary medicine’s slightly fallible nature. After all, scars served a purpose for Kylo Ren.

Rey’s small, calloused hand pressed gingerly to where the wound once was. Lips parting in awe, it was as if the bacta and its effects were a fantastical thing she’d only ever heard of, or perhaps not at all. Just like the snow on Starkiller base and the rain on Ahch-To. Kylo couldn’t look away from the wonder in her expression, nor the glistening in her eyes. He knew what she was thinking without setting foot inside her mind. Knew that she’d wanted him to heal beyond the wound itself. Kylo’s flesh was the last tear that needed mending from before; the last door that needed closing, even if it meant closing on Han Solo. Rey needed to heal as much as Kylo did, but she had no visible wound to tend to – hers tore from within. And while Rey seemed to possess an inexplicably innate ability to survive and, more so, to forgive, Kylo was not a fool. Some wounds would never heal and some sins would never be fully absolved.
While Kylo was lost in thought of Rey – her eyes, her touch, the anomaly that she was – he hadn’t
noticed that she’d grown still. Uncertainty rolled off of her in waves, and suddenly, they seemed so
far from everything. Far from the resolute girl on Starkiller who didn’t think twice about facing a
creature in a mask. Far from Snoke’s mercenary with a death wish and nothing to lose. Far from
everyone that couldn’t possibly understand how and where and what they were... They’d crossed a
line beyond carnal kisses that were like coming up for air in a world in which they were drowning.
Beyond good and bad; black and white. There was no going back... But it seemed by the way that
she stared, wide-eyed, that Rey did not know how to go forward, either.

Or perhaps, she was afraid to.

She moved, almost indiscernibly, to take her hand back, and Kylo reacted without thinking.
Covering her hand with his, he held it in place against his ribs. The thought of Rey retreating – of
never touching him again – was as unnerving as the step forward he was desperate to make.

“Don’t be afraid,” she whispered. Kylo wasn’t sure if it was meant for him or for herself.

Suddenly, Rey wasn’t an open book anymore. She was the girl he could take everything from yet
never truly know a thing – the girl who’d lured him across star systems by the thinnest of strings. He
didn’t understand her. Not in the slightest. But he wanted to... More than he’d ever wanted to
understand anyone. And to get what he wanted, Kylo could not take in the way that he usually
would. He couldn’t bring himself to on Starkiller, and he didn’t want to, now. A bridge was built
between them, held together by fragile beams, and Kylo would not be the one to burn it to the
ground.

When he looked closer, it wasn’t fear in Rey’s eyes, but fatigue. Valiantly fighting it but facing a
losing battle, the exhaustion from the mountain, the rain, tending to Kylo’s wounds and everything in
between was more than she could contend with. Though she tried not to, her body swayed in
attempt to stay upright. It did nothing to betray her undeniable beauty: her hair nearly dry and a
tangled mess of soft, auburn wisps. Her skin flushed pink and warm; a long cry from the bone-deep
cold from the rain. Her body bared to him save for the blanket that, despite her efforts, was now
hardly keeping in place. As much as he hated to do it, Kylo had to let her go. For her sake.

“Rest,” he murmured, lifting his hand from hers. She slowly pulled back, her gaze drifting from his,
to his torso, and to the bunk in turn. Ever the defiant one, resistance was adamant in the squint of her
eyes and the purse of her lips. She did not like being told what to do, but inevitably, she nodded,
gathering the thin blanket more securely around herself and crawling into the bunk. Kylo retrieved a
second blanket from an overhead compartment and passed it to Rey, who graciously spread it over
herself. He would have left then, despite every fiber of his being screaming for him to stay, had she
not scooted herself as far to the side of the bunk as she could. Braced on her elbow, Rey’s eyes
swept from Kylo to the space beside her, left open and inviting.
Now, Kylo’s bones were warning him to retreat, but his blood urged him forward. Running hot and rampant in his veins, there was no quieting his pulse. No calming the want that Kylo could barely restrain, begging him to take hold of the girl and never let her leave. It would take everything he had not to give in to those desires…

Kylo slid in beside her and mirrored her position on his side, the narrow bunk forcing them flesh to flesh and nose to nose. Her fingers draped the blanket over them both, then crept back to where they had been moments before – pressed against the skin she had healed.

“Thank you...” Rey’s voice was soft inside his thoughts. The door left open. “... for staying.”

They watched each other for as long as their tired eyes allowed. Neither said a word more, but Kylo warred with a thousand things he should say. Nothing seemed right. Nothing seemed enough. But if everything changed the next day, he’d at least remember how she looked beneath him, purity intact and unmarred by the darkness that he was. He’d savor til his last day how she’d tasted on his tongue.

Typically when Kylo could no longer stave off sleep and it finally overtook him, the nightmares would come the moment he closed his eyes. In the past, he’d resist for as long as he could. Days would go by before he’d inevitably give in. Like clockwork, Snoke would be waiting behind closed eyes. There, through Kylo’s subconscious, Snoke would stoke the flames of his apprentice’s hatred, recounting Kylo’s past life and all of the sinful things he’d done to make his Master proud. He was relentlessly reminded of who he was and would always be – the Jedi Killer.

This time, Snoke would not be waiting for him.

Kylo closed his eyes to the image of Rey curled against him, her eyelashes casting shadows and mingling with the faint constellation of freckles on her cheeks. When he opened them again – his subconscious ones – she was there, too. Or rather, it was her former self. Little One.

He’d drifted into her dreams like a moth to a flame.

Jakku materialized around them, sand dunes extending infinitely in all directions. The sun was setting and the sky was stunning, streaked with pinks and oranges. Though Rey was fixated on the sky, she paid its beauty no mind. Her sights were set instead on a standard transport ship fading from view. The further it flew, the louder Rey’s cries grew.
“Come girl.” An ugly, gelatinous Crolute gripped her arm and pulled her in the opposite direction. Tiny as she was, Rey struggled valiantly against him, succeeding in wrenching her hand free just for the Crolute to nab her again. “Calm down. There is no sense in this, girl. You belong to me, now.”

Kylo seethed, his blood boiling as he watched the two make their way to a nearby outpost. He applauded little Rey’s defiance, for every step forward, she fought and pulled and struggled two steps back. The Crolute pulled her along with a rough, unceremonious tug so often, it was a wonder that her arm did not pop out of its socket. Exhausted and fuming by the time they made it to the outpost, he directed her to a large gathering where a tattered canopy stood on shaky legs and countless others of all ages huddled beneath its shade. Grumbling, the Crolute tossed Rey brusquely into the shelter along with a single package of something unappetizingly green. Unkempt and too-thin passersby lunged for the packet, but were kicked away by the Crolute. Rey took it with trembling, unsure hands and gripped it tight.

“I am Unkar Plutt and I am your employer. This is what you will work for: rations. Enjoy my hospitality tonight, girl, because tomorrow you begin earning your keep.”

The last thing Kylo heard before the image faded from view was the sound of Rey’s confused cries for her parents, sputtered between choking sobs. She never slept that night, though she was desperate to. Instead, she covered her face with her hands and whispered muffled prayers, asking for it all to be a dream and to wake up the next morning somewhere familiar.

She appeared again: older by several years and running along an empty landscape of arching dunes. She was sweating profusely and dressed in the same drab wraps she’d worn on Takodana, although they were too large and draped too loosely from her skinny body. What little skin was exposed to the harsh sun was filthy. Goggles covered her eyes and her face was loosely masked by a headwrap to block out the sand-laden winds. Her legs were pumping like pistons and she flew across the sand like a bird in flight… but every once in awhile, she would glance back, scanning frantically behind her.

One by one, three indiscernible creatures sprouted from nothingness, each donning a filtermask and covered from head to toe in grimy gear. They had nothing on Rey’s speed and kicked up as much sand as they waded through. But they weren’t giving up, and where she lacked in resources, they did not. The one leading the pack pulled a blaster pistol from his waistband and aimed for her. Crying out uselessly, Kylo lunged for the apparition just as the thug fired, his shot landing just ahead of Rey’s trajectory. Sand erupted in front of her and, startled, she tumbled backward. She scrambled to her feet, but the diversion gave just enough time for the thugs to catch up.

They surrounded her, each laughing a guttural, breathless laugh from the exertion. The lead thug approached her and caught Rey’s kick that aimed straight for his groin. As he doubled over, Rey
leap-frogged over him just to be met by a second thug’s quarterstaff to the gut. She crumpled beside the first thug still rolling in pain. Kicking her over onto her back, the two left standing each placed a foot on Rey’s biceps and pinned her to the ground.

Finally regaining his breath, the pack leader hoisted himself to his knees and wrapped his dirty, gloved fingers around her throat. “I’m going to enjoy this,” he spat, using his thumb to press hard against her esophagus. “And then he will. And then he will.” The other two were laughing, ready and willing for their turn, but the leader looked as if he meant to take his time. “You will not enjoy this, scavenger.”

Rey was screaming strangled, unintelligible obscenities, her head whipping back and forth erratically. It only served to make the thugs laugh harder. “Go on,” one taunted. “No one can hear you.”

“And even if they did, no one would care,” the other one chimed in.

“Let’s have a look, shall we?” The leader pulled at the layers of her tunic, exposing her chest binding. He ripped the goggles from her face and the headwrap followed suit. Suddenly, the laughter died. Save for Rey’s heavy breathing and still rambling curses, the others were silent. The leader shot to his feet.

“Did she see your faces?” he shrieked at the other thugs. They shook their heads.

“It won’t matter. Plutt will figure out which of his men attacked his favorite scavenger.” They commenced in shoving each other, frantically lashing out at themselves for their mistake. Plutt’s order was law at the outpost, and it was well-known: Rey was one of the best employees he had. She was one of the few willing to scour the worst of ruins, and more often than not brought in the most material. No one was to touch her.

Freed by their distracted scuffle, Rey stood, angrily brushed the sand from her limbs, and snatched her gear out of the leader’s hands. Beneath the rage that gleamed in her eyes, there was also resourcefulness. By now, she’d survived the waste-planet on her own merits, and Kylo could see how. “I will make you a deal, then.”

The three thugs shut up and turned their attention pointedly to her. Rey gestured to the quarterstaff. “First you will leave me that.”
“In exchange for what?” the leader interrupted, eliciting an impatient glare from the teenage girl.

“First,” Rey continued, leveling eye to eye with the leader. Again she pointed to the other thug’s quarterstaff without even turning her gaze. “You will leave me that.” A few heartbeats passed before the leader nodded. His henchman threw the staff at Rey’s feet in a disgusted huff.

“Second, you will not touch another woman or child here ever again.” Rey scanned the group, staring daggers into each respective thug before returning to the leader. “Is that clear?”

The leader smiled sickly and reached up to pinch her cheek. Rey jerked her face away before his touch could land, and, laughing vilely, he backed away. Without another word, they were gone.

Picking up her prize – if she could call it that, for the price she paid for it – she rolled the quarterstaff between her hands, testing its weight. Kylo watched as she eased herself into sloppy, questionable stances that grew steadier and steadier as the sun dipped below the horizon.

When the light was all but gone, she was wielding the staff like it was an extra limb. A formidable extension of herself.

The next thing Kylo knew, the endless sand dunes disappeared behind metallic walls and the blinding sun was shrouded save for hazy beams of light filtering in from between cracks in those walls. Kylo couldn’t identify what sort of shell he was in: too large for a tank or AT-AT, yet too small for a starship. The thick steel seemed to retain heat or, by the unforgiving feel of it, conducted it. On the far side, Rey ducked inside a torn hatch, her eyes eager and her scavenging net in hand.

There was not much left to the metallic carcass. It had already been meticulously gutted, save for a few panels that looked untouched high above them and clearly out of reach for the inexperienced hand. It didn’t seem to faze Rey. Leaving her net behind, she scanned the barren walls until she found a series of grates and wiring on one side. Grabbing hold, she hoisted herself up, her hands finding the narrowest of ledges and her feet often without holds of any kind. Nimply, she traversed along the smooth, curving façade. It did indeed curve, and she followed it until she was nearly horizontal the opposite way. A single beam ran the length of the ceiling – or maybe it was the dismantled machine’s side – and it led straight to the panels. The beam was just out of reach.

Rey blew on each of her hands and wiped them along her tunic for good measure before taking hold of a protruding sill. Hanging freely, she pumped her legs to and fro, gaining momentum and launching herself from the ledge to the beam. Kylo held his breath through her jump, releasing it only when she made contact and pulled herself up by grace of her upper body strength alone.

Crossing her ankles around it, she shimmied along, making it all look so effortless. It was tricky, however, reaching for the sheathed dagger clipped to her belt and her sweaty hands lost hold. Legs holding strong, it took a few tries to curl back up, hugging the beam close and pausing to shake out her nerves and catch her breath before continuing. With the edge of her blade, she pried the compartment open just to find nothing but useless wiring.
Rey stayed there for several more minutes, staring as if it would change if she looked long enough. Suddenly, she erupted into shrieking disappointment and slammed her fist over and over against the console. The heel of her hand bloodied and stinging, she cradled it with the other and grit her teeth, forcing back tears of frustration. When Rey calmed herself, she hung lifelessly from the beam, her hold on it slowly relaxing as well. Her thighs unclenched and her legs slackened around the beam as if on purpose…

Below, Kylo thrust his arm ahead of him. Nothing happened, and he instantly recalled and cursed the fact that he could not use the force to hold her there. Not while inside Rey’s dreams. He held his breath until Rey apparently changed her mind, angrily swiping at her wet cheeks before grasping the beam once more.

By the time Rey made it back down, she had lost the vigor, determination and hopefulness she’d radiated upon entering the forgotten machine. Retrieving her net, she trudged back to her transport and angrily stuffed the dingy, fraying rope into its side compartment. From the looks of it, she’d collected nothing that day, though the dirt and sweat and bloody scrapes mottling her skin showed she’d very much tried to.

Back to Niima before the sun set and with nothing to show, she did not bother visiting the cleaning stations or Plutt’s deposit stand. Instead, Rey continued beyond the outpost until a broken down AT-AT came into view. Kylo watched her disappear inside and return seconds later. Flopping down against the machine, she twirled a rusted pilot’s helmet in her hands. It was too large for her but she donned it anyway, craning the visor to the sky and losing herself in thought. Kylo could imagine what she was daydreaming: flying away from the wretched planet; seeking out her parents; starting a new life somewhere beautiful and without a single grain of sand. It was evident by the way she watched the sky long after the sun had gone down. She smiled at those thoughts despite how loudly and insistently her empty stomach growled. The helmet hid the tears that slipped down her cheeks, though no one would have seen them anyway. No one spared the scavenger any attention outside of business hours. And no one but Kylo heard her whisper “Come back…” Kylo recognized the tone in her voice, for it was often his own. In that moment, she’d lost faith. She spoke the words, but didn’t believe in them. No one was coming for her.

