Sealed To Me

by glitter_ature

Summary

Rey turns around again, starting to descend the steps, leaving him alone in the temple. ‘You can’t be here. Go back to your sycophants.’

He stands up abruptly and she flinches, shying away. ‘Have we really regressed back to being enemies now? After all this time?’ He motions between them, to the ephemeral, unbreakable bond.

Rey faces him, her hazel eyes so full of sorrow; it pierces straight to the core of him, an arrow to the heart. ‘You made your choices. You chose the Dark, Ben. You chose to kill the rebels rather than help them. There’s nothing I can do to help you anymore. So yes, you’re my enemy. And you need to leave.’ She turns away again, starting down the flight of steps that lead away from the cliff. The water in the pool undulates as her footsteps peter out, and Kylo stares into the pool, at his reflection, the scarred, damaged face that doesn’t even come close to portraying the conflict within. The face of the First Order. He hates it more than he ever has.

_You're no Vader._
_You're just a child._
_In a mask._
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Chapter 1

Sealed To Me

A Reylo Fanfiction

One Month After The Events Of The Last Jedi

He is glad to be rid of the bond, of the visions, of the inconsequential, traitorous, simpleton girl. No longer does his mind feel the sudden tug that snaps him out of reality and face-to-face with her, no longer are his waking moments haunted with the sight of her face, solemn and pious.

At first, he lamented the loss, prone to brooding as he is. When the idiot scavenger foolishly chose a desecrated rebel “family” over galactic control, when she slammed the door shut on their link, he’d felt pain like no other he’d ever experienced bloom in his chest, a hidden wound throbbing deep inside him. Later, he’d had the med-droids check him extensively for every kind of heart abnormality. They didn’t find anything wrong with him.

As much as Kylo hated to admit it, he’d grown somewhat used to the strange disconnect, the sudden insight into a stranger’s life, a stranger’s mind. It’s a peculiar form of voyeurism, and try as he might to deny it, he had grudgingly enjoyed the time spent with somebody who turned out to be so remarkably similar.

But not where it counted, he reminds himself. The scavenger lacks drive, ambition and the ability to forsake the past in favour of a new, better future – things that Kylo considers fatal flaws. And so now he is thankful for the lack of connection, for the meaningful silence that reigns whenever he can be bothered to think of her. And that is not often.

But tonight, lying in his solitary, too-crammed chambers – he really ought to demand an upgrade; after all, he is the Supreme Leader of the First Order – stripped of his daily armour and airs, he can’t help but ruminate. Think back to the time they first made contact from across the stars.

He’d been sitting in the med-bay, a team of droids working to repair the soft-tissue damage he’d attained in recent training drills. He was staring off into the distance, bored, when suddenly, he felt a gentle tug, deep in the core of his brain, and he was no longer alone.

The scavenger girl – Rey – sat across the room from him, sleepy-eyed and sluggish, as though she’d fallen asleep on the seats in the med-bay. He watched her, still as a statue in case he startled her, his eyes wide with surprise.

Her head turned towards him, and she registered what she was seeing. Kylo had watched her eyes glaze over with panic as she scrambled for her blaster. He didn’t even have time to raise a hand before she fired, shooting a slug straight into his stomach. He’d cried out and doubled over, clutching himself. But there was no blood, no scorched flesh.

He should have been dead. But the slug never made contact. He felt it, felt the impact, but it didn’t pierce him.
What kind of Force daydream…

Rey had disappeared when he bent over, but now he leapt off the med-table and skidded out into the corridor, scanning for danger in the form of a small girl with a powerful laser gun. But there’s just a couple of stormtroopers walking rapidly away – avoiding him, no doubt. No scavenger.

He swivels and she’s there again, clear as day, lit up with infernal light. He throws his hand out reflexively, pulls his considerable strength into line and murmurs, imbuing his words with power: “You will bring Skywalker to me.”

The command slid off her like mercury off glass. Just like the blaster bolt and him. What in the world… she’s not really here. Is she Force projecting?

“You’re not doing this,’ he said slowly, puzzling it out, moment by moment. “The effort would kill you. Somehow… this is something else.” But what? What?

The girl doesn’t say anything, staring at him with a curious blend of terror and contempt, but then – He felt, rather than saw, a door open behind her, that sudden airflow –

And it was gone. Dead air. Connection fizzled out, like a faulty holocron message, and his mind seemed relatively intact as he smooths a hand over his head, running his fingers through tangled black locks.

Nowadays, whenever he’s in a particularly self-loathing mood, he likes to mull over why he didn’t just use his considerable strength there and then to force the connection back open, to crack her mind like a clamshell and harvest the precious little pearl of information there – the location of Luke Skywalker. He was sure that’s who had opened the unseen door – there are some things he can entrust to intuition. It had never let him down. At least until the filthy little traitor rejected his proposal, almost killed him by exploding a lightsaber in his face, commandeered his father’s ship and flew what was left of the Resistance to force-knows-where. He didn’t intuit that. Or that Luke would be the one to Force-project, distracting him with a hologram so that Leia and her ilk could escape the First Order. Kylo hopes it was worth it – he’d felt his uncle’s death in the web of the Force, felt his triumph and his peace, and… well, the command deck had needed a new set of computers anyway. He’d let his temper get the better of him one too many times.

Now tonight. Alone in his chambers, the Supreme Leader of Nothing and Nowhere lies quietly, thinking. No respect from his army, certainly not from that insufferable, obsequious Armitage Hux, and nobody to talk to, not even about something as trivial as the weather. Which he can’t really discuss, given he’s currently floating in deep space, but it’s the principle of the matter.

He has nobody. And the wretched pangs start to nibble at his heart again, just at the edges, enough to remind him that they’re there and they’re hungry.

They are to blame for what he does next.

Ben Solo closes his eyes, takes a deep breath in, and mouths, Rey. He doesn’t care, not really, but perhaps it would be interesting if anything still remains of their psychic link. It’s worth a try.

He feels that deep part of his brain, the part that is bonded to her, even now with her denial of their connection, light up, humming with life. It is there, their bond. Something has been there ever since the time they spent together in his little interrogation room on Starkiller, and it burgeoned when his old master fed it – a glowing, infinitesimal part of him. And now it’s awake again, reaching through space and time, trying to find its equal. The other half of the whole.
It’s like hitting a brick wall at walking pace – it doesn’t hurt, but it’s maddening all the same. She is blocking him, so effectively that there is not even the tiniest of gaps to feel out, the smallest of cracks to test his weight against. He can’t believe her arrogance. How is she doing this? It is entirely unfair that she should be able to close herself off to him so completely when he cannot escape her.

*Please*, he murmurs, his brow furrowing with concentration. *I just want to talk.*

He’s met with that infuriating silence. It’s deafening in this dark, claustrophobic room, and his heart pounds, anxiety levels rising rapidly. *Come on.*

A brief flash of pearly light nearly blinds him, even with his eyes closed, as the connection rips open, and her disembodied voice tells him sternly, *Not a chance.*

The link is crushed under the weight of the silence as she tears away from him. And he should be crushed too – and those damned little tendrils of hurt are twisting around his insides again, barbed wire on his heart. But Ben Solo can’t help the little smirk that steals across his face – so the bond persists. He is not alone.

She feels it too.
Chapter 2

Chapter Two

Rey slams her tray down on the table, jolting it so hard that Finn’s bottle of water falls over and rolls away. He looks after it mournfully for a moment, then turns back to her with an uneasy gaze.

‘What’s wrong, Rey?’

He knows something’s up with her; he’s known it since the first day they disembarked the Falcon on Elbara Nine, the rebels’ (temporary) new home. And he knows it’s not just the constant, biting chill of the wind here, making her blood turn gelid, that’s got her stressed out. Every so often, she’ll have flashes of normalcy, where she’s back to being sunny, optimistic Rey, with a smile that could melt the icicles that hang from every door and archway of this tiny little rebel base. But more often than not, she’s angry, her mouth downturned, her eyes burning with something Finn can’t place. Even now, unwrapping a nutrient bar, she’s lost in thought, her face set in a scowl.

‘Seriously, Rey. If something’s goin’ on, you can tell me. You know that, right?’ Finn reaches out, tentatively, to touch her hand, lying limply on the table. ‘I’m here.’

The second his fingers make contact with her skin, Rey recoils as if she’s been stung, reflexively retracting her hand. She stumbles backward, knocking her chair over, almost bumping into Poe, who’s just arriving from a meeting with General Organa. He’d promised to meet Finn for breakfast so they could catch up, and Finn was hoping Rey would show – the three of them haven’t had much of a chance to talk yet.

‘Rey, don’t go-‘ he implores, but she’s already running helter-skelter out of the room. Finn sighs and lets his head hit the table, narrowly missing his own breakfast tray and untouched bowl of porridge.

Poe hovers for a moment, then pulls up a chair. ‘Uh, should I ask?’

‘Nope,’ Finn mumbles into the table. But he pulls himself together and faces Poe, resting his chin on his hands. ‘That’s the fourth time that’s happened. I’m worried about her.’

‘What’s going on?’ Poe probes gently, his expression full of concern. Finn’s struck all over again with how much he adores his friend – the guy’s got a heart bigger than the First Order’s dreadnought, to be honest. The limit to his empathy does not exist.

Finn clenches his jaw, thinking. ‘She never did like to be touched much, so I don’t know if this is just normal Rey stuff. But she’s off in her own world ninety percent of the time now. Nearly every time I see her, she looks like she’s walking around stuck in a daydream. Or a nightmare,’ he adds as an afterthought, worry churning in his stomach at the notion.

Poe nibbles at his bottom lip, digesting what Finn’s said. ‘Could it be the… you know, the Jedi training?’ he murmurs in a hushed voice, although they’re not exactly spilling state secrets here. For one, the cafeteria’s empty except for the two of them, and two, everyone knows about Rey the sort-of-Jedi – it’s kind of hard to miss the fact that someone’s magical when they’re literally levitating boulders in front of your eyes.

Finn shakes his head, shoulders slumping. ‘You really think Luke Skywalker would mess her up like that? If anything, it’d be his death that’s impacting her – although I didn’t get the impression they
were tight."

They’d all heard, of course – the grapevine is lightning-fast when information only has to pass through, like, thirty people – that the legendary Luke Skywalker, the last true Jedi, had died. Leia had skimped on the details in her briefing to the other commanders, but oddly, she’d told them that Luke didn’t die fighting Kylo Ren – in fact, he hadn’t even left his little island hideaway. He’d made himself into some kind of hologram and projected it halfway across the galaxy; fooling that tantrum-throwing sack of porg-dung into thinking he was really there.

Finn somehow doesn’t think that’s what’s bothering Rey, though. He’s seen her grieve, after Han was murdered, and this doesn’t look like grief. More like anger, which is an emotion he thought the Jedi weren’t supposed to be capable of. But what does he know?

‘Hmmm,’ Poe muses, biting into a reheated crumpet. ‘I don’t know then, buddy. Maybe she just needs time? We don’t really know the context behind her time with Luke, after all, or what their relationship was like.’

Finn folds his arms. ‘It’s been a month, Poe. In case you haven’t noticed, we’re not exactly thriving out here.’ He waves his arms at the thickly reinforced cafeteria windows, barely managing to keep the driving sleet at bay. ‘We’ve all had to adjust pretty damn quick, and she’s not coping. I just wonder why.’

‘Wondering and worrying doesn’t do any good,’ Poe counsels through a mouthful of crumpet. ‘Action is better. If you’re really concerned, just straight-up march into her quarters and ask her what’s up. Or, if you don’t want to look like an insensitive dick, I vote you let her come to you.’

Finn scowls, kicking at the leg of Poe’s chair under the table. ‘Fat chance of that,’ he grumbles. But he’s right, of course, he usually is.

‘There’s this thing about time, buddy,’ Poe grins, kicking back at him playfully. ‘It heals everything.’

She can’t stand it any longer. Rey jumps up from her bed and throws on a couple of layers of animal furs and lined boots, rugging up against the cold weather. She kicks the door of her room open and stalks down the corridor, steadfastly avoiding eye contact with every person she passes. The tiny complex of Glitterfall Base doesn’t have many rooms, so it’s easy enough to navigate her way to the exit, swinging open the door without touching it. She struggles through the calf-deep snow, gasping at the chill, leaving a pothole trail as she treks about five hundred metres from the base. Not far enough. She wraps the furs around her and marches on, the snow lessening slightly the further she gets, until it’s barely ankle-deep. Tolerable. She cranes her neck and looks back at the camp, a turtle-shaped dome dropped in the middle of an icy wilderness. She hates it here. It’s eating her alive. It’s not where she wants to be.

So where does she want to be? Ach-To, with Luke? Not possible, not anymore, and even when he was alive, she didn’t exactly relish the time spent hiking up endless stairs and spearing fish from mountaintops in torrential rain.

Jakku? No. Never again. She doesn’t want to see that place again, for however long she lives. As if there weren’t enough bad memories associated with that hellhole, she now has to reconcile herself with the fact that her parents were apparently junk-traders who sold her to Unkar Plutt for nothing more than a cheap drink. The knowledge of that doesn’t hurt any less than it did the day he told her.

They’re dead in a pauper’s grave in the Jakku desert.
You have no place in this story.

You come from nothing.

You’re nothing.

That rage, the white-hot fury that’s been building since the day Ben Solo turned around and destroyed every hope she’d had in redeeming him, boils again, robbing her of breath. She clenches her fists, screws her eyes shut, and screams. It leaves her lips like the strangled cry of a newborn, but it makes the icicles on a nearby cave opening shatter. She staggers over to it and crawls into the little indentation on hands and knees, shivering. Even outside the rebel base, away from prying eyes and concerned questions, she can’t escape.

Him. Whatever connection the Force saw fit to draw between them, it’s still there, funnelling his emotions into her. She can block it temporarily, when she really tries, and so far she’s been able to put up a mental wall against his attempts to talk to her, as few as they’ve been. But his feelings are still leaking into her – flashes of pride, of fury, of despair. She can’t bear to be touched, because she doesn’t know if it’s him or her that feels the sensation. And she doesn’t want anything to get back to him. Because if she can feel all of this, then he can too. It’s like a two-way funhouse mirror, distorted, but discernable. And if the newly hailed Supreme Leader of the First Order could see where they are… she doesn’t like to think about what would happen, and not because it makes her fearful. It makes her cry.

She can’t believe that she was so wrong about Ben Solo. Stupid enough to let herself believe his softly-spoken words, foolish enough to feel pity for his spun-sugar story of betrayal at the hands of his former master, Luke. And insane enough to package herself up like a birthday present and fly to him, in some misguided attempt to sway him to the light side of the Force. That boy – that man – was never going to turn. Whatever future she saw was obviously a web of lies, crafted by Snoke. He’d said, after all, that he engineered their bond, and she was naïve enough to believe that the Force willed them to become allies.

But why, why, if Snoke made their bond, did it not disappear when Kylo killed him? It should have evaporated like so much mist, but it’s only getting stronger with time and distance. At first, she could only get a glimpse of his emotions, as fleeting as a comet, shooting across her consciousness. But now it is near constant, her brain humming with rage and guilt that is not hers to bear.

That’s the worst of it. That he has her feeling guilty. Of any emotion, that is the last she should be feeling for Ben Solo. But every night, when she closes her eyes and tries her best to drift off, she’s haunted by the last bonded moment she allowed them to have.

She was chivvying the rebel survivors into the Falcon, and was about to close the door, when she felt that bass throb, deep in her the centre of her mind. And she wasn’t looking out at a red-salt landscape anymore, but at Kylo Ren, kneeling on the floor of Crait’s command room, a pair of golden dice in one gloved hand. The way he looked at her struck her to the bone – the pure accusation in his eyes, and something else, something like desolation.

He didn’t say a word, but he didn’t have to. He blamed her for leaving him, that much was obvious. Rey had stared at him in disbelief for a brief moment, before she came to her senses and slammed the door, cutting him off. She’d resolved to keep doing that for as long as it took. She hadn’t expected it to become so bloody hard.
She can feel his emotions again now, tickling her nerves unpleasantly – he’s lonely. Does he expect her to feel sorry for that? Ben Solo has brought his loneliness entirely upon himself - he chose that loneliness when he chose to rule the First Order and the galaxy rather than return to the rebellion. He is a fool, and Rey doesn’t feel pity for fools.

She’s about to crawl out of the ice cave again, before frostbite sets in, when she hears him speak.

_Rey_.

_Kriff, she hates_ that it makes her heart race, but it’s probably just the adrenaline talking. She bites her tongue and concentrates, digging her fingers into the dirt floor of the cave, trying to close off the link.

_Please, I just want to talk._

Oh, how she wants to spit something cruel back at him. He had so many chances to talk, and he used them to seduce her with vanilla half-truths. She isn’t going to listen to another second of it. She furrows her brow and pushes harder, clamping down on that clandestine spot in her mind where his voice emanates from.

_Come on_. A last surge of his desperation floods the link, hot and acrid, and she loses control for a moment, his feelings moving through her like a wave of electricity. She closes her eyes for a moment, enveloped in his loneliness, and then she firmly replies,

_Not a chance._

She pictures an anvil falling on that part of her brain, and the link is severed. At least for now. The idea of sleeping tonight is looking less and less appealing. Death by hypothermia may be a pleasant alternative.

Rey sighs, her breath crystallising in front of her eyes, and crawls out of the cave, heading back to her prison.
Chapter 3

He doesn’t need to train anymore. As the Supreme Leader, however meaningless his title might be, he could easily languish in a throne-room all day and order his subjects to bring him food, entertainment, even whores. But he’s never been one for laziness, and so he trains. Privately, in a small dojo that was previously a dedicated space for the stormtroopers. Now it is his alone. A place of self-inflicted punishment. And after all, who knows when that snivelling Hux will stage a coup and come for his title and/or life? He needs to be ready to fight, not let muscle waste away.

He painstakingly removes his armour, unravelling his arm wraps and stripping layers until he is dressed only from the waist down. He trains better this way, more rigorously, when his skin can breathe.

A training dummy pops up on the floor and he drops his centre of gravity, feet planted in attack position. In one smooth movement he unholsters and ignites his lightsaber, the familiar whoosh and crackle of unstable energy comforting him as it always does. He spins the beam of energy and lunges at the dummy, slicing its head clean off, sparks floating like fireflies in the air around him. He hacks at it again, cleaving it down the middle, the ripping of wood and stuffing bringing him immense satisfaction. Another one springs up to his right and he glides to it, bringing his saber down on its ill-formed neck. Two more dummies pop up to replace that one, and he whirrs and slashes, caught up in the grotesque ballet of battle, his feet carrying him wherever he needs to go. He doesn’t even have to reach out to the Force – this is basic instinct.

A final dummy rolls out, bigger than the rest, painted sky-blue. For one ludicrous moment, Kylo thinks of his dead uncle, and a thrill of fear courses through him. But he can use this to his advantage. Make your fear into your weapon, and you can defeat anything, that’s what his master used to say. Both of them, actually. They probably had no idea just how alike they were. Only their alignments differed. Both got what they deserved, in the end. But only one tried to kill him.

He blinks, replacing the dummy with the image of Luke Skywalker, standing before him holding a blue saber. He should have seen right through that ruse – that saber had been broken only hours earlier, when he and Rey had fought over it, their powers matched so evenly that the blade had split in two, causing an explosion that knocked him the hell out and allowed her to sneak off like the thief she is. But, faced with his long-lost uncle and would-be killer, he hadn’t exactly been in a frame of mind to fact-check. He just wanted him dead, and a thousand blaster slugs hadn’t done it, so he and his saber would have to.

Have you come to tell me you forgive me? To save my soul? He closes his eyes, remembering the moment with anguish.

No, his uncle had said simply, his eyes narrowed with something Kylo couldn’t place. Later, he’d find out it was effort – the man was trying valiantly to keep himself solid as he projected his image across countless parsecs.

Kylo reaches out with the tip of his saber and pokes the dummy, letting the laser heat of his saber
burn a hole through the dummy’s face – first once, then twice. Now it has eyes. He can’t make it have the same expression as his uncle’s did, though, when he apologised to him.

_I failed you, Ben. I’m sorry_, he had called as he wielded his lightsaber – not doing a very good job of apologising, when he was actively trying to strike him with a weapon. Kylo had found that so outrageous he wanted to laugh.

_I’m sure you are!_ he’d barked out, not backing away, not taking his eyes off his uncle, even for a second. The moment he let his guard down, he’d be vaporized.

Kylo slashes at the dummy, pretending he’s cutting Luke’s other hand off. _Oops_. He impales his saber through what would be the dummy’s stomach; imagining burst guts and hot blood droplets spilling like rubies over the floor. He lets his finger slip from the button momentarily, spinning the hilt of the saber in his palm before he reignites it and jams it through the head of the dummy, dragging the blade downwards, slicing through the structure like butter. It splits in half and rolls away across the floor; he’s not done, not even remotely close. Deprived of any more dummy outlets, he turns his saber on the shelves at the side of the room, slashing at the steel, carving deep, glowing veins in the metalwork.

Once the shelves are sufficiently mutilated, he switches off his saber again, breathing heavily. This pitiful workout was nothing compared to the gruelling feats he used to put his body through daily, but he’s sweating, shaking slightly. Catharsis. That’s what’s been achieved here.

He collects his discarded clothing and strides into the showers connected to the back of the dojo, trying to put Luke Skywalker and his callow attempt at an apology out of his mind. The showers are black and cold, and the warm water is a welcome reprieve for tired muscles as he removes his undergarments and steps under the spray. There’s no shampoo, which is irritating, but someone left a bar of scented soap behind, and he scrubs himself all over with it, bubbles glistening as they slide down to the floor of the shower. He glances down at his bare chest, hairless and soaking, and –

He remembers.

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He’d felt the pull of the bond when he’d just left another training session, much more strenuous than this one, and was covered in sweat. All he’d wanted to do was shower, but the moment he stepped foot in his quarters, she’d appeared, her back to him, messy little buns of hair wet from the rain. Whatever planet she’s on, it’s miserably wet.

_I’d rather not do this now_, she said curtly, not turning around.

_Yeah, me too_, he bit back acerbically, hoping she’d take the hint and get out of his room. As fun as it can be to toy with her, he doesn’t need this right now.

_Why did you hate_– she whirls around, but doesn’t finish the sentence, and her eyes are stuck on his chest. That’s when he remembers he’s not wearing anything above the waist. And suddenly things become a whole lot more fun.

_Your father_, she finishes lamely, but she’s still staring, bug-eyed, at his physique. It’s a little uncomfortable, the way her eyes are just burning a hole between his nipples. He’s certainly never stared like that at a naked person. Not that he’s seen one.

_Do you have something – a cowl, or something – you could put on?_ Rey demands, her eyes darting all over the place now, trying to avoid the sight of him a little too late.
He’s laughing inside, but he schools his expression to be neutral, and doesn’t respond.

She sighs, then fires a question at him, catching him off guard. *Why did you hate your father? Give me an honest answer.* She chokes up, her voice seething with anger. *You had a father who loved you, who gave a damn about you-*

*I didn’t hate him;* he interrupts smoothly, trying to cut her off before she starts properly yelling. She does that, now, hurrs insults at him every time they connect like this, and truth be told, it’s wearing thin. He doesn’t need this on top of how much trouble he’s in with the Supreme Leader for letting her live.

*Then why?* she implores him, her voice strained.

*Why what?* He asks her, his fists clenching as he fights to not let that familiar anger bubble up. *Why what? Say it.*

She sobs once. *Why did you… why did you kill him? I don’t understand…* Of course you don’t. *No. Your parents threw you away like garbage.*

*They didn’t!* she spits vehemently, her face screwing up in anguish, and he can *feel* how his words cut at her, how deeply they penetrate, and he’s sorry, but he can’t stop.

*They did. But you can’t stop needing them. It’s your greatest weakness – looking for them everywhere. In Han Solo. Now Luke Skywalker.* He can’t hold back the venom that laces his words at that revelation – how can she presume to steal his own relatives away from him? As worthless as they are, as much as they would have disappointed her, they are his. And he wonders what kind of lies his uncle has filled her head with, what falsehoods he’s told her about the night he plotted to murder him while he slept. He can’t help but ask her – he’s never been adept at keeping his curiosity under wraps.

*Did he tell you what happened that night?*

*Yes,* she spits, but her eyes are uncertain. Kylo smiles bitterly, inwardly.

*No. He projects the memory directly to her, hands shaking with the effort, so intent on showing her the truth.* She *can’t* go on believing Skywalker to be some kind of selfless hero. It’s an insult to him.

*He sensed my power. As he senses yours.* He was sleeping peacefully, hand tucked under his pillow, when he heard the unmistakeable sound of a lightsaber igniting. *And he feared it.*

Assuming it was a dream, but curious all the same, he opened his eyes and sleepily rolled over, expecting to see one of the little ones in his room, playing with the saber he keeps on his bedside table. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d had to chase one of the younglings out of his cabin – they’re fascinated by him, the older, lone wolf Force user among a pack of baby Jedi.

He rolled over –

And came face to face with an acid-green beam of energy about to split him in two. His nostrils burned from the heat as his eyes widened in disbelief – who the hell was holding the saber? His eyes travelled up from the blade to the face, the crazed, yet familiar face, ravaged by emotion – Luke Skywalker, his uncle, was holding him at saber-point. Everything, *everything* Snoke had told him was true.