The light faltered for just a moment before dawning again, the memories persisting. Now, Rey was on her knees, her quarterstaff in hand and splayed laterally across her thighs. The backs of her wrists rested tensely in her lap, the palms turned upward. She scrutinized them as if they were foreign tumors she’d never seen before. As if in disbelief of their existence… or perhaps, what they had done. A crumpled form laid in front of her, lifeless and unmoving, its neck bent in an awkward, unnatural angle. Behind her, a girl no older than ten cowered with her knees hugged to her chest. Rey’s chest rose and fell, her mouth agape with each ragged breath. She squeezed her eyes open and shut in a staccato’d rhythm without time. Clenching her hands into fists, she rose weakly to her feet. Her body swayed and she staggered beneath her tired, aching shoulders. The fight had taken
everything out of her, but she’d won. By her own two hands, she’d survived. Rey turned to the girl behind her who winced at the sudden attention. The tracks of tears on her dirty face were already drying, but the ones on Rey’s cheeks were fresh.

“Please don’t be afraid. He can’t hurt you anymore.” Rey knelt with difficulty beside her, grimacing and leaning heavily against the quarterstaff for balance. She reached for the girl only for her to careen away, hide her face, and violently shiver. Rey sniffed the tears back roughly and swallowed. “I won’t hurt you.”

Finally, the girl accepted her hand and off they trekked, back toward the hell they called home.

They disappeared from view first. The dunes followed, blowing away bit by bit and the sky above fading to black. Kylo waited eagerly for some sort of redeeming vision to materialize. Something that showed happiness or contentment for the scavenger. Anything to augment the pain and tears and abandonment Rey felt, or the years of self-sacrifice and self-reliance she’d endured in some sort of resignation of her fate. He couldn’t forget the sight of her, hope in her eyes when she would look to the sky, and how that hope would fade; because what she yearned for was just a faraway dream that held no promise.

Kylo felt responsible for it all. The pain, the sadness, the abandonment… It was all his doing. The darkness that seemed so out of place festering inside of Rey was not there before. Little One on Chandrila had been full of light and promise. Rey on Jakku was filled with fear, doubt, and unspeakable actions for sake of survival. Desperately, Kylo wanted to take it all back: the dark seeds that were planted and swayed Rey from the light, whether she admitted it or not. He could see it there, in the confines of her memories. It was his own story told in a different light. He’d take it all back; lock it away inside; do anything to keep her from becoming like him.

But the darkness swallowed every last bit of light and drowned the remnants of Rey’s memories until there was nothing left. Nothing else came. Nothing ever came for Rey on Jakku, and nothing came there in the pitch black… save for the long, thin string that glistened red. It was taunting – a starcrossed link between two disparate souls meant for more than what they were dealt. Far off at one end, a pinpoint of light flickered, beckoning. Behind, some tangible sort of gravity pulled at him, growing stronger the longer Kylo stayed still. It wanted him to fall back; wanted to drag him away from the flickering light. He was no longer safe inside Rey’s mind, or even in the gray middle ground between hers and his. Kylo was careening back into his own head – a dangerous place when he was left alone inside of it. His doubts were twisting and creeping their way back in…

And there it was again. The noise. The dull *hum* that started from nothing and crescendo’d alongside the pull at his back. The light ahead, small as it was, seemed so blinding in its brightness and purity… but the *pull*… it was familiar, like the darkness surrounding him. It came so easily, finding its way to the home it was just beginning to lose. It was always there. In the recesses of his mind, it never left.
The red string creaked, straining and thinning against the pull.

Clawing at the pounding at his temples, Kylo faltered and closed his eyes. How could he have been so foolish to think he could escape it all so easily? The noise. The darkness. It is what he was... what he is. And she, the scavenger, had led him to believe that he could be otherwise. She’d made him feel vulnerable: the last thing Kylo could afford to be. She’d disarmed him completely, and he’d given himself over so eagerly that it both thrilled and sickened him. It all led to weakness. Once upon a time, he would have killed a man for showing such faults.

Kylo stumbled backward and away from the light, his heel colliding with something metallic and hollow. He reached for it, turning it over in his hands and seeing it perfectly well despite the shadows. Black and silver and glistening with fresh, wet crimson, his mask stared back at him. Kylo’s teeth clenched and he threw it as far as he could, the thunderous clatter empty-sounding and echoless as it landed. With newfound purpose, he headed back toward the light, its glimmering pinpoint flourishing with each step. But the closer he drew, the more it flared, writhing against itself and pulsing like a neutron star nearing self-combustion. He stopped, waited for the light to steady, but it didn’t. It reacted to him, a flame drawing him in like the moth that he continued to be, threatening to engulf him and drag him down with it in its demise.

It was clear to Kylo that his proximity threatened to extinguish the light. There was only one way to save it...

There is nothing there for you, Kylo Ren.

The pounding in his temples intensified and Kylo gripped the sides of his head again, desperate to silence the voice. It came, loud and clear just the same.

She is using you. She will hand you over to the Resistance where you will die at the hands of their self-righteousness.

He couldn’t place the voice… was it his? Snoke’s? A marriage of both, taunting him in memory and in madness?

She will abandon you like all the others.

An earsplitting snap sounded all around him, and Kylo felt something break from deep within
himself. The string was broken. Behind him, the warmth of that wavering light that had so
determinedly tried to remain lit, vanished. Ahead, Kylo saw himself, masked and stoic beside his
Master. Snoke stood eye-to-eye in a lavish, golden cloak and sober expression. Simultaneously
moving as if one entity, they reached for him. Pulled him back to where he belonged.

She cannot love a creature in a mask.

Kylo awoke in a silent scream, bolting upright in the too-small bunk. Curled beside him, her
breathing even and rhythmic, Rey slept on. Peace had found her and she slept so deeply, she was
impossibly still save for the rise and fall of her chest and the occasional darting of eyes beneath
eyelids. He wondered if she’d seen everything, just as he did. He wondered if she’d be able to
escape it, too.

But the hum… it was still there. Though she was as close to him as she could possibly be, he could
not will the silence to conquer the noise. He was awake, but the voice from his vision had followed
him into reality. His own voice...

Lies. She is full of them, just like the Jedi. Skywalker. She is no different.

Squeezing his eyes closed, Kylo tried desperately to resist the thought.

I see where your weakness lies. She will be your undoing.

It was true. He'd said it himself; had told her the very same. The proof was in the noise, the voice,
the broken string. The darkness would never leave, and Kylo had to let it back in. He had to
embody it in its entirety and steal it all away before it latched onto Rey. The string, their bond, could
not be repaired– not without risking the darkness following it and making its way to her. Kylo
couldn't let that happen. He had to get away from Rey... It was the only way to ensure her light
would not flicker out for good.

If he failed, he'd destroy her like everything else he’d ever touched.

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**Author’s Note:** Whelp! We were SO CLOSE, weren’t we? I hate being a tease, but it wouldn’t be slow-burn (and true or realistic to the story) if it were that easy (ya know what I mean). Trust in the process, dear readers - when it’s time, it’s going to be LOVE and it’ll feel so right. You’re going to love it, I promise.

On another note -- Kylo didn’t react well to experiencing Rey’s darkness! Dude is like a sponge for the dark stuff. It’s like a trigger. Poor guy can’t seem to catch a break – as soon as he lets his guard down, crazy shit happens. So many questions!

Is the string really broken?

Can Kylo wade through the disparaging, darkness-induced thoughts versus the burgeoning need to protect his apprentice?

Has his insecurities and self-doubt turned into an internal monologue of crazy, so that Kylo is becoming his own version of Snoke?

Can a dude just be happy?

Find out next time! :D

**vivalamiia89** – As always, THANK YOU for your reviews. I always look forward to our conversations. I agree that there is a lot of feelings swimming around amongst our heroes. Their ability to rein in those emotions, deal with them, and find a way to move forward gives such deep perspective to the concept of “forgive but never forget.” It really shapes these characters, because forgiveness is a subjective thing. And can anything truly be forgotten (even WITH the force)? What’s so important about this dynamic is that it gives us a reasonable way of believing that yes, everyone can be forgiven for their transgressions, but at a price (whatever that may be).

I could definitely see Kylo panicking at Luke’s assertion that Snoke is stronger than they perceive him to be, but then again, I think it’s safe to assume that Kylo would know that fact better than anyone. He may overestimate his own abilities, but be emboldened by the strength he is drawing from the bond with Rey. By the end of this story, I think he’ll realize that his strength is not JUST in the force, but derives from other things as well.

You pointed out one of my FAVORITE things about the last chapter – Kylo’s modesty for Rey. I cracked up when you said “It’s like you can murder your own father but you still manage to act modest…” SO TRUE, and so funny. He thinks of Rey as an anomaly but really, so is he. Things like this is how we see the inherent good in him, which is SO important. The little things show that he is human, after all, and that he is not too far gone.

Thank you again, love!
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: Warning – this may be a tough read toward the end. Please take note of the discussion at the end of the chapter.

Because of the nature of this chapter, I’ll try to get the next one out pronto. We need some feel-good feels after this!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Eighteen

Rey knew something was missing before she even woke. She did not rouse from simple, nightmareless slumber and open her eyes to the calm and the quiet. No, because the reason for that serenity was no longer in the bunk beside her. Instead, she was jarred awake by the feeling of loss and a noise she’d nearly forgotten. A noise that had made her mindless and, just days ago, had driven her from the edge of a cliff.

Rey dressed quickly in her nearly-dried clothes, throwing on her trousers, tunic and cloak. Though she felt guilty for it, she breathed a sigh of relief when she found the hilt of Luke’s lightsaber at the bottom of the pile. That relief faded when she noticed that Kylo wasn’t the only thing missing. His helmet was gone as well.

Instinctively, Rey closed her eyes and sought out their bond. It was there: the string. Along with it, the constant, reassuring presence it had become. She plucked at it, listened for its hypnotic chord that had, at one time, risen like a beacon above the wretched hum… but the chord was silent. Rey panicked, fearing the noise drowned it out – too loud like it had been at the cliffside, but… it wasn’t loud at all. The noise was indeed there, but it was manageable. The string was simply silent.

In her mind’s eye, Rey was sprinting to where it led. She found the gray in seconds, the balance like a second nature to her now with the light and the dark on either side. It was the dark where she had to venture, and for the first time in a while, she feared it. She feared what she might find after the vulnerability she’d shown in Kylo Ren’s arms. Yet it pulled in such an alluring way, as if to say the answers were all there, waiting for her, if Rey simply braved the journey. She gave in, and though she followed it as far as she could go, Kylo was not at the other end. No matter how often she called his name and clawed at the barrier he’d rebuilt, she could not beckon him back to the light or the gray.

Why are you shutting me out, Kylo? Rey demanded against the silence. You can’t do this; it’s dangerous!

Rey broke from the reverie and, for a moment between the haze, she thought she saw the shadow of
him waiting in the doorway… Blinking, she looked again, but nothing was there. She was seeing things… like the mirages on Jakku, her eyes were playing tricks on her.

Rey rubbed at her eyes to clear the sleep away, snatched up the lightsaber, and fled from the Falcon. She thought of the dream she’d had in the night, of effortlessly running along the dunes of Jakku. The burn in the muscles of her vigorously pumping legs as she ran along the mountainside’s terrain was no different than in the desert. As horrid a place as Jakku was, the planet conditioned her in such a way that Rey imagined she could face anything… But as her attempts to reach Kylo continued to fail, Rey realized that it wasn’t until she defeated him on Starkiller Base, then began training alongside him, that she really could face anything. He was the reason she knew it to be true.

Beneath an unmistakable, sinking feeling, Rey just hoped she wasn’t going to have to face him. Not again. He’d given her new strength in so many ways, and now, he seemed to be leaving her. That couldn’t be all that there was. It couldn’t be the end.

Breathless, she reached Luke’s dwelling and was greeted by an overzealous Wookie pulling her into a bear hug. Rey returned the greeting, forcing aside her concern for a moment. She’d missed him since they landed on Ahch-To. It had warmed her heart to witness the reunion between Chewbacca and Luke. It mirrored the moment when Chewie and Leia reunited, and Rey counted herself blessed to have been included in this loving circle of legends. All faults and mistakes aside, they were the closest things to family she’d ever truly had.

“It is good to see you again, my friend,” Rey murmured, smiling at his typical Wookie response. She never tired of hearing his eclectic language. “Luke…”

Luke raised a hand, his expression stern. “I have not seen him, Rey. He has not come here.” Chewie wailed his disdain, and at Rey’s gap-mouthed and questioning stare, Luke elaborated. “Sometime in the early morning, I awoke to this…” he struggled to find the right word. “This droning in my mind. I couldn’t escape it, no matter how hard I tried. I realized that I was hearing your thoughts again, Rey. I’ve heard the noise. Snoke… What has happened to your bond?”

The color drained from Rey’s complexion. Her strength of mind was weakening, and she’d unwittingly allowed Luke to enter her thoughts. It just served to prove her right: her and Kylo’s bond was waning… but why? After so many days of having her guard down, bolstered by the strength of their bond and Kylo’s proximity, Rey hadn’t had to put in the effort to fortify her mind. Together, they’d been a fortress that not even the most powerful Jedi, Luke Skywalker, could infiltrate it. But now, the darkness was a flood encroaching upon those walls, and the bond was too weak to hold it at bay.

Rey didn’t need to answer; Luke simply listened to her train of thought. “I’ve never seen anything like it,” he mused, both concerned and intrigued. “Your bond surpasses anything like that of a mere Master and Padawan. I’ve never seen something that is as empowering as it is debilitating, depending on how you utilize it.”

Debilitating… what was happening to Kylo? Just as quickly as she’d come, Rey bolted from the hut, calling back over her shoulder. “We have to find him before Snoke does.”

Splitting up, the search began. Rey’s first instinct was to check the mountaintop, crossing her fingers that perhaps he awaited her there like the day before. She hiked to the top, and when her line of sight reached over the plateau, she gasped. A tall, shadowy figure stood, swathed in black from his helmet and cowl down to its boots. At the center of the clearing, its back was turned to her. Before Rey could truly see who or what it was, her vision blurred. The world around her disappeared in a second, replaced by black nothingness. With each beat of her heart, the world around Rey shifted – image after image playing like the last memories one sees before their light is snuffed out. In
between the chaos, Rey saw him – Kylo Ren, as he once was. Masked and cold, standing above an old man who looked back at him as though he knew just what he was. Fragmented whispers… I know where you come from. Before you called yourself Kylo Ren … It did not faze Kylo Ren as he ripped his lightsaber mercilessly down upon the old man.