Reflexively, his hand shot out and grabbed the hilt of his own saber, igniting it and swinging it up to
meet Luke’s blade. His uncle cried out, Ben, no! and he was briefly confused – why the hell is his uncle trying to stop him defending himself? - before blind fury overtook logic and he threw out a hand, contracting his fingers to bring the ceiling down on top of them. Traitor! Murderer!

He still fumes, even after so many years, at that memory. And when he returned to the present, to Rey, she was staring at him, her hazel eyes starred with tears. Liar, she breathed, but her face was too easy to read. She believed him, as she should. And he was vindicated. He moved closer, acutely aware of how her eyes followed him, darting back to his bare torso and then flitting away, determined not to linger too long.

Let the past die, he urged her, his eyes searching her face, drinking in her emotions through the bond. Kill it, if you have to. It’s the only way to become what you were meant to be.

She stared at him, dumbfounded, and he wanted to say more, but the connection was slipping away, like sand through an hourglass. Time’s up. But when she turned away from him, there was less of a set to her shoulders, less animosity in her body language. He was getting somewhere. She believed him. It was more than he could have hoped for.

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He jerks out of the memory, shivering at the spray of cold water that trickles down his back. He’s been in the shower so long that the hot water’s run out, and he’s still slicked with soap bubbles. He rinses himself off as fast as he can, practically leaps out of the spray, dries himself with one of the supplied towels and struggles back into his clothing. He’s about to pull his pants back on when he notices something… well, something that doesn’t happen very often, or at least, hasn’t in the last month.

He’s semi-hard, and that’s more of a nuisance than anything, because how’s he supposed to get his pants back on? Someone could walk in at any moment, or worse-

There’s a tickling, deep inside his brain, a warmth spreading out from the centre, almost like –

No! Not now! After all this time, she chooses now to unblock the connection? He’s silently screaming as he picks up the towel and hastily wraps it around his lower half, but by the time he’s, you know, not stark naked, the bond has cooled again, quiet and cold as the water-slicked shower tiles, and he’s more frustrated than ever.

What the hell was that?

Did she see anything? He didn’t see her, but if the connection between them taught him anything, it’s that it wasn’t always on equal footing. From the start, she’d been able to see him and his surrounds, whereas he could only see her. What if she could see him and he couldn’t see her, just now? His face grows hot, and he knows he’s flushing, can see his still-bare chest turning pink too.

Well, he hopes she liked what she saw, because she’ll never see it again. The girl is obviously toying with him, reminding him that the bond is still there, but only on her terms. Well, two can play at that game.

Kylo throws his clothes back on, face still burning hot, and stalks out of the dojo, Force-pushing the piles of broken dummies out of his path.

Chapter End Notes
what is my brain
This stasis will be the death of her. For a month now, they’ve been stagnating on Elbara Nine, eking out an existence on a frozen planet, getting their comms running and trying to recruit more numbers to the rebel cause, with limited success. For a whole month, she’s slept in a tiny room, eaten the same food, and hasn’t come within a hundred metres of a starship. She’s grounded, in every sense of the word, and it’s worse than she could ever have imagined. The few bright points of her day are seeing Chewbacca around the base, playing with his Porg pets, or catching glimpses of Finn and Poe from afar.

She doesn’t ever engage them, too frightened of what they (or she?) might say, but she’s studied them with mild interest over the past few weeks, watching their friendship blossom now that they’re not constantly reacting to danger. Poe’s a better friend for Finn than she ever was, and it warms her heart to see him laughing and joking with the pilot. But she can’t help feeling a little jealous, even though her isolation is entirely self-imposed. Even Leia has approached her a few times, asking what she plans to do with the destroyed saber she keeps in her bedroom, or inviting her to take tea in her quarters, but she’s been noncommittal at most. Truth be told, she can’t bear to look at the mother of the man who’s still firmly wedged inside her head, the monster she helped to create. It makes her angry, and she’s still not sure whether that stems from Kylo’s feelings or her own. It’s getting harder to keep a lid on those emotions, and Rey sometimes catches herself wondering if this is what it’s like to be him, so volatile, like a hand grenade primed to explode at the touch of a feather. She hasn’t broken, not yet, but the effort of corralling the turmoil that’s swirling inside her is sapping her strength.

If she could just get out, get off this horrid planet for a few days, she knows she’d be able to recharge. Get her strength back, and some perspective. She can’t be getting resentful of the general when she’s doing her best for the resistance, the side Rey chose. She can’t begrudge the time they’re taking to mobilise and resume the fight against the First Order, especially when their numbers have dwindled so drastically in the space of days. And she can’t tell anybody how she’s feeling; because if she starts to talk about him, the floodgates will open and everything will come pouring out and she’ll drown.

She’s sitting in her quarters, at the tiny desk and chair by the window, rimed with ice. The room is so Spartan and bare, she finds herself actually wistfully thinking of her shelter on Jakku. At least there she had belongings – the fighter pilot doll, the books-

The books! She’d forgotten about the books, the ones she’d stolen from the Force tree on Ach-To. Well, not really stolen – more like borrowed, with intent to return. Except now there’s nobody to return them to. She is the last Jedi, and if Luke has his way from beyond the grave, it will stay that way. He wouldn’t have wanted her to read those books – he despised the Jedi Order, and by extension, the teachings within.

But, she reasons with herself, he also never truly taught her the ways of the Jedi. He taught her his own redacted version, constantly impressing upon her that the Jedi were wrong, that their ideas about the Force were misguided, that it was time for the Jedi to reach its natural end. That was why he’d come to Ach-To, after all, wasn’t it? To die in peace? He certainly achieved that, but now he’s left
her with an uncomfortable legacy she’s not entirely sure she wants. Maybe reading the books would help? Maybe the original documents are different than the lessons Luke learned?

It’s better than sitting around aimlessly, not even daring to daydream in case it opens the Force Bond. Rey stands up and opens the door to her room, striding down the hallway and into the communications hub, on the hunt for Leia.

She spies the general over in the corner, hunched over a computer monitor with Lieutenant Connix, scribbling on a piece of paper. Rey stands awkwardly back from them, clears her throat.

‘Um…’

Leia turns to her, smiling warmly. ‘Rey. How are you?’

‘I’m fine,’ she says quickly, moving on to the matter at hand and hoping Leia follows. ‘I was just wondering where the, um, Falcon’s being stored.’

Leia can’t quite mask the curiosity that flashes in her eyes then, but she answers easily enough. ‘It’s parked outside, directly behind the west wing of the base. Why?’

Rey swallows. ‘I need access to it. I left something on board when we got here.’

The general frowns, puzzled. ‘Is it important?’

‘Not exactly,’ Rey lies, ashamed at how easily the falsehood slips off her tongue. ‘Just a memento… you know… from home.’ She casts her eyes down to her feet, hoping she looks more dejected than guilty.

It works too well. The general softens, stepping closer to Rey as though she wants to pull her into a hug. Rey stiffens at the thought – she can’t touch her. If she does, she’ll shatter.

‘Of course, Rey,’ Leia says gently. ‘You have my permission. Not that you really need it - that flying lemon may as well be yours now. Although Chewie might have something to say about it.’ She smiles wryly. ‘Go on.’

Rey forces a smile at her and does an about-face, practically jogging out of the room and away from human contact. As soon as she’s outside the complex, she relaxes, even with the rapid drop in temperature that raises goosebumps on her arms. That was easier than she deserved. Now she just needs to find the ship.

She trudges through the ankle-deep slush, leaving boot imprints behind her, and after she crests a small hill, she sees the shuttle, parked unceremoniously on a flat stretch of snow-covered ground, the door closed and ramp raised to protect from the wind squalls getting in and messing up what’s left of the décor. She rushes over, barely hindered by the ice and snow, and presses the button to release the ramp.

Racing up the ramp and into the shuttle feels like coming home after a very, very long day. How has she let a month go by without doing this? She slumps down into the pilot’s chair and studies the dashboard, the multitude of buttons and levers, the clear screen that shows the snowcapped landscape beyond. She’d rather be looking out at a starfield, flying through meteor debris, but it’ll do for now.

Sitting in this seat reminds her of Han – how could it not? His indignation when he’d returned from the med-bay to find her sitting in the pilot’s chair, commanding his spacecraft. Watching that indignation turn to reluctant respect as he’d watched her fly, putting the shuttle through its paces
effortlessly, solving problems before they’d even occurred. She touches the blaster she wears at her hip, the one he’d gifted her and tried to teach her how to use correctly. She’d used that blaster for the first time on Takodana, when she was lost in the forest, being hunted by a devil in black robes, a monster in a mask.

*The girl I’ve heard so much about.*

Remembering his voice, filtered through the mask, raises goosebumps that are entirely unrelated to the chill outside. Back then, he’d seemed like a nightmare made flesh, stalking towards her and deflecting her blaster bolts with a flick of his stuttering red saber. He wasn’t in the slightest bit human, until he removed the mask. She wishes he had kept it on. If he had, they might not be neck deep in this mess now. She recalls the way he froze her with one simple movement, rooting her to the spot while he methodically searched her mind, gloved fingers barely brushing her temple, her cheekbone.

*Forget the droid. We have what we need.*

How little that matters now – how much can change in a matter of months. If he was still that impenetrable masked figure to her, how much easier her life would be. But he isn’t. He has a face and a name and thoughts and feelings that she knows entirely too much about.

He’s Ben Solo.

He’s Kylo Ren.

At the mention of his name, that wretched part of her switches on, catching her off guard. Before she can shut it off again, she feels that throb of bass reverberate through her, and he’s standing outside in the snow, but also in some kind of black, tiled room. He’s flustered, moving incredibly fast to pick something up off the tiles, and Rey feels a thrill of horror when she realises - he’s *naked*.

*What the…?* She rears back from the dashboard, falling off the pilot’s chair and hitting the floor with a thud that rattles the walls of the shuttle. *No, no, no, no way. No way that just happened.* She can feel her face heating up all the way to her hairline, and her eyebrows have probably abandoned ship and flown off into the ether.

She presses her face into the floor of the Falcon for a moment, trying to cool down. Then, slowly, using the pilot’s chair for support, she lifts herself up and peeks over the dashboard and out the screen again.

He’s gone. Thank the *stars* for that.

She doesn’t want to think about what she just saw. She needs a distraction, now more than ever. The books. Where are the damned books? She bustles around the Falcon, moving jerkily, trying to force the image out of her mind. It doesn’t work. It’s probably burned onto her retinas, like she’s looked too long at a solar eclipse. She’s had previous experience with Ben Solo’s chest, but this… well, she didn’t know men looked like *that*. Then again, she’s never really seen one.

Oh, there were plenty of depraved half-wits down at the seedy bars on Jakku, whipping their gear off for all and sundry, but she’d always run away before she got a good look. No chance of that now.

*Did he do that deliberately?* She froths with ire at the thought of it. He just *loves* making her uncomfortable, doesn’t he? Relishes it. It’s the only kind of enjoyment he can get, making the little ‘nobody’ feel awkward. Being the Supreme Leader must be a joyless exercise if this is how he has to get his rocks off.
She yanks open a locker and – thank the Force – there they are. The dusty little tomes sit in an orderly line inside a grimy old tin locker, the spines embossed with unfamiliar script. She picks them up and slides them into a little bag she brought specially for this, throws the bag over her shoulder, and descends the ramp. She can’t help looking over before she goes, at the space previously occupied by Kylo Ren, but there’s just miles of snow. *What did you expect, Rey? Some kind of warped invitation?*

She shakes her head, trying to clear it, and trudges away from the ship, the weight of the books in her bag a welcome distraction.
Chapter 5

Hux is behaving more obnoxiously than ever, and it’s all Kylo can do not to surprise-choke him from behind as he’s detailing their newest plan of attack on the Resistance. He and Hux are standing at the front of the committee room as Hux points to a beamed image of the Outer Rim being projected in front of them, planets spinning lazily like a children’s mobile on the table.

‘All that is required is trial and error, gentlemen. We will eliminate these planets as possibilities, one by one, until our informants pinpoint the location of the new Resistance base, or we narrow our choices down to one. It’s a failsafe plan. At last count, the entire Resistance consisted only of four escape pods, which can carry a maximum of ten souls each. They are, effectively, destitute. Frankly,’ he sniffs, wrinkling his nose, ‘it’s hardly even worth wiping them out. But nevertheless, it must be done. It is what our Sup… Snoke would have wanted.’ He casts a nervous glance at Kylo, who caught that slip of the tongue immediately. It’s not worth punishing him for his impudence, though. He really can’t be bothered with any of these war stratagems anymore; it’s duller than watching paint dry.

He turns and walks out of the meeting room, and every head follows him as he slips through the door, probably taking bets on whether Hux will see the light of the morning. He marches down the metallic corridors, not really sure where he wants to go.

He lets his feet lead him and ends up in the hangar, standing in front of his TIE Silencer, running his hands over the lustrous black metal of its exterior. He opens the door and climbs into the pilot’s seat, brushing his fingers over the gearsticks and buttons, and for one ludicrous moment, he thinks about firing up the engine and flying straight out the door, to be alone with the multiverse.

But the TIE probably isn’t even fuelled, and where would he go? The most hated man in the galaxy, by his own troops as much as by sympathisers of the Resistance, can hardly stroll into your everyday city and blend in with the crowd. The lack of distinctive mask makes him no less recognisable.

He touches the gearstick that controls the Silencer’s guns, biting his lip. The last time he’d had to use these, he’d shot his way up the Resistance’s Raddus cruiser, leading a team of TIE fighters to the bridge, where he’d planned to shoot his mother, the general, out into the void of space.

But he was weak. He’d hesitated, torn, and in those moments of indecision, others had stepped in and done the job for him. If that isn’t the greatest metaphor for his life, he doesn’t know what is.

Now look what’s happened. That hideous little gingersnap in a drill sergeant costume is running the show, but letting Kylo think he’s in control, so that he doesn’t meet the pointy end of a lightsaber. It’s so pathetically transparent he wants to laugh every time he’s called to one of these bogus meetings. Their considerable number of troops haven’t managed to find the Resistance in the month that’s passed, how does Hux expect to track them down now, with the millions of planets they could be hiding on? What’s he going to do, blow up every planet in the Outer Rim as a precaution?

It’s crazy, but it’s the way he used to think, as well. He doesn’t know what’s changed – he’d always hated Hux, but he didn’t always disagree with his ideas so much. He just… can’t be bothered going after the rebels. It doesn’t matter anymore. There are so few of them, they might as well be cockroaches he could squish beneath the sole of his shoe. Rebel scum in the truest sense of the word...
– scum is easily removed.

He’d rather direct his attentions to a new age of the galaxy – one that doesn’t include Sith, Jedi, rebels, imperials, or anything. Just a government and people to govern. But he’d eat slugs before he ruled with Hux anywhere near him, and the Jedi still exist, in the form of Rey. He doesn’t know what leadership would look like without an equal, which Armitage Hux certainly is not. Nobody is.

Except her.

He hadn’t always thought so. First, he’d thought her weak – how easily she’d submitted to his hold over her, how little resistance as he’d explored the tunnels of her mind – until she fought back, flipped his power back on him, and invaded his thoughts, repeating his darkest fears back to him. Then, when she’d bested him in battle, he’d thought it nothing more than novice luck – after all, he’d just been shot by Chewbacca’s bowcaster, was bleeding profusely, and had just come from dispatching his father via lightsaber. But then, when the Force had seen fit to connect them, Snoke’s influence or no, he’d gotten glimpses of her strength, her spirit. When they fought together, back-to-back, against the Praetorian guards, he’d been in awe of her – it had taken him years to perfect the lightsaber forms she flowed in and out of with mastery. She was savage, strong, and brave, and he had been dizzy at the thought of finding someone equal to him, finally. Someone who could understand.

But then she didn’t, and now he doesn’t. Doesn’t understand why she would reject the chance to rule the galaxy, together, rather than be forever apart, locked in a battle of wills and minds, forcing their connection to remain sealed off.

He closes his eyes and probes at the link again, not even daring to hope now that it will be anything other than blocked. It’s like stoking flames with a poker, and to his surprise, his mind warms, glowing as he grips the gearstick of the TIE Silencer tightly, knuckles turning milk-white, concentrating-

You’re sick! she shouts, and his eyes snap open.

Rey is standing directly in front of him, where the Silencer’s console should be, and she’s furious. Her face is as red as a lobster and she clenches her fist as if she’s readying herself to punch him. And as much as Kylo wants to see her try, he’s confused.

What? He blinks, and that only serves to make her angrier, her face flushing an even deeper scarlet.

You know exactly what! she whisper-yells, her eyes flicking away from him for a moment before refocusing. You’re a disgusting pervert, Kylo Ren. How dare you subject me to that – that display?

Oh, that. He can feel his cheeks reddening, and he badly wants to use the Force to stop the blood from rushing to his face, but she’s taking up his every thought right now, shrieking at him, sapping his resolve. He notices her eyes flitting to the side again – wherever she is, she doesn’t want to be overheard – and she crosses her arms, fixing him with a stare that could probably burn a hole through a Sarlaac.

He does a quick calculation, and decides arrogance is the best course of action. How dare you? he counters. You knew exactly what you were doing, opening the bond like that, without warning. But then, it wouldn’t be the first time, would it? he needles, and from the way she blanches, he knows she’s reminded of the time she barged in on him shirtless. I think you’re the pervert, Rey.

She gasps, offended beyond words. And the sight of her standing there, mouth hanging open gormlessly, makes him smirk. And she doesn’t like that. At all.
Bastard! Her hand flies up and she slaps him straight across the face, and for all that the force bond is intangible, there’s nothing intangible about the slap, or the pain that radiates out from his cheek and flares across his jaw and temple, brilliant and tingling like rays of sunlight.

For a very long moment, they stare at each other, shellshocked. Rey’s eyes are wide as moons and twice as shiny, a rumour of tears at the corners. Kylo glares at her, not moving an inch. She turns to go, to sever the bond again.

Don’t even think about it, Kylo snaps, and he snatches her elbow, yanking her back.

She falls against him, the weight of her solid and familiar, until she pushes away from him and twists in his grasp, freeing her arm. Don’t touch me, she snarls, her eyes sparking with anger.

Why? he mocks, leaning forward in the pilot’s seat, lips twisting into a bitter smile. You can’t keep doing this forever, Rey. You can’t shut me out forever. We’re bound by the Force, like it or not. So maybe next time… knock before entering.

She flips him off with one of the rudest finger signs in the galactic vernacular, and she’s gone. Kylo collapses back in the seat, heart pounding, face flushed with exhilaration and lingering pain from her slap.
Rey has to admit, despite her hearty dislike of this planet and its climate, it has a kind of stark beauty unlike anything she’s seen. She’d experienced snow on Starkiller, of course, but that planet was a militarized wreck, strangled by smog and war machines, and while she was escaping the First Order’s base, she hadn’t had time to stop and smell the proverbial roses.

Here, on Elbara Nine, the days are lost in flurries of white flakes – but the sunsets. The sunsets are gorgeous, and the tonight’s one is a masterpiece as she looks out her bedroom window, chin in her hands. The sun sinks down over the horizon line, spilling watery tangerines and pinks over the snow, staining it with colour. It looks like an artist’s reproduction outside her window, and as the sun melts away, replaced with a sea of stars, she’s taken by wistfulness. The stars are so bright here – brighter than they were on Jakku, or Ach-To. They look like jewels, like someone’s scattered a million seed pearls over a bed of velvet, letting them fall where they may into the shapes of constellations.

The beauty of the cosmos is a much-needed distraction from how dull the first Jedi text has proven to be – try as she might, she can barely decipher it, and she doesn’t even have the excuse of it being encoded. It’s in the common tongue, all right, but its teachings are so bizarre Rey can’t even begin to comprehend how to incorporate them. This particular book details how to construct a lightsaber, which is pertinent information, given there’s a broken saber currently in her desk drawer. But it doesn’t really explain how to do it, and it’s immensely frustrating – all her life, she’s been able to nut out problems with engineering or construction, but this isn’t some hyperdrive fault or gear malfunction. This is lightsaber building, that psychic process which involves handling a kyber crystal, dangerous and temperamental.

And the worst part? The further she reads, the harder it hits her that these books are all she has. She is the Last Jedi. There are no others left in the galaxy to help her interpret these texts; follow these instructions; carve out her path to the Light. Luke was her last option. And even if Luke was here, he’d probably be no help.

‘Now, now, Rey, remember that the Jedi are bad and wrong about everything,’ she intones, channelling her former master as she flicks through the pages. ‘The Force is for everyone and you should absolutely know how to construct a lightsaber even though I never bothered to teach you anything of consequence because I’m an enormous nihilist.’

She smiles grimly at the memory that elicits, of Luke flipping his wig the first time she felt the Force in his presence. When the well on Ach-To had reached for her, and she hadn’t resisted, but reached back – the expression in his faded blue eyes had been one of unadulterated fear. He had sworn not to train her, because she was too much like his nephew. He feared losing even more than what he already had – he had already lost the temple, the padawans, even the Force. He’d shut himself off, afraid to connect, afraid to feel. He’d eventually come around, but even when he did, he never missed an opportunity to drill it into her that the Jedi were not the all-knowing beings the galaxy had elevated them to be – they were flawed and fallible like anyone else. Talk about taking the gloss off a childhood dream.
Surely he hadn’t always believed that. She can’t help but wonder what it would have been like to train under Luke when he was a proper Jedi Master, with his own temple and acolytes. His lessons would have been inspiring, not discouraging. Living in a supportive environment of fellow padawans would have been a haven, not like the harsh environment of Ach-To – sleeping on a bench in a freezing-cold hut rather than a warm bed.

But then again, if she had been trained at the temple, she would have been trained alongside Kylo Ren. And she would probably not be here now having this spell of wishful thinking. Still, it’s maddening that he had the opportunity to be properly trained in the ways of the Jedi, but threw it all away in favour of being a Dark-side lapdog, and now, the Supreme Leader of the First Order. Somehow, she doubts he’s entirely happy with that choice – it may have something to do with the constant current of negative emotions that leech into her brain, from his side of the Force Bond.

Kylo Ren. Ben Solo. In a warped, ironic way, he is the last Jedi, because he was one of the last to receive proper tutelage under Luke. Rey received three lessons, he probably endured thousands. It’s absolutely abhorrent to think this, but she thinks it all the same – he is probably the one person in the entire kriffing galaxy that could interpret these Jedi texts now.

Not that he’d want to. He treats the Jedi Order alternatively as a plague that needs to be wiped out, or a disease that’s going to infect him if he lets his guard down. He’d beseeched her to leave the lore of the Jedi – and, admittedly, the Sith – behind and forge a new path with him, and she’s grateful he’ll never know just how close she came to accepting that offer.

Well, if he wants to wipe out the Jedi now, he’s going to have to kill her – and he doesn’t seem to be trying very hard to accomplish that. He’d rather play word games with her, trying to make her fly off the handle, and taunt her with glimpses of him in various states of undress.

She balls her hands into fists again now, thinking about it. If there was some way to purge her mind of what she’d seen outside in the snow, she wouldn’t hesitate to take sandpaper to her brain. He did it on purpose. He’s vile. He knew she wouldn’t be able to unsee it once he’d put it there – the image of him without clothes is at once horrifying and fascinating to her – from an anatomical perspective, of course. She’d already seen him without a shirt, but this was off the edge of the map, all the way down to here be dragons.

He has freckles. She didn’t know that. When she’d seen him in one of their earlier Force bonding sessions, standing shirtless in his chambers, his skin had been milk-white and smooth, stretched over a broad chest and shoulders. He was less thin than she’d thought, too – she’d pictured him drowning in that ridiculous cloak and armour, secretly thin as a twig, but he was sturdy, even muscular, though not overtly so. But on his back and legs, Kylo Ren has freckles. One particular constellation of them on his upper right thigh has been burned into her brain, and she can’t stop thinking about them.

It’s the worst kind of torture, because he probably knows she’s thinking about him – that was clearly his intention, provoking her like this. It makes her so kriffing furious – he’s so childish, messing with her like this, it’s been a whole month of relatively blissful silence and now he’s screwing with her again, like it wasn’t hard enough for her having to close her mind off, to say goodbye-

Her emotions reach boiling point and the blasted bond sings, that weak point in her brain flaring up, and suddenly –

He’s sitting in front of her, but past her window, so the glass separates them. He’s in the front of a TIE fighter, his hand wrapped around the gearstick that controls the guns, and for one blazing, terrified second she thinks he’s going to shoot her with the Silencer’s powerful cannons. But he’s across the galaxy, and he can’t kill her, and so, she speaks-
You’re sick! she shouts, and his eyes fly up to meet hers, startled.

What?

Her face reddens with embarrassment and rage, and she wants to let loose, to scream at him the way he deserves, but it’s curfew at the base and most of her comrades are asleep in their rooms, through paper-thin walls. You know exactly what! You’re a disgusting pervert, Kylo Ren. How dare you subject me to that- she struggles for the right word – that display?

It’s as if he doesn’t remember, but then – his face flushes too, unmistakeably, cheeks turning the palest pink. But if she thought he would apologize, or be humble about it, she never knew Kylo Ren. He leans forward in the chair, and through the glass, she can see his eyes glint with mischief.

How dare you? he accuses, lips curling up at the corners. You knew exactly what you were doing, opening the bond like that, without warning. But then, it wouldn’t be the first time, would it? He lets the nasty smile spread over his face, smug as a Cheshire cat, then adds, I think you’re the pervert, Rey.