Gasping for breath, Rey broke free from the vision and crumpled to her knees. The vision was gone, and so was the shadow… she was alone on the mountaintop. Clawing at the gravel beneath her hands and knees, Rey closed her eyes and reached for Luke.

Something is wrong, Rey spoke through the connection. I feel it… the darkness.

Understanding, Luke reached back. Guard your mind. It may be faltering, but the bond is still open between you.

Rey frowned. In their time together, she’d grown used to experiencing visions or memories and sharing them along the bond. She was getting the hang of searching for the right ones and taking what she needed… but what she just saw came of its own accord in wakefulness like a hallucination that was far too real. The memories were not hers. They had to be Kylo’s…

Pressing on, Rey pushed the uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach aside. At full speed she ran back down the mountainside, heading for the site of Kylo’s downed ship. It sat, still in shambles when she found it… but to Rey’s dismay, the strange shadow had followed her there. It was hunched against the hull of the ship, just as Kylo had been when Rey first tended to his wounds. Once again, Rey’s sight shifted into darkness, the world around her fading. She was no longer in the clearing, but in a ship’s lavish and deserted med bay. The sparking carcasses of medical droids littered the floor, left in the wake of what Rey could only guess was an incensed tantrum. Maskless, Kylo Ren dragged himself toward a bacta pod. His uniform was torn to shreds. Through each break in the fabric, he bled profusely. Whatever energy he’d had left was undoubtedly spent on destroying the very droids tasked in healing him. On his knees, Kylo gripped the side of the pod. His entire body shook with the effort, and halfway between hoisting himself inside, something inside him broke. Sliding back down and wincing as he shifted himself into a sitting position, he gave up. The word conditioning crept into Rey’s train of thought. And when Kylo began pounding at a particularly angry looking wound at his chest, roaring with each punch in an agony that was as much psychological as it was physical, Rey couldn’t bear to watch anymore…

Rey clung to the side of the ship as the vision lifted with the light of day. Gasping for breath, she waited for her pulse to calm. Even more urgently now, she needed to find Kylo. Needed to see if he was orchestrating the dark memories, making her see them while he puppeted the strings out of sight.

Having searched every part of the island she knew of, Rey ventured to where she had not yet explored. Through a clearing raised high on a plateau, crumbling arches and stonework reached like skeleton’s fingers into the sky. The nearly-gone remains of a courtyard and satellite buildings surrounded a central building. Its roof was gone, as if the structure had not had one in the first place. Walls jaggedly lined its perimeter, vines cascading along its façade and trees growing inside, throughout, and from beneath it. They looked as though they’d always been there, and it was the temple’s remains that disturbed their existence. That, and a strange shadow that meandered through the crumbling pillars.

Luke had mentioned the place when Rey first arrived: it was the site of the first Jedi temple. So badly had Rey wanted to see its remains, to take the time to appreciate its history… but suddenly, she no longer saw the temple. In its stead, the light of day was replaced by the glow of orange flames, licking impossibly high into the sky. Walls crumbled in the fire, the terrain desolate and charred.
Bodies burned until they were unrecognizable, and among them, a lone figure strode through. He was looking for something – or someone – else. He was not satisfied with the lives he’d already taken. No… the Jedi Killer needed one more.

Screaming and clutching at her temples, Rey fell to her knees just as the vision broke. Though she knew daylight was on the other side of her closed eyes, she couldn’t bring herself to open them. *Please…* she thought, begging, though she wasn’t sure *who* she was begging nor if they would hear it. *No more. I’ve seen enough.*

*What do you see, Rey?*

It was Luke who answered, and Rey choked back a sob. How could she tell him that what she saw could have only been the slaughter of his students? *Darkness. Things from the past…* Rey couldn’t figure out why she was seeing the memories at all. Every time she looked for the red string that bound them together, it writhed against her reach. Resisted her. At the other end, she could not see through the darkness, and Kylo was lost inside of it.

The only place left to look was the first place Rey had left.

Gauging her trajectory, the choice was clear: she was nearer to the Falcon than to Luke’s, having circled almost all the way back. If she followed the coastline, she could avoid the terrain and cut her time in half making it back to the Falcon; and that is exactly what she did. Rey followed the horribly rocky beach, evading countless waves that tried over and over to devour the shore. Here and there she could skip from boulder to boulder, keeping her feet dry. Through a stretch, she clung to the base of a cliffside, traversing it laterally above where the waves had won and the beach was gone.

For a moment, if she closed her eyes, she could picture Jakku beneath her instead of Ahch-To. Instead of a mountain, she scaled the interior of broken and abandoned starships. When she opened her eyes, the cliffside gave way to a new image: a long, suspended walkway. The two figures who occupied it became one when one fell, leaving the shadow behind.

Rey waited for the vision to pass. It was clear to her, then. The shadow would continue to follow her until she ended whatever this was…

Finally, the crest of the Millennium Falcon came into view… but something was not right. Rey stopped and pressed herself against the wall of the stone façade’s overhanging. The ground shuddered beneath her feet, skittering stones along the path. When she peeked, she saw that the Falcon’s hatch was closed and its engines were engaged.

*You are not leaving so easily!* Rey screamed, mentally pounding against the walls of Kylo’s mind and praying he’d hear. *You will not run!* Rey leapt from the cliffside and, landing effortlessly on the shore, bolted into a sprint toward the ship. Her fists slammed against the hatch controls and the hydraulics flushed and released, hissing beneath the airtight compression. Not waiting for the ramp to fully descend, Rey hoisted herself up and inside.

It was not difficult to track him down. Rey simply needed to follow the path of destruction. Nevermind his lightsaber – Kylo was a weapon himself, leaving dents and jagged, gaping holes along the corridors where he’d sent his fist through its walls. Lights and wiring were torn away from consoles, or what was left of them. In one section, the bolted plates that the walls were comprised of were ripped from its fastenings. In another, the metal grates of the floor were pulled free and implanted in the ceiling.

The wreckage led to the cockpit bay where Kylo stood, masked, heaving and breathless. The controls were in shambles. Blood dripped from countless cuts in his hands, his gloves in shreds and practically nonexistent.
“You cannot control me! You will not win!” he roared to the empty air. He was still, as if waiting for a response, then doubled over in pain. His hands clutched the helmet where his temples would have been, his pained groan crescendoing into an incensed roar. Once he regained his composure, it was as if something that Rey could not hear told him to turn around; to look behind him at the intrusion.

Rey did not fear him. She couldn’t, or she suddenly believed that she wouldn’t survive. She needed to separate him from the shadow that haunted her all across Ahch-To. “Take it off,” she demanded, glaring at the helmet she’d come to hate. “This is not who you are anymore.”

Kylo did not comply; would not do as he did in the interrogation room. He was not the same man…

At first, it was as though he saw right through her… until his shoulders rolled back and his hands balled into fists. The leather of his gloves creaked against the tightness of his grip. The small room filled almost tangibly with his anger.

Something he’d said what felt like ages ago rushed back to Rey.

Isn’t that what you want? Not to let the darkness in?

Kylo was letting it in. All of it. And the dark side was winning.

Horrified, Rey tore at his barrier again and reached for the red string, reached for him, willed him to stop. She knew he was there, lost inside the darkness he couldn’t let go of.

“Incessant girl,” the words rolled in a low growl. All around him things were in chaotic disarray, loose wiring throwing sparks and the lights flickering above. Each time they dimmed, Rey thought she saw the shadow flitting back and forth between what Kylo once was and what he was fighting to become.

Rey extended an arm to him as if calming a wild beast. Keeping her tone soft and even, she approached in small, measured steps. “I know he is there,” she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. “You don’t have to listen to Snoke. What you’ve done… it’s in the past. Leave it behind.”

Kylo’s hands clenched and unclenched, the blood squeezing through the creases of his fingers and the shreds of the leather. It dripped to the floor as he met her, step for step. “You know nothing, scavenger,” he hissed through gritted teeth.

Rey winced at the belittlement. It had been a while since he’d last used the word, and it burned in her ears to hear it now. “Don’t let him in, Kylo. He will try and lure you back. You cannot let him –” She yelped as his hand shot out, fisting in her tunic and dragging her close. Effortlessly, he lifted her to meet his gaze and she clung to his arm, her feet dangling and kicking. Even as she landed kick after kick, Kylo did not waver.

“Let him what, scavenger? Reclaim his monster? His creature in a mask?”

She tried to speak, to coax him to stop, but his grip wasn’t just on her tunic. An invisible force closed around her throat and began to squeeze. When she closed her eyes, he was there – the real him – resisting just as strongly. She was too close and he could not keep her out. Visions were flashing with lightning speed: strikingly white snow, crimson blood stark against its purity; a lethal dance of blue saber against red; Rey standing above and him subdued on the ground. The scar on his face was wide and fresh, and she could hear his breath hitch at the pain… but it was the Kylo in reality who was struggling with the memory, as if a phantom pain had returned to the scar beneath
the mask.

Opening her eyes, though her vision dulled from lack of air, Rey clawed at the jaw of Kylo’s mask in search of the latches. Held by nothing else but his grip at her tunic and the force around her neck, her fingers found purchase. She wrenched the helmet from his head. Beneath, his eyes were glazed, unseeing even as they bore into hers. But Rey could sense the break in the madness. A faltering in his blind rage.

His face contorted, twisting as Rey traced the scar with her trembling thumb. It was true: he was feeling it. Once he’d let the darkness in again, his past returned to haunt him... and it gave Rey an idea. Bracing his wrist with one hand, Rey pulled the other back and sent a solid punch into his ribs. Doubling over and groaning in pain as if the wound was fresh, Kylo released her. Rey stumbled to her knees, the mask clattering beside her, but she had no time to right herself. Reaching up to his prone form, she took his face in her hands and forced him to look into her eyes.

“No, Ben. No.”

He growled in response, the name itself wounding him, and his grip reclaimed its place around her throat. Rey croaked against his grasp but did not – could not – relent. She closed her eyes and held tight to the string, whispering his name to him over and over. Ben. This is not who you are, Ben. She felt him fall to his knees in front of her, felt him force her backward and release her, his arms instead caging on either side of her. His body shuddered all around her and his quick, gasping breaths were hot against her cheeks. The walls broke down, crumbling to dust.

She caught his panting lips with hers, and after a long, tumultuous moment, Kylo finally breathed back. His body went slack against her hold, spent. When Rey dared to open her eyes, she saw that the faintest of light had returned to his.

“Please… don’t leave…” his voice was hoarse, panicked, and barely a whisper against her lips. Rey’s hands finally left his face to wrap around his waist, pulling him closer. They collapsed together on the floor, holding on to each other for dear life.

“I won’t,” Rey murmured, threading her fingers into his hair. “I won’t leave you, Ben.”

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Well THAT was not our poor boy, was it!? (It is important for me to point out that at this point in their story, in his right mind, Kylo would not harm Rey). Side effect of trying to be Mr. Noble and take on all that darkness, for sake of shielding Rey from it. There’s no time for martyrdom! Not when our fave couple is battling some pretty gnarly, dark side-induced hallucinations. Was it Snoke that made Kylo believe the string had broken? Or was it Kylo’s own fear of not only accepting Rey’s affections, but also the possibility of losing her? Just like everything else that had been taken from him. His actions mirror the events at Luke’s temple, so what can we expect from him next? Fight or flight? WHO KNOWS??

And poor Rey. The darkness within Kylo overflowed, and she was the recipient of the runoff. Her ability to forgive is TRULY being tested here, and yet, she fully understands that she is the only one who can pull Kylo back from the brink. Can she trust him to
keep it all under control? Will the gray be enough to satiate him, or will Rey be enough “pull” to bring Kylo back toward the light? Can’t a girl just get some damn training?
WE’LL SEE!

**Special thanks to Robyn, Blackeyedlily, Beholderseye, and vivalamia89!**

For a little more insight and discussion on the story / what’s to come, Beholderseye made an amazing, spot-on comment. I’ve also included my reply:

**Beholderseye:** The way I see it, you have touched on an important point (while being a tease.....grrrr! ;). Kylo is reliving his worst fears while being triggered by her darkness as you put it, but even at his most vulnerable he wants to protect her. He still feels responsible, and wants to preserve her happiness even if it is at the cost of his own. And that is love in it's most pure and potent form. Infatuation seeks only to consume, to venture further toward what attracts it. Love can deny self to seek the best for the beloved. That is what Anakin and Padme didn't have and what Han and Leia struggled with. Kylo and Rey are equals and they both want to truly understand each other. And this is why I squeal every time you update!!!!

**KristinaMarie:** And this is why *I* squeal every time you comment!!! I am SO glad you see it that way!! I believe that someone so deeply steeped in darkness - regardless of what "light" may be lying dormant within - cannot simply throw it to the wind on a whim. There will be struggle. There will be rehashing of what he's trying to escape. But above it all, the innateness of their bond shines through, and Rey is the one who will pull him out of it. We all know that Kylo (or rather, Ben) has the ability to draw upon a deep sense of compassion - it's in his blood. I believe that his definition of compassion absolutely leads into Anakin's, but in a much more profound sense. Ben gets it, and it's what he's been wanting his whole life. True, unconditional love. The culmination of his character is to have learned for himself what everyone before him got wrong - even if he makes (big) mistakes along the way.
Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: To all those still reading – I’m so sorry it took so long for me to put out another chapter! Lots of things got in the way, but finally things are slowing down. I’m hoping to push out the rest of this story in quick fashion because I’m already working on the sequel. :) So I’ll be responding to comments after I post this so as not to waste any more time.

Anyway... Who else is counting down the days til TLJ?? :D

Chapter Nineteen

There was a time when you let me know
What's really going on below
But now you never show that to me, do you?
But remember when I moved in you
And the holy dove was moving, too
And every breath we drew was Hallelujah

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Exhaustion clawed at him, begging him to give in, but Kylo couldn’t. He wouldn’t; not when she was there with those eyes that held so much more wisdom than anyone gave her credit for.

There was no way to tell how long they laid there on the cockpit floor, not daring to move or breathe. She was a hair’s width away from him, both on their sides and facing each other. He could see the uncertainty in her eyes. He could see how the trust that had come so achingly slowly was now wavering. And he couldn’t blame her. Still, his mind was clear… for now. Every part of him desired to touch her, the sweet haze of silence filling his head until there was nothing left there but her. No Snoke. No darkness. Just her.