You sanctimonious, repulsive, evil piece of- her thoughts spin wildly, topsy-turvy, like she’s on a merry-go-round that’s been cranked into overdrive, and he has the nerve to smirk at her. Her composure splinters.

Bastard! Before she can stop herself, she’s striking him hard across the face, the glass no longer a barrier between them. The slap connects brilliantly and both of them reel back, shocked at the first physical contact they’ve had in over a month. Rey’s palm stings from the force of the hit, and her eyes well up with tears. I’m just as bad as he is.

Kylo glares at her, his eyes black and unreadable. Ashamed, she turns to run, to get as far away from him as she can before she sinks any lower – but his gloved fingers close over her elbow and he growls, Don’t even think about it.

The squeak of the leather gloves against her funny bone sends a powerful shiver through her nervous system, and she falls against him for a moment – what happened to the glass? – before she regains her equilibrium and yanks herself away. Don’t touch me, she warns, stepping back from him, hating the way his eyes chase after her.

Why? he taunts, leaning forward so his hair falls over his cheek, still red from the slap. You can’t keep doing this forever, Rey. You can’t shut me out forever. We’re bound by the Force, like it or not. So maybe next time… knock before entering.

It would be so worth it to hit him again, harder, for that parting remark. But violence is not the Jedi way, and she’s already proven herself unworthy once today. She resorts to giving him one of the rudest hand gestures she knows; one she picked up from her interactions with traders in Niima outpost – from what she can recall, it implies one should sit on the two upturned fingers. She turns away again, rattling the window to make sure it’s firmly in place, and crawls into her bed, wrapping her arms around her knees.

Nice job, Rey. You resorted to violence. Now you’re really his equal.

She shuts her eyes tightly, forcing Kylo Ren and his sneering face and his secret freckles out of her mind, and drifts into an uneasy sleep.

Chapter End Notes
Okay, guys, I think I'm FINALLY starting to get some vague sense of where this story will go, in a few more chapters I'll probably update the blurb, only took me 11K *laughs nervously*

Come find me on tumblr if you wanna fangirl about all the Reylo things! I'm galacti-core over there :)}
Chapter Seven

The moment his head hits the pillow, he’s transported into a dream that isn’t his, full of foreign memories and imagery, seen through a different set of eyes. Deep in his subconscious, he knows the dream is emanating from the bond they share, that in her sleep, she is defenceless and cannot keep the connection closed. He’s wide-awake and dreaming, entirely aware that something mesmerizing is playing out on the backs of his eyelids – her thoughts, her fears weaved into a series of images projected directly to him.

Focus.

He’s on an island, rain-drenched and teeth chattering, looking out at a vast expanse of ocean. As he watches, the spiny back of some sea leviathan rises out of the water, then disappears again with the pull of the tide. He looks down at his feet, about to ascend some stairs, when he hears a faint whisper. He turns.

He’s in a hall of mirrors, repeating the same reflection over and over into infinity, but it isn’t his image, it’s hers: dressed in grey clothes like spun spiderwebs, thin as gossamer, dark hair hanging to her collarbones, loosened from its buns. He raises a hand and it’s small and delicate, with bitten nails. In front of him, an opaque, seafoam-green glass – a mirror. He spreads her hand against it and whispers, Show me, in her voice.

He’s seen all this before.

He feels a tap on his shoulder and turns away from the mirror, and he’s wheeling through a vortex of colour and sound, the blood rushing to his head and beating in his temples, before-

He lurches upright, eyes flying open. Where the f-

His blood pressure spikes before he scans his surroundings - he’s in his room, the dull black metal walls the same as always. For a moment, he’d caught a glimpse of something else…

He lowers himself back down onto the bed and –

‘Ouch,’ someone says drowsily as his elbow connects with their ribs. Kylo rockets up again, twisting to get a glimpse of the stranger that’s in bed with him.

Rey.

She’s sleeping next to him, breathing deeply, lost in dreams. Her lips are parted, eyelashes fanned out. He can make out every vein in her eyelids, the dusky lilac colour of them, and he stares at her, bewildered. How?

She’s not really here, that much is certain. Somewhere, across an eternity of stars and planets, she’s asleep in her own bed, not his, dreaming a separate dream. But only seconds ago, he’d shared that dream. Why is he awake now and she’s not, but instead is sleeping beside him? This is the Force
bond amplified to the nth degree – somehow; they’ve connected to the point where she doesn’t need to be awake to be present.

But she has some control over the link, doesn’t she? If she can shut it off as easily as turning a faucet, how is she here now? Was she dreaming about him, and the Force took advantage of the opportune moment? No. She was dreaming about her time on Ach-To.

So what in the entire universe of...

She sighs in her sleep, her breath tickling his bare arm, and it distracts him enough to drop the subject for a second and resume his study. She sleeps in the foetal position, which is unexpected – knees pulled up against her chest, curled in upon herself like some kind of nightflower that hasn’t yet bloomed. Her eyelashes flutter with every exhalation, and she looks so serene, the frown wrinkles that are usually ever-present when she talks to him smoothed out in sleep, erased so neatly it’s like they never existed. Or maybe he’s just the only one she frowns at. That seems likely.

She stirs slightly, rubbing her face into the pillow, and her mouth pulls into a slight frown. ‘No,’ she mutters, burying her face deeper in the pillow, her brow knotting back up into that frown. ‘Ben, don’t.’

She is dreaming about him. Or if she wasn’t before, she is now. Curiosity piqued, Kylo lowers his head onto the other pillow and slowly, inch by inch so as not to disturb her, brings his hand up to her forehead. His hand hovers there for countless moments, uncertain if this is even remotely okay – but he caves to his curiosity and lets one finger touch her temple.

The moment his fingertip makes contact with her skin, he’s tugged back into the dream.

The nightmare.

They’re back in Snoke’s throne room, enveloped by rich ruby curtains, and the shrivelled alien creature is sitting on his throne, beckoning them closer. Kylo’s heart promptly leaps into his throat, even though he knows it’s only a nightmare – it’s going to take a lot longer than a month to undo the instinctual dread he feels at the sight of his old master. His face, pitted and scarred like the surface of the moons of Naboo, his mouth twisted into a rictus smile. He’s satisfied, and that’s a rare gift.

The Praetorian guards flank the throne, weapons exposed, as Rey and Kylo walk onto the bridge that leads to Snoke’s dais. And her recollection fast-forward through Rey’s denial, her attempts to fight, until Kylo looks down and she’s at his feet, staring up at him with pleading eyes. She thinks he’s going to kill her. He wouldn’t-

But at his master’s command he ignites the crimson blade instead of the blue, and he’s thrown from the dreamscape, watching himself bring the saber down on Rey, the one who’d believed the best of him.

She whimpers, lashing out in her sleep, and before he can think twice about protecting what’s left of his shredded dignity – or his heart - Kylo seizes both her wrists. He’s honestly just trying to stop her from injuring him; her movements are so frenzied. And he can’t get the image of himself striking her down out of his mind, but he holds onto her until she stops thrashing, until he remembers that he didn’t do it after all, he was stronger than Snoke, and that he has no master – he’s the Supreme Leader... yeah, that part’s even more depressing. And gods above, her wrists are thin and delicate as sapling branches – how does she wield a lightsaber? His gaze travels up her arms, to the cords of muscle there, and he has his answer.

Rey sighs against his chest, and he comes back to himself. This is the scavenger who ruined his life,
who rejected his proposal, and she hates him. He still has the mark from her slap on his cheek. She’s not exactly going to be happy if she wakes up to him as her bedfellow, let alone touching her. He extracts himself, more gently than he needs to, sliding to the very edge of his bed, musing over why she hasn’t just disappeared already, like she does every other time the bond plays itself out. It’s taking much longer than usual, and it’s not exactly easy for him to lie here, watching her breathe, chest rising and falling. His eyes track down over her collarbones, to the soft golden skin of her-

Stop. She already thinks him enough of a scoundrel.

It’s just as well he averts his eyes, because hers flicker open, sleep-crusted and sad. He waits for the inevitable cry of outrage, possibly even another slap to add to the growing collection.

She just blinks at him drowsily, not even the slightest bit perturbed. Her eyes glaze over again, and before the bond dissipates, she mutters something that sounds like “freckles.”

And with that, the bed is his again.

He liked it better before.

Chapter End Notes

The superb samantha-maclean-draws on tumblr drew the Force bond sleeping scene and it's GORGEOUS. Check it out here!
Chapter Eight

She awakes the next morning with the oddest feeling, like something integral has changed, but she can’t quite put her finger on what it is. Her brain’s still suffocating under a cellophane layer of sleep – gods, last night’s sleep was the worst she’s had in probably years – and she knows she had nightmares, but luckily for her, she can’t remember them. Self-preservation at its finest.

She stretches, letting her muscles warm up for the day ahead, and slides out from under the bedcovers, pulls her shoes on and shuffles over to the door. Despite her abysmal circadian rhythm and persistent foul mood, she feels slightly more ready to face other human beings today than she has in the past few weeks. This self-imposed exile’s getting old, and it’s not like she’s actually accomplishing anything, wasting away in her quarters.

Rey shuffles down the hallway and into the cafeteria, daunted by the number of people sitting in the open space, eating breakfast, talking, laughing together. The camaraderie they all seem to share is beyond her, and it normally hurts, but today, she can’t bring herself to care. She just wants to find Finn or Chewbacca and inject a tiny bit of normalcy back into her life. Often, she can’t believe it’s only been a month since she trained with Luke, or flew to the First Order’s command ship in a naïve attempt to bring Ben Solo back. It feels like years have passed, and she’s aged in accordance with them. Her body has never felt this tired, but again, that’s probably the bad night’s sleep.

She joins the small queue, taking a plastic tray from the stack, and right as she turns around with her plate of panna cakes, she bumps into Poe, knocking her glass of blue milk off the tray. Never has she been gladder to be Force-sensitive as she freezes the milk glass in mid-spill, quickly scooping it back onto her tray. Poe watches her with amazement, but nobody else saw the slip-up, thank the gods.

‘Hey, now you don’t have to cry,’ Poe quips, and Rey can’t help but grin a little back at him. His eyes are so warm and his humour’s so easygoing – it’s easy to see why Finn likes him so much. They walk together over to an empty table, and Finn joins them within seconds, plate heaped high with hotcakes.

‘Rey, am I glad to see you,’ he exclaims, shovelling in Poe, knocking her glass of blue milk off the tray. Never has she been gladder to be Force-sensitive as she freezes the milk glass in mid-spill, quickly scooping it back onto her tray. Poe watches her with amazement, but nobody else saw the slip-up, thank the gods.

‘Rey, am I glad to see you,’ he exclaims, shovelling in a forkful of panna cake. ‘Man, these are good.’ He drags his fork through a pool of prune syrup, shaking his head. ‘Who made these?’

Poe laughs. ‘I did. Well, me and Rose. Well, I handed her the ingredients, at any rate. The lady’s a whiz at baking.’

Finn rolls his eyes, his expression fond. ‘Why am I not surprised?’

Rey looks between them curiously. ‘Rose?’

Finn looks confused for a second, and then he slaps himself upside the head. ‘Jeez, I never introduced you two, did I?’ He shakes his head ruefully. ‘I never really got the chance – she was hurt bad after the attack on Crait.’ He misses the way Rey flinches at the mention of that skirmish. ‘But she’s doing great now, she’s been brainstorming new tech for the Resistance.’
‘And cooking for us,’ Poe heaps onto the pile of praise for this new girl Rey’s never met. As if she
didn’t already feel estranged from the group.

She forces a smile. ‘These are pretty good.’ She pokes at the hotcakes, but doesn’t really feel like
eating any more, her appetite’s soured along with her mood. Funny how little it takes these days.

She pushes the cakes around for a few minutes, listening to Poe and Finn talk, but she quickly tires
and stands up, excusing herself for the restroom. She speed-walks out of the cafeteria and practically
runs to the toilets, but when she swings the door open –

Leia’s there, washing her hands at the sink. The door clangs shut and they both jump at the
unexpected noise, and it’s almost comical. If he could see his mother’s face just now... she clamps
down on that treacherous part of her brain and addresses the general, looking directly into the former
princess’s eyes for the first time since she brought them all aboard the Millennium Falcon, aeons ago.
She never really noticed how much her eyes resemble Ben’s, both in colour and shape. It makes her
chest ache.

‘Hello, General Organa.’

‘Rey.’ Leia gives her a tentative smile. ‘Just the woman I wanted to see. I was going to send for you
once I got back to the comm centre.’

‘Oh?’ That doesn’t sound promising. ‘What do you need?’

‘Just to give you an update.’ The general wipes her hands dry and motions Rey to her side. ‘Walk
with me.’

Rey worries at her bottom lip, but acquiesces, following Leia out of the bathroom and down the
rabbit warren to the comms room. It’s hardly a centre, even after they’ve given it a cleanup – there
are about six old computers, rusty old drawers full of files and charts, but there are at least ten people
crowded around the central table, scribbling notes and bouncing ideas off each other. Rey recognises
the girl, Rose, that Finn and Poe were talking about – she recalls seeing her briefly in the Falcon’s
med-bay, Finn attending to her wounds. Jealousy flares in her again, acid eating at her nerves.

Why, though? She and Finn had always been friends – they have an ironclad bond, yes, formed by
overcoming hardship together, but it’s never been anything more. If anything, she’d thought maybe
him and Poe... oh, whatever. If he wants to gallivant off with some tech-head he barely knows-

Everyone looks up from their charts, noticing the presence of the last Jedi. Rey shifts her weight
awkwardly from foot to foot; hating this. So much for sociability. She just wishes the general would
get on with whatever it is she wanted to say so she can scuttle back to her room like some kind of
hermit.

Like Luke Skywalker.

The thought of Luke makes her eyes prickle uncomfortably – why is she getting affected by this
now? – and she wipes them quickly, erasing any hint of tears, just as Leia turns back to her,
beckoning her over to one of the computers manned by Lieutenant Connix, the dust-rimmed screen
scrolling through various databases.

‘Give us an update, Lieutenant,’ Leia commands, and the woman tilts the screen so they can see it
better.

‘Going by the reports we’ve received from our implants in the First Order, the military higher-ups are
machinating for a siege on the Outer Rim. They want to destroy all potential Resistance bases and
head us off before we can move to other options. Luckily,’ she smiles grimly, ‘they’re barking up entirely the wrong region of space. The false leaks we fed them have them believing that we’re located somewhere in the Javin Sector. That’s bought us some extra time to regroup – plus, with Kylo Ren at the helm of the First Order, I doubt they’ll be swift in tracking us down. There’s probably so much infighting happening within their ranks that they’ve half-forgotten us.’

So it’s true. Ben Solo is well and truly lost, having usurped the throne of the master he murdered. It was all for nothing. Rey’s shoulders slump, like someone cut her last string, and she bites hard on her tongue, so as not to say something that could offend Leia. She simply lifts her chin and tries not to care, but her hands are trembling.

Leia notices. ‘Rey, are you all right?’

She reaches out, and before Rey can recoil, the general’s fingers brush against her arm.

Snap.

Her walls crumble, as she knew they would, and she can’t stop the leak once it’s started – it starts as a trickle, then the breach widens, turning into a downpour of memories – the first time they connected, when she tried to shoot him with her blaster; the prideful look on his face when she called him a monster for the second time; walking in on him shirtless; the flashback to Luke’s betrayal; the blue saber slicing through Snoke’s midsection as he fell like a ragdoll from his throne; the black-gloved hand extended to her, begging her to leave everything behind, to be together and welcome a new era. Kylo yelling at her to let go; Ben Solo watching her in misery as she closed the door of the Millennium Falcon. Kylo in the shower without cl-

She wrenches away from Leia so roughly that she nearly causes the general to fall over. She grabs the back of Connix’s chair for support, staring at Rey, her hand still outstretched.

‘I’m sorry,’ Rey stammers, and she flees. Not back to her tiny room; it isn’t safe there anymore. She bursts through the doors to the outside, the glacial wind biting at her cheeks and nose, freezing the tears that have started to drip from her eyes.

Leia knows everything. She’s Force-sensitive, more than she’d have people believe, and she saw everything, there’s no doubt about it. The humiliation is unbearable, and she runs through the snow, cursing her legs for the way they burn with lactic acid, not as fit as she used to be. She’s never hated herself so much in her life. Every shameful secret, every moment that was meant to be kept between them, has been laid bare before not just anyone, but his mother.

She knew that the moment she touched her, she’d crack. She’s weak, weaker than she ever allowed herself to think. Loathing herself, it makes her recall the last conversation they ever had without the Force bond.

You have no place in this story. You come from nothing. You’re nothing.

‘No!’ Rey roars, and she throws out her hands, needing something, anything, as an outlet for this rage before she detonates entirely, explodes into a billion pieces of confetti.

A sharp sizzle and crack cuts the chill air like a gunshot, and Rey looks at her hands, terrified that she’s somehow blown one of them off. But they’re both there. And then, she nearly passes out.

There’s sparks coming from her fingertips.

Electrical sparks.
Force lightning. She just conjured Force lightning.

.... that's new. His voice enters her mind, unwelcome, followed by his physical presence. Oh, splendid. Now there’s a second witness to her mental torture. She doesn’t have the emotional fortitude to kick him out. At least he’s dressed this time, thank heavens for small mercies. Kylo Ren stands in front of her in a swath of black, arms crossed, eyebrows lifted.

Get out, she hisses, but lacking the usual venom. He’s encouraged by that, of course, and he steps closer, testing her limits, looking at her searchingly.

You don’t really want me to.

Oh, I assure you, I do, she declares. And by the way, congratulations, Supreme Leader. She musters up as much sarcasm as she can. Was it worth it, to gain the crown but lose every last good thing about you along the way?

It hits harder than she meant it to – Kylo actually flinches, his eyes flickering with what she knows is pain – she feels it through their link, and she’s almost sorry. But he recovers well, drawing himself up to his full height, regarding her with abject disdain that’s so convincing she could almost believe he means it.

Absolutely, he retorts, and his brown eyes hold her gaze unblinkingly, daring her to look away.

She doesn’t, and they stay like that, locked in a stalemate, until he melts away like the snow beneath her feet.

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit I gotta go to bed
Chapter Nine

She’s the most insufferable, prickly little cactus of a girl, and he’s at the point where he could legitimately take a scalpel to his brain, excise the connection so he doesn’t have to be haunted by her anymore. He’d be relieved, he’s sure of it. At first, it was fun, but now he’s growing tired of being disrespected whenever the connection decides to air itself out and their minds come into contact. He should have known they’d never regain the intimacy they’d shared before she came to the Supremacy, trying to tempt him away from the Dark, away from his master.

When Supreme Leader Snoke had crowed that he had been the one to link their minds and exploit each other’s fragility, he’d truly believed it, and he was angry; angrier than he’d ever been at his master. Angry enough to kill. But Snoke had lied, or at least bent the truth, and that becomes more blatant with each passing day – the bond remains, steadier and stronger than before – hell, she’s even showing up asleep in his room these days. Okay, so that was one time. It counts.

It makes him ponder how many other things Snoke lied about over the years? Did he lie when he said he saw potential in Kylo? Or was he just using him as a tool to get to Luke Skywalker? Was he being truthful when he said Ren was special? Or were those just the honey-tongued words of a master manipulator?

He doesn’t know what to believe anymore.

And now he’s on the proverbial throne. The new Supreme Leader, although he never expressly claimed that title, didn’t even want to, really. The weight of it is far heavier than he ever imagined, along with the responsibility that accompanies it. Now the entirety of the First Order, however unwillingly, looks to him for guidance, when up till recently, he’d been spoon-fed all his orders from Snoke. He misses being told what to do, when to wake up, where to go, who to talk to. And he hates that he misses it. But he’s autonomous now, whatever that means, and it’s hard to adjust to. His mind is all his own.

Except for that one tiny little part that’s tied to her. But that’s hardly a big deal.

He’s getting ready for a personal meeting with General Hux, and as he’s getting dressed, donning yet another set of sable robes and boots, he finds himself wishing he hadn’t smashed his helmet in the elevator. He could use a mask to hide behind, especially now, when faced with that smarmy little social climber. He’s never been altogether good at keeping his emotions off his face. The mask helped disguise that. Perhaps he ought to have another one designed.

He’s still mulling over that as he strides through the halls of the Star-Eater, the temporary accommodation for the First Order’s flight crew until another ship to rival the Supremacy can be built. Personally, they all look the same to Kylo Ren – the halls are all black steel and floodlit with oppressive white lights, the scenery never changes.

Neither does Armitage Hux. Kylo meets the ginger general on the bridge, where he’s strutting up and down like some puffed-up peacock in his perfectly starched uniform. He fits the image of a
leader far better than Kylo does, especially now: black hair a nest of tangles despite his attempts to tame it, all-black robes without the traditional First Order insignia – he’s never once worn the emblem that identifies him as one of them. Always the outsider.

Hux turns to greet him with a smile so insincere he might as well have cut it out of paper and slapped it over his actual mouth. ‘Good morning, Supreme Leader. I trust you’re well rested? We have many things to discuss.’

He didn’t rest well, actually, and his head’s a mess. Neither he nor Rey are getting any better at blocking eachother out, and after the turmoil of yesterday, the link had devolved into a cesspool of her distress for most of the night. He even resorted to sedatives, something he despises, to fall asleep, whereupon he was subjected to garish morphine dreams of Force lightning and endless, looping saber battles.

But he doesn’t need to explain himself to Hux, so he nods curtly and walks beside the general into one of the consulting rooms off to the right of the main bridge. When Hux opens the door and Kylo strides in, he immediately notices that they aren’t alone – Hux brought protection. For Kylo, or for him, that’s the million-credit question. Kylo’s betting they’re for Hux – his Force-choking quota has gone up markedly over the past month. The little man doesn’t forget, or forgive, easily, even without his long-standing hatred of Ren and his Knights.

The sudden remembrance of his underlings prompts a question. ‘Where are my knights, General? It slipped my mind, but I haven’t seen them for weeks.’

Hux clears his throat. ‘We have temporarily moved them over to the Finalizer while we mobilise a new fleet. They were... superfluous at the time of signing the executive order.’

‘Superfluous,’ Kylo repeats, his tone low and silky, and the temperature in the conference room drops by several degrees. ‘On a ship that can accommodate 80,000 men.’ He’s toying with Hux, he doesn’t really give a damn about the location of his Knights at present, but the general doesn’t need to know that. And would you look at that – the redhead’s chin is trembling ever-so-slightly. Kylo almost, almost cracks a smile. The power play never gets old.

‘Never mind,’ he says smoothly, waving the issue aside. ‘What was it you needed to discuss? Be brief, and in return, I’ll refrain from asking why you required several bodyguards to discuss it.’ He traps Hux with his most authoritative stare, and the general quails a little.

‘I... am just curious as to your intentions with how to lead the First Order, Supreme Leader,’ he falters, trying to regain his composure. ‘It has been a month since the Resistance escaped our grasp, and you have not issued any directives or participated in any strategies.’

Kylo regards him coolly – watching this blithering idiot practically soil himself under his gaze is well worth the verbal dressing-down. What does it matter if Hux thinks their new leader is not performing as well as he should? He’s still the leader. Who would replace him? Hux? Kylo has more Force ability in one of his toenails than that man does in his whole bloodline.

But does the Force necessitate leadership? If not, the idea of Hux leading a mutiny against him becomes more and more of a believable outcome. He has to tread carefully, at least for now.

‘You’re right,’ he admits, arranging his expression to look contrite. ‘I have not been as attentive as one expects from their leader. It has been... difficult to adjust to the absence of Supreme Leader Snoke.’ He lowers his eyes to the floor, and the general just eats it up, projecting his own grief at the loss of that alien overlord onto Ren.
‘Of course,’ he says accommodatingly, his tone a smidgen softer. ‘The recent changes have been hard on us all. Having said that, we must keep moving. The Resistance may never again be closer to extinction than they are now. Their support throughout the galaxy has never been more lacklustre. And now, Captain Canady has informed me that we were fed false intelligence about the location of the new rebel base. New data we’ve collected tells us that the resistance is in fact hiding somewhere in the Mid Rim, on a planetary body in the Cerean Reach. There are not many places left to search, my lord, so I sought to confer with you on our next move.’ Hux looks up at him, some of the old arrogance returned to his mien. ‘What are your thoughts?’

Kylo takes a moment to process the enormity of what Hux just told him. They know where the Resistance is – and thus, where Leia is, where Rey might be. They have the chance to wipe out the last of the rebels in one coordinated attack, and damn, if that isn’t a loaded idea. On the one hand: freedom from his mother, and from the scavenger, from the Force bond, from every last shred of his past. Add the respect he’d gain from the Order as the cherry on top and it’s looking like a pretty solid yes. Let the past die. Kill it if you have to. He still believes in that adage.

But on the other hand, yet more blood on his hands, more dark deeds to tally with the Force. When last faced with the opportunity to kill General Organa, he hadn’t been able to fire his weapon. What makes him think it will be any different when it comes to Rey?

He gnaws on the soft inner lining of his cheek and considers what Hux is saying. Crush the Resistance for good and start a new era, a new rule? It’s not exactly in line with Kylo’s vision of the future – one without the rebels or the First Order. But you’ve got to start somewhere.

‘My thoughts are, why aren’t we already setting a course for the Cerean Reach?’ he replies, and an approving smile spreads across the general’s face.