The ache grew stronger with each passing minute. There was no doubt in his mind that given the chance she once seemed so willing to give, he would devour her. He couldn’t trust himself. He couldn’t trust that the darkness wouldn’t return and consume him again. He didn’t know how long it would take, but eventually, Snoke would win again. The monster knew what strings to pull, what emotions to provoke. And then, Rey would face the same kind of creature that she so naively thought she’d purified.

They had much to rebuild. He would have to stay close to keep the darkness at bay, but he would
not risk harming her again. He would not give in to his desires if it meant keeping her safe.

“Why? Why did you hide this?” She was the first to speak, and her voice shook in its disappointment. She was not a fragile girl by nature, yet there she was, laying on the floor amid the wreckage, clinging to a broken man. She exposed herself so willingly; forgave so easily. Kylo had never known how to do the same. It dawned on him that it wasn’t her fragility keeping her there, but her bravery.

Rey’s brow furrowed. She couldn’t hear his thoughts. “It is frustrating that I must break down your walls over and over. That I must read your thoughts to know what you feel… And now, I can’t even do that.”

His jaw clenched, both in shame and in defiance. He couldn’t run anymore. He would have to let her in; let her see what she wanted to know.

“Come with me,” she whispered. The way her voice rounded softly over her words was so inviting. “Don’t stay in here. You are frightening the droids.”

Kylo knew what she meant, and he did not like it. She wanted him to go to Luke’s dwelling and stay there. She wanted everything to be harmonious, so that she could have her Jedi friend and her… whatever he was… at the same time. But it occurred to him, suddenly, that there was nothing she could ask for that he wouldn’t give. Nowhere she could go where he wouldn’t follow. Since landing on the pitiful island, every moment between them made him feel like he was losing his resolve. Now, with his mind clear, he had simply gained a new one. He had a new purpose, and it was in her.

He would do anything for her.

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Rey was sick of all things psychological. Perhaps she’d grown accustomed to how easy it was in the fleeting time of blissful quiet, solitude, and strength. Before Kylo’s breakdown, it had been too good to be true. It couldn’t have been that easy, that they’d find each other, their bond would flourish, and nothing would break through and threaten to send them careening back into what they’d had before. But she was wrong. It happened, and it was the more experienced of the two who’d faltered.

The breakdown… she imagined it was similar to what had happened when he was young; when he’d lost his will to fight and gave in to Snoke. Everyone around him ushered him over that edge and left no one to pull him back from the brink. Rey couldn’t be sure – she’d only seen glimpses of the happenings there, and never of his full resignation to the dark side. Now, she was unsure if she even wanted to see it. What happened in that day was similar enough.

Kylo was close-lipped, but when he finally conceded and let Rey in again, Rey’s task was obvious. She had to bolster his confidence in their bond. She had to make him see that what they had was right. He couldn’t allow doubt to complicate things and threaten their security. And so, there on the cockpit bay’s floor, she needed him back inside and in the place that was safest for them both: she beckoned him to the gray.

He was there, waiting for her in the middle where their minds met. There was nothing there except for their metaphorical bodies: no visions to enlighten them, no dark and no light. *Forgive me,* he said
beneath his breath. *I was trying to protect you.*

At last, an answer, albeit a confusing one.

*You were scared,* Rey chastised, beside herself. He grimaced at the accusation. *You know that we are safer together. Stronger against him than when we are apart. Why are you so adamant on refusing that fact?* Kylo didn’t respond. She sighed. How was it so easy for her to admit her weakness, while he would deny his to the death?

Rey continued. *It’s when we are together that we are impenetrable. Without you, perhaps I could fend Snoke off for a bit, but who knows for how long? I’d eventually tire. He’d outlast and overpower me. He’d win, and all we have worked for – all that you have trained me for – will have been for nothing.* Rey closed the distance between them, but did not dare touch him. Not yet. *The exact same would happen to you – it already has. When we are together, it is not weakness you are seeing. It is calm. It is the gray. It is purity and strength. It is the force embodied in our bond. It is my life entwined with yours.*

Kylo’s eyes were fixated on Rey’s hands, just out of reach where she restrained herself with the strongest of reservations. When she did not reach for him, did not touch him, she could see the resistance in Kylo’s expression.

*Whatever this is between us,* he conceded. *It is all that it is. Something that binds us together. Nothing more.*

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They parted ways, Rey heading back to the dwelling on the mountainside and Kylo to who knows where. He had to leave the Falcon for his own good, Rey had warned – C3PO and R2, who’d been idling themselves with diagnostics and upkeep in the storage bay, had already begun repairing the damage, and Rey intended to send Chewbacca to assist. A sneer on his face, Kylo would follow her orders, but not before stepping to her. Close enough to hear the hurried heartbeat that contradicted the words that would fall from his lips. Leaning down to her level, his breath tickled her ear when he whispered *“This will not happen again. I will not let it.”* He was gone a moment later, disappearing along the coastline.

Though she would take him at his word, Rey had no desire to follow; in fact, she needed to get as far as she could. Just for a moment. Just to breathe. In his own way, he’d conceded to joining them and would not be returning to the Falcon… not just yet. Rey understood the feeling: he needed to steady himself, first. He needed to find clarity and bolster his resolve. He needed to be sure he was stable before he could trust himself. Rey wondered if he could see the light in himself, then, shattering the darkness. More so, she wondered if he’d even admit it.

For his sake and theirs, Rey needed him away. Their relationship – or whatever she could call it – was draining with its constantly moving parts. It was her burden to bare, and she needed to go and settle the nerves of her comrades. They were sure to have felt it all. Wisely, they stayed away, leaving Rey to tame her monster. After all, Luke’s ambition to save his nephew was no longer his: that torch had been passed to Rey the moment the incredible strength of their bond was realized.

Luke was pacing outside of his home when Rey returned, and he stopped and watched her with a silent, heated glare. Uncomfortable, Chewbacca left to tend to the Falcon, grumbling at the affront of
his beloved ship and continuing to do so until he was out of sight. Rey missed him the moment he left, because being face-to-face with an angry Jedi Master was not the most pleasant of things.

Luke set the tone for the conversation, and it was one that made Rey’s stomach clench. “Was I right to believe that Ben Solo is lost? Lost to him; lost to us all.”

Rey was right: Luke had felt and heard it all. With their bond weakened and barriers down, Rey and Kylo had little defense against the experienced Jedi. Still, she refused to accept defeat. “He is not lost. You are letting your emotions get the best of you, Luke. Where is your compassion?”

“What compassion are you showing now? You do not want him near you, and you shouldn’t. He is dangerous. He is unstable. Snoke has driven him mad.” He was pacing again, and Rey wondered if he even noticed how similar he was to his nephew in mannerism.

“He is not mad,” Rey seethed through gritted teeth. “And… and even if he were, you’d have gone mad, too! We all would have.” Rey wished her argument could be stronger. True, she did empathize with Kylo Ren. Enduring years of torture and committing unspeakable acts, just to finally be free of it… Feeling all the pain of what he’s done… Having the darkness and the monster within coaxing and pulling him back… Still, Rey couldn’t help but feel disappointed. She had not expected to ever look the creature who’d killed and maimed her friends in the eye again, and yet, she did. It was never gone – it had merely lain dormant inside Kylo Ren.

When Luke approached her, toe-to-toe, Rey did not like what she saw. He was like the young Luke in her vision: stalwart and focused on a code rather than empathy. “He could have destroyed you, Rey. It is obvious to me now that no matter how strong your connection is, it isn’t enough. We cannot take any more chances. When the time is right, we will take him to the Resistance. There, together, we will decide on what to do with him.”

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Days passed and if Rey had it her way, she would have avoided everyone. Unfortunately, Rey was logical and knew that doing so wasn’t wise. She had work to do. There were things much bigger than her and her feelings. She wished, for just a few moments, that there weren’t.

For three mornings, she walked with Luke along the coastline, listening to whatever augmented lessons he imparted. He’d begin by explaining the standard Jedi way, then tore it apart, reworked it, and compared the rights and the wrongs in his own interpretation. He cross-referenced it with the Journal of the Whills, and by the end of each conversation, Rey imagined that her education was the most discombobulated thing the galaxy would ever see. Beneath a former Jedi, an ancient prophetic book, and a First Order warlord, there was no way to tell what was right or wrong, up or down, and least of all, black or white. No, she was comfortably uncomfortable there in the gray, and somehow, she’d find a way to pull meaning from it all.

There had never been a code on Jakku save for work and be fed. And when Rey had first met with the Resistance, and subsequently with Luke, she’d had a head full of visions of grandeur. Now, there was no grandeur. There was no code left to follow, and she was slowly realizing that there was no place for one. It would only hinder her, trying to live within confines that limited her. If she simply listened to her head and followed her heart, Rey believed she would find the way.

In the afternoons, Rey would join Chewbacca in his repairs. It was so easy with him. Casual
conversation over mechanics and mutual excitement over the ship itself. She loved listening to him retell his and Han’s adventures; how Han would get offended over any naysayer when it came to the Falcon, and how many hours they’d spent repairing their “fastest hunk of junk in the galaxy.”

Rey hadn’t known him long, but she missed Han. Chewbacca clearly missed him too, evident in the way he would pause between stories to reminisce for himself. A quiet would settle over him and Rey could almost see all of the memories, inside jokes, squabbles and moments of devoted camaraderie pass over his expression.

Rey couldn’t help but think that Kylo – or rather, Ben – should have had such experiences with his father.

Each evening, Rey would walk alone. Back along the coastline, around the base of stooping hills and through the dark, dense woods, she wandered with no perceived destination. Every so often she closed her eyes and reached for the familiar red string, tugging just to be sure he was there. After a moment he would always pull back, and Rey could breathe in relief.

By the third night, Rey was ready to do more than check.

Tentatively, she reached further along their connection, seeking him out and listening for her other half among the quiet.
Chapter Twenty

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: Double update for the wait. :) And because I want to hurry and get to some special parts coming up (winkwink, nudgenudge).

Chapter Twenty

Rey wasn’t sure why she was bringing Luke’s lightsaber the next morning, aside from the fact that Kylo had asked her to. When he’d responded to her call the night before, he’d asked her to meet him on the mountaintop where they’d always trained. His request was impassive but resolute, and though Rey was ready to return to her training, she was also hesitant. The closer she was to being “finished,” the closer they were to returning to the Resistance with Kylo in tow as their prisoner. The thought of turning him over was unnerving. It was a struggle to remind herself that she had to keep all of their best interests in mind. If it meant helping him, healing him in a way that she couldn’t…

No amount of reasoning erased the fact that Kylo had always been a prisoner in some way. The man would never know true freedom.

She had to focus. Strapping her quarterstaff to her back and the lightsaber to her belt, Rey disembarked to Luke’s disapproval. He did not seem to care for either of Kylo’s requests, but Rey was not worried. Yes, she was ready to see him… but not quite ready for another practice duel. The saber hilt felt heavier and cumbersome at her belt, and she could no longer feel its call to her. The day seemed so far away when it came to her with such little effort. Now, it felt foreign, and she feared it would not serve her well in battle, practice or no.

Reaching the apex of the trail, Kylo was there waiting, fully armored and somber. Rey did not like seeing him like this, as if he had not changed at all since he left Snoke’s control. As if what had happened mere days ago was a reflection of things to come rather than a fleeting regression in his redemption.

“I brought it,” Rey started, keeping several feet between herself and Kylo. She pulled the saber from her belt but held it firmly in her grip. She would not be caught off guard again.

Kylo turned to face her and his eyes swept over her form. Rey could feel the blush burn in her cheeks as he did, goosebumps rising along her flesh. She felt naked under his gaze, as if the sleeveless tunic that cut generously below her collarbone – for coolness sake – was suddenly not enough to cover herself. Like she wanted to run back down the mountain, far and away.
And yet, there were the moments she admitted she couldn’t get close enough...

Without a word, he stalked to the outskirts of the clearing and retrieved his cloak – Rey hadn’t noticed that he’d left it off to the side and wondered why he would even need it. Cloak in hand, he circled behind her and dropped the fabric over her bare shoulders.

“You will need this,” and he gestured with a nod to the saber in her hand. “Engage.”

Rey did as she was instructed but kept her suspecting gaze trained on him. Kylo took up his own lightsaber and, with a press of a mechanism, pried open its hilt. Inside, Rey could see its archaic design, ironic against its modern components.

“It is unstable because of this,” he pointed to the cracked kyber crystal, dislodging it from its cradle. “Nevertheless, it is mine. You should have one that is yours and yours alone. But first, you must earn it.”

Rey’s knuckles turned white around the lightsaber’s handle. As tempted as she was to accept the challenge, part of her wished the saber would call to her again. Alas, it had found its owner, alive and well, and it did not need a new one; she herself had served her purpose as a vessel for its delivery. “What do I have to do?”

Kylo held out an open, gloved hand and Rey reluctantly complied, handing her weapon over with the beam facing downward. Again with the rollercoaster – first wanting it, then denying it, and now wanting it again. Holding it seemed to weigh him down, and he pursed his lips into a thin line as he studied it. Visibly forcing himself to move on from the sensation of holding his grandfather’s lightsaber, Kylo extended his other hand that held the crystal.

“Take it.” Timid fingers plucked it from his gloved palm, unsure of how it would feel against her bare skin. He asked the same question. “How does it feel?”

Rey closed her fingers around the crystal. “… Warm. It feels warm.”

“Good. Now. Keep it aloft.” When Rey hesitated, Kylo frowned. “You have done this before.” It was true. Not only had she practiced along her long walks, but she’d seen visions of her tiny, six year old self do the exact thing he was requesting. She had to be able to do it, too.

Despite his expectant look, Kylo waited patiently as Rey closed her eyes, centering herself. He was there, everywhere, waiting for her, and she felt the calm take over her nerves, her breathing, her pulse. In her thoughts, Kylo was behind her, his hand running the length of her arm and, reaching her wrist, lifted it and the crystal to hold it steady. When her eyes opened, he was still across from her and several feet away… but she could still feel him holding her; supporting her.

Rey raised her arm laterally to the ground, palm side up and the crystal unrestrained. She envisioned it staying exactly where it was and inched her hand away, bit by bit. The crystal floated and Rey wanted to cry out in celebration, but Kylo’s voice mandated her concentration.

“Do not let it fall, and cover yourself.” Rey pulled the hood of Kylo’s cloak over her head and wrapped it tighter around her bare arms. She stepped back, giving him room.

Meanwhile, Kylo circled the crystal and, when he was satisfied, fell into a calm stance, Luke’s saber at the ready. Rey followed his stare and eyed the fissure in the crystal, fully visible like a fault line amid the glistening red substance. “The only thing strong enough to cut such material is the material itself,” he stated matter-of-factly, and before Rey could react, he raised the saber and swung with exact precision against the diminutive crack. Rey startled, falling back as the sparks flew, showering
them both in plasmatic castoff and singing the material of Kylo’s cloak. It crackled just as his saber did but in larger fireworks, the strong material spitting and igniting against itself. As Rey faltered, so did the crystal, stuttering in the air before she regained composure and held it still. Finally, Kylo pulled back the saber and swiped the crystal fragments out of the air. When he opened his palm, he presented two segments nearly identical in proportion.

“You… you broke it!” Rey gushed, flabbergasted.

“Had it not already been splintered, I would not have been able to break it in two, with or without another lightsaber.” Eyeing the pieces, he took her hand and pressed them both into her palm. They still glared a fiery red. “Now, you will make your own.”

“I don’t know how.”

Kylo retrieved his now useless hilt, turning it over in his hands. Without the fragmented crystal it was designed for, it was useless. “Neither did I.” He presented it to her. “Use this. I’m sure you can find more suitable parts in the Millennium Falcon. Take what you need, dismantle what you must.”

Rey’s face lit up at the challenge, accepting Kylo’s saber and turning it to and fro in her hands. She’d been itching to take one apart and see its inner workings since the first time she’d laid eyes on a lightsaber. Ideas were already whirling in her head on the things she could dissect from the ship and what parts the Falcon wouldn’t miss. She could just hear C3PO now, following her about the tunnels and protesting each thing she’d take apart.

As excited as she was, Rey couldn’t deny the guilt welling in her stomach. With his gift to her, Kylo was left with nothing. But the way he was looking at her with determination in his eyes, he was obviously aware of the sacrifice he’d made. He could tell what she was thinking. His one hand closed reassuringly around her fist holding the crystals, and his other dared to run his thumb along her jawline. In a low voice, he spoke. “Take them. Know your strength. You will need it when it is your time to fight.”

Rey nearly slapped her forehead in mock indignation. Unstrapping her quarterstaff, she cleared a path on the table for its length. Screwdriver in hand, she removed the middle segment and affixed both ends together. With a bit of force and firepower, Rey cracked the rod open on each end and hollowed out a foot of its metallic contents. It created a perfect shell, sturdy in its material.
Piece by piece, Chewbacca helped Rey scour the ship for replica components of Kylo’s dismantled hilt: a cradle-like framework to mount the crystal in place, prongs for the blade emitter, magnetized metal for stabilization, and various other makeshift pieces for conduction and insulation purposes. While some pieces were perfect copies, most had to be molded and shaped. Though it was a hodgepodge collection of metallic shards leftover from spare Falcon parts and the other day’s aftermath, Rey was proud. Arranged in front of her, each piece aligned with their original, Rey saw the potential.

With painstaking precision, Rey constructed her double-bladed spear. Screwing the last bolt in place, she could finally breathe, lifting the finished product from the table as if it were the most fragile and precious of treasures. The new components compensated for the lost weight of its middle segment. It felt balanced in her hands. It felt right.

Chewie watched with bated breath as Rey took a ready stance, her thumb hovering over the engagement switch. Nodding, a giant, hopeful smile on her face, she pressed it… and nothing happened.

A loud, exasperated groan filled the room and Rey slammed the spear onto the table, immediately meeting eye to eye with the switch. It had been nearly impossible to replicate from Kylo’s hilt, so she’d settled for transplanting it from his to hers. And yet, when she pressed it again, it vibrated in her hand as if it should work… there had to be something obstructing it.

Pried open again, Rey stared in disbelief at the crystal halves. They glared back at her, burning so brightly Rey half expected them to erupt into a blaze of light all of their own accord. They felt like they had a life of their own; a history that had made them what they were. Tentatively she tapped at their surfaces, finding them merely as warm as they had been when they’d split. Yet they struggled, compromised in some way.

Rey dislodged them from their cradles. Regardless of alignment, their coloring was brilliant. It was hard to believe such small, simple things held so much power. Images of Kylo’s crackling, static blade flashed in Rey’s mind, and she felt humbled. He’d given them to her so readily, and now they were calm: just like when he’d given himself to her. They were the embodiment of Kylo Ren: bold, strong, and brimming with potential, and Kylo would have said the same about Rey.

It dawned on her, then. She had to make them hers. Just like in Luke’s stories of younglings going to the caves on Ilum to retrieve their crystals in a rite of passage, Rey had to conduct a similar trial. Taking one crystal in each hand, she squeezed them as tightly as she could and closed her eyes. With every ounce of her strength, every thought in her mind and every beat in her heart, she focused her energy to her hands. She imagined her purpose and what guided her: fierce loyalty to her cause, immeasurable devotion to her loved ones, and faith in her own morality. Everything she thought she was and everything she endeavored to be, she incited of the crystals.

Content that she had done all that she could, Rey earnestly opened her fingers. Instead of red, two vivid, violet crystals were in its place; purified by her light. It was perfectly balanced, part of him and part of her merging together: the embodiment of the gray.

Reassembling the components as quickly as she could, Rey gripped it again and this time, it engaged flawlessly. Light erupted from both emitters, bright and stable. It was the most beautiful thing Rey had ever seen, and all Rey could think of was how she needed Kylo to see it. She needed him to see what they’d made together.

Tidying her space, Rey promised Chewbacca that she’d return later to help finish up the last of the repairs and said her goodbyes. Two steps down the exit ramp and Rey slowed to a stop. Her desires had been answered. Kylo stood where the water met the shore, intensely focused on the way the
waves crashed and broke against one another. When he heard her spritely footsteps clamber down the ramp, he turned to her, the hint of a proud smile on his lips.

“I-I did it,” Rey announced, presenting her staff as proudly as she had when she’d bypassed the Falcon’s compressor. Engaging it, Rey demonstrated a few trusty flourishes that came so naturally through her years of wielding the staff. “It is rather archaic compared to blasters,” she admitted thoughtfully. “But it has a far better reach than Luke’s saber.”

Kylo looked amused but nodded in agreement, watching her continue to pace about and test the weight of her new toy. “Combat in the shadows is for cowards. I prefer closer quarters.”

“Is that so?” Rey chided, ensuring her smile was nice and bright through her ribbing. It was ironic to hear him defend the old style as if he felt a kinship with it. “That is quite the talk, seeing as how a blaster made good work of you, once.”

Smirking, Kylo raised his arm and reached for her, though she was still several feet away. Rey felt a tugging at her vest from behind, compelling her backward. She dug her heels into the terrain but to no avail as they skid along the sand and rocks. When she was a mere inch from his grasp, Kylo released her, his arm falling back to his side. “There are other ways to draw out your enemies.”

Rey’s eyes went wide. “Show me.” Kylo nodded in acceptance, and Rey grinned triumphantly. Finally, she was getting somewhere again, and despite his breakdown, it was all in thanks to Kylo Ren.

Suddenly the staff felt heavy in her hands. She had taken so much, yet sat upon secrets.

He was turning to leave, ready to follow her back to Luke’s home as she had earlier insisted. Rey lurched after him, gripping his arm and willing him to stop.

“I… I have to…” her words choked in her throat, and she sighed, realizing there was no way around it. She’d have to tell him the truth, and to him it would undoubtedly mean a death sentence. But Rey knew better, and she owed it to Kylo to not keep secrets if she expected him to be honest as well. “They are planning on returning to the Resistance. They are going to hand you over to them…”

To her dismay, no emotion betrayed Kylo’s expression. He stood stock still for longer than she could stand, digesting her confession. When he spoke, he was quiet and unnerved.

“If it is what you want, then I will go.”

Relief flooded through Rey. “They will help you there. I will help you.”

Kylo looked abruptly away, his emotions finally hardening on his face. He shook his head incredulously, almost as if he was amused by her assumption. “They do not help war criminals. They… remove them.”

“I don’t believe that,” Rey argued, sidestepping around him to force him to meet her eyes. “How could you possibly know that?”

“Because I watched how it formed, and it was formed in part because of me. My mother was ostracized from the Senate when she was outed as the daughter of Darth Vader. They did not trust her, and would not listen to her about the First Order. So she formed the Resistance herself. It was the First Order for which the Resistance was created, and they would not let nearly a decade’s worth of work go by allowing their second most insidious target to live.”
Rey frowned and shook her head in disbelief. “You honestly believe your mother would let that happen?”

“What I believe,” Kylo murmured, calming himself. “Is that I am an obstacle in their path. That they expect you to be the key to removing that obstacle. And that your being found on Jakku was not a coincidence. I believe that we are just as much pawns in their game as we were in Snoke’s.”
Chapter Twenty-One

Author's Notes: In this chapter, we'll be finding more answers to some questions that are still lingering! And finally, we'll see some resolution to the ongoing rift between Luke and Kylo, AND Kylo and Han (oh yes! One last moment with our favorite, charismatic Smuggler!)

PLEASE let me know what you think! I live for your comments! :D

Special thanks at the end!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Kylo’s declaration rung in Rey’s ears all the way back to Luke’s dwelling. Though his speculation unnerved her, she insisted upon seeing it through: she had to get them together, all on one side. She had to repair, at last, that which was broken between uncle and nephew. She would not send Kylo to the Resistance without accomplishing that first. If what he said was true, then doing so would only help his case.

Also, she had some questions of her own…

In each other’s’ presence, the men were silent. They found Luke in the makeshift courtyard outside of his cave home skinning some fat, unrecognizable animal. Its furry flesh was hung along a clothesline for drying while strips of its meat were twined around a spit over the fire pit.

Luke regarded them both curtly. Gently, Rey set the hilt of his lightsaber on the bench beside him before settling across the pit on another upended log, her new saberstaff balanced on her thighs. Kylo kept his distance, crossing his arms and standing wide-stanced at the perimeter of the clearing as if keeping watch over nothing.

“Luke,” Rey licked her lips tentatively, her mouth suddenly dry and her fingers fiddling mindlessly
with each other. “May I ask you something?”

“Of course,” he replied, though his words were clipped and he busied himself again with his handiwork. Rey recognized the look on his face: he was concentrating on more than just his kill. Though his eyes were not currently on his nephew, his mind was, and it was steadfast. “What is it?”

Rey made up her mind, opting to settle the easiest of demons first: her own. “Well, it’s something that just hasn’t made sense to me. If I were purposefully sent to Jakku, could I have also been purposefully found?”

Luke’s hands went still on his work. Quiet for many moments, he visibly picked over his words, choosing them carefully. His silence unnerved Rey even more than Kylo’s speculation had.

“When I was still a Jedi… before I lost everything I’d worked for…” his eyes peeked from beneath his brow, darting to Kylo before disappearing again. “I worked with a man named Lor San Tekka. He was an explorer of sorts, and a member of the Church of the Force. He and I would search the galaxy for Jedi lore that the Empire meant to destroy. We found many things together, including” he looked again to Kylo, “the very kyber crystal in your lightsaber. And the Journal of the Whills, of course.

“Anyway, before the temple was lost, I’d felt a stirring in the force for years. I could feel its culmination just days before it happened, and so, I devised a plan. You see, I knew what it wanted.”

“You mean what I wanted,” Kylo interrupted, his voice low and threatening.

“Indeed, I did. Though you didn’t know; you had no way of knowing that there was more to what you wanted than to join Snoke. Somewhere deep inside of you, you wanted her.” Luke gestured to Rey. “Snoke wanted her. And so, I contacted Lor San. Entrusted him with a piece of a navigational chart and told him to deliver it to Leia when the time was right. I gave the other piece to R2 – an idea I’d actually stolen from my sister, once upon a time. It was safer that way.

“Lor San retired to Jakku and I, here. It was all in Leia’s hands, then.”

Rey swallowed roughly. “What was?”

Crestfallen, Luke sighed. “To find you, Rey. That was always the plan: to find you again when you
were old enough and the time was right. When you were both young, Ben had been right when he’d recognized the strength in you: the pure potential you embodied. We knew Snoke wanted you as badly as he wanted Ben to serve him, and I am sorry to say that we wanted the same advantage.

“Leia sent Poe and BB-8 to retrieve the chart from Lor San . . .” Rey recalled both Poe’s and Leia’s retellings, though she’d felt even at that time that there were pieces missing. “But how –”

“I of course can’t know all the specific details myself, but my sister has always been resourceful. She must have programmed the droid with your identifying characteristics. Between her and Lor San, they’d been watching you for years. This Poe was to find Lor San and retrieve the chart. He must have taken the same precaution in entrusting the chart to BB-8, and thank goodness he did.

“I imagine it was supposed to be simple: find Lor San. Follow BB-8 to you. Bring you and the chart to the Resistance base. Once that was complete, you were to be sent to me for safe keeping and out of the hands of the First Order.”

“You . . . you waited for me? They watched me all those years?”

“They watched you in part,” Luke corrected. “They watched to make sure you were safe and that Snoke would not find you. They watched to make sure that the Force remained dormant inside of you . . . for your own sake.”

“So what then?” Rey couldn’t mask the bitterness in her voice. “I would be sent to you, and what then? You were meant to train me after all?”

“It is what we originally planned, yes,” Luke confessed. “But I’ve had a lot of time here to think of my mistakes, and you two were my biggest ones. The Whills helped me to realize that. That is why I could not follow through, Rey. I could not train you. I had already taken so much of your life, I would not indoctrinate you into a war that was not your doing. I could not live with saving you from it, just to deliver you to it.”

It all made sense, to Rey’s dismay. The one BB-8 had been waiting for had been her all along. “What is the point of your guilt when I fought, anyway? Every day of my life, I fought.”

Kylo had been right – she was merely a pawn, after all.
“You did. And you are the strongest of us all, for it.”

“You are the strongest of us all, for it.”

Luke nodded. “Hence my hiding. I hid for the sake of the galaxy. And I intended to hide you again, too. I would accept the repercussions from the Resistance, but in the end, I have to believe my sister saw it my way, also. Even with the best of intentions, we were wrong.”

“And I would never leave this place. I would be stranded on yet another planet.”

Rey did not want to see Luke’s apologetic expression. Did not want to hear any more of his reasoning. “With you and I gone, Snoke would only have Ben. The Resistance survived this long without us, and they could continue to survive. And now, without Ben, Snoke has nothing.”

A singular, incredulous laugh escaped Rey’s throat, her voice cracking. “Of all the things you and your Resistance have done, I don’t know which is the most selfish.” Finding the willpower in her legs, though her weak knees nearly betrayed her, Rey backed away. There were no innocents in this battle. Everyone had toed the line of the dark side, it seemed. “I will not be imprisoned again. I will not have my freedom and my choices stripped from me again. If I was meant to fight, then so be it.”