‘You’re not quite so bad, Kylo Ren,’ he says, and sticks out his hand to shake. ‘I will inform the captain of our accord and ask him to move the fleet to hyperspace presently.’

It pains him to take Hux’s outstretched hand, but at least Kylo has gloves on. He shakes the general’s hand, squeezing too tightly for emphasis, then turns on his heel and strides out of the room, his thoughts a blur of confusion.

This is what you wanted. All these years...

You wanted to end the Resistance, the Jedi.

But not her. Never her.

The girl doesn’t matter anymore. She has been seduced to the ways of the Jedi already by Skywalker. There’s no hope.

What about the bond?

Decimate it. If she dies, so it will.

I can’t.

As if in defiance of his mental gymnastics, the link grows warm, flickering before bursting into fruition, just as he makes it back to his chambers and shuts the door.

‘Really?’ he mutters, keeping his hands pressed against the door, not turning around.

I don’t like this any better than you do, she volleys back, and that gets him to turn, and he sees her,
sitting in a chair that he vaguely recognises, across the room from him.

‘This really isn’t a good time, Rey.’

She snorts. Where have I heard that before.

He clenches his fists and steps closer. ‘I’m not kidding. You- is that the Falcon?’ His fists rapidly unclench and his eyebrows disappear into his hairline. She turns away, frowning, refusing to answer.

It is the Falcon, he recognises the shabby old seat and the worn-down buttons of the dashboard. There’s one red button that’s missing, he played with it so much as a child that it fell off – he got in so much trouble that day. And it’s still missing, like nothing’s changed in the twenty-four years it’s been since he sat at the dashboard with his father, pretending to fly.

‘Why are you in the Falcon, Rey?’ he asks, breathing slowly.

She doesn’t answer, fingers flying over buttons on the dashboard, but her hands are shaking and she can’t press them in the right order. I’m leaving.

What? His heart thumps.

I can’t stay here. Leia – she- Rey wipes at her eyes quickly, but she can’t disguise anything from him anymore – he felt the tears, they’re echoed in his own eyes. I don’t belong. I can’t stay. She sniffs, chuckling a little to herself. I don’t know why I’m telling you this. Maybe because you’ll find out anyway. But yes, I’m leaving.

To where? he asks incredulously, and then wants to hit himself over the head for the question. As if she’d tell him? Offer up the location of the last living Jedi on a silver platter? Scratch that.

She laughs, her deft fingers moving over the buttons again, and he can feel the bond twisting away from him, but he tries desperately to cling on.

Wait. You can’t go.

She looks up from her work. Why? And don’t say you want me to join you and bring order to the galaxy.

He shakes his head hurriedly, hair falling over his face. No, not that. The First Order, they’ve tracked-

The bass thrums through his skull and the link phases out before he can tell her everything; tell her not to leave, that she’s leaving the Resistance open to slaughter, because they’ve tracked them-

Tracking.

Kylo yells and whirls around, sprinting out of the room and through the corridors of the Star-Eater, inelegantly Force-pushing an errant pair of Stormtroopers out of his path. He reaches the computer bay – the door’s sealed – and blasts through, barrelling up to the technician that’s monitoring the hyperspace trackers, no doubt scaring the young recruit straight out of his skin. He slams his hand down on the table next to the computer screen and shouts, ‘The Millennium Falcon. Do you have it monitored for lightspeed jumps?’

The technician, shaking in his seat, types a few commands into the computer. ‘The one from the battle of Crait? Yes, sir. It hasn’t made any hyperspace jumps for over a month. Its last tracked location was near Corellia.’
Kylo shakes with a combination of exhaustion and triumph, and he’s never felt more like keeling over and falling asleep than he does at that moment. ‘It’s going to jump. Give it time, and track it when it does.’

‘Forgive me, sir,’ the technician says meekly, pointing at the screen. ‘It’s just made a jump. Literally as we spoke.’

He follows the technician’s finger, sees the readout of the coordinates. The blinking green numbers etch themselves into his memory like acid. ‘Pull up a map.’

‘Yes, sir.’ The technician’s fingers race over the keyboard, minimising the tracking screen and pulling up a map of the Outer Rim. Through some form of technology wizardry, he inputs the coordinates into the map, and a glowing circle appears over a small planet flirting with the brink of the Outer Rim. Kylo squints at the screen, reads the printed name underneath the planet.

He knows where she’s going.

He knows where she’s going.

‘Patch these coordinates through to my command ship, then erase them from the system drives. Tell no-one,’ he orders, and the technician nods tightly, fingers scrambling to delete the history, just as footsteps close in behind them.

‘What’s all this commotion?’ General Hux calls out, crossing the red bridge into the computer bay. ‘I just had to see several Stormtroopers to the med-bay, Ren, so you’d better tell me-‘

‘Shut up and tell your men to prepare my ship. Not the Silencer – the shuttle,’ he interrupts with fervour.

Hux’s jaw practically hits the floor. ‘What about the Resistance, Supreme Leader? The battle plan we just agreed on?!’

Kylo resists the temptation to throw him through the computer screen. ‘With all due respect, General Hux – and by that, I mean none at all – this is bigger than the Resistance. I’m not going to ask you again.’ He stalks past the thoroughly bamboozled Hux, making a beeline for the hangar bay. The First Order can pursue the rebels all they like – by all means, crush them into oblivion. But he has bigger ambitions than that, visions of a future without this imperial mess. And the time for contact across the stars is over.

This time, she won’t refuse.

Chapter End Notes

HELLO this is a really long chapter and I saw The Last Jedi again in the middle of it so I'm really hoping it makes sense and isn't just babble but WHOOO boy we've finally got ourselves a little bit of a P L O T. Also seeing the movie again gave me so many ideas and I'm really inspired, sorry if anyone waited around ages for the next chapter, I didn't drink coffee today so my chapter production rate went <---- that-a-way. Anyway, thank you all for reading, imma reply to your lovely comments and then go to sleep. Keen to write the next chapter!
Chapter 10

Chapter Ten

She’s not usually this impulsive, and she hates to leave a job half-done, preferring to see things through to the end, solving puzzles and fixing problems. But this is beyond any problem she’s wrestled with before, and what she’d said to Kylo Ren was true – she doesn’t belong here, with the Resistance, with Poe and Finn and Rose. Maybe she could have been one of them, back before her aptitude for the Force awakened, but things are too different now. There’s too much that separates her from her friends and comrades – turns out religious difference really can make or break you, the cynical side of her thinks. She wasn’t at home on Jakku, and she isn’t at home on Elbara Nine. There’s nothing that binds her here.

So she’s bailing. She packed her rucksack with the Jedi books and the broken lightsaber, carefully wrapping fabric over the exposed kyber crystal, and she stole out the entrance to the base, unseen. She tracked through the icing-sugar snow, leaving deep footprints all the way up to the Falcon, which was blissfully empty, Chewie nowhere in sight. Probably feeding his Porgs bread scraps in the cafeteria. He’s like a father with newborn babies, and it’s heart-warming to see. She’ll miss that. And him.

She lets the shuttle warm up underneath her, shuddering to life with a clunk and a roar. The shields activate and the screen enlarges as she starts to lift, the spacecraft hovering centimetres above the snow. She programs a sequence into the computer and the shuttle suddenly soars upward, throwing her back in her seat, knocking the breath from her lungs. She coughs, and bends over to push the lever that will kick-start the ship’s thrusters, propelling her out of Elbara Nine’s atmosphere.

Snowflakes are falling all around her, sticking to the windshield in flimsy, intricate patterns that melt into water droplets before she can admire them properly. This place is beautiful. But it’s not for her. Something out in the furthest reaches of the universe is still calling to her.

_The island._

She ascends, passing the barrier of the troposphere when her radio crackles to life and Finn’s voice blares through the Falcon’s speakers.

‘Rey! Rey, what the _hell_ are you-‘

There’s a fizz and pop as someone steals the radio from him, then Leia’s calm voice is flowing through the communicator. ‘Rey? Sweetheart, what are you doing?’

Rey squeezes her eyes shut – not a smart idea when piloting a shuttle – and battles to keep her voice steady and tear-free. ‘I’m sorry, General. I just... I have to go.’

‘Goddammit! Where is she going?!’ Finn yells in the background, before Leia drowns him out with three poignant words.

‘Rey? I understand.’

There’s a double meaning there, and a few tears manage to leak out of the corners of her eyes. Leia knows everything, and she _understands_. She knows why Rey has to get away from everyone, why she can’t stand to be touched, why her emotions are so out of control. If she is to be the Last Jedi, she
needs to go back to the place of her training; finish what she started. Become a true Jedi, passionless and calm, and cast Ben Solo and his emotional damage out of her mind forever.

‘Rey, please-‘ the radio cuts Finn off with a high-pitched squeal just as the Falcon breaks atmo, and she turns it off for good measure. Guilt trips are just going to make things harder. The banners of white cloud are replaced by an ocean of glinting stars, and she immediately feels the tension melt out of her shoulders, a happy smile spreading across her face. If nothing else, space is her home. Firmly in the pilot’s seat, navigating to uncharted regions of space.

She sights the hyperdrive lever and nudges it up, the stars melting into silver smears of light in front of her eyes, before matter disintegrates and hurls her and the Falcon through space-time, across hundreds of lightyears, the view outside her screen a churning maelstrom of electric blue.

She makes herself comfortable on the pilot’s chair, tucking her feet up on the seat and wrapping her arms around her knees, hugging herself. ‘Am I really doing this?’

A loud, high-pitched beep behind her nearly makes her topple off the seat for the second time in as many days. She spins around, almost displacing her neck in her hurry to see who’s behind her.

‘BB-8?’ she gasps, as the source of the noise rolls into her field of vision, whistling tinnily. But it’s not BB-8, it’s blue-white rather than yellow, and is propelling itself around the ship’s floor on three powerbus cable “legs”, instead of a spherical base. It beeps again and Rey can’t help but laugh.

‘R2-D2! I forgot all about you!’

The droid lets out a series of toots, affronted.

‘I’m sorry! I didn’t mean that in a bad way. I just... what?’

The droid repeats itself, telling her in no uncertain terms that she should turn around and return herself and it to the rebel base.

Rey bites her lip. ‘I-I can’t. I have to go back to the island. It’s the only place I-’ the ship jolts as they pass through a rough spot, and she grabs onto the dashboard to keep herself upright. ‘It’s where Luke trained me. It’s where he died. I can’t become a Jedi, reading books on Elbara Nine. I have to go back.’

The droid whistles and beeps angrily, but even though it pains her, she has to tune it out. Leia couldn’t change her mind; Artoo certainly won’t be able to. ‘I’m sorry, Artoo. But I’m going.’

The droid wheels around and speeds out of the room, squealing angrily. Rey drops her head into her hands for a moment, and the ship judders again, leaving her with serious fears that it’ll shake itself to smithereens in the middle of the hyperdrive channel. She crosses her fingers and focuses on steering, putting all her regrets out of her mind.

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Five hours later, as she sits at the dashboard with bags the size of Tauntaun saddles under her eyes, they’re within reach of Ach-To. She kick-starts the thrusters again and they hurtle forwards, the Falcon spat out over a smooth, blue planet with a marbled surface, clouds scudding rapidly across the atmosphere. She urges the ship forward again and breaks through the atmosphere with a rocket-blast from the distressed engine, speeding towards the expanse of ocean, glass-smooth. She steers the *Falcon* over the surface, churning up sprays of water, and circles around the biggest archipelago, at once familiar and entirely strange.
She parks on the same outcropping of rocks as Chewie had last time, a month and forever ago. It’s not raining – for once - and the cries of nesting porgs cut through the silence as she exits the shuttle, looking back over her shoulder to check if R2 will follow. They don’t.

Sighing, she raises the ramp and picks her way across the salt-slicked rocks, trying not to slip on patches of moss, starting her climb up the endless steppes to the hidden Jedi temple.

The air gets colder and stronger the higher she climbs, and her calves burn – she’s not as fit as she used to be. She prays she doesn’t run into any of the temple’s caretakers on the way up, because they hated her enough with Luke around – they may actually push her off the cliff now that he’s gone.

She wishes she had her staff to lean on as she ascends, one step at a time, into the mist.

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At the top of the tallest peak, there is a room, carved out of natural basalt rock. In the centre of the room, there is a pool, inscribed with the symbols of yin and yang, light and shade, with a thin film of water over the surface. That water ripples at her footsteps, and Rey lowers herself to her knees beside the pool, staring intently at the carved symbols, lost in thought.

So she’s back. Back where her journey properly began. But how is she supposed to continue? Without a teacher, how can she become a true Jedi? And – the tiniest, most rebellious part of her brain pipes up – does she even want to?

The Jedi, from what she now knows, are a passionless, ordered few. They value structure and adherence to their religion, and believe that emotional attachments lead to ruin. What would the old masters think, she wonders, of the literal attachment she has to another human being?

Can the Force bond be severed? Sealing it off only works temporarily, and she’s not even strong enough to keep that up now. It won’t be long before he’s back in her head, goading her into rage, something that would also be frowned upon by the Jedi, no doubt. She’s got too much emotion for this. Example: the Force lightning she’d conjured out of nothingness yesterday. It should have scared her, but instead, when she’d first seen the silver sparks flying from her fingertips, she’d felt a thrill of elation. Vindication, even. He might be able to freeze blaster bolts in midair, but not even the great, blue-blooded Kylo Ren can conjure Force lightning.

Who’s nothing now?

She examines her hands again, half-expecting them to have changed in some discernable way. But they’re just the same small, dirty-nailed hands of the everyday Rey. Worker’s hands, toughened from days spent digging scraps of metal out of the Jakku desert.

Looking at her hands brings back a memory. It’s not a positive one. It aches more than any of the others, the moment she touched hands with Ben Solo.

And yes, it was Ben Solo, not Kylo Ren, who she connected with, that night by the campfire. She was wet and shivering after her time in the mirror cave at the bottom of the island, and damn her, she was crying. She’d thought she would finally get an answer about her origins – an answer she was willing to accept, at least – but when she asked the mirror, it had shown her her own dirt-streaked face.

I’d never felt so alone, she’d confessed, looking down at her lap, ashamed.

You’re not alone, he’d said urgently, and she looked up at him, seeing her tears reflected in his brown eyes. It had touched something in her, a deep, precious part of her stirring to life, and she had
extended a hand.

*Neither are you.*

His eyes had been so uncertain, but he’d slipped one of his gloves off and reached back. And when their fingertips touched – Gods, a whole universe had bloomed in that hut, possibilities exploding into existence around them, like nascent stars, everywhere, everywhere. She saw to the core of him, and knew that what he had told her was false – he wasn’t a monster. He was a boy. And she saw his future – brighter and more achingly beautiful than she’d let herself think-

*Stop.* No more. She doesn’t want to remember that part. He’d thrown that potential away for the throne of the Order, there’s no point reminiscing about a future that will never come to pass.

Rey rubs her tired eyes and kneels over the pool again, reaching out with two fingers to touch the surface of the water.

*Splash.*

That was much louder than it should have been. She glances up from the pool, noticing a faint whirring noise coming from outside the room. She gets up, following the sound, and steps out onto the overhang where Luke had given her her first lesson. She scans the skies for the source of the noise. They’re clear, except for a few wisps of cloud.

‘No, no, no – *shit!*’

She drops her gaze down. There’s a black shuttle with upturned wings squatting on another shelf of rock, but whoever landed it there made a huge mistake – they parked over a blowhole. And it looks like their shuttle just got water-blasted.

And the most ironic part? The man standing next to it, black-gloved hands raised to the heavens in some kind of prayer for absolution, is none other than Kylo Ren.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He senses her the moment he flies over the island; her Force signature is all over this place, like the headiest of perfumes. The Light of her, pearlescent and fundamentally good. He wrinkles his nose in distaste and searches for a flat spot to land.

He manoeuvres the shuttle onto a bed of rock, jagged teeth washed smooth by the waves. He descends the ramp and –

Bang.

He’s thrown from the ramp as water erupts from beneath the shuttle, spraying the underside of the spacecraft and lifting it into the air in a fountain of water, before it’s slammed back onto the rocks with an unearthly screech of tearing metal.

‘No, no, no – shit!’ he yells, throwing up his hands in exasperation. Saltwater and spacecraft technology does not mix, evidenced by the sparking and crackling that’s now occurring on the bottom of the ship. One of its legs snapped off when it hit the rocks, too, and that will need fixing. Somehow, he doesn’t think there’ll be any repair mechanics on this island in the middle of nowhere.

He runs a hand through his hair, trying to think, and that’s when he senses her again, stronger this time. His pulse quickens and he spins around, eyes darting up the mountain of their own accord, catching a fleeting glimpse of grey before she flits out of sight. He can still sense her emotions, though; in this close proximity they’re more overwhelming than ever – she’s frightened. He snickers to himself. Frightened of him? After she scarred his face with a lightsaber, bested him in battle, slapped him through the Force and proved that she was just as strong, if not stronger, than he? Please.

He scans the mountain, mapping out a path to where he’d seen her, and starts up a set of tiny stone stairs. His feet are too big for them – one misstep and he could fall to his death on the rocks below. But he climbs them nimbly enough, reaching the top of the cliff in minutes, and finding himself in an abandoned room cut out of rock.

The place reeks of Luke Skywalker. His stain is everywhere on the island, on the rocks, the grass, the sea – but it’s most concentrated here. He must have spent a lot of time in this room, staring into this odd pool. Kylo bends to look at it, glimpsing his reflection in the water, in the middle of the two overlapping symbols –

Crack.

He almost topples into the pool as something hits him over the head, hard. He literally sees golden stars swimming in front of his eyes, and his mouth wells with blood – he bit his tongue.

‘Ow,’ he gasps, dizzy and disoriented, golden flecks bursting in his vision. His scalp is on fire, and he turns around, rubbing it, to see Rey standing before him, holding the broken bottom of a ceramic urn. She holds it up threateningly, and he puts up a hand to shield himself from any further blows.

Rey’s eyes search his face for a moment, and his vision doubles so that she has twin faces, both equally confused. ‘Are you really here?’ she asks.
He lets out a laugh that’s more of a groan. ‘I wish I wasn’t.’

His vision slowly stitches itself back together as Rey lowers the urn, turning away. ‘Good. Then go.’

He plonks down next to the pool, dazed. ‘You’ve got to be kidding.’

‘I’m entirely serious,’ she snaps, whirling back around, arms crossed. ‘God, Kylo, how the *hell* did you find me?’

He rubs his temples, trying to massage away the ache that’s burgeoning there. ‘Hyperspace tracking,’ he mutters, fighting the urge to lie down and recuperate. ‘The *Falcon* was still on the First Order’s flight list.’

Rey clenches her fists. ‘*Kriff*. That’s just wonderful. I assume every First Order officer and his dog now knows the location of the Jedi Temple?’

Kylo stops rubbing his forehead. ‘No. Just me.’

‘Somehow, that’s not very comforting.’ Rey turns around again, starting to descend the steps, leaving him alone in the temple. ‘You can’t be here. Go back to your sycophants.’

He stands up abruptly and she flinches, shying away. ‘Have we really regressed back to being enemies now? After all this time?’ He motions between them, to the ephemeral, unbreakable Bond.

Rey faces him, her hazel eyes so full of sorrow; it pierces straight to the core of him, an arrow to the heart. ‘You made your choices. You chose the Dark, Ben. You chose to kill the rebels rather than help them. There’s nothing I can do to help you anymore. So yes, you’re my enemy. And you need to leave.’ She turns away again, starting down the flight of steps that lead away from the cliff. The water in the pool undulates as her footsteps peter out, and Kylo stares into the pool, at his reflection, the scarred, damaged face that doesn’t even come close to portraying the conflict within. The face of the First Order. He hates it more than he ever has.

*You’re no Vader.*

*You’re just a child.*

*In a mask.*

He stays beside the pool for a long time, until the blue leaches out of the sky and dusk draws around the island. He walks out of the room and onto the overhanging ledge, noting with interest that the stone is split in parts, rent by some great force.

He settles himself on a boulder, crossing his legs underneath him and resting his elbows on his thighs, as he used to do when he would meditate at the Jedi temple, all those years ago. He closes his eyes, and his uncle’s essence eclipses his senses again, his aura, a pale and washed-out blue, coalescing at the edges of his mind.

He died here. That’s clear as the filaments of the Force that stretch out around him, responding to his touch, the web vibrating like a tuning fork, balancing itself. Kylo breathes, drawing the salty air into his lungs, leaning into the tranquillity of this place. He can see why she came back. The Force is strong here, like a comforting blanket over the island.

This is where she trained with his wretched uncle, where he filled her head with a revisionist history of Kylo’s own backstory. He had seen into her mind and knew that Luke had told a saccharine version of the truth – he had simply wanted to *talk* to Ben the night of the temple desecration. That
was why he’d stood over his nephew with a switched-on lightsaber; it was a mere conversation-starter, clearly. The injustice of it all makes Kylo’s hands curl into tightly balled fists, and the cracks in the rock beneath him deepen.

He jumps up, before the overhang can split apart underneath his feet, and stalks back into the rock room, past the strange pool, and down the steps, headed for his shuttle. Strange, brown-and-white birds have flocked to the rockbed, drawn by the still-flashing lights of the shuttle, and their squawking cries make his headache come back with a vengeance. That kriffing scavenger and her penchant for leaving him bruised.

He boards the shuttle, making a valiant attempt to ignore the fact that it’s still hissing and crackling from the water damage, and searches for the supply pack the Stormtroopers who readied his ship should have included. There should be a pallet with enough food and water to last seven days stored in one of the bunkers, but after two consecutive rounds of the ship, he has to admit they’ve forgotten. Goddamn bucketheads can’t formulate one original thought between an entire squadron, and it’s not as if Captain Phasma’s around to keep them in line anymore. Hux had taken the blow of her loss particularly hard, almost as hard as he had taken the death of the previous Supreme Leader. Kylo’s caught himself speculating a few times on the nature of their relationship.

But now is no time for scandalous thoughts. He’s got a more pressing issue at hand – a total lack of sustenance.

Well, he’s not going to sit down and wait for food to come to him on the wings of angels. Kylo strides back out of the ship, cups a hand over his eyes and squints up the mountain, to where he can see a small congregation of huts. He blows out an exasperated breath and starts to climb again, taking it easy on the slippery steps.

As he nears the village, he notices that there’s a flickering orange light emerging from the biggest hut. Fire. Like the fire that had burnt happily in the grate, the night he’d seen Rey’s future. Not once in the last ten years had he felt more raw hope than when he’d touched the scavenger girl’s hand and beheld what she could become, beside him – the mightiest of empresses. Whole star systems would have erupted at the touch of their fingertips, the old order dying out to be made anew, better than before, with the two of them standing side-by-side, watching paradise take shape from the ashes of the empire-

He shakes his head, ridding himself of the memories. They would never come to pass now – too much has changed, and too much time has passed. Rey had her chance and she missed it. She was the one who needed help, not him. Oh, how many nights he’d lain awake, hating himself, thinking that if he’d just tried harder, made his intentions clearer in the throne room, that vision would have become a reality. He had sensed her emotions – she had been so close to taking his hand. But the little traitor had reached for his heirloom lightsaber instead, and the resulting tug of war had split it in two. The blast had knocked him clean out, and when he’d woken up, he’d lied about everything. Hux still believes Rey was the one to murder Snoke, but he doesn’t know how long that fabrication will last. Dead men tell no tales, but nobody told Force ghosts that rule. What if Snoke appears to Hux one night, while the general attends to himself in his chambers? The comical imagery of that aside, it could be life-threatening for Ren. It’s probably a good thing that his last official act before he left for Ach-To was getting that tech to erase his shuttle’s details from the system archives. He should be entirely off the grid until he returns. If he returns. This is the first time he’s flown free of the First Order in years, and he’d be lying if he said it didn’t feel like a breath of fresh air. For half a decade he’d been the imperial ace in the hole, the trump card they dealt when they couldn’t crack the toughest nuts of the Resistance. Snoke had carefully trained him for one purpose – snuffing out the last rays of hope in the galaxy, by ending the Skywalker bloodline, and the Jedi religion. Clearly, his former master hadn’t known about this place, this hallmark of the Jedi origins, or he’d have had Kylo
journey here sooner. If that had happened, he would have truly faced his uncle, not a hologram designed to trick him into losing the first battle he’d ever been in charge of.

An old, decrepit Jedi made a fool of him once. It won’t happen a second time.

He reaches the top of the stairs, standing still for a moment and taking in the sight of the small, stone-and-mortar huts. Whoever made these wasn’t particularly skilled in construction, but they’ll do for the night. After he finds some food.

He’s about to start up a second set of stairs when a door opens in the corner of his eye. He turns his head slowly; noticing one of the huts has opened for him out of nowhere. He approaches it, and sees that there’s a small bundle, tied with string, on the bench inside. Kylo ducks under the arch of the door – were these huts designed for children? – and unties the bundle like he’s unwrapping a birthday gift.

Inside it, there’s a small ration-pack of flash-frozen meat and gruel, along with a skein of water. He permits himself one quick, amused grin.

_Wonder who put that there._

Chapter End Notes

_Wonder who put that food there? I think it was the wizard of Oz. Or maybe Luke's ghost. It couldn't possibly be the only other inhabitant of the island... nah, that's crazy._
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She hates him. She actually outright hates him. How dare he invade her privacy, yet again, and forcibly track her to the one place she felt even remotely at home? He’s destroyed the sanctity of the Jedi Temple and unbalanced the Force of the island - she can feel its tremors as it tries to right itself, accommodate for this new swell of Dark energy.