Rey stormed from the clearing, and it took every ounce of self-control Kylo had not to follow her. She roiled with an anger that rivaled his own. It was a familiar disappointment. He’d felt the same a long time ago when a part of him had gone missing. It was what he’d used to complete his years of training as Ben Solo. That anger had been his strength for so long, and he’d vowed that nothing and no one would ever again take something from him. He’d lost so much: his parents, his childhood, his choices, his future… and now, he knew he’d at one point lost Rey, too. The hole she’d left in his life had festered, needing to be filled with something. So he’d filled it with his hatred. Thanks to all of it, he was able to bury Ben Solo and emerge as Kylo Red, Jedi Killer and Snoke’s enforcer.

He couldn’t let Rey follow the same path.

“I am sorry, Ben.” Luke’s broken voice pulled Kylo from his thoughts. The old man rose tiredly, excusing himself to wash his hands in a nearby trough set aside to collect rainwater. Kylo found nothing within him, not a single retort or insult that he could muster in response. He could merely watch his uncle in silence as he paced along the clearing with sad eyes and little resolve. Guilt did
something to the man – rendered him a shadow of what he once was, a great Master Jedi once thought to be the last hope of the world. Skywalker was now a far cry from such things, having wallowed in said guilt for far too long.

He stopped in front of Kylo, uncomfortably close. All intimidation was gone, and for a brief moment, Kylo had forgotten who was supposed to be the intimidator. As brazen as he had always been in his search for Skywalker, Kylo always wondered behind closed doors if he’d be able to best the more experienced Jedi. Furthermore, he’d always wondered if he’d be able to finish the job at all. Before and after the deed was done on Starkiller base – before and after he failed to rid himself of the light – Kylo felt the compassion burn brightly within himself, and it would not be quelled.

“When I think of the things I’ll never be able to forgive you for,” he started, his voice steady despite the way his shoulders heaved beneath a sigh. “I tend to forget what unforgiveable things I have done.”

Both men knew, in that moment, that a crossroads had been met. That there were no other options left. That they would have to face the catalyst that had brought them to this point.


Honestly, being close to his uncle, let alone being touched, was the last thing Kylo wanted. But the intrigue was there as it always was. With his and Rey’s bond once again functioning optimally, he had nothing to fear of the Jedi’s intrusion. Reluctantly, Kylo nodded, and Luke closed the gap between them. He gripped his shoulders and closed his eyes, breathing deeply. Kylo followed suit.

From nothingness, a room materialized. It was familiar: a modest home with sweeping views of open plains through the south windows and dense, lustrous forest through the north’s. Its features were a perfect blend of modern and traditional – a marriage of his parents’ styles. It boasted the functionality of a city high-rise with its automatic-everything, but the décor of an elegant Alderannian taste. Ben’s school-issued boots were not by the door as they usually were, and his satchel was not slung sloppily over its hook. Still, Leia stood by it, as if simultaneously wishing those innocent things were there and that they’d stay far, far away.

“He’ll be home soon,” Leia spoke into the air to no one in particular. She was younger by at least twenty years, give or take.

“I see. School is going well for him?” At the center of the den, an equally younger Luke stood in his brown Jedi robes. He looked as though he was fixated on his sister and doing his best to avoid
Han behind him. The aggravation on Han’s face said it all.

Leia turned to face the men, a pained smile flitting briefly across her lips. “He is so smart, Luke. But it has been tough. The others do not accept him, and he’s gotten into trouble…”

“He’s handled his own,” Han interjected. He lounged in the window seat, arms crossed and boots kicked up in a way Leia had always disliked.

“He’s ‘handled his own’ due to his abilities, Han,” Leia frowned at him before turning back to Luke. “He’s hurt others. He can’t seem to control his emotions and I fear he’ll do something he’ll regret. He already has…”

“The kid had it coming.” Kylo knew exactly who Han referred to: the bully Felsin who’d plagued him for years until that eventful day by the river. “And he’s fine now.”

Leia shook her head in disgust. “You sound so different than you did that day, Han. Your tune has changed now that it has come to this.”

Riled, Han rose from his seat and joined the siblings at the center of the room. He pointed his finger in both of their faces. “I will not have my son sent to fight someone else’s war. He is meant for bigger things.”

“And I won’t let him wither away beneath some creature haunting him!” Leia spat back. “If going with Luke will save him… if it will drive that thing from his head… Then I will make that sacrifice.” Tears rolled freely down her cheeks and her shoulders shuddered under the weight of her decision. “I can’t reach him anymore, Han. I try every day, and every day he slips further away. It’s growing stronger, I know it, and it’s taking my boy away from me. Away from us.”

His anger and resolve faltering, Han collected his wife in his arms so she could sob into his chest. He looked to Luke, defeat and a faint shine in his eyes. The decision had been made.

“You save my boy, kid,” Han murmured against Leia’s hair, a single tear escaping.
Kylo was breathless when Luke ended the vision. Staggering backward, he gasped for air, breathing through the pain that ripped through his chest. But Luke did not let go. Rather, he pulled his nephew back to him, locking his arms around him and holding fast.

“I think of that moment often. When I remember the Academy; when my anger wells up… I think of that moment and my promise.”

Once Kylo steadied himself, Luke drew back only to grip his shoulders one last time.

“You do not have to forgive any of us, Ben. You need only know the truth; not the lies that Snoke has told you all these years. The truth, that your parents loved you and that they tried their best. They never lost sight of the good in you. I realize now that I should have listened.”

Shamed, Kylo couldn’t meet his uncle’s eyes. Turning his sights to the ground, he shook his head. “How can you be so sure?”

Luke’s voice cracked through a chuckle. “Because that girl, Rey, has been put in this world to do many amazing things. One of them, to heal this family.” He was quiet for a moment, thoughtful. “And there’s something else. Something I was told by the natives on this planet. They are widespread but few. You have not seen them, I’m sure, but they are there. They’ve been here long before the first Jedi temple was erected not far from here, and they’ll be here long after we’re gone. They are not sensitive to the force, but their connection with this planet is innate. They feel everything, you understand.”

Kylo did not answer, confused as to what purpose Luke’s strange story would serve. Luke continued. “I visited the chief’s settlement not long ago, to retrieve Chewbacca. We spoke at length about the … stirrings they’d observed as of late. They felt a strong goodness arrive on their planet when Rey came here, and then, a more formidable presence when you arrived. They weren’t sure what to make of it; only that it was something of an immeasurable power. It concerned them. They were certain it was Armageddon… until they changed their minds. I visited them again last night, and they told me so. Tracking the fluctuations, they discovered something: what they’d felt had changed.”

Luke squeezed Kylo’s shoulders, hope shining in his eyes. “They could not feel the darkness anymore, Ben. In the end, they felt not just one presence of goodness, but two.”

Chapter End Notes
Author’s Notes: REDEEEEEEEEEEEEEMED!!!! Or at least, on his way to redemption. :)

Special Thanks to all those who have commented on AO3 and the following from FF(dot)net:

KyloRen’sgirl213 – thank you for reading and reviewing! The updates should be coming quickly again, now. :)

Viktor2040 – I’m so glad you liked the chapter! You’re so right when you said “the gravity of the galaxy’s expectations dictates what they do.” I think people tend to forget that beyond their affection for each other, they’ll have to figure out how to live in a world that would not accept them together (or just Kylo, himself). I guess we’ll have to see if Rey and Kylo think of those things, or throw caution to the wind. :D

SheLitAFire – Thank you for all of your comments! I loved seeing your thought process as you went through the chapters. I’m so humbled that you think I did Ben’s backstory justice, as it was my favorite part of writing this story. That comment in particular made my day!

Sara Alvarado Porter – I’m so honored that my story was your first Reylo fanfiction!!!! I’m thrilled that you are enjoying it. I hope you like where the end of this story goes, and will stay tuned for its sequel as well. :) Can’t wait to hear what you think!

Midnight shadow of darkness – I’m not sure if I’ve replied to your comment yet, so I thought I would go ahead and do it here just in case. Thank you so much!! I love that you called them cupcakes! :D I hope you’ll let me know what you think about the forthcoming chapters!
Chapter Twenty-Two

Author’s Note: And because I love you all, here’s a double update for today. All I’m gonna say is… I think you’re going to love this chapter. :) PLEASE leave a comment/review and let me know what you think!!

Forewarning: This chapter is rated M.

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Rey had not gotten far. She’d made it to the base of Luke’s mountain and proceeded to contend with herself over her next steps. Chewie and the droids were already in place, so it was tempting to board the Millennium Falcon and disembark. Leave everything behind and start over. Being the most literal of assertions that she would not be held against her will on Ahch-To, it nearly was the choice she made… But ultimately, she couldn’t leave Kylo and Luke behind, and she’d never forgive herself if she had.

Instead, she waited for the world to move around her. She waited for some answer to strike her. Since she was a small child, her life and her future had been orchestrated by too many hands in the pot. She lived where she was put, went where she was told, followed everyone’s orders but her own…

Suddenly, insistently, she drove the thought from her mind. She refused to allow herself to blame and to hate.

“How is it that you can forgive them so easily?” Kylo’s voice startled her. He’d descended the mountain behind her and had watched her for who knows how long, a strange expression on his face like he’d seen a ghost. She couldn’t hide a thing from him – not anymore – and he’d felt the notion as strongly as if it’d been his own.

Rey shrugged, craning her neck backward to see the canopy of trees above. The treeline bordered
the mountain base but arched over it, as if to reclaim their space the mountain had impeded upon. The whistle of the wind between their leaves was a symphony Rey never tired of hearing. Trees were such a luxury here, and she’d hardly known a thing about them back on Jakku. Oceans and trees, endless blues and greens – she was growing used to the beauty. But not enough to live amongst it forever.

Kylo continued to watch her expectantly. Rey had to respond – Kylo would not force it out of her, nor would he take it for himself. “Because they tried to help me.” It seemed a menial answer, but it was true. “They tried to keep me safe… just like you did.”

Though she could not approve of the methods or the means, Rey knew the truth. Had Luke and Leia not done what they had – had her parents not agreed – Rey would have suffered the same fate as Ben Solo at the hands of Snoke. If Ben had succeeded in fleeing the Academy with her in tow, Snoke would have found them both, defenseless and alone. Luke and Leia had had to make the most difficult of choices: to save Rey or their own flesh and blood. His inevitable choice of allegiance aside, at the time, Ben was old enough to resist despite his continued struggle under the weight of the powerful intruder. She was not. And so, the Skywalkers chose to save her from Snoke, from herself, and even from Ben.

Once again, Rey’s mission was clear. She would give the Resistance what they wanted. She would give herself to them and serve her purpose in the war against Snoke. But she would not give them everything. They had her forgiveness, but they still needed to atone for what they’d done. Luke, Leia, and the organization would have to make do with her, and in all hope, with Luke, because Rey would not give them Kylo Ren. They’d failed Ben Solo once in life; they would not fail him again.

The light was not everything she’d thought it would be…

“Walk with me.” Rey implored him, heading off in a particular direction that came to mind. “I’m still in need of a teacher.”

Their walk through the island was a slow one, interrupted often by teaching moments. Kylo was intent on teaching her to manipulate the world around her: lifting stones, then boulders, then small, fully-rooted trees out of their way. Each critter that crossed their path became a target, albeit humanely. In her first few attempts she’d merely slowed the trajectory of a few errant lizards. It didn’t take long before she could freeze them completely. The fear in their eyes saddened her at first, but she always released them, no worse for wear. The abilities flowed naturally through Rey’s being, and she was beginning to wonder how she hadn’t already utilized such things for herself… like how Ben Solo had as a child. Perhaps it was the mind-wipe…
“There must be more than simply making things float.”

“It is the first step to many things.” Though her eagerness amused him, Kylo crossed his arms as if offended. “Orchestrating objects at will. Immobilizing things in mid-motion, like blaster beams or even people. Master it and the other abilities will come easily.”

Rey stifled a shudder. Images of a masked Kylo Ren hunting her in the jungle and then holding her still like a statue before everything went black... It was not how she wanted to think of him now. She forced herself out of her reverie and focused on him, on how his eyes were much softer now as he watched her, and how the lines of his face seemed so much less tense.

“You’ve also shown prowess in stealth.” Kylo continued to speak and Rey nodded vigorously in an attempt to act like she hadn’t wandered off in thought. “You’ve been able to hide your presence in the force from Snoke, Luke, and myself. That will prove useful in battle.”

“I can do more,” Rey insisted. With her newly reinvigorated resolve to return to the Resistance, she was growing impatient.

Kylo nodded in agreement and continued along the path. “I know you can.”

Rey hurried after him, pulling on his arm to make him stop. “No. I mean I *have* done more.”

“What is it that you have done?”

The memory came back as lucid as if it’d happened just the day before. It was only the second time she’d harnessed the Force – all in mere minutes – back in Kylo’s interrogation room. “Haven’t you ever wondered how I escaped you on your own base? I... I forced that Storm Trooper to do what I wanted. I bent him to my will, and he released me and abandoned his weapon, too. All because I told him to.”

Rey could hardly detect Kylo’s expression, save for that it appeared torn. Drawing close to her, she could feel his breath on her cheeks, and Rey couldn’t help but wonder if she’d ever be able to bend a will as strong as his.
“Be careful,” he murmured, his voice dangerously steady. “Using such abilities… it draws a line that is far too easy to cross.”

He turned on his heel to proceed where he originally meant to go, ahead of her, leaving her bereft and annoyed. “I think I am in a position to decide that for myself,” she insisted, scurrying after him.

“I thought so too, once,” Kylo retorted. His pace was unrelenting in its large gait, and Rey struggled to keep up. It only served to fuel her frustration. He seemed so sure that she would make the same mistakes he made.

“I am better guided by my own morals than I am by anyone else’s. You are, too.” She saw him flinch, but she did not care. It wasn’t just him that she wished to blame, it was everyone. Each actor in the charade had their own idea of right and wrong, light and dark. Each acted upon their own whims and it was obvious to Rey, then: what was “right” depended upon the eye of the beholder. Kylo had to see it, too. He had to see that, if everything that tried to guide him throughout his life had been pulled away – Snoke, his parents, his uncle – things would have been different. If he’d been his own person, unhindered by it all, he would have been good. He already was inherently so.

“You are beginning to whine,” There was a hint of jest in his chastisement. “Perhaps you are spending too much time with Skywalker.”