She had stormed back down the cliff to the cluster of huts, and without a second thought, she’d barged into Luke’s one, slamming the tin door behind her. He’s not here to kick her out, after all, and she slumps down onto the bench in the corner, groaning. This is her fault, for letting him know she was leaving. She should have realised he’d have some kind of conniving plot twist up his sleeve. Kylo had lulled her into a false sense of security, until she’d believed him to be more of an incompetent, smitten little fool than the cunning mastermind he actually is. She should have known better than to trust a Dark-side serpent – she’d witnessed how easily he’d spun that lightsaber, concealing his intentions from his master until the grisly end. It’s naïve to expect better, when she’s only truly known him for one lunar month.

And she knew Ben Solo, anyway, not Kylo Ren. Or she thought she did.

She draws her legs up on the bench, presses her back against the wall and closes her eyes, reaching out to the Force. She almost cringes away from his Force signature, instantly recognisable – chaotic and dark, almost lightless, but if you look closer, there are several small pinpoints, like tiny stars, at the centre. So he is still conflicted, then. But about what?

Probably about whether to blast the kriff off this island and leave her in peace, or continue to be a particularly sharp thorn in her side. Based on his past decisions, she doesn’t hold out much hope he’ll pick the right one. She sighs, opening her eyes again, and hooks a foot through the strap of her rucksack, pulling it to her and unpacking her belongings. Might as well put her unwelcome guest on the backburner and try to settle in.

She takes out the broken lightsaber and gently sets it on the wood mantelpiece. The ledge is already half-full of Luke’s things – random rocks and sea-glass and little trinkets he collected over the years on this island, and it makes Rey’s eyes prick uncomfortably to think of him, amassing this collection, making this threadbare hut a little more of a home. He was so full of self-hatred when she’d flown to him, jaded and bitter because of the mistakes he’d made, to the extent that he’d completely shut himself off from the Force, from feeling. But he’d made a home here, and this is all that’s left of it – a few mementos and a well-worn bedroll. Rey sits down on the bed and opens one of the Jedi texts again, trying to focus. But the letters jumble themselves up, her vision blurring, and she can’t stop getting distracted by that stupid boy outside. His emotions are like an electric current that’s splitting her focus apart. Her brain is the conduit for his excess emotion, and Rey gives up on reading and tunes into it, closing the book and stepping to the door of the hut.

She can see down the mountainside from here, to where he parked his shuttle, and from the way it’s sparking, it probably won’t be flying anytime soon. But that’s not what he’s upset about – and he is upset, she can feel his mounting distress, and her own anxiety levels rise to meet it. No, it’s not the malfunctioning ship that’s got his knickers in a twist. He doesn’t have any supplies.

Well, that’s his fault for getting so tangled up in tracking her to this place. What kind of novice forgets to pack food when they fly to the other end of the galaxy? Then again, it’s probably not an
element the princely Kylo Ren has ever had to consider – no doubt he had servants to cater to his every need on those imperial starships. A lurid imagining of exactly what those needs may have entailed makes her shiver, and she pulls back from the doorway, walking back over to the bedroll and sitting down, trying to resume her studies.

*I should give him one of my ration packs.***

*No way. Those are mine. He should have brought his own. Idiot.*

*I can’t just let him starve.*

*He would, if the situations were reversed.*

But she doesn’t know that concretely, and a tiny, optimistic part of her even suspects the opposite. So she sighs and gets up again, knees creaking from all of this stopping and starting. She takes a ration pack out of her bag and deposits it in the hut across the way from Luke’s, passing by the half-demolished one with a wry smile. Luke had blown that one up when he’d caught her communing with Ben through the Force bond, the night she’d seen his future.

By the time she hears footsteps on the stairs again, she’s finally hit her reading stride, but she waves a hand, willing the door of the other hut to open. The footsteps stop, and Rey senses his confusion, then the flash of amusement as he sees the ration-pack. She rolls her eyes and sticks her nose back in her book, blotting him out for the time being.

Later, in her borrowed bedroll, she distracts herself by musing over what the Resistance might be up to. Finn is, let’s be honest, probably concocting some scheme to get her back from the island – and gods, if he knew who she was sharing the island with he’d probably be press-ganging Poe and Rose into flying over here at triple-lightspeed. Leia’s probably sending scouts to various systems, trying to raise their numbers for the oncoming war. Hopefully, the First Order still has no clue where they are – if Rey had an inkling that they did, she’d have to go back. She’s not so callous that she won’t help her friends if the time comes. But the month in hiding on Elbara Nine has made her idle – if she’s to be of any help to the rebellion, she needs to train to become a decent stand-in for Luke, and for the Jedi. They have everything they need already, without her in the way.

She pulls the blanket higher, over her face. It smells like Luke, like wheat and sweat and sun, and it’s comforting. Sometimes, when she’d seen rare glimpses of his sense of humour, the warmth and kindness that was hidden under the grumpy old man exterior, she’d wished he were her father.

But there’s no denying the truth about her parentage now. Kylo Ren ripped that Band-aid off spectacularly. The words he’d said to her still make her teeth clench so hard her jaw aches. You’re nothing? Who says that and expects it to be taken as a compliment? She should be over it by now, and maybe if they hadn’t had that brief, intense friendship, she would be. He can come across so unaware, so tactless; she can almost believe it’s just a byproduct of his upbringing, not intentional cruelty.

And he’s here, probably asleep in that hut across from her. She groans, flinging her hand over her eyes, thinking about the conversation they’d had that time he was shirtless. It was almost like he’d been waiting for the Force to bridge their minds again, just so he could startle her with that particular reveal.

He’d told her that she was looking for a father figure in everyone she met, in his family members. The gleam in his eyes told her he was jealous, which he had no right to be. *He killed Han Solo.* He’d rammed that red saber through the hero’s chest and tossed him from the bridge like a piece of trash, like the years before he became a slave to the Dark were nothing to him. Every day, even after she
believed he could be turned, she’d questioned herself, wondering why on earth she was bothering to engage with this monster, to let his words seep into her head. And letting him in was a huge mistake, and one she’s still paying for, because now his words are rooted deeply in her psyche, as deeply as the Force bond they share.

He has a way of cutting her to the quick with only his tongue. It’s quite the talent. But he hadn’t always been cruel with his words. If he had, she wouldn’t have gone to him, tried so hard to sway him away from the First Order. In the hut, that night, he’d listened to her weep, told her that she wasn’t alone, and if that wasn’t nice enough, his eyes had said the rest. He’d touched her skin with his bare fingers, sending a shock of electricity through her veins, from tips to toes. But it was the vision that really made her see the potential in Ben Solo, the light that he’d tried so hard to expunge completely. It was still there, a tiny flame, and she was more attracted to the light of that flame, that inner radiance, than she’d been to anything in her life.

Rey nibbles on one of her nails, her mind wandering to perilous places in the comforting darkness of the hut. Being here, with him not far from her, is stirring up things she doesn’t want to think about, feelings that she doesn’t want to explore. The vision of their future. What she’d seen when their hands brushed. She’s blocked it from her mind for a long, hard month.

*Let it in.*

She closes her eyes and lets it wash over her.

*No.*

Ben Solo rose from where he’d knelt before Snoke, and ignited his lightsaber, the red blade almost invisible in the entirely red throne room. His master started to rise from his throne, but Ben raised his saber so that it was pointed directly at Snoke’s left eye socket.

*I won’t let you destroy her, too.*

He rammed the blade into his master’s eye, straight and true.

The image drifted away, replaced by another just as quickly.

He was holding her hand, and they were flying through deep space, piloting the *Falcon*. All around them, stars were combusting, nebulae spinning out into clouds of pink gas, entire spectrums of colour sliding over the blackness of the dark matter, a sublime rainbow against the absence of light. Rey stopped to stare, wondrous, at the stars, and Ben turned to her, a half-smile playing out across his face.

*Where are we?*

*Does it matter? We’re together. We’re free.*

True. The scene faded out, replaced by a bright, pearlescent light, and Rey raised the flat of her hand to shield her eyes against the brilliance. She heard a voice, deep and thrumming, but couldn’t tell if it came from somewhere beyond the light, or from inside her.

*Two halves of a whole...*

Ben Solo. The other half of the equation. Her equal, her opposite. They were standing in the throne room; glowing embers drifting in the air like fireflies, the red curtains puddled at their feet like pools of blood. She met his gaze, his eyes dark and glossy with longing, and he extended a hand to her.
She took it, lacing her fingers through his, and stretched up on tiptoe, stopping just shy of his mouth. *Come back with me,* she murmured.

*Say the words,* he whispered to her, so close she could feel his breath caress her lips, *and I’m yours.*

Rey opens her eyes, not surprised to find them wet, her lashes stuck together with a crust of salt. She rubs at them furiously, then lets her hands flop to her sides, defeated. What was the point of rehashing all that?

She’d been so sure it was fate intervening, that everything would play out exactly as the vision had promised. But it had all been warped and bent out of shape, a cruel mockery of the Force prophecy. She’d held onto hope when he’d killed his master – what difference did technicalities make? It was the act that mattered – and all through their battle with the Praetorian Guard, when they’d seemed so in sync that their moves were almost a primal dance. But the moment he extended his hand to her, asking her to be his queen, to rule the galaxy with an iron fist, that hope had been stripped bare, leaving her in crisis.

Kylo was the one who killed Snoke, not Ben Solo. Kylo was the one offering her the galaxy on a plate, not Ben. And she couldn’t say the words, because she didn’t love Kylo Ren, and she refused to settle for him when she had seen what she could have had, the future she’d wanted so badly to come true. They had failed each other.

She’d thought it was fate. But it was just fantasy.

Rey rolls over, punches her pillow, and cries herself to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote and rewrote the vision scene SO MANY DAMN TIMES TODAY so I hope the final version does the characters justice. Was gonna put a sex scene in but it felt too soon so y'all will have to WAIT AND SUFFER WITH ME *cackles* *drinks coffee* *flips out*
Chapter 13

Chapter Thirteen

By morning, he’s come up with a vague, half-baked plan. After a very poor sleep on a hard bench that makes the beds of the Star-Eater look like cotton-candy clouds in comparison, he’s aching all over, but the rest has strengthened his resolve.

He will convince Rey to come back to the First Order with him. She can’t stay on this island forever, alone with her books – he knows her, she’s used to working things out on her own - but there are some things that cannot be self-taught. And he knows what she wants, what he can offer her that nobody else can. Training.

You need a teacher. He’d meant it, the night they fought on Starkiller, when the flashes of crimson and blue lit up the night like fireworks, the snow melting from the heat of their sabers, the earth splitting apart beneath their feet. She had raw power, and a lot of potential, but it was unpolished and unfocused. She needed someone to guide her, and the poor fool had chosen Luke Skywalker over someone who could have made her a truly unstoppable force. Him.

And she still needs a teacher. He’s glimpsed her in quiet moments, struggling to comprehend the instructions of the books she’s poring over, sensed her frustration over how to mend the split lightsaber, felt her pining for Luke and the guidance he can no longer give her. If he helps Rey, makes himself invaluable to her, she will bend to his will. He had seen it in a vision, after all.

When they’d touched hands, he’d witnessed himself helping the scavenger girl, sharing his knowledge of both the dark side and the light, the Sith and the Jedi, along with their shared bond, to make her a truly well-rounded Force user. She has rage in her, they both know that – and with his tutelage, she had been able to use that to her benefit, tap into that buried reserve of fury and channel it. It’s already beginning to come true. Only days ago she had conjured Force lightning, he had felt the sparks, the voltage as powerfully as if it had come from his own fingers. She has the potential to be his true equal, and at first, he’d resented that. But now, after Snoke’s death, he sees the appeal of having her on side, first as his pupil, and soon, his ally. She’s not there yet, but one day, she will be. The battle with the Praetorian Guard was enough to make him sure of it. She had stood with him, despite whatever reservations she may have had. Of course, she’d knocked him out and fled to the Resistance afterward with the remnants of his heirloom lightsaber, but that’s another matter entirely.

There was more to the vision than just work, too, but – well, he’ll get to that later. First, he needs to earn her trust back, and that won’t happen without offering up something valuable in exchange. Knowledge is power, and that, he has in spades.

He stretches, the bones of his spine cracking in protest after spending the night on a solid bench, and opens the door of the hut. The sun immediately bathes him in golden light, and he squints, eyes watering from the glare. This island is too exposed to the elements for his liking; he can’t imagine what she likes about this place. But then, she is a sand rat from Jakku – she knows all about surviving in harsh climates, while he is accustomed to the tempered interior of a Star Destroyer. But even princes have to slum it occasionally.
He ventures out into the middle of the circle of huts, scouting for the girl. The door to her hut is open, and he wants to go inside, snoop around a little, learn more about her. But Kylo Ren has some semblance of a conscience left, after all, and he decides against invading her privacy so soon after arriving on the island.

Just as well, because she would have caught him in the act – she’s coming back up the steps now, carrying a bottle full of strange, viscous green liquid. She uncaps the bottle and drinks from it, while he looks on in disgust. Rey screws the lid back on and is about to take another step when she catches sight of him above her. She scowls.

‘Do I want to know what that is?’ he asks, nodding at the fluid.

Her frown deepens. ‘You’re still here.’ She starts to walk up the steps again, and she’s framed against the bright glare of the sun, her silhouette haloed with gold light. Appropriate. She shakes her head ruefully, and her hair spirals out around her face, loose from her buns. ‘On Jakku we were told never to feed the stray lizards, or they’d never leave you alone. I get it now.’

‘Are you comparing me to a lizard?’ Kylo asks, affronted, but he can’t help smirking at the absurdity of it.

‘There are worse things I could compare you to,’ Rey mutters darkly, scaling the last set of stairs and marching past him, and if she could act any more aloof she’d have her nose stuck in the air. He grins to himself and turns, letting his words carry over to her on the breeze:

‘I have a proposal.’

She stops in her tracks, her hand resting on the door to her hut. She doesn’t turn around. ‘I’m not interested. Especially if it’s anything resembling the last proposal you had for me.’

He has to fight not to roll his eyes – she won’t like that. ‘I have a feeling this one will be of more benefit to you.’

Her shoulders slump a little, and Rey exhales an annoyed breath. ‘The only proposal that could benefit me right now is you proposing to get the kriff off this island and back to your First Order cronies. And a truce with the Resistance.’

He folds his arms, hugging his elbows. ‘We both know that I can’t leave this island without you, Rey. I flew here to take you back to the Order, and now that there is only one ship between the two of us, one cannot leave without the other.’ He thinks for a second, wrestling with himself. ‘But there may be something I can do about a truce.’

She whirls to face him. ‘If you think I won’t maroon you on this planet without a second thought-’

‘Then you’ll be no better than your parents,’ he shoots back, and she stills, stunned by his audacity. She bites hard on her bottom lip, and he can tell she’s fighting back either tears or the urge to slap him again.

‘You still need a teacher,’ he continues, gentling his voice somewhat. ‘Luke Skywalker isn’t around to fill the position anymore. Let me.’

‘He isn’t around because you killed him,’ she grinds out. ‘Just like you killed Han and everyone else who mattered.’

‘I didn’t kill Skywalker. What he did, projecting himself across the galaxy, was an act of suicide.’
'That *you* drove him to,' Rey bites back, her gaze steely. ‘He did it to save the Resistance from being wiped out. He was a hero in life and in death.’

Kylo has to count to ten to keep a lid on his temper at that. Once he has, he lets out the breath he’s been holding. ‘Look, Rey. You can keep blaming me for everything that’s wrong with the galaxy, but it won’t get you anywhere. You cannot become a Jedi through book-learning alone. You need a teacher.’

Her eyes narrow into slits at that recycled phrase. ‘I thought you wanted to exterminate the Jedi. Isn’t that your whole schtick?’

She’s got him there. But she doesn’t know everything.

‘That was before I looked into the future,’ he replies, treading carefully, because she looks like a wildcat right now, watching him distrustfully, waiting to pounce. ‘When the Force showed me that vision, I saw myself instructing you in the ways of the Jedi. *And* the Sith. Perhaps a Jedi who is not constricted by Light alone is not such a radical wrongness.’

She laughs, her voice laced with scorn. ‘Why don’t you just admit you can’t bring yourself to kill me?’

His hands ball up into fists, but he can’t say she’s wrong. He’s had multiple ripe opportunities to kill her, and she him, but it’s always been beyond him. He, who has crushed whole star systems between his hands, cannot kill a scrappy little scavenger girl, and the worst part is she knows it, and she exploits that weakness.

‘Fine,’ he grinds out, teeth clenched. ‘I can’t kill you. But you can’t kill me either. You had your chance on the *Supremacy*. Maybe one day you’ll be able to, but not if you’re half a Jedi. I can help make you whole.’

‘Oh, I *bet* you can,’ she retorts, and then she blushes, realising what she’s just implied. The blood that stains her cheekbones berry-pink is distracting to him, more than he’d admit, but he just regards her impassively, waiting for her to muster up a proper answer.

‘Why are you doing this?’ she asks finally, and he reads defeat in her body language. ‘You know I won’t come back with you, short of you commandeering the *Falcon* and kidnapping me, and we both know I’m stronger now than I was on Takodana. Why are you trying to help me now?’

His eyes rove over her face, from her furrowed eyebrows to the confused set of her lips, pale and delicate as rosebuds. She wants to believe the best of his intentions, despite every instinct screaming at her not to. He can tell. He plays his trump card.

‘You already know.’

She blushes again, and he can feel how much she hates that she can’t control it, her reaction to him. It’s visceral, rooted in both DNA and destiny, and enhanced by a bond that first stretched across the universe, and now brings them here, sharing the same space again. Neither can deny how much it pained them to be apart.

Rey, tenacious as she is, still won’t give up. ‘Three days. You have three days to teach me what you know, and then you’re getting off this island, one way or another. I’ll fix your ship myself if I have to. And I’m not coming back to the First Order with you, no matter what tricks you try.’

He smiles, but it’s not a happy smile. ‘That doesn’t sound like a mutually beneficial arrangement. But we’ll see. After those three days, you’ll be begging to leave this island with me.’
Rey steps closer to him, and to his surprise, she extends a hand to shake. ‘Give me your word. Three days.’

He starts to lift his hand to take hers, but Rey clears her throat, raising her eyebrows pointedly, her eyes focused on his black glove.

‘Oh.’ He slides it off, holding the empty glove in his other hand, and reaches out. She squeezes his hand with a vice-like grip, much harder than necessary, and even though it’s meant as a show of defiance, the spark of electricity that passes between them at the skin contact is anything but. An entirely different kind of Force lightning, Kylo muses.

Rey drops his hand and walks into her hut, closing the door, and he’s about to retreat to his own hut when she reappears, this time holding the two sheared-off halves of Anakin Skywalker’s lightsaber. He can see the kyber crystal, exposed at the end of one half, gleaming bright blue.

‘Let’s start with this.’

Kylo stares at her incredulously. ‘You want me to help you build the lightsaber right now?’

She smiles sweetly, a veneer that barely conceals the contempt beneath. ‘Three days,’ is all she says.

Kylo sighs. ‘All right. If you want to waste your first day trying to reconstruct that sloppy old relic, it’s your funeral.’

‘Or yours, once I get it working,’ she volleys back, starting up the steep stairs of the cliff.

It would be very wrong to push her off the cliff. Very wrong. But justifiable.

Three days. Then all bets are off.

Chapter End Notes

Just noticed how much like Davy Jones Rey is in this lol. "Three dayyyyyys."
Anyone else a fan of Dead Man’s Chest and Davy Jones? No? Just me? Okay. *crawls under bed*
She leads him up the cliff-face, carrying the broken saber in her hands and the weight of the cosmos on her shoulders. *This is wrong.*

She is acutely aware of his footsteps behind her, measured and light, and it feels like being hunted, even though she agreed to this. Three days. How dumb. As if she could hope to learn the ways of the Jedi in three days. But she doesn’t want him around her for any longer than that. She’d thought about sneaking off and sending a distress signal to the Resistance, but if anyone came for her, they’d be drawn out of hiding. Kylo’s presence proves that the Order are tracking their ships. If she were responsible for the annihilation of what’s left of the rebels, she’d never forgive herself.

What’s going to happen when the three days are up, though? Does she really think if she still refuses to join him, he’ll just accept that? Without any fight whatsoever? That’s not his style. Agreeing to the bargain may be the worst mistake she’s made yet.

But what choice did she have? He was right – she can’t become a Jedi simply by reading books and communing with the Force. If there is a student, there must always be a master. It’s the natural order of things. She will never accept Kylo Ren as her master, he’s not even remotely qualified to be one – but he can be a teacher. Sort of.

She arrives at the temple at the top of the cliff, and Rey turns, afraid to look at him, but more afraid not to. It’s so bizarre to be face-to-face with him after all this time apart, knowing the intimate details of each other’s thoughts and feelings, but never closer to each other than a couple of star systems. Now he’s right in front of her, and it’s impossible to ignore the way the morning sun outlines his frame, his formidable height, the thickness of his arms in black ribbed sleeves. These are all things that don’t even factor into the equation when he’s just a voice in her head. And does he have to look at her like that, like she’s the most fascinating thing he’s ever seen? It’s infuriating.

‘What?’ she snaps at him, catching him off guard. ‘Stop staring at me.’

He looks her up and down, then, ‘You first,’ he replies evenly.

She was staring too. She huffs and sits down on the temple floor, beside the pool, and places the broken halves of the lightsaber in front of her. ‘Let’s begin. One of the books from the Force tree is about how to make a lightsaber. But I can’t understand the instructions, plus I’m not trying to build a lightsaber, I need to repair one. I assume they’re different?’

Kylo watches her impassively, one eyebrow slightly cocked, ‘You assume correctly,’ he says slowly. She frowns, and she’s not mistaking the fact that his gaze drops to her lips.

Rey lifts her chin. ‘You made your lightsaber, didn’t you? So how hard can it be? Teach me how.’

She expects him to come back with some retort, but he shrugs. ‘Okay.’ And then he sits down opposite her, legs crossed, looking as much of a student as she does. He doesn’t take his eyes off hers, and Rey can’t tell how much of that is mistrust. ‘To build a lightsaber requires a lot of mental
focus and control. Something you don’t seem to have, judging by your previous temper outbursts—'

'Oh, and you’re a paragon of anger management,’ Rey rolls her eyes. ‘Quit lecturing and just give me instructions.’

He chews on his cheek, masking his annoyance, and starts to speak in a low, even voice, letting her follow the instructions at her own pace.

‘Take it apart.’

‘I don’t know how to do that,’ Rey grinds out, frustrated.

‘Close your eyes,’ Ren says impatiently. Rey shoots him a suspicious look, but obeys. His voice immediately becomes amplified as her sight is cut off, and she can’t tell if she’s hearing him externally or inside her head. ‘Visualise pulling the saber components apart, one by one. Manifest it.’

She furrows her brow, zeroing in on a mental image of the broken saber, imagining it hovering in front of her nose, falling apart into all its little constituents. Kylo breathes in sharply, and Rey feels a thrill of excitement – she’s done it.

‘Keep your eyes closed,’ he says hastily, seeing her eyelashes flutter. She refocuses, straining to keep the saber floating.

‘You already have the necessary parts: the metal, the kyber crystal, the power cell and activator. This will be easy,’ Kylo’s voice filters through to her. ‘Now, focus on the crystal. How does it feel? Is it cracked?’

Rey examines it from every facet in her mind – studying the miniscule fibres inside the gem, plucking at the matrix like harp strings, testing for weak points. There are none. ‘No,’ she reports, but as she stretches out her hand, fingertips brushing the floating crystal – something flickers.

‘Wait.’ She pushes again, and a sudden strobe of neon skewers her brain, and she gasps at the same time as Kylo does. Her eyes fly open.

She’s still touching the crystal, and it’s still floating – but it’s changing colours, fluorescing like a chameleon’s scales. It was once the rich blue of sapphire, but as Rey’s fingers brush against it, it flares to ruby, sending a spear of terror through her frontal lobe before it pales into a brilliant topaz.

‘What the...’ Kylo breathes, enraptured.

‘I don’t...’ Rey stares at the kyber crystal, afraid to move in case it breaks the spell. ‘What do I do?’ she whispers, panicked.

‘Put it back in the crystal mount,’ Kylo orders, and Rey jams her eyes shut, focusing intensely on the hilt of the lightsaber. She slots the crystal back into its holder, but the lightsaber is still in halves.

‘What now?’

She can hear the smile in Kylo’s voice. ‘Now you heat the metal so you can weld the saber back together. And rewire the internal chamber.’

‘What? I need tools for that!’ Rey exclaims. If he’s been wasting her time with this task and she could have just fixed the saber as she has any other ship wiring, she’s going to murder-

‘You don’t need anything,’ he reassures her, and Rey flinches as she feels the squeak of leather
against her fingers, as he guides her hands into the right shape. He’s touching her, and she should yank her hands away, but-

The lightsaber. It’s heating up, the sheared-off edges of the metal hilt glowing first blue, then orange, then a waxy white as it heats itself to smelting point. Rey motions instinctually with her free hand, the other still touching Kylo’s, and the two halves align themselves, top sinking down onto bottom with a hiss of molten steel.