Ahead of them, the path broke apart and the familiar plateau came into view. Kylo suddenly halted his pace at the sight and Rey nearly collided with his back. A hush fell between them, disrupted only by the soft rustling of life that never dissipated around them. Rey bit her tongue and patiently waited for Kylo to make the first move – which he did, painfully slowly. Their feet crunched along the rubble, kicking up plumes of dust and marring the undisturbed surface of the Jedi temple’s remains. Rey fell back, allowing the would-be Jedi to explore for himself. His hands traced the walls and the engravings within them; tore at vines that hid its dilapidated beauty.

When Kylo finally spoke again, Rey nearly jumped. “I can’t trust my own morals. But I can follow yours.”

Rey shook her head adamently, understanding exactly what he meant. “I was wrong. You can’t go to the Resistance. I won’t let you.”

“No. You weren’t wrong. You and Skywalker, you think that I’ve been redeemed, but you can’t know that for sure. I’m a danger here. Imagine if I was back in Snoke’s hands.” He shook his head and his shoulders fell. “I wouldn’t be strong enough.”
“We can fight this together,” Rey insisted, rushing to him. Desperately, she took his face in her hands, wanting him to look her in the eye… but instead, her vision flared with the brightest of lights at the contact. The sky was dark, clouded by black smoke, and the night was imperceptible against the glow of the flames lapping high into the air. Mountains of crumbling stone and torn, twisted metal littered the ground, still smoldering red hot. Countless bodies, old and young alike, were strewn as far as Rey could see. In the distance, flashes of light broke through the smoke – the blues and greens and a solitary red glow of lightsabers, growing brighter as they approached. Emerging from the disaster, two cloaked Jedi resorted to retreat and ran toward her… but they never made it. Stalking them like prey, Kylo Ren followed, six men flanking him but lagging behind… the same six men from the vision she’d had on Takadona. Kylo was upon the injured Jedi in seconds, running his crackling red saber through their backs and slaughtering them as they fled.

Rey gasped as if she, too, were choking on the smoke. Ripping her hands away from Kylo’s face, she stumbled back. Grimacing, she forced herself to regain composure. The vision was nearly the same as the first time she’d seen it – when Kylo had arrived on Ahch-To. Except it was much more vivid, now. This time, Kylo wanted her to see.

“I am a danger,” he repeated. “Nothing can convince me otherwise. I will go to the Resistance, and you will persevere on your own. There is no redemption for me, Rey. Only atonement.”

Livid, Rey couldn’t help herself. Rearing back, she sent a punch across Kylo’s face as hard as she could. It was his turn to stumble back, though he easily recomposed. Obviously, her heart hadn’t been in it. “You cannot change what you have done,” she spat, rubbing at her sore knuckles. “And my seeing your past does not change the future. It does not change the now. I need you with me if I am to see this through.” Her anger cracked alongside her voice. “I’m not strong enough without you. You can’t just give up now.”

It wasn’t enough. Kylo was visibly struck by her words and Rey could see how it tortured him; made him question his resolve. But still, it wasn’t enough, and she could see it in the shine of his eyes. He moved as if to leave, but Rey couldn’t let him. With every ounce of her being, Rey wrenched her arms ahead of her, willing him to stop… and he did. Kylo had barely taken a step before freezing stock still. She didn’t realize she’d been holding her breath until her lungs ached for air, and Rey couldn’t stop the amazed, incredulous laugh that escaped her lips.

“I did it,” Rey whispered, cautiously circling Kylo’s prone form and he followed her with his eyes. He visibly struggled against his capture, but her hold on him was steadfast. She felt emboldened, a new confidence rushing in her veins. She could make him listen, now. True, she could not know for sure what the Resistance would do with him. Even if Kylo seemed sure. There was no doubt in Rey’s mind that Leia would do all that she could to aid in her son’s rehabilitation, but eventually, the Jedi Killer would be tried for his war crimes. Light or dark, such things were punishable in the same fashion. Rey had no doubt anymore that it was not the way to go. The Resistance may not know how to live in a world alongside Kylo Ren, but Rey couldn’t live in a world without him.
“I can redeem you, Ben.” The promise in her voice was strong and demanding. “I can save you, if you’ll just follow. I promise, I’ll make you see.” An idle thought crossed her mind; perhaps she could employ the same trick the Jedi used. If she could just wipe away the things in his mind that stood between –

“Ugh!” Rey clenched at her temples, disgusted with herself. It frightened her how easily the deplorable thoughts came and how they’d felt so right. She was expected to be this balance, to safely walk the line between the dark and the light, to find the gray and rise above it all. How could she think such dark, horrible things… As though even the thought of being alone – of losing him – had driven her to darkness.

Unbeknownst to Rey, her hold on Kylo faltered and he broke through, gasping for air. Tears stung Rey’s eyes at the sight and she sputtered, searching for the words. The apology died on her lips when Kylo engulfed her in his arms. “I will not let you fall to the dark,” his voice cracked, wavering, but was determined. “Not you…”

He held her silently, for how long, neither knew. Burying his face in her hair, Kylo waited for her sobs to subside. “Say it again, Rey,” he whispered, his lips brushing against her ear. “My name.”

She obliged, whispering Ben. She wished the world would fade away – that reality could shift and somehow, they could be anyone other than Rey of Jakku and Kylo Ren. She knew he wished for the same. She could feel it, and he was making good work of helping her forget what she knew she shouldn’t… what no one else would accept: that her heart had made room for Kylo Ren, and nothing could change that. Not anymore.

The stars collided. The dam broke. There was nothing left to force them apart. Kylo fist ed his hand in Rey’s hair, tugging ever so slightly so as to slant his mouth over hers. His hungry kisses took her breath away, but somehow, it was like coming up for fresh air. It felt so quiet and free and good just being near him, and Rey couldn’t get close enough. She didn’t care that she had no idea what she was doing. She’d never touched a man – not this way. But she wanted to feel everything. She wanted to commit every last inch of his body to memory, and, at long last, he would show her. It took only a moment for him to discard his jacket and tunic, and Rey obliged in unwinding his arm guards. Her fingers followed their criss-crossed pattern along his chest, bravely roaming free of their own volition and memorizing as they went: the long, hard edge of his jawline moving beneath her fingertips as his lips worked; the soft, dark curls of hair at the nape of his neck that slipped through her fingers; the span of his shoulders and the way his biceps tensed beneath her palms; the sharp bend of his shoulder blades and the broad expanse of his torso; the dip in the small of his back that curved where his belt began; the intense heat radiating from his skin that, in turn, warmed her to the core. All that was his was now hers.
Kylo broke their kiss and waited with bated breath. Fire danced in his eyes as he watched her, dragging his gaze from her eyes to her lips and below. A blush heated her cheeks beneath his intensity, and she thanked the Force when his hands responded in kind. Kylo seemed intrigued by the pink in her cheeks, so his fingers started there and followed the flush that led down her neck to her collarbone. Through little effort, Rey’s vest shifted off her shoulders and Kylo lifted her tunic over her head, kissing the constellations of freckles that mapped their way across her shoulders. He unwrapped her chest binding with slow, careful hands. She could feel his eyes sweeping ravenously over her, overlooking nothing, memorizing everything. His fingertips traced their way down her sides, leaving goosebumps in their wake. They followed the path of each scar – the one she’d gotten tripping on torn metal in a scrap heap, and another from when she fell from a high peak inside an already gutted starship. She might have been embarrassed had he not had plenty of his own to match. Rey chose her favorite ones – a crosshatched one, a jagged one that looked almost like a lightning bolt, and one that circled his bicep so cleanly, it looked as if it were done on purpose. She planned to ask of their stories later, if the intoxicating pressure of his touch against her skin didn’t render her mindless by then.

Rey had no more time to think, because Kylo was quickly losing restraint. His fingers were more persistent, learning her slight curves honed by years of hard work and survival. The flats of his palms smoothed up her spine and Rey’s eyes drifted shut at the soothing caress … until his left hand buried again in the loose hair at the nape of her neck and his right circled beneath her bottom. He lifted her and instinctively, her legs wrapped around his waist just in time. Carrying her inside the highest remaining walls of the temple, Rey’s back met with the smooth, cool grit of the stonework. With the leverage, he could feel everything then: the press of her breasts against his chest, the taught muscle of her thighs clenching him through the thin material of her cut-offs, and the heat that pooled and throbbed at her apex, burning into him. Urging him to grind his hips into hers. Doing things to him that stripped him of what little remained of his willpower.

He claimed her again, his lips parting hers and languidly tasting every bit of her. She nearly whined when the kiss broke, but was quickly silenced when his mouth trailed to her jawline, her pulse point, her collarbone. She didn’t know how it could feel any better until he’d roamed to her breasts, kissing the valley between and nipping at her skin. His tongue found the blush of her nipple and Rey couldn’t help but mewl at the sensation. While he tended to one, his free hand massaged the other, delighting in how perfectly they fit in the palm of his hand.

Rey squirmed against him, clenching her knees and trying impossibly to bring him even closer. The heat only grew between her thighs, aching and driving her into a delirium the more his ministrations continued. From there it spread every which way, pulsing in her veins and sending her breaths in excited gasps. There had to be more, she was sure of it. There had to be some sort of release from this exquisite torture.

Kylo sensed her urgency, pressing his forehead to hers. His fingers hooked along her jawline, his thumb holding her chin and his lips hovering dangerously above hers. “Tell me to stop, Rey.”

Rey panicked. “Wh-what?”
“Tell me.” Though his eyes were closed, he was grimacing and his breath was even more ragged than hers. She was relieved to see him as tortured as she felt; as affected by her closeness as she was of his. He was asking her permission. He was practically begging her to push him away so as not to, what… defile her?

Rey wound her fingers in his thick hair, taking handfuls and clenching hard. His eyes snapped open to meet hers and she thought he’d devour her right there, permission or no. “I won’t,” she whispered, denying his request.

It was all he needed. She was soaring through the air then, laid gently against a soft patch of grass that had thrived within the temple – shortly shorn by hungry herbivores but soft from the salt air and generous Ahch-To rains. She closed her eyes to still the incessant thudding of her heartbeat and the breath that escaped her; listened to the clunk of his belt and buckle hitting the ground and the shift of fabric. She didn’t dare open her eyes when she felt his weight cover her, braced by his arms on either side of her head. She didn’t move when he nuzzled into the crook of her neck, sighing an unsteady, eager sigh. And she didn’t breathe when his hands unfastened her belt, thumbed her trousers, and peeled them down. Lifting her hips, she relished against his agonizingly soft touch navigating along her thighs, the underside of her knees, and down to her ankles. Finished, he guided her legs back around his waist and she felt the heat of him – all of him, including the undiscovered – against every inch of her skin.

“Look at me, Rey,” he murmured. Even with her permission, even with desire radiating from her like she’d been starving and he was her first meal, Kylo sensed her nervousness and apprehension. “Do you trust me?”

Rey tentatively opened her eyes and was taken aback by him. The quiver of his lips and the tenderness in his expression made her stomach flutter. No one had ever looked at her like that before, like she was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. Like she was loved and wanted, in every sense of the word.

Perhaps this was the belonging she sought.

Rey nodded with earnest, all fear slipping away, and it was her turn to reclaim him. Relieved, Kylo returned her kiss while his hand followed the curve of her breast to count each rib. He released her lips to breathe while his touch continued along her hipbone, down to the dip of her navel, and to the soft curls below. Finding her slit, he traced along it and reveled in the goosebumps he coaxed. Already spread and braced against his thighs, Rey’s knees opened wider to his heavenly touch. His fingers worked their way and she was deliciously wet and ready; he found her and slipped a finger inside, massaging as he progressed, centimeter by centimeter. Rey’s breath hitched and her eyes fell shut, taking her bottom lip between her teeth and riding out the wave of tingling intensity that coiled
in her stomach. And when he found the bundle of nerves with his thumb at the crown of her sex, stars erupted in her eyes. Rey couldn’t formulate words even if she tried, resorting to moans that Kylo caught between his own lips.

Just when she neared the brink, grinding herself against his hand and clutching his shoulders for dear life, Kylo withdrew and Rey could breathe again. Finally, she dared to look down, and her eyes went wide at the sight of him. Long and thick and ready, she couldn’t imagine it fitting where his fingers had so perfectly did. Worry unsettled her, but she stopped herself. Everything had terrified her, everything had seemed impossible and scary, and yet he’d guided her through every step. He’d let her lead the way. She trusted him, and she wanted him, and she desperately wanted to give herself over to him completely.

“Hold on to me, Rey” he whispered against her lips, and she did as she was told. Another kiss, a reassuring one that was deep and sweet, and she felt him where his fingers had vacated. He pressed there, and it was like she was being fulfilled in a way no one could ever have done before. No one, before Kylo. She stretched around him, somehow accommodating him, and he moved so achingly slowly within her, inch by inch. Just when she thought he could go no further, he hesitated, hitching one hand around the curve of her backside and the other braced astride her face. She breathed, and he pushed through, so deeply in up to the hilt that Rey felt torn in half. A spasm of pain ripped through her abdomen and she struggled against it, burying her face in the crook of his neck. He held so still, shuddering above her but finding a way to pull her as tightly to him as he could.

Just as quickly as it had come, the pain melted away, replaced by the feeling of fullness and delicious, all-encompassing completion. Pressing a kiss to where Kylo’s pulse fluttered beneath his skin, he accepted the invitation and, with impressive restraint, began to move. He pulled back just to slide in again and again, each thrust gaining momentum. The stars were returning and Rey clawed at his shoulder blades, holding on and riding each wave of pleasure as they mounted from within. She could feel his mouth tasting the skin of her neck, the bend of her shoulder, the line of her jaw. He was everywhere and she could see and feel and taste nothing but him.

Rey clamped her eyes shut, nearing her brink. Her thighs tightened into a vice around his hips and she arched to meet Kylo thrust for thrust. His hands took hers in his, pressing them to either side of her head and threading their fingers together. “Keep your eyes on me,” he whispered, and they were nose to nose when she peeked through her eyelashes. “Rey, keep your eyes on me.”

The thick rumble of his voice and the look of pure need in his expression did her in. She came undone around him, white hot lava flooding her veins and her hips bucking involuntarily against him. Her mouth fell open in a silent scream, but she did it: it took every ounce of will she incoherently had, but she didn’t look away. She unraveled and quaked and gripped as hard as she could to his hands, and he gripped her back, meeting her at her peak. Rey saw the exact moment when Kylo broke, spilling inside her like he was always meant to be there. But he never let go. He held on as tightly as she did, their chests heaving and their bodies trembling beneath each other’s hold.
Long after they calmed and after they’d caught their breath, Kylo couldn’t bring himself to move more than a slight shift of weight for consideration’s sake. Rey didn’t want him to. She wasn’t ready for the feeling to subside: the sense of completion that came so suddenly and so exquisitely. She wasn’t ready to be without him; to be two instead of one.