‘The wires,’ Kylo urges her onward, and Rey struggles to see to the interior of the chamber, to reconnect the wires into the correct arrangement that will stop the saber from exploding when she tries to ignite it. They are like veins, and she must resection them. Rey extends her hand, palm up, and contorts her index and ring fingers, pinching the two biggest wires into formation. Next, the two skinny red conductors. They slot together like puzzle pieces, so satisfying.

‘It’s ready,’ he murmurs, and Rey’s eyes shoot open to the saber in all its glory: restored, whole, but with a faint seam of burnt metal along the hilt. It isn’t perfect. But it’s better than it was.

Will it work?

‘Only one way to know,’ Kylo tells her, and Rey holds out her hand, lets the saber hilt drop into her palm, heavy and warm. She thumbs the switch, tempted to press it and let the saber ignite. But what if it doesn’t work?

‘Do it,’ Kylo orders, and Rey closes her eyes. Presses the button.

A gush of energy tears through the silent room, and the backs of her eyelids blaze with gold. She grins, exhilarated, her face alight with a fierce joy, and underneath that, she can sense Kylo’s approval. A little taste of admiration, too.

She opens her eyes. ‘I did it.’ She can’t resist grinning, elated, eyes glued to the repaired lightsaber, to the stream of yellow energy that pours from the hilt, like gold from a crucible. She takes her finger off the ignition switch and the beam cuts out, and absence of humming is deafening as they stare at each other now, and his eyes are so dark but there’s a glimmer of something bright there, something like pride, the ghost of a smile on his lips, and Rey leans forward slightly-

She stops stock-still. No. She stands up, walking quickly to the door, and braces her hand against it, trying to wrestle herself back under control. ‘Let’s take a break,’ she says, and then she practically runs down the cliffside, leaving Kylo sitting next to the pool.

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The break ends up lasting the rest of the day, as Rey takes some time to herself to practice her forms with the new lightsaber. She gets a jolt of excitement every time she turns it on, its golden blade gushing at the slightest touch, perfectly responsive. She spins and slashes at the air, tosses the hilt back and forth behind her back, tests out switching it on and off with the Force rather than her fingers.

She pirouettes at the cliffside, acting out a proper battle dance, pretending to fight like they say Luke fought Vader, with grace and agility, rather than the brute strength she’s used to attacking with. She’s performing a particularly graceful arabesque when she feels his eyes on her, burning like lasers, and stops mid-spin, wobbling clumsily.

As expected, he’s standing a flight of steps above her, watching her with his arms behind his back, like a soldier. ‘You need to let go of your anger if you want to fight like a Jedi,’ he says offhandedly.
‘Like you let go of yours, you mean?’ Rey asks, raising her eyebrows sarcastically. ‘You fight like a hormonal gorilla.’

‘Again with the animal comparisons,’ Kylo says emotionlessly. ‘Your preferences are showing.’

Rey’s face flames – and did he just make a sex joke? It’s so unbelievable, his having a sense of humour, that she can’t discern his meaning, so she settles for glaring at him with all the animosity she can pack into one look. He looks back at her with a face that’s the textbook definition of deadpan.

‘Clever,’ she says acidly, and she strides past him, back up the steps to her hut. It’s starting to feel like a perpetual game of cat and mouse on the steps of this sacred island, and she doesn’t like it one bit. But then, when hasn’t it been a chase, this weird not-quite companionship of theirs? He pursued her to Takodana, through the ice forests of Starkiller, to the red salt fields of Crait, and now to the birthplace of the Jedi order. He feels inescapable to her, and that’s without considering the Force bond that drives their connection, making her feel emotions she doesn’t want to feel, chemistry she doesn’t want to crave.

It’s contagious and electrifying, the way she dually wants to tear his hair out and tangle her fingers in it, pull him close and repel him all at once. And all because she pushed back when he entered her mind.

She’s been thinking about the Force bond, and where it originated. It didn’t surprise her to realise Snoke had lied; when the spell he’d claimed to have cast didn’t crumble into bone-dust along with him. The sorts that Kylo trucks with aren’t exactly models of integrity. But surely, as one of the people who really did create it, she should be able to umake it. She hadn’t understood the power budding in her back then, in that interrogation room on Starkiller, but she has a stronger grasp of it now. There has to be some way to undo this.

Two quick raps on the door outside. Kylo. ‘Dinner,’ is all he says, his voice muffled by the walls of her hut.

Rey steels her spine and walks outside. Somehow, he’s gotten a fire burning on the grass outside, and there’s a spit-roasted carcass of a bird dripping juice onto the flames. It smells heavenly.

‘Those ration-packs you have are truly disgusting,’ Kylo remarks, and Rey perches on the brick wall across from the fire, watching him cautiously as sparks fly from the firepit.

‘Did you kill a porg?’ she inquires, looking at the cooked bird as Kylo takes it off the spit, disassembling it with long, elegant fingers. ‘But they’re so sweet!’

‘They’re pests, actually,’ he replies nonchalantly, and holds out a drumstick to her. For all her protestations about porgs being cute, she doesn’t really want to spend another night reconstituting protein cubes, so she takes the drumstick and bites into the cooked flesh, a bead of juice dripping down her chin.

Kylo watches her eat for a long time, and Rey starts to get self-conscious – she’s never been a neat eater, and she’s getting juice all over her hands. But he clears his throat eventually and brings up something that’s obviously been niggling at him.

‘I couldn’t help overhearing before that you’ve been questioning the Force bond we have,’ he says directly, gazing directly at her face.

Rey flushes. ‘Who gave you permission to rifle through my thoughts? This is exactly why I want it gone.’
Kylo puts down the wishbone he’d been toying with. ‘You think it’s that easy? Don’t you understand what’s happened to us?’

‘You know I don’t,’ Rey snipes. ‘I’m nothing, remember? I’m the illiterate peasant here, so go ahead, enlighten me.’

He regards her with undisguised scorn. ‘Very well. A Force bond is something ancient, something extremely powerful, between two Force users. I researched it in spare moments on the Supremacy. It can be used to share power, read one another’s thoughts and feelings, view each other’s memories, among other things. A Force bond occurs at a pivotal moment, usually near-death. But I think the connection between us was forged when I interrogated you at the First Order base.’

‘When you forced yourself inside my mind?’ Rey interjects. ‘Yeah, that’d do it.’

‘When I reached into your mind,’ he raises his voice to drown out her dissent, ‘and you reached back into mine, somehow a seed was planted there. At first, it was only brief flashes of your feelings, your thoughts, broadcast from your mind to mine. But the bond is getting stronger, particularly now that Snoke is no longer a concern.’ He sips from the skein of water he’s placed at his feet. ‘For instance, did you know that the Force has been connecting us while you sleep?’

Her heart ices over, actually ceasing to beat. Her chest aches with cold. ‘What?’

He doesn’t smile. ‘Yes. It’s a relatively new development, so don’t get too excited.’

‘Oh, I won’t,’ she mutters, playing with the leftover bone from her drumstick, bending it one way and then the other, testing its mettle.

‘Anyway. The bond is growing stronger, less inhibited, more intuitive. Before, when you were rebuilding the lightsaber, I was able to channel some of my power into you across the link.’

Rey jerks at that. ‘Great. So I didn’t really fix the lightsaber by myself? You couldn’t even let me have that?’

He rolls his eyes, as if her frustration isn’t even worth acknowledging. ‘Have you ever thought about picking your battles?’

The bone snaps in two and Rey stands up, tossing the shards into the fire. ‘Yes, I have, and I’m picking all of them. And if you really know everything, then tell me - how do you break a Force bond?’

He looks at her from across the firelight, his expression obscured by a curtain of black hair and floating embers. ‘You can’t.’

Rey takes hold of her elbows, shivering as she stands in front of the fire, all the anger leaking out of her. ‘There must be a way.’

‘Oh, there is,’ he agrees, tossing the wishbone he’s been holding into the flames, too. ‘But it would result in everlasting agony. If you break a Force bond, it doesn’t go away. It persists, like phantom pain in a missing limb, but worse. From what I read, it’s meant to feel like your heart has been torn from your chest.’

Rey glares at him, her expression flat. ‘Even if all of that is true – and that’s a big if- how do you break it?’

Kylo stares at her for a long moment, saying nothing.
Then-

‘One of us has to die.’

She takes a minute to think that over. Several minutes, as the tenuous hold she has on her composure slips more and more, until she’s on the verge of bursting into tears. Kylo doesn’t take his eyes off her – he can feel the mayhem of her emotions, and he doesn’t say anything, just sits in solidarity, a metaphorical shoulder to cry on-

‘Well,’ she says shakily, clenching and unclenching her hands at her sides. ‘That’s not ideal. But how do I know you’re not lying?’

He raises an eyebrow. ‘Didn’t I just explain that we can read eachother’s thoughts?’ The suggestion of a smile plays at the corners of his mouth again. ‘Go ahead if you must, and search my feelings. You won’t find the barest hint of a lie. I just wanted to give you a more informed view of the situation.’

Rey’s shoulders slump in grim defeat. ‘Thanks for that.’ She turns away from the fire, brushing the ash off her clothes as she heads back into Luke’s hut. She pauses at the door. ‘Don’t let the fire burn too long.’

‘All right,’ he says, and it’s phrased more like a question, but Rey’s too tired to hash things out any further. Today has sapped her of all her mental fortitude, and she lies down on her bedroll, sleepily playing with the hilt of the reformed lightsaber. At least she’s accomplished that amongst this mess. Tomorrow, she will ask him to explain the other books – maybe she could bring him to the tree-library. Two days left, to learn the Jedi order inside out, as much as he can teach her. And then she’s getting the hell off this island and away from him. She refuses to accept that the bond can only be broken in death, or that it will feel like torture when it happens. She’s been tortured before, multiple times, and didn’t crack. It can’t be that bad, and even if it is; it’s preferable to letting him in again in some bid to preserve her sanity.

Rey learns from her mistakes. She simply needs to practice better self-control. Look at the travesty in the temple today, when she’d let the pheromones in the room, the excitement of fixing the lightsaber, overwhelm her, leaning into the feel of him sharing her triumph. She can’t let him worm his way into her heart again. She won’t.

Rey thumbs the switch of the lightsaber in the blackness of her room, the gold light searing her eyes. She stares into the laser beam, eyes watering, searching for a sign.

Chapter End Notes

HELLO fam. Sorry this update took a bit longer, I had to do a shift at work and then I got really fucked up and watched TLJ again and was in heaven so I didn't have much time to write, plus I wasn't a huge fan of this chapter as I'm beginning to get impatient for all the feels! But see what you think!

I appreciate all of the support and the readership so much, y'all are amazing and made me cackle with your comments! xo

P.S. - MERRY FORCemas EVERYONE!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Meanwhile...

Armitage Hux is not meek of manner. Not at all. He has clawed his way to the top of a military organisation from the lowest of bottom-feeder planets, Arkanis, through the ranks of the First Order, all the way to General. He has fought tooth and nail to maintain that rank, and in his most private moments, he had used to entertain the thought that perhaps one day, he could become the next ruler of the organisation. Snoke had been fond of him, he’d known it – despite his harsh penalties when disappointed, he had been pleased overall with General Hux’s performance, and more kindly to his subordinate than Hux had probably deserved at times. He still feels strong ripples of grief when he thinks about the loss – especially when he remembers his replacement.

Kylo Ren. That thirty-year old crybaby in a Vader cape, with his crappily made lightsaber and his lofty bloodline. The masked moron who keeps costing the First Order thousands in damages and weapons costs, both from his poorly-thought out military strategies and his destructive temper tantrums. He had superseded Snoke’s position at the end of a bloodbath, bodies of the Red Guard lying broken at his feet, and Hux hates him for it with a passion that could burn all the sun’s fuel in a day.

He doesn’t trust the new Supreme Leader as far as he could throw him, and when he’d happened upon him, unconscious in Snoke’s throne room at the end of his battle with that impetuous girl, Rain, or whatever her name was, he’d been sorely tempted to double-tap the bastard, put him out of his misery, both his and Hux’s. But he woke up, and usurped the throne, and now Hux is stuck CC-ing him on all official emails – ones Ren has made precisely zero effort to answer – and having to defer to a younger, more emotionally volatile man than himself, who’s partial to meting out magical punishments with impunity. The man had nearly single-handedly ruined their attack on Crait a month before, unwise enough to be deceived by Luke Skywalker’s hologram, and just yesterday he’d departed the Star-Eater without so much as a by-your-leave, in a tearing rush to fly to somewhere or something.

Hux is seething about this yet again as he writes a duty report in his quarters. He’s just about to crack open a bottle of Corellian wine when there’s a knock at his door.

‘Come in,’ he calls, and the door cracks open to reveal a security officer, one of the younger ones, still bright-eyed and keen to make a difference. There’s a gleam in his eye that Hux rather likes the look of – it’s promising to see someone happy around this place for once. Since Ren was crowned the Supreme Leader, things have been bloody miserable, and holding the First Order together has felt like being pulled apart by horses. Especially without Phasma to oversee the running of the Stormtrooper program – without her, that task has been left to Hux, and he’s seriously considering canning it all and signing off on an order for a clone army.

‘Can I help you?’ Hux asks, as the young aide is just standing there, grinning, and it’s starting to get unnerving.

‘Sir,’ the security officer says in a hushed voice, ‘we’ve found something of great import. From the security cameras in Kylo Ren’s chambers.’
Hux’s spine stiffens at the mention of their new leader’s name, and his heart skips with anticipation. Could this be the spark they need to start a mutiny? ‘Yes?’ he presses urgently.

‘If you’ll follow me, sir,’ the aide says, bowing, and Hux almost jogs out of his quarters, striding purposefully beside the security officer through the corridors of their temporary home, into the security booth. Inside, another aide is bent over a computer, typing commands furiously as the computer’s screen glows blue.

‘What have you discovered, gentlemen?’ Hux places his hands on the back of the aide’s chair. ‘This had better be worth the time taken away from my reports.’

The first aide has the gumption to grin at him. ‘With all due respect, General – I think this will be the funniest thing you’ve ever seen.’

The second aide clicks something on the screen and the blue film is replaced by a reel of images, crisp and in Technicolor. It takes Hux a moment to place the location – the blackness of Ren’s sanctum matches the décor of the rest of the ship, after all. After a few seconds of doldrums, their Supreme Leader shows up on-screen, closing the door to his quarters and resting his hands against the door.

‘Really?’ he can be heard through the speakers, slightly tinnily, but unmistakeably. Hux leans closer to the screen.

Ren turns around, fists clenching in annoyance, and now he’s looking at something off-screen. ‘This isn’t a good time, Rey.’

The camera pans as he walks across the room, and Hux realises with a sharp jolt that he’s looking at nothing. The Supreme Leader is literally talking to the walls, looking directly at the corner where the east and west walls of his bedroom meet. ‘I’m not kidding. You – is that the Falcon?’ he asks, incredulity lacing his tone, and Hux blinks copiously, making sure that he’s seeing clearly and that there really isn’t a spaceship sitting in Ren’s room.

There’s nothing there. ‘He’s mad,’ Hux breathes, gripping the back of the aide’s chair hard enough to buckle the metal.

‘It gets better,’ the first aide chuckles, and the second types in a new string of commands. ‘When we saw this one, we checked the archives back as far as two months ago for any other episodes. We hit the jackpot, sir.’

‘Yes, yes, show me,’ Hux flaps an impatient hand at the aide, and a new video rolls over the screen, this one showing a shirtless Ren in his chambers, writing a letter at his desk. He stands up and turns around, his half-nakedness in full view of the camera, and Hux is revolted, but it’s okay, there’s wine for that later. Ren doesn’t say anything for a moment, rather looks like he’s listening intently, then–

‘I didn’t hate him,’ he addresses the tapestry of a volcano hanging on his wall. Hux almost shrieks with glee.

Ren continues his conversation with the painting for a while, and Hux has almost grown used to the insanity of it all when the Supreme Leader steps closer to the wall, practically touching it with his nose, and speaks, his voice echoing through their speakers.

‘Let the past die. Kill it, if you have to. It’s the only way to become what you were meant to be.’

He returns to his desk, the camera rolling away, and Hux loosens his grip on the chair, his face
flushed with exuberance. ‘How,’ he asks, ‘in the name of god did you know to look for this?’

The second aide, the one controlling the computer, spins round in his chair. ‘I was manning the tech office when Ren rushed in the other day and demanded I check the tracking details we had for a ship. One Millennium Falcon. He was acting strangely, more so than usual, and after I did as he asked he ordered me to delete the information from the system drives. I did, but it was enough to make me suspicious. So Bant and I here checked the footage from his cameras. We weren’t expecting this much material.’

‘That makes three of us,’ General Hux replies, still shellshocked.

‘General? There’s one more,’’ the first aide guides his attention back to the screen, where a third film is playing. In this one, Kylo Ren sits alone in his bedroom, staring at nothing, as still as though he’s been frozen in carbonite. He’s listening to something, Hux realises, noting the rapt attention on his face – the same on Hux’s own countenance as he watches this bizarre scene.

Ren suddenly reacts to something. ‘You’re not alone,’ he whispers, in a voice almost too soft for the camera’s built-in microphone. He lapses back into listening again, and Hux is about to question why the aides showed him this particular video when there’s a flicker of movement on the screen, as Ren takes off one of his trademark gloves and extends a hand to nothing.

Between one frame and the next, a girl appears on the camera. Dressed in shabby white cloth and with stringy hair falling all over her face, she reaches for Ren’s hand. They touch, and the moment is so embarrassingly intimate that Hux feels like he’s switched to watching a pornvid on the Holonet. Kylo Ren actually looks like he might cry – gods above, the man is an emotional wreck. But Hux pays close attention to the girl, and as he watches, both of them turn towards the camera, and Hux can see the details of her face – it’s that girl. Rain. The one Kylo claimed murdered Snoke is joining hands – and lord knows what else - with their upstart Supreme Leader.

‘Betrayer!’ Hux shrieks, reeling back from the computer as the girl’s image flickers and disappears. The general clutches at his decorated collar like a terrified socialite holding her pearl necklace, and the second aide pauses the video feed, turning around to him again.

‘We have reasonable cause to suspect that Kylo Ren may not be as innocent in the matter of Supreme Leader Snoke’s death as was previously thought,’ he says reasonably, and Hux nods, panting from a mixture of severe shock and ecstasy. This is it. This is what he’s endured the last month for. A chance to give Ren the fate he deserves. He forces his emotions back into the carefully labelled boxes in his brain, calming himself into a trancelike state.

‘You have done well to bring this to my attention, gentlemen. I will personally see to it that you each receive a substantial bonus. For now, I would like you to privatize that last video, the one with the girl. It doesn’t need to be a part of the narrative yet.’

‘And the other two, sir?’ the first officer asks, while the second is busy inputting his commands.

Hux pauses, basking in the joy of this moment. ‘Spam them out to the entire HoloNet. And every email address within the First Order. I want this circulating in the farthest reaches of the galaxy by morning.’

‘Very good, sir.’ The first technician inclines his head and joins the second at another computer. Hux can barely contain himself as he strides through the ship’s hull and back to his rooms – once inside, he lets out a whoop of savage joy, beating his fists against the pillows of his bed. At last. The First Order will no longer suffocate under the chokehold of Ren. Or his Knights.
He sobers up, pulls out his chair and sits down at his desk, beginning to scribble furiously in his journals. A plan starts to take shape, first rudimentary, then, as time goes on and he grows more calculating, a diabolical strategy. Cut the little lunatic where it hurts the most.

Hux switches on the small short-wave radio he keeps on his desk for times like these. He punches in a code and waits for the response.

‘Yes, hello, this is General Hux from aboard the Star-Eater. I’d like some information regarding whether the Supreme Leader’s knights were offloaded from the Finalizer recently. Yes, I’ll hold.’

Hux doodles a quick sketch with his pen as he waits for the integral reply. ‘Affirmative. Two of the eight disembarked on a routine stop at Pillio. The other six remain on board.’

‘Excellent.’ Hux switches the radio off and looks down at his pen squiggles. He’s drawn a stick-figure with a sweeping cape, hanging from a noose. A fitting end for a deserter and a betrayer, but enough to personally exact vengeance? No. He can do better than a hanging.

Hux leans back in his chair and smiles. Tomorrow, it begins.

Chapter End Notes

This is probably not what y'all envisioned when I promised a Christmas update! But I promise it does progress the plot, Hux and his conniving ways are going to enter the game BIG time. I hope everyone's had/having/about to have a lovely Christmas, and that you all eat LOTS of food (I'm sitting here half-dead from a sushi and chicken overdose tbh)

Let the Reylo recommence in person next chapter! *writes furiously*
Chapter 16

She’s perched on the stone wall that circles the village, letting the morning breeze tangle her hair as she gazes out over the endless ocean, watching the wind cast ripples and eddies across the surface. The sky is a calm orange as the sun starts its daily climb, only a few clouds scudding across the panorama. Rey breathes in deeply, stealing the energy from the air, letting the warmth of the sun settle in her blood and bones, recharging her for the day that’s ahead.

Beside her sits another book, this one a series of essays on the nature of the Force. Bound with a thick gold-leafed spine and calligraphic writing, it’s a beautiful book, but impossible to understand – it’s written in anything but basic script, and Rey has been struggling to string the sentences together, to glean any meaning at all from the valuable source. She just hopes that when she takes Kylo Ren to the library in the Force Tree, he doesn’t smite it down in protest, because that’s totally something he would do. It’s absurd that the man responsible for exterminating the Jedi Order is helping her to interpret their instructions and become one. But it was his proposal, after all, not hers. And it’s more than she could have hoped for.

She chews absent-mindedly on a leftover scrap of porg-meat, cracking open the bone and sucking the marrow out. Old habits die hard – on Jakku, if once in a blue moon she was lucky enough to find and kill a bloggin, she’d waste nothing – pluck the feathers to make extra stuffing for her pillow, boil the gizzards for broth, and suction out the nutrient-rich bone marrow. Every little piece of that animal would help her survive just one more day. And things don’t feel too different here on Ach-To – it might not be a parched desert, but it’s not like they’re swimming in food options here either. They’ve got ration-packs and a dwindling supply of fresh water and that’s it. When that runs out, she’s going to have to get crafty.

She’s musing over how easy the weird milk-beasts on the shoreline would be to kill when she senses Kylo stirring, easing out of a deep sleep. She’s been detecting his presence more in the last two days than in the entire span of their Force connection – the bond has grown from a faint and unreliable string to a reinforced bridge between their minds, stalwart and unbreakable, with constant traffic back and forth. If he falls asleep before her, she senses as he slips into dreams, even gets garish flashes of them if she focuses enough. If he’s angry about something, it bubbles in her gut, if he’s happy - and that’s exceedingly rare - her heart leaps. There’s no going back now, she thinks glumly, feeling the luxurious stretch of muscles that don’t belong to her as he rolls over on his bench. You let him stay.

He’s getting dressed now, and Rey tries to blot out the sensations of him slipping on pants and surcoat, the fabric touching the skin of his legs in a titillating manner. She’s afraid to close her eyes in case she loses herself completely, in case the Force bond funnels her mind into his body or something ludicrous like that. It hasn’t happened yet, but every time she thinks she’s got a handle on this evanescent connection they have, it ups its game. She’s scared of what she might see, what she might do, if the unexpected happens.

The door to his hut opens behind her and he strolls out, darkness clinging to his edges like perfume. She can see it in his Force signature again, a roiling blackness, a starless void. Something’s troubling
Rey takes a deep breath and jumps off the wall. ‘Day two,’ she says casually, turning to face her teacher. ‘Hope you brought your A game.’

‘Of course,’ he replies dismissively, looking down his extraordinarily long nose at her. ‘Lead the way.’

Rey starts down the steps away from the village, in the opposite direction to the pool room at the top of the cliff. Kylo lopes easily after her, his long legs eating up the distance she creates between them by jogging ahead. They clamber down the hillside, passing a handful of nuns – Rey secretly refers to them as fish-wives, sure they’re gossiping about her as soon as she turns her back – attending to various monuments as they go. Kylo eyes them curiously, and when Rey probes at the link, she sees that he’s wondering what colour their blood is. She walks faster, disgusted.

They come to the start of the valley, wreathed in thick banners of mist, and Rey summons him to her side as she starts up the steps to the Force Tree. It’s treacherous here, the stone steps slick with condensation, the path invisible because of the floating streams of fog. But the tree stretches its branches towards the sky, above the layer of mist, and Rey stops in her tracks, startled. Then, she gasps, a shuddering breath that ripples through the man beside her.

The tree is dead. As they get closer, the fog dissipates, parting like a theatre curtain to reveal the blackened charcoal of the once-healthy branches, the huge split in the trunk, riven as though an enormous axe had dropped on it from above. Rey cries out and rushes forward, splaying her hands to touch the burnt wood, leaking sap like crystalline tears in spots.

‘Who did this?’ Rey asks rhetorically, running her fingers over the wood. Beneath its crisped layer, the Force tree still sings, but the melody is one of pain, of sadness. Rey blinks back tears as she traces the hole that leads to the library. Is that burnt too? She doesn’t want to find out.

Kylo moves beside her again, and she can feel his emotions as he stares up at the tree: confusion, recognition, pain.

‘It’s a Uneti,’ he says quietly, and Rey swivels to look at him, surprised to find that his dark eyes are full of sorrow. The link warms, sending a vivid swirl of his memories through her head: of a similar tree on Coruscant, its branches heavy with blonde blossoms, that his mother had shown him on one of their visits to the rebuilt Jedi temple. He’d wanted to climb all over it, but Leia had held his hand tightly and told him to just listen. It was more than a tree – a Force-sensitive entity, its foliage changing with the balance in the Force. At the time, the tree’s blooms had all been rich gold, to signify the Light, but Leia had told him that in the time of Darth Sidious’s reign of terror, the leaves had turned a shocking white. At only six years old, he’d been unable to get the image out of his head, of the leaves turning pale, losing their lustre as the galaxy lost hope, as the scales of the universe shifted to the Dark side.

‘This tree is Force-sensitive?’ Rey asks in a hushed whisper, drawing Kylo Ren out of his recollections. His eyes flick to hers quickly and he nods, taciturn.

Rey presses the flat of her palm against the bark again, closing her eyes and taking a slow, steady breath. She reaches out to the matrix that’s vibrating at the corners of her mind, letting the network of the Force blossom outward, seeing Kylo’s Force signature behind her, and amazingly, the tree’s own aura, directly enveloping hers. It is a deep and pearly grey, particularly stark against her own white swirl, and Rey presses harder, murmuring to the tree:

What happened to you?
An earth-shaking crack and the smell of burning wood fills her nostrils, the slow, muffled groans of
the tree as its flesh is scorched away, ashes falling at its roots. She sees a bolt of grease-silver
lightning strike the base of the tree once more, and turns around to-

Luke, holding a crude flare in one hand, still lit and unused, while a transparent figure sits next to
him, one finger lifted over its staff in a gesture of supreme power. This is the one who conjured the
lightning. Why?

Rey takes her hand off the tree and the vision fades. She turns back to Kylo, thinking it’s ironic that
she was so worried about him razing the Force tree, one of the last remnants of the Jedi, when a Jedi
has already done the job for him. She can see from his resulting expression that he’s amused by that
line of thought, but not truly pleased about it. He has an impressive poker face, but the bond allows
her to glimpse his feelings – he’s intrigued.

‘Luke was going to burn the tree down,’ Rey relays to him, shocked. ‘But there was someone else –
a ghost, I think – who struck it with lightning.’

‘I saw it too,’ Kylo reminds her, and Rey smiles sheepishly.

‘Oh, right.’ The moment of embarrassment is as transient as the charged look that passes between
them. ‘Why would Luke want to burn the tree?’

‘Maybe he knew you stole all his books,’ Kylo says shrewdly, pinning her with his gaze. ‘Skywalker
doesn’t have a spotless record when it comes to acting rationally.’

‘Neither do you,’ Rey jabs, and with that, she steps through the opening of the trunk, covering her
nose with the neck of her shirt to prevent the floating dust and ash from clogging her airways. The
ground crunches underfoot as she steps into the atrium, broken twigs and cinders stirred up by her
footsteps. Kylo ducks to fit through the opening, and has to keep his knees uncomfortably bent to
avoid bashing his skull on the wood of the trunk once inside. It’s laughable, and Rey’s glad she has
the cloth covering her mouth, because she’s grinning a little, despite the gravity of this, standing on
the cinders of a half-dead Force tree. A Uneti, he’d called it. Rey has a keen sense of its distress as
she walks further into the trunk, gingerly touching the carved shelf that had used to hold the Jedi
texts. It’s coated with a thick layer of ash that crumbles on her fingertips as she brushes the shelf.

She senses Kylo behind her, still sunk in an odd half-crouch, and addresses him without turning
around. ‘It wasn’t like this when I left Ach-To. I didn’t know...’ she says, trying to rub the ash off
her fingers, only succeeding in smearing it all over her hands.

‘Didn’t know what?’ he prompts, and now she turns. He’s made his way to the tallest part of the
trunk, where he can stand unimpeded, and the absence of light turns him into a black shadow, tall
and menacing, watching her from the corner. It strikes her how much he looks like a demon from the
horror stories told to misbehaving children, his features obscured by the dark. He’s just missing the
glowing yellow eyes. Dark-siders have them. She wonders why his eyes are still so brown.

‘You’re staring,’ Kylo says, drawing her out of her thoughts, but his voice is oddly soft, at odds with
the demonic image. ‘Again.’

‘Sorry.’ She casts her eyes down to her feet, to her shoes coated with flakes of ash. ‘We should get
out of here before we suffocate.’

He looks at her silently for a long, tension-filled moment. Then nods and ducks back out of the
entrance, and Rey sees his boots heading away from the tree as she lingers for a few moments more,
looking at the destruction of the tree and wondering why in the world Luke would want to burn it to
the ground. She knew he’d grown jaded and weary of the Jedi religion, but he was always respectful of the monuments – more so than her, who has probably made countless nemeses among the fishwives over the few short days she lived on this island. Burning down the Force tree in a fit of temper, well, that’s something she’d expect from Kylo, not the Jedi Master.

It’s a jarring role reversal, with Luke destroying Jedi artefacts and Kylo Ren, the Jedi Killer, acting as her new teacher. It’s like she’s slipped through a mirror into an inverted world, where up is down and wrong is right and the factors that made up her view of things are being switched out and shuffled, puzzle piece by puzzle piece. It no longer strikes her as absurd that the new Supreme Leader flew to Ach-To to take her to the First Order, but has stayed to help her learn the ways of the Jedi, and has been treating her more fairly than she’d expected after the last time she’d left him.

Lately, it’s just yet another thing about him that makes her heartbeat race.

Rey steps out of the burnt-out tree, into the blazing sunlight.

Chapter End Notes

And we're back to the regularly scheduled Reylo! Mmm-hmmm, this my shit. Hope y'all enjoyed!
Chapter Seventeen

The dying Force Tree is bringing back too many unpleasant memories, and he has to step out of it and catch his breath, remind himself that the past is dead. Or as dead as it’s ever going to get, with his mother still alive, somewhere in the untraceable regions of the galaxy. Even on this godforsaken island in the middle of nowhere, he can feel her – her Force signature thrums, a point of blue light in the network of the Force that spans the universe, a giant cosmic net, a map of stars.

If he wanted to, he could brush his consciousness up against that blue pinpoint, feel out his mother’s life force, sense her emotions – such is the psychic link between mother and son, almost as strong as the bond that exists between Rey and him. But he doesn’t dare to reach out – there’s every chance the general thinks he tried to kill her, the night the First Order squadron bombed the bridge of the Raddus. They’d sensed each other on board their respective aircrafts, and Kylo had felt his mother’s resignation and acceptance – she knew he’d come to kill her, to bury what was left of his heritage so he could begin anew. But when he’d put his thumb on the trigger of his TIE’s forward cannons, he couldn’t push it. Two subordinates had swooped in and taken over, but Leia would have been blown into the vacuum of space before she could have a good enough look at who’d taken the shot. Kylo doesn’t know how she survived that – Darth Vader survived for forty-five seconds in deep space and was close to death, yet his mother had been outside the safety of the airlock for much longer and lived to tell the tale. Leia Organa is made of tougher stuff than he thought.

She always was a battle-axe, though, he thinks, and even though it hurts, he can’t stop himself reaching back to his childhood memories again. Growing up on Coruscant, surrounded by neon lights and whizzing, comet-like starships, towering skyscrapers breaching the atmospheric bubble, and the adoring attention of the public, who worshipped his parents for their heroism in the battle of Endor. Behind closed doors, his mother had ranted about the hypocrisy of the people, longing to get back to being a military strategist rather than a beloved princess, while Han had lapped up every iota of fame, showing off his scars and telling taller and taller tales to anyone who would listen. Fights, there had been so many fights, sometimes just small simmerings of resentment, other times outbursts so explosive he’d have to hide under his bed, with a flashlight and a book, to drown his parents’ yelling matches out. He knew that Leia had never wanted this domestic aspect of her life – she was whip-smart, with a brain geared towards strategy, she didn’t want to play housewife and look after her Force-sensitive son while Han gallivanted off on supposedly above-board space missions. One of their biggest blow-ups had happened when Leia had suggested sending Ben to Luke for training. The words still ring in his head, clear as bells, after twenty odd years.

_For god’s sake, Leia, he’s just a kid! He doesn’t need to go off and learn all this fancy stuff with laser swords and levitation – I thought we were done with that crap after Endor!_

_Luke was only a few years older than him when he began his training under Obi-Wan. This could really help Ben; get him out of his shell._

_Sweetheart, in case you’ve forgotten - we won, there’s nobody to fight. He doesn’t need to be a Jedi like Luke. There’s no use for them now._
There is always a need for peacekeeping in this galaxy, Han. Just because you’d rather gallivant off on one of your smuggling routes than spend time with your own flesh and blood-

You lasted two minutes before breaking out the guilt-trips, that’s gotta be a record for you.

Solo, you smug, insufferable son of a jackal-

His parents loved each other. He knew they did. They just had a pretty dysfunctional way of showing it, happier when verbally sparring than they were to sit together on the couch and cuddle. Some masochistic part of him can’t help but notice the parallels between them and his dynamic with Rey – he doesn’t think they’ve ever held a conversation without some form of insult being thrown, usually from her end.

As if summoned by the train of his thoughts, Rey steps out of the tree, brushing herself off. Kylo tries not to smile when he realises she’s got ashes stuck to her eyelashes. She blinks at him, and they fall off, which makes him notice just how long her lashes are – like the eyelashes of the delicate china dolls he used to see in the display windows of toyshops on Coruscant. God, is everything going to trigger reminders of his childhood today?

Rey gives him a questioning look, and he averts his eyes, gazing out over the low-hanging mist at the ocean, which is hammering itself against the rocks at the bottom of the cliff, sending up a spray of water, rainbows arcing in the air. It’s actually quite beautiful here, once you get past the utter isolation of the place. Maybe isolation is what he needs right now, separation from the First Order and his new, too-big role. He doesn’t feel like the Supreme Leader. He never has. He just wanted the Jedi gone, and instead he’s helping to create one. Something about this place, about Rey, makes him forget all his aspirations, and it’s strange how little he minds that. But even so, he knows in his heart that he cannot stay here, cannot neglect his new role forever. Hux would raise all nine circles of hell if he was gone for longer than a week. But he can’t, won’t, leave without Rey, he refuses to go back to a half-life of imperial boredom and scarce, stolen moments of intimacy from entire galaxies away. And so he’s at an impasse.

‘Are we done?’ he asks, and Rey shakes her head, but she looks nonplussed. ‘What is it?’

‘I don’t know what to do now,’ she confesses. ‘I brought you to the tree because I thought it would be the right place to study what’s in this book.’ She holds up the ancient book, and Kylo wonders whether its pages will slide right out of the spine, she’s gripping it so tightly. ‘But now it just feels wrong.’

Kylo holds out one hand. ‘Give me the book.’

Rey passes it to him with a wary look; clearly afraid he’ll start ripping the pages out or something reckless like that. Instead, he tucks the book under his arm, turns and starts walking back up the slippery steps, out of the mist. Rey follows him closely, and he can sense the timbre of her emotions, a blend of worry that he’ll make off with the book, interest at what might happen next, and a faint, almost indiscernible undercurrent of appreciation. What exactly she might be appreciating, walking behind him at close range, makes him smirk to himself as they start to scale the steps back to the village.

Once they’re back, Kylo leans against the stone wall that guards the edge of the cliff, and Rey shuffles over to him, hoisting herself up onto the wall and sitting there, legs crossed underneath her, not the slightest bit concerned that a gust of wind could buffet her over the edge and send her barrelling down onto the deadly rocks. Kylo looks out over the battlements as he addresses her.

‘You don’t have to do this, you know.’ He squints into the wind gusting up from the ocean, blowing
his hair wildly across his face. There’s a storm rolling in, it’s obvious from the chill of the wind and
the clouds that are bunching on the horizon, slowly darkening. Excellent. A storm on the second
night. Even more reason to get out of this hellhole.

Rey stares out at the cloudbank too, resolutely keeping her eyes off him. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You don’t have to train here. There’s nothing here but sea and sky.’ He gestures out at the endless
ocean. ‘The setting doesn’t matter; it’s the knowledge that does. You could train to become a Jedi
back on the Star-Eater. I’d protect you.’

She snorts rudely. ‘I had a feeling this would come up at some point. I’m only going to say this one
more time: I am not coming back to the First Order with you. That would be tantamount to suicide.
And yes, I know what that word means,’ she snaps, reading his thoughts all too well.

‘You’re smart for a desert-rat,’ he fires back, whipping around, ‘but not so smart that you can
recognise an opportunity when you’re offered one. There’s nothing for you here, Rey. Skywalker
burned down the tree. There’s no food and little water. Whatever magic was on this island, it died
with him.’

Rey blinks at him incredulously. ‘You think you know everything about this place after being here
for two days? You’re so arrogant it’s mind-blowing. This is the first Jedi temple. It is full of magic
and history and knowledge and ghosts, everything you despise. Have you forgotten about the cave,
down at the bottom of the island?’

Kylo bites the lining of his cheek, not answering. He had forgotten that. It had been the subject of
one of their more memorable Force conversations, before he’d touched her skin and had immediately
lost track of everything that had happened beforehand.

Rey reaches out, and for a wild second he thinks she’s going to embrace him, but she tugs the book
out from under his arm. ‘Are you going to help me with this or not?’

‘Fine,’ he says petulantly. ‘But we’ll do it in the hut – there’s a storm coming.’ He strides past her
and into Luke’s hut. Her hut. A shiver tingles its way up her spine.

‘Hey!’ Rey exclaims, bustling in after him. ‘This one’s-

‘Where do you keep the ration-packs?’ he interrupts, reaching for her rucksack. Rey shoots out a
hand and pulls it to her with the Force, glaring pointedly as she yanks it open and pulls out two of the
rectangular packs.

‘Here.’ She tosses him one. ‘Start talking.’

Kylo settles himself on her bedroll, and he can tell she wants to slap the smug expression off his face,
but she’s holding herself in check, wanting the lessons more than the gratification. He could draw
things out, tease her a little, but it’s not worth it.

‘All right. Hand me the book.’ Rey sits down on the floor and slides the tome across to him. He
picks it up and leafs through it for a few minutes, skimming passages of text and occasionally
shaking his head. This is wrong. But it’s what she wants, so heaven forbid he give his opinion on the
matter.

‘According to this book, the original Jedi Masters didn’t separate the Force into Light and Dark.
They had no reason to. They were the original experimenters, the patient zeroes, and they explored
every aspect of the Force, letting it shape them, and vice versa, any way they wanted. Hate, fear,
rage, passion, purity, hope – it was a spectrum of emotion that influenced the Force and allowed
Force-sensitive people to bend it and use it. When I was training, we were always told to reach out with our feelings, because that’s what the Force responds to. The more emotional you are, the more strength you have, as long as you can control it.’

A smile flits across Rey’s face, distracting him from his monologue. ‘Is that why you’re always pitching fits? Emotions?’ She shuffles forward on her knees, closer to him. ‘I feel them, you know. When I was with the Resistance, and you were with the First Order, it felt like I was becoming you. So angry all the time... I think it’s what brought on the Force lightning. I’ve never been able to do that again.’ She looks down at her fingers, a little sadly.

Kylo gulps. He doesn’t know how to say that at times, he’d felt like he was becoming her, too. When he was on that ship with Hux, there’d been so many times where he could have smashed yet another console, hurt someone, or lost control – and he hadn’t, but it wasn’t because he hadn’t wanted to. It’s because she was influencing him, her calm and rationality an antithesis to the rage that normally fuels him. He’s become a more tranquil version of himself since the bond first arose in their minds.

Could it be, then, that because of his rage funnelling into her, she produced the Force lightning? If that’s true, and Rey is gaining dark-side powers through him, will the opposite be true for Kylo Ren? Will he start manifesting light-side abilities? Because he really doesn’t want that.

He forces his mind off that topic and back to the discussion of the Force. ‘Um, yeah. So emotions definitely play a part in how a person interacts with the Force.’ He snaps the book shut. ‘But it’s not really learning if I just tell you all this. Come here.’

Rey approaches him without hesitation, and he tries to keep the surprise off his face at that. Her eyes are sparkling, she’s so eager to learn. It’s kind of charming in an annoying way.

Kylo slides off the bench and onto the floor of the hut, sitting opposite her, and it feels like breaking new ground, being this close. Rey scans him, but not with distrust. With curiosity. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Teaching by example. Hold out your hands.’

Rey slowly raises her hands, palms up. Her eyes flicker to his hands. ‘Take the gloves off.’

He rolls his eyes and slides them off, throwing them into the corner of the hut. He leans forward and takes her hands – gods, they’re so small compared to his – and closes his eyes. Rey follows his lead, her hands supernaturally warm in his, and without a word, she plumbs the connection between them. He can feel the link warm up in the centre of his brain, beginning to glow, and a ticklish sensation as her influence comes across. She’s poking around in his head, searching his thoughts at close proximity.

Squeeze my hands if you can hear this, he projects at her, and is satisfied when she gives his hands a hard squeeze. All right. Now, think about something that makes you angry.

Why?

Don’t ask stupid questions. Just do it.

Ironically, her temper flares, he can feel it rise in her like fizzing bubbles, and he urges her to hold onto that, or find something better. Rey concentrates, racking through her brain for something that’s adequately rage-inducing. Kylo shuffles through her memories along with her, surprised by how easily she’s letting him in, enveloping him with her Light. She would reveal precious secrets about
herself in exchange for knowledge. How interesting.

He sees her being beaten and starved by that sickening beast Unkar Plutt, sees her throwing engine parts into the dirt when she realises she can’t fix them and fly out of Jakku, sees her defying Snoke, telling him he would be the one to die that day in the red room—

His concentration stutters and stalls at the mental reminder of his old master, and his hands shake a little in her grip. Rey squeezes harder, forcing him to snap out of that memory, and he does, feeling an intense bout of motion sickness from the reel of images that are flying through his head, but they can’t stop now. The memory of Snoke is replaced with another painful one—her, restrained in the interrogation room on Starkiller, Kylo leaning over her, browsing through her memories, taunting her. He grimaces and tries to pull his hands away, but Rey clings on, and her voice floats across to him, harsh and determined. *You asked for this.*

They continue. Kylo can feel the fury building exponentially in her with each new recollection; it’s growing inside him, too, a mirroring rage, exhilarating and raw. She replaces the interrogation room with the battle in the snow, the red and blue flashes of their interlocking sabers like strobe lights in his mind. She had channelled his fury then, too, it was how she’d won. *Come on,* he goads her, stoking the flames. *You can do better than that.*

And now, she swaps to the most agonizing moment of all, and it’s too bad his eyes are already shut because he can’t block out what’s happening now. She’s remembering asking him to come with her, to turn back to the Light and to his mother. She remembers the most overwhelming wave of despair washing over her as it dawned on her that he was choosing wrong. And she sees the moment he asked her to rule the galaxy with him, when he opened his stupid, too-big, filterless mouth and called her *nothing.* Rey’s temper reaches boiling point, as does his, and his words cut through the memory like a dagger—*You’re still holding on. Let go.*

He feels Rey drop his hands. There’s an enormous, cataclysmic pulse in the Force around them, the web throbs with the effort to expel this energy, and Rey screams. Kylo’s eyes fly open just in time to catch the single bolt of electricity that arcs from her fingertips, sizzling and searingly white, burning a stripe of brilliance into his retinas. He winces, eyes watering, and Rey turns to him, tears streaming from her eyes, too, but for different reasons.

‘You,’ she pants, wet hazel eyes locked on his, ‘called me nothing.’

Without thinking, he seizes the hand that only seconds ago had shot lightning—not a wise move if he doesn’t want to die of a massive electrical shock. ‘I didn’t mean it the way you think,’ he says, his voice sounding too intense, too emotional, and he struggles to tone it down, not give so much of himself away in this avalanche of connection. ‘Rey... you’re not nothing.’ It’s killing him to open himself up like this, after years of bottling it up, of crushing any light that remained in him, the discipline and demolition of his old self, but she can’t go on thinking that of him when she’s *everything,* she’s all he thinks about, the reason for what little good is left in him. ‘The opposite.’

She stares at him, tears still leaking from the corners of her eyes, and all the rage burns itself out of him, replaced by the sadness that’s transferring from her. It’s a heart-deep sadness, choked with regret, and it hurts him—she’s not getting it. So he does the most irresponsible thing he’s probably ever done.

He closes the gap between them and kisses her.

*Chapter End Notes*
Soooo I typed this all up and was going to wait till tomorrow to post it, because I've got a good rhythm going where I write a new chapter, then write the next one, then post the first one I wrote, so that I have a backup waiting in the wings for the next day, but I just COULDN'T RESIST OKAY? Finally some mouth-to-mouth resuscitation! Now the next chapter will probably take a little more than a day to come out as a result, so don't hate me guys! XD
Chapter Eighteen

The aftershocks of the Force lightning are coursing through her body; her blood electrified, heart throwing itself against her ribs like a caged lion. She’s sweating and shaking, and crying too, because he just said the words she’s been wishing he’d say for an entire month, ever since she left him unconscious on the *Supremacy*, and it doesn’t matter. It’s hollow. It changes nothing between them. He’s still the man who chose the throne of the First Order over redemption. Who refused to stop firing on the rebels when they were defenceless and fleeing. Who turned his back on the Light and her. Words are meaningless. *Actions* matter.

And he must read that thought on her face, because he leans forward, closing the gap between them, and seals his mouth to hers.

Her brain shorts out for a second, unable to cope with the rapid change of trajectory, and there’s an abrupt disconnect – for a second she wonders whether this is really happening, or if it’s just another Force-bond dream – but his lips on hers are far too real for that, too soft and insistent, and she couldn’t get away if she wanted to, because one of his hands fists itself in her hair, tugging her into the kiss.

She’s never been kissed before. Her heart resumes its pounding and her blood beats in her lips and they’re on fire, more sensitive than she knew they could be, and his lips are warm and taste like plums, a syrupy kind of sweetness, and she presses closer, drawn to the warmth, chasing something that’s just out of reach, a spark...

His fingers twist painfully in her hair, and it breaks the spell. Rey rips her mouth violently from his, turning her face away so that he’s forced to disentangle his hands. They’re shaking slightly, and Rey’s stomach swoops with a mixture of exhilaration and revulsion.

She wipes her lips with her sleeve, removing the taste of him. He doesn’t meet her gaze.

‘Tell me you got carried away,’ she whispers, almost begging him to go along with it, the easy way out.

He doesn’t say anything, but his eyes travel up to hers, huge and brown and swimming with emotion, a contrast to her hot, accusatory gaze.

‘This doesn’t change anything,’ she tells him staunchly, affirming it to herself as much as him.

*That* riles him up, some of the old haughtiness creeping back into his demeanour. ‘Doesn’t it?’ he asks, with a cruel sneer to his voice. ‘Because I can sense your feelings, and they’d have me believe that it does, in fact, change a lot of things.’

‘Oh, really? Rey inquires. ‘Can you feel this’?

And she swings at him with a closed fist. Before it can connect with his nose, he raises a hand and waves it idly, stopping her fist mid-curve. The Force contracts around her arm, squeezing like a vise,
making it impossible to move, and slowly, mockingly, he envelops her balled-up fist with his giant hand.

‘Would you please,’ he says, emphasizing the platitude, ‘stop trying to hit me all the time?’

He flicks his other hand and the pressure is expelled, leaving her fist cramped and tight. He smoothes out her curled fingers, hands still bare of his usual black leather gloves, and his skin is so warm that she shivers, and she lets her hand go limp as he checks her over for any damage from the Force block.

‘You cheated,’ she says reproachfully, no longer angry, and he actually laughs. It’s not a proper, happy laugh, but it’s *Kylo Ren* laughing, and that’s not something you see every day.

‘I didn’t want any more bruises.’ He lets go of her hand, and all the tension drains out of her muscles, leaving her jellylike. ‘You really need to stop throwing punches.’

‘And you need to stop altogether,’ Rey counters, tiredly. ‘Quit it with the mind games. I’ve had enough.’

He looks down at her, dark eyes glittering with an emotion she cannot put a name to. In the hut, their height difference is emphasized – the crown of his head nearly touches the roof, where she is comfortably sized. ‘Mind games?’ he echoes, playing the innocent. It doesn’t suit him.

‘This is exactly what I’m talking about.’ She jabs a finger back and forth between them. ‘You think I can’t see what you’re doing? Playing your little seduction games so I’ll fall into your arms and fly back to the First Order with you? It’s pathetic. I fell for it once, Ben, I won’t be that stupid again.’

She expects him to harden, his fists to curl, and for him to lose his temper. But his brown eyes get grow soft, and his tone even more so when he says, ‘You’re calling me Ben again.’

*Goddammit.* ‘*Kylo Ren,*’ she corrects huffily, and she’s about to lay into him when Kylo/Ben places his fingers under her chin, tilts it up, and kisses her again.

Her knees are melting into the dirt floor, and she’s only held upright by her arms as she grips his shoulders, but she’s not pushing away. This time, she lets it all wash over her, the bond between them budding like a starburst, brighter and brighter, until she can’t tell who’s feeling what, there’s just the overwhelming softness of his lips on hers, sealing off every other sense and reducing her to touch. The sensations as their lips fuse make her stomach drop and an intense, addictive heat start to build between her thighs, making her gasp when he sucks her bottom lip into his mouth, teeth grazing it gently. She bites his top lip in return; hard enough to draw blood, and his answering growl could almost be a moan.

This time, he breaks the kiss, to sit down hard on the bench in the corner of the hut. His eyes are wide, pupils blown all the way to black, lips kiss-swollen and slightly bloodied. He doesn’t say anything for a long moment, and Rey doesn’t either – they just stare at eachother. He’s out of breath when he finally says, ‘You’ve no idea how long I’ve wanted to do that.’

She’s curious about that, but there’s a more pressing matter at hand – making sure it doesn’t happen again. ‘Good. At least it’s out of your system, and mine,’ Rey says firmly. ‘It cannot happen again.’

Kylo leans his head back against the wall of the hut, shutting his eyes, Adam’s apple exposed as if for throat-slitting, which is looking like a tempting offer at the moment. ‘Don’t tempt me with black-and-white statements, Rey,’ he warns, keeping his eyes closed. ‘Only a Sith deals in absolutes.’ He smiles, and she doesn’t know what’s so funny about that, but he doesn’t get to *laugh* about this when
it’s tearing her apart. She touches the hilt of the lightsaber at her belt. His eyes snap open.

‘Don’t you dare,’ he barks, sensing her intent. Rey is reminded ironically of the last time she’d drawn a lightsaber on someone with intent to kill– the throne room that is still the setting of her nightmares. When Kylo had outfoxed Snoke, spinning the lightsaber to slice him in half, and the resulting battle they’d had, back to back against the Red Guard, using eachother’s bodies to gain advantage over their shared enemies – it had felt like the beginning of something, like with every slash of their sabers, they were tearing down the life that Kylo Ren had built for himself on the ruins of his past. When she had flown to him in the Falcon’s escape pod, she’d held so much hope that he could be turned, that maybe, if he became Ben Solo again, the bond between them could blossom into something else, something more.

But it’s still so wrong. It’s wrong how right it feels when he kisses her, wrong that it makes her heart sick with passion, wrong that just touching him creates explosive, corrosive chemistry, because he is not Ben Solo, the man. He’s Kylo Ren, the monster, and no matter how he feels about her, or vice versa, he still wants to take her back to the First Order. He still wants to be the Supreme Leader. He still wants the Jedi to end. And if that’s the path he’s choosing to walk, she will not walk beside him. Ever.

There’s a thunderclap outside, and Rey runs to the door, peeking out to see that he was right, a storm is rolling in, the previously grey clouds now charcoal-black and thick with ozone, real lightning gathering in their bellies. The rain hasn’t started yet, but it will, and from the looks of things, it’ll be torrential. She closes the door and picks up one of the discarded ration-packs, tossing it to Kylo. He catches it deftly.

They’re at a stalemate, Ren and Rey. Killing and kissing eachother is off limits, Rey tells herself. But they can’t go on like this, subtly struggling for the upper hand. She decides to put everything out of her mind for now – easier said than done when there’s a Force bond in the mix - and pick up tomorrow, when the storm has passed. She ushers Kylo out of her hut, and once he’s gone, she slumps down onto the bedroll, her thoughts churning like a whirlpool. This is insane.

Thunder rumbles overhead, disconcertingly close to the roof of her hut, and she draws her knees up to her chest, wishing a little bit that she hadn’t kicked Ren out. But the company is more trouble than it’s worth. The clouds unleash their payload then, rain lashing the roof, and she rolls onto her back, spreading herself out across the bed, trying to lose herself in the sound of the rain, the scent of petrichor. It doesn’t work.

It’s still not working hours later, long after the lightning has passed over the island, when Rey is still lying awake, staring at the ceiling, her lips numb as she runs her thumb over them, thinking back to the kiss. Her first kiss. She’d expected, when she’d thought about them before, that his lips would be harder, thinner than they were – more like a man’s. But they were soft and plush and weirdly sweet-tasting, like sweetblossom, that narcotic flower Resistance troops used to drug people in the old days. She certainly felt like she’d been drugged, it was probably why she couldn’t bring herself to stop before. The bond between them had filled her to the brim with so many warring emotions, so many conflicting sensations; it had felt like synaesthesia.

She cautiously pokes at the link, testing to see if Kylo’s awake, but she doesn’t get a response. The rain is still falling steadily on the roof as Rey slowly lifts her hips to slide her trousers off, her cheeks flushing with shame from the thoughts she’s thinking. But she can’t help it. When he’d kissed her today, it had aroused something in her, deep in her core, and it doesn’t even have to do with him, not really – he was just the trigger.

She’s done this plenty of times before – what else is a teenager to do on hot nights on Jakku – but
she’s never felt the need as much as now. She slips her hand in her underwear, feeling no better than a dirty, debauched junk-rat, and touches two fingers to the secret folds of her, slick with moisture. She slides her underwear down to her knees and lets her fingers return to her centre, circling lazily, instinctually, letting her mind wander, but not too far, lest she opens the bond and projects to him the absolute last thing she wants him to see.

*Only a Sith deals in absolutes.*

Gods, he can be an arrogant piece of work sometimes. She’s not going to waste valuable time thinking about him. She replaces him in her mind’s eye, instead crafting the image of a faceless person kissing her, making her stomach clench and heart flutter, yes, someone faceless with black – no, brown hair, it can’t be black, it’s too similar.

She’s thinking too hard, and it’s making her lose the thread of her arousal, a common problem she has. *Don’t think. Feel.* It’s unnerving how much her inner voice sounds like his these days. She brings the faceless person back into focus, remembering the touch of their lips, the smell of their hair, like apples and soap-

*Oh, hell.* It’s him; it doesn’t work with anyone but him, and Rey gives up on the illusion and just focuses on reality, what actually happened, as she parts her thighs wider, fingers circling quicker now, her sex growing hotter under her attentions, clitoris hardening to diamond under her hands. She flicks a finger over the exposed part and can’t stop the gasp that’s ripped from her lungs and into the cold night air. She does it again, faster. Every erogenous zone comes alive as she squirms, nipples hardening into peaks, her ears buzzing, bottom lip swelling up from biting down on it so hard, thinking about when he’d taken it between his teeth, how they’d scraped over the sensitive skin, sending bolts of heat lightning straight to the base of her spine-

Rey arches on the bedroll, tendrils of hair sticking to her face as she gasps, tension coiling in her abdomen, muscles beginning to clench as the fingers still swirl themselves over her core. She closes her eyes, seeing golden flecks burst on the backs of her eyelids, the buzzing from her ears extending into her teeth, her head full of pressure and light, body starting to shake.

Abandoning the last shreds of her morality, she conjures to mind the body of Kylo Ren, the time she’d seen him naked through the bond, and her brain supplies the details impeccably – the size of his legs, the constellations of freckles there, the cut-glass V of abdominal muscles, tapering down to the thatch of dark, curling hairs and the-

*oh - *

Her toes crack as she curls them and the pressure surges upward; filling her head with colour and light so extreme she implodes, breaking down into girl-sized pieces, shaking uncontrollably as her muscles clamp down on nothing and she bites her tongue to stop the groan that wants to tear itself from her throat, primeval and frightening.

When she comes back to herself, the whirl of colours in her brain dissipating so that she can see clearly, she knows she wasn’t alone for that performance. She’s not even surprised to find the link wide open, a fully alert Kylo Ren on the other end, silent from the magnitude of what he just witnessed.

She feels the extent of his arousal through the bond and moans, clapping a hand over her mouth as her clit pulses, extremely oversensitive but responding to his clawing, aching need. Profanities float into her brain, dark and filthy words to match the thoughts that come from him as he starts to undress, shedding layers of black to reveal the rock hard, twitching length of his cock, already leaking pearls of pre-cum. Rey gasps at the sensation as his thumb slides over the tip, stars, it’s so *sensitive,* and just
as his hand is about to make its way down-

The bond is cleaved in two by a terrible scream, a disturbance in the Force so catastrophic that it makes Rey’s brain rattle, her skull seeming to tighten around it into an unbearable clamping pain, squeezing the halves of her brain together, squashing her-

It abates as suddenly as it had come on, and Rey rolls over onto her front, burying her face in the bedroll. *Ow*.

She sinks into the Force bond, confused and hurt. *What was that?*

He’s sitting up on the bench, naked and completely flaccid, his thoughts on anything but sex.

*Someone just killed one of my Knights. I felt him die.*

Chapter End Notes

My mind when I read this chapter back to myself: Well, that escalated quickly.
Also my mind: Delet this.

Uhh.... lemon alert? Also, I was listening to I Hate Everything About You on repeat while writing that whole scene, and it fits so well, give it a go!
Chapter Nineteen

He’s retreated to his own hut, the memory of the kiss still burnt onto his lips, like he’d locked lips with a firebrand instead of a girl. He’s not the slightest bit sorry he did it – the tension between them had been building for so long, he’d almost become scared to get close to her, and Kylo Ren isn’t scared of anything. He confronts his fears, turns them into weapons. This is a little different than what he does with most of his fears, but no less enjoyable.

He’d never kissed anyone before, or at least not on the lips. Oh, there had been plenty of creamed-and-powdered cheeks, both wrinkled and smooth, he’d been forced to kiss when lords and ladies came calling for an audience with his mother on Coruscant, before she’d sent him away for training. But this was different. Intimate. Inflaming. It felt like a dam had overflowed, like something long suppressed had burst inside him, emptying its contents into his bloodstream, the aftereffects of which will surely be felt later.

Kissing her had felt like diving into a bottomless pool, shutting off awareness as the water encased him, showing him a different, slower, sensuous world. Her lips tasted like honey, like the sweetest thing he could possibly imagine, and just thinking about them is dizzying. He lies down on the hard stone bench inside the hut, listening to the lightning storm begin to rage outside, as if the weather is reacting to the shift in the balance of the Force.

He’d felt it, the change in the balance. For so long now, it has felt like the Force has been pushing them together, only to pull them apart when they meet. On Starkiller, when the ground literally split beneath them, pulling them to opposite sides of a chasm. And on the Supremacy, when the lightsaber had rent itself in two, exploding in a flash of brilliance, hurling them to opposite ends of the throne room. If he didn’t know better, he’d think that the Force doesn’t like it when they fight.

So maybe they shouldn’t fight anymore.

Today, in the hut, had been the first time they’d truly connected, face-to-face, without lightsabers, blasters, or any deadly weapons. And the moment he’d pressed his lips to hers, he’d felt it, the makeup of the Force rearranging around them, a kaleidoscope of light and dark, with them at the centre, linked mentally and physically.

For such a long time he’s been bound to her, and he knows innately that this is fate, it’s not something they can change or influence, no matter how much she says she wants to be rid of the Force bond. They are connected for a reason.

She would make such a perfect Dark-sider, so full of beauty and rage – he’d had to hold back a smile when she’d tried to punch him. And gods, the sight of her conjuring that Force lightning again, channelling both of their emotions to make electricity spurt from her fingertips – well, it was hot, and that’s putting it mildly. She has so much... passion. That’s the word. It would be such a waste, to consign herself to the Jedi religion, to forsake all passion and pleasure and devote herself only to the Force, to the Jedi’s warped view of justice in the galaxy.

But Rey does not belong as a Jedi or a Sith - the weakest part of him, the part that still contains light, knows that. Straddling the line between the light and the dark, she’s somewhere in the middle, the spectrum of colour in between two colourless paths. And if that’s so, and their fates are entwined,
what does that mean for him? Could he be destined to meet her in the middle? Walk the line?

*Never.* He is dark, and he’s always been dark, and that can never change. Any true shot he’d had at redemption had been destroyed when he killed Han. Even if Rey could have convinced him to come back to the Resistance, to the Light side, what did she think the outcome would be? That his widowed mother would welcome him back with open arms? That the rebels would accept him into their ranks after he’d slain their fleet by the hundreds? He takes a savage joy in murder, in hatred, in lust. He loves to exert his dominance over other, weaker minds. He *belongs* in the shadow – without it, he is lost, exposed, the softest parts of him laid bare. For the thousandth time, he wishes he still had his helmet. There’s nobody in the hut, it’s just him and the night, but he feels more exposed than he’s ever been.

His hipbones protest as he resettles on the hard bench, and he considers meditating for the first time in a long time. He’ll never get to sleep otherwise on this mortuary slab of a bed. Meditation isn’t something Snoke had had him practice often, more a remnant from his days as a Jedi padawan, but what does it matter as long as it lulls him to sleep?

He shuts his eyes and takes a deep breath, folding his hands over his chest, forcing all attachments out of his mind, except the Force bond, and that, he tries to temporarily close, the way Rey has done so many times before. It can’t be that difficult. He visualises building a soundproof bubble around that deep-rooted part of his brain, sealing it off so no thoughts can get past. *There. Easy.*

Now that that’s taken care of, he sinks into meditation, tensing and then relaxing every muscle, one at a time in sequence.

He’s on the brink of falling asleep when he feels the briefest tremor in the web of the Force. The effects of the relaxation are instantly lost, his shoulders tensing, eyes snapping open, fully awake. He lies still as a board, listening for any further changes, his muscles coiled tight and ready to spring into action. His mind flies to Rey, to what she’s doing, and the link bursts open, completely disregarding the barrier he thought’s he’d put up. The indignation at not being able to mentally block her out, the way she can him, doesn’t last for more than a split second, because Rey-

Rey is-

Holy *shit*-

She can’t see him, but surely she felt him slip into her mind? – If she did, she doesn’t appear to care. All the blood that was previously flowing through his circulatory system is redirected south as Rey plays with herself, in the darkness of her room, delicate fingers touching places that are at once familiar to her and startlingly new to him. He can’t see exactly what she’s doing, but he can *feel* it, feel the rhythmic pulse of her heartbeat – it’s *everywhere* - along with an increasing hum of *pleasure* that makes his fists clench and his feet cramp. Every shiver, every ripple of arousal that wracks her is multiplied in him, and he bites his tongue hard, trying to distract from the building sensation-

He’s frozen solid, stuck to the bench as Rey begins an assault on his senses through the bond. He’s feels a brief zap of panic, unsure how to respond to the things he’s feeling, the things she’s doing to him, no, to herself. Their heartbeats combine and swell into a crescendo that roars in his ears, a rushing river. He doesn’t move, closing his eyes and surrendering to the sensations, and he can taste her kiss again, the honeyed sweetness of her lips, and it terrifies and arouses him in equal measure. It’s so wrong, but it’s so right. He shouldn’t harbour these feelings, it’s the fault of the Force, but it’s never been something he could fight off, despite all reason. He’s wanted her from the first day he saw her, hiding in the forest, ready to shoot him dead. And maybe that implies something about a death wish, but there it is.
He feels the Force flex around them, sees Rey’s opalescent signature wink out as her legs quiver, the shattering ecstasy consuming her, her hands never stilling as the shrapnel of her orgasm almost tears his mind apart, every neuron misfiring, creating an electrical storm in his skull. Shaken beyond belief, he notices with a red flush of shame that he’s harder than he’s ever been in his life, so hard he aches, and this is what finally cripples him, brings him to his knees. He hates this, hates touching himself, loathes how flawed his yearning makes him. He hasn’t done this in years, not since his master had caught him in the act and chastised him for his weakness, for being a slave to testosterone and sick little fantasies. This isn’t how it was meant to go, but he can’t control himself anymore.

_Fuck control._

The rational part of him, the part that’s anxious at the thought of moving a muscle, doesn’t want to do this in front of her, but this is not cerebral, this is the basest of instincts, the rawest of needs, and he strips off his clothing in a blur of motion, and his mind is a whirlpool, a mix of fantasy and reality as he tears off the last layer until he is nothing but skin, and he grips his dick hard, running a thumb over the tip, where pre-cum has beaded, dribbling obscenely down his shaft when he gives in, letting his imagination run wild at last, picturing her pretty little mouth wrapped around his-

A scream rips through his brain like a bullet, and his desire lapses instantly, his focus rerouted to the familiar aura of one of his Knights, Cianh, screaming his torment into the void of the Force. Ren reaches out to touch his Force signature, crimson and bleeding, and he recoils at the razorblades of pain that slice him, only a faint echo of what the Knight is experiencing, before Cianh’s signature stutters and dies, fading from the web and leaving a vortex of energy in its wake. Entropy.

Kylo comes back to reality, jolting upright, and braces his hands against the bench, his heartbeat pounding in his temples. He’s naked, but all the arousal, the fuel, has burnt out of him, and he cringes when Rey’s voice echoes in his head:

_What was that?_

_Someone just killed one of my Knights._ How did he die? Who killed him? And _why_? Cianh was strong with the Force, a former Jedi padawan just like Ren; he should have been able to defend himself from whatever came for his life. _I felt him die._

A flash of concern from her comes unbidden, and he’s perplexed – why would she care one iota about the wellbeing of his Knights? He gets up, dressing quickly, and pushes the curtain aside, striding out of his hut, to find Rey already outside, adjusting her clothes, waiting for him.

There’s a moment of supreme awkwardness where they just stare at eachother, dazed, unable to reconcile what just happened, what they’ve each just experienced, with the vertigo of this sudden death.

Rey breaks the stalemate. ‘Act like nothing happened?’

It’s a temporary solution, a band-aid over a broken bone, but it’ll do for now until they’re both ready to process this. He nods brusquely at her, and starts down the steps toward his damaged command ship, Rey hot on his heels. She slips a few times on the rain-drenched stone on the way down. He does not react, does not turn to catch her when she falls.

They board the ship, and Kylo makes a beeline for the subspace transceiver, yanking it from its holster and twisting the dials to connect with the radio of the _Star-Eater._ General Hux will get to the bottom of this. If he doesn’t immediately open an investigation into what happened to Cianh, Kylo’s bumping ‘castrating the general’ to the top of his to-do list.
There’s nothing. Not even a hiss of static to indicate the transceiver has made contact. It’s just dead air. His comms system has been disabled, or his frequency’s blocked, he doesn’t know. He can’t reach Hux or the Knights or anyone in the First Order. And one of his Knights has been murdered.

Something is terribly wrong. Why would the First Order shut off communiqué from their Supreme Leader? Hux should be jamming his feed with constant transmissions, given he’s been gone two days and they were in the process of mounting a siege on the Mid-Rim. Why the radio silence? When Hux gets quiet, it never means anything good. It means he’s scheming.

‘Kylo,’ Rey murmurs behind him. He doesn’t turn around, squeezing the transmitter in his fist until the metal casing buckles, the technology crushing in on itself, giving him a mild electric shock. The current sends tingles through his nerves, incensing him, a red film, like cellophane, distorting his vision, and-

‘Ben?’ Rey tries, and he drops the transmitter, clenching his jaw at the offending syllable of his old name. Before, it had been sweet, a reminder of the past. Now, it’s only pushing him closer to the edge, a reminder of everything he can’t be. For her or anybody. Let the past die.

‘Out,’ he manages to grind out, but she doesn’t move.

‘Out!’ he yells, and he draws his lightsaber, bringing the stuttering blade down on the cruiser’s dashboard, metal squealing and electronics short-circuiting, sparks flying from his saber like blood droplets. The fury is building into an uncontrollable tempest, the kind of anger he could turn on anyone in his path, and so he throws out a hand, Force-throwing her down the ramp and sealing the door, to be alone with his wrath. This sin he gives into easily. He does it every day.

Kylo Ren is made of rage. It is all he knows.
Chapter Twenty

She lands hard on her back at the bottom of the ramp, the breath knocked clean out of her lungs. Winded, gasping, she rolls over onto her front, hands scrabbling for purchase on the wet surface of the ramp, as the door seals itself shut above her. Rey’s chest heaves as she struggles to draw breath back into her body, the lack of oxygen making her head spin as she hears the sounds of items being smashed, the staccato spitting of his lightsaber, Kylo unravelling, and a facsimile of his temper tantrum simmers in her, making her clench her teeth and seethe, seeing red. She feels electricity start to gather in her veins like livewires, like she’s a conduit for his emotions as they combine with hers, convert into raw power, and silver sparks start to fly from her fingertips.

He’d thrown her out onto the ramp without a care, leaving her bruised and breathless, and even though she knows he did it to get her out of the way while he’s on the warpath, it feels like a deliberate act of cruelty, casting her aside so brazenly, especially after what’s just happened between them. Rey rises on trembling knees, ready to kick the door down and confront him, possibly electrocute him if the mood takes her. She raises her hand, but when the lightning surges in her, she hesitates, unsure, and robbed of a target, the energy flickers and ebbs, the voltage calming back into the everyday rhythm of nerve impulses, and her hands are just hands again. She’s not angry anymore. Just sad and disappointed, two emotions she’s become regularly in touch with since knowing Kylo Ren.

And boy, does she know Kylo Ren. On a whole new level, thanks to what’s just transpired. But she doesn’t know everything. Every single time she thinks she’s starting to understand him, to predict his thought patterns; he surprises her in unexpected, usually dangerous ways. She’d obviously overestimated his level of control over his temper, for one thing, if the sounds of shattering glass coming from the shuttle are anything to go by.

Rey also has to admit to herself, with a stomach-flipping churn of mortification, that she hadn’t anticipated his reaction to seeing her the way he had. There’s nothing worse than having an audience for your most private, basest moments, and if she’d realised that harmless self-stimulation would open the Force bond between them, she never would have indulged in it. He wasn’t supposed to see that, but she should have realised he would – he has a knack for cropping up at the most inopportune moments, whether he wants to or not. And she’d let her needs get the better of her; let her attraction outweigh the distaste she usually feels when she thinks about him. All because of a kiss. One thing’s for certain – she is no passionless Jedi, nor will she ever be. Hate, lust, rage, desire – all qualities of the Dark that she doesn’t think she could quell, even if she wanted to. Not while the Force bond exists. Not while his feelings can travel through her, getting her drunk off the dark desire that runs through him, an intoxicating undercurrent.

Speaking of feelings. She hadn’t expected him to be so... shy. He is nearly ten years her senior, yet by all accounts, in those tense few moments in separate huts, Rey could have sworn he’d never so much as touched himself before. For someone who is such a slave to his temper, his emotions, he’s rather sexually repressed. She can’t help but be curious about that. He’s a chaotic mess of contradictions, and there’s something intriguing about them. About him.

There must be nothing left to break inside the shuttle, because it’s finally quiet behind the door. She could knock, come inside, talk to him, but she doesn’t have a clue what to say, can’t fathom how to
start a conversation after what they’ve both just been through. It’s beyond awkward, and even with the agreement to act like it never happened, memories don’t work that way. They are the proof, as solid as the bruises that are starting to bloom on her shoulders and back from the fall.

Rey’s ribs ache as she takes a deep breath in, turning away from the ruined shuttle and starting back up the steps towards the village. But she doesn’t want to go back to her hut, to the reminders of what happened only minutes ago, so she lets her feet take control.

They take her to the Millennium Falcon.

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She stands at the dashboard, dripping all over the floor of the ship. She hadn’t noticed until now that it had been bucketing with rain outside, she’d been too focused on Kylo and the issue with his Knight. Her sodden hair sticks to her skull, sending rivulets of water down her neck, and makes her shiver. She gathers it up and twists it into a haphazard ponytail, then sits down in the pilot’s seat, leaning back in the chair and finally relinquishing control over her warring emotions.

Embarrassment and disgust versus pride and power move across the battlefield of her brain, but nothing is resolved.

The fact of the matter is, Force bond or no, Kylo Ren makes her feel things, dark, tempting things that she thought she’d never feel about anybody. She’s felt the stirrings of attraction before, of course, but never like this. She’s never hated someone so much for everything they stand for, and yet at the same time, coveted them for who they could become, if they just stopped being so damned stubborn.

But she has been stubborn, too. Refusing to acknowledge the fact that is now glaringly obvious: she doesn’t only have feelings for Ben Solo, but for Kylo Ren as well. The duality of his personality is so ingrained; he can never leave one side of himself behind, not forever. The idea that she could grow to feel affection for a monster is appalling to her, it goes against everything she’d thought about her morals, but she’s beginning to see that Kylo Ren and Ben Solo are one and the same, the worst qualities and the best ones all jumbled together to make up the anarchic, conflicted creature that he is.

I understand, Leia had said, when she’d seen to the heart of what Rey felt. Well, that makes one of them, because Rey doesn’t understand at all.

Thinking about Leia makes Rey’s chest hurt, like she’s been winded all over again. She hasn’t given more than a passing thought to the Resistance in two days, selfishly focusing on the “training” she was getting from Kylo which, instead of turning her into a better Jedi, seems to be pulling her further down the path to the Dark, to temptation.

She wishes Luke was here, to remind her of her place. The Last Jedi. Strong and brave and balanced.

She doesn’t feel balanced in the slightest.

Something clatters behind her and Rey gasps, spinning around in the chair. But it’s just R2D2 again, pistoning towards her on his little legs, whistling a greeting. Rey puts her chin on her hands and listens intently as the droid talks to her. She’d forgotten all about him, the last link to Luke Skywalker, besides his flesh-and-blood sister and nephew.

‘Hey, Artoo, hang on a sec,’ she interrupts, and the droid breaks off mid-beep, its red camera turning to regard her inquiringly.
'Could- do you-' she pauses, unsure how to phrase the question so as not to upset the droid. ‘Do you remember Luke’s father?’

The droid screeches indignantly, steam blowing out of a side gasket.

‘Okay, okay,’ Rey says hurriedly. ‘Sorry. Could you – please – tell me about him? About being a Jedi?’

Artoo beeps questioningly.

‘I just want to know, that’s all. I hardly know anything about Darth Vader, and Kylo...’ she trails off, biting her lip. ‘Well, he idolizes him. I want to know why.’

The little astromech beeps again, acquiescing, and Rey lowers herself