In return, Rey pulled Kylo’s face to hers for a tired, effortless kiss. Rolling onto their sides, he pulled her close, one arm holding tight around her waist and the other fisting in her hair. He wasn’t ready to let go, either. As he pressed his lips to her forehead, he caught a glimpse of her wide, pleased grin and raised his eyebrows in question. Rey was happy to answer.

“You said my name.”

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Not sure if anyone noticed, but this chapter is the first time Kylo has ever said Rey’s name. ;) Did you all like the chapter? If so, let me know what you think! Where are we going to go from here??
Panic was rising within Kylo Ren. There was no mistaking what he’d seen, felt, heard… and they were all in danger.

He couldn’t have resisted Rey if he’d tried. Lust and desire had taken rein of him and for the first time in his life, he truly let himself feel it. His want for Rey had been undeniable since the moment they’d met – even when he didn’t understand fully what that want entailed. The rush in his veins at her strength and vitality. The ache in his chest at her tears. The coiling heat in his stomach when she spoke with those lips or touched him with those hands. How adamantly he had tried to suffocate his own senses, over and over, to deny that which made him carnally a man. He never could have guessed that he’d have her. All of her. Made her his. She so willingly gave of herself and Kylo gladly took it all. The taste of her on his tongue and the feel of her surrounding him were branded upon him now, and if he were killed the next day, he would die a happy man. As happy as he’d ever been, at least.

From what he saw, he may very well be killed in a day’s time…

Rey was tired. Spent. But she would not willingly succumb to sleep. In the wake of their climax, she’d clung to his waist, digging her nails into his flesh if he so much as moved. His weight upon her was a safeguard; one that anchored her to the warm Ahch-To ground. Being connected, flesh to flesh and buried deep, was like a charged conduit that ignited their bond even more valiantly than Kylo thought possible. Each blink of his heavy eyelids brought fleeting images, and he saw flashes of himself over the days from her eyes: his surprisingly handsome, unmarred face revealed from behind a sinister mask; his dark hair dotted with feathery snow; his body wet and glistening from the rain; his bare skin wrapped with gauze; his mouth canting over hers; all of him, hovering above her and kissing her flesh. She saw him as he was, and she fought against sleep to continue seeing. Kylo idly wondered as Rey's eyelashes fluttered open and closed if she saw through his eyes. If she saw
how glorious she was and the untamed passion that he felt. What he couldn’t yet put into words...

Rey’s eyes wide and questioning, Kylo could hear the rambling in her thoughts. What they’d done bewildered and excited her, but also guilted her. Kylo clearly saw the guilt in her eyes for wanting something she shouldn’t so badly. Right alongside that guilt, though, was the resolution that she did, in fact, want it. Want him. And in the flush of her cheeks, the swell of her lips, and the unrelenting grip of her thighs around his, Rey betrayed no doubt that she intended to keep what she wanted.

That is exactly why, for all of her planning and her shifting faith, Rey didn’t know what would come next. She didn’t know how to move forward and what it would mean. What she did seem to know, however, was that the world would start moving again as soon as they parted, and she wasn’t ready for it. And so, Kylo kissed her eyelids closed and kneaded his stroking fingers into her flesh, lulling her to a calm. Only when her limbs ceased their quivering did he finally, regrettably, remove himself.

Nonetheless, Rey was a divine sight with her naked body against his and surrounded by the beauty of nature. Long, auburn strands of her hair draped along her shoulder, tickling his arm that cradled her. She’d taken to wearing her hair down ever since he’d pulled it from their loops, wet from the rain. His chest ached at the thought that she would change for him. The woman could cry like a Wookiee for all he cared; Kylo would still desperately lose himself in her.

Alas. The world had to start moving, and so did Kylo.

To his dismay, Rey responded to the loss of his heat and his weight. She whined and squinted warily – disapprovingly – through her eyelashes. He could see how tired she was, and she needed the rest. The day weighed so heavily on them all. Kylo wasn’t ready to make everything more difficult; not just yet.

Dressing as quickly and quietly as he could, Kylo gathered Rey’s clothes and thought twice before jostling her about. Instead opting for his cloak, he draped it along her naked body, immediately mourning the sight of her perfection. It was still a marvel to him that he had been her obvious first – there was no denying the sensation or the pain. Selfishly, he was grateful for it but also relieved… relieved that she had not been defiled by anything on Jakku or anywhere else. He wouldn’t have been able to live with it if she had. He’d have torn apart the galaxy in search of the heathen and he would not have stopped the darkness, then.

Sliding an arm beneath her shoulders and her legs respectively, Kylo lifted her into his arms and began the trek away from the temple. She didn’t protest. Kylo imagined that any day before then, she would have – demanding in her brazen, obstinate way that her legs worked as fine as his. There was no more flinching away; no more indecision about his presence and his touch. Now, there was only what bound them. The thought of returning to the time before – when they were nothing more
than adversaries and something as simple as sleep was to be evaded at all costs – seemed so far away.

Kylo hadn’t expected to feel such vulnerability again…

“Where are we going,” Rey muttered, barely winning against the veil of sleep. She burrowed into him, smiling with the sway of his gait.

Infatuated, Kylo pressed a kiss to her forehead. He didn’t want to answer her, but knew better than to lie. “I am taking you to the Millennium Falcon. We can sleep there tonight.”

To Kylo’s relief, and most likely indebted to her near-unconsciousness, Rey seemed to accept his answer. And though he’d rather not have, he reached out to Skywalker, instructing him to meet them there. Thankfully, Kylo arrived first and tucked Rey away in the crew quarter’s bunks. The Jedi and the Wookiee met him outside.

There was no time for niceties, not that Kylo would have made the time, anyway. “You will board this ship and you will take it to your Resistance,” he commanded. “Today.”

Luke raised an arm to calm Chewbacca as he uttered a string of expletive-laden retorts. “Tell me what the hurry is, and I might do as you ask.”

Despite his uncle’s reasonable reply, Kylo sneered in frustration. “There is no time for long-winded explanations. We’ve had enough of those. Just do as I ask for Rey’s sake.”

“What is for my sake?”

Kylo’s eyes fell shut in exasperation. Of course, Rey couldn’t simply stay asleep. How much easier it would have been to simply force her to sleep, but then, those times were better left in the past. The world kept moving, after all, and Rey would not be one to miss it after having already missed so much for so long.

Kylo had hoped to bypass this entire unnecessary confrontation that was now inevitable. It was clear to him how it would go, but there was no sense in lying. Not when Rey could easily find the truth.
She was a vision descending the ramp, hastily dressed, new saber strapped to her shoulder, and hair all in disarray. “Is… is this about what happened? What I did?”

It pained him to tell her yes and to see the guilt wash over her, her loveliness clouded by self-deprecation. She didn’t even know what danger imposed and she was already blaming herself. “When I was… incapacitated. I was unable to resist.” he searched for the words, beseeching her forgiveness with his eyes. He felt her in his thoughts, tugging along the tie that bound them in search of the answers. She found them: how he was vulnerable and powerless; how they found him, unhindered; how close they already were.

“What could you not resist?” Luke demanded impatiently, though he surely knew the answer already.

“They’ve found us,” murmured Rey, her eyes wide and unmoving. She could not look away. “The Knights of Ren.”

It was obvious to them all: when Snoke had failed in seeking them out, he’d enlisted Kylo’s own apprentices to find their master. Breaking away from Rey’s torturous stare, Kylo faced Luke. “It is time for you to leave.”

“Us,” Rey interjected, clambering the rest of the way down the ramp and inserting herself between the men. Fisting her hand in the front of Kylo’s jacket, she tugged as if to shake sense into him. “It is time for us to leave.”

“How much time do we have?” Luke ignored Rey’s interruption.

Kylo looked pensive as he gauged it. “They had a few minutes to scour my mind… so I’d say little to none.”

“And I cannot convince you to join us? They couldn’t possibly follow.”

“If I am with you, then they will. I am sure of it.”

With all of her might, Rey shoved Kylo in the chest, forcing him to stumble back and away. Her expression contorted into a mixture of fear, frustration, and anger. She no longer seemed to care for the logistics of it all, let alone being left out of the planning. Instead, she fixated on him, throwing a
quick “try me” glance in Luke’s direction.

“You will not take from me what you have taken, then send me on my way,” she spat, nose-to-nose with him. Attempting to grip her shoulders, to calm her, was to no avail. She merely shook off his touch. “I know what I said about the Resistance. I know… But we can go anywhere.”

Kylo shook his head, beating back the agony in his gut. “There’s nowhere else to go, Rey.”

Rey smacked the heel of her fist against his chest in an attempt to counter the angry tears stinging her eyes. “I thought we’d figured this out? I thought you agreed that we are stronger together?”

Catching her third or fourth punch mid-swing, Kylo pulled her gruffly to his chest, holding her there as she resisted. Threading his fingers into her hair, he ducked his head so that his lips met her ear and whispered so only she could hear. “You are strong, Rey. You don’t need me for that.”

“I do need you. I’ll stay and fight with you.” As if to punctuate her point, Rey gripped her saber still slung over her shoulder, white-knuckled. “You said I would need this when it was my time to fight. That time has come.”

“Don’t let your fear and your anger in this moment cloud your judgment,” he murmured, shushing her. “Don’t let it change you. They need you, Rey. Everyone who loves you, needs you…” Clenching his eyes shut, he bit back the emotion. Searched for the calm resolve to make an impossible demand. How do you tell someone who has fought her entire life to stop fighting? “I need you to do this for me. I need you to go.”

He felt her break in his arms, the tension in her body falling away. The others – the only family she’d ever truly known – were her weakness. Even without them, Rey knew Kylo would not allow for her to stay, even if that meant physically strapping her into the pilot’s seat and setting it on autopilot. “I don’t think I can do this.”

Behind them, Luke approached, his expression crestfallen but confident. “You’re the only one who can do this, Rey. The prophecy is true. This is your purpose.”

His eyes fixed on his nephew, Luke reached to his belt and unclipped his lightsaber. He held its hilt aloft, disengaged, and pressed it firmly into Kylo’s free hand. “Can you do this?”
The worry was evident in Luke’s voice, and it bolstered Kylo’s determination. Once upon a time, a very long time ago, he had wanted to make his uncle proud. It seemed that now, there was a chance to do just that. The weight of his grandfather’s saber in his hand, Kylo felt empowered. “I am their master. I trained them, and I can defeat them.”

There was nothing left to discuss. Chewbacca and the droids readied the ship in expert quickness: it was obviously something Chewie had grown used to doing. Assuring Rey that they mustn’t wait, Luke gave Kylo a single, thankful nod before boarding the ship for himself.

Rey stared at the water’s edge, fixated on the glow of the largest, sun-like star as it descended toward the horizon. She took Kylo’s breath away, bathed in the light. It was then, in that quiet moment where their mutual brokenness was held together by their string alone, that Kylo could finally put words to the indescribable. Yes, he admired her strength as she bested him in battle, took pride in her abilities, and burned hotly for her in the wickedest of ways. But it was more than that that heated the blood in his veins. It was everything. She was everything. Her mere existence in the galaxy baffled him: the missing piece that she was. The light to his dark. But she could be nothing – and ostensibly was – and she’d still be more than Kylo ever deserved. He wanted to tell her how grateful he was to her… how indebted he felt. That she was what fit when nothing else did in the no longer perpetually empty space. That she made him feel something he’d never felt before, yet could somehow recognize – because he’d wanted and waited for it, so ardently, his entire life.

“I love you, Rey.”

Like he’d said, everyone who loves her, needed her. Even Kylo Ren. Whether he’d live to see the sun rise, and whether she realized it or not, Rey had saved him.

Her lips were on his so suddenly, her tongue beseeching and her heart hammering through her skin. Kylo graciously drank in the way her breath hitched and her mouth moved. He savored the press of her against him, the pulsepoint of her neck beneath his fingers and the tickle of her hair against his cheek. Her thoughts flowed freely along the thin red string… *I won’t say it back. I won’t say goodbye. This won’t be the last time. It won’t.*

Parting for air, she pressed her forehead against his but couldn’t meet his eyes. Just as quickly as she’d claimed him, he was released, and she was heading to the Falcon. Leaving him. Returning to the Resistance. It was where she belonged, among heroes and friends.

“*Rey,*” he croaked out just as she boarded the ramp. She swiped at her cheeks out of view before turning to look, demanding herself be strong. For her, for him, for them both. She was an effigy of strength and beauty, waiting with a futile hope for him to tell her to stay. But the words of his mother rang in his ears, about sacrificing for the ones you love. Kylo cleared his throat. “When you find my mother… Tell her that I am sorry.”
Despite her resilience, a single tear managed its way down Rey’s cheek. She nodded and disappeared inside, the hatch closing with a deep hiss behind her.

They were gone in an instant, piercing the atmosphere and undoubtedly jumping to hyper drive as soon as they were clear. There on the beach with the last rays of sunlight clinging to life above the horizon, Kylo opened his mind to the Knights, beckoning them there. It would only be a matter of time.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Nobody puts Baby in a corner! Also, I’ve been waiting this whole story to use the essential “I brought them into this world, I can take them out of it!” line! :D

Special thanks to soupyup, CMA, Jena, ReadAllTheFeels, sylverkeller, ashmandalc, YaminoTenshi202, KylosLady, and niteowl29 on AO3 and the following from FF(dot)net:

Sara Alvarado Porter – you have to let me know what you thought of TLJ! Thank you for your kind comments – I’m always incredibly relieved and excited to hear readers think that the characterization is done well. It’s what I strive for!

shiitakehero – thank you!

midnight shadow of darkness – thank you!!! I’m so glad you enjoyed the scene with Luke and Kylo! I wanted there to be a meaningful moment between them, even if it isn’t a full resolution. Because like you said (and you’re so right), I don’t think it can be neatly wrapped up in a bow. Something tells me that nothing in Kylo’s life can be like that (and maybe not in Luke’s, either, if we’re being honest. I mean… can anyone’s in the SW universe? LOL!). I’m personally hoping that Force Ghost Luke haunts the shit out of Kylo next movie. :D

acetwolf94 – thank you! Can do! :)

greekmomma25 – Ask and you shall receive! :D Thank you so much for reading and reviewing!

Rita593 – I certainly applaud you for reading in one sitting (and am incredibly humbled that you did)! Thank you SO much for your comments about the characterization. Getting it right was beyond important to me. It definitely did take a lot of careful planning to make this story work/flow, so I sincerely appreciate your comments!! Thank you for reading and I hope to hear more of what you think about the forthcoming chapters!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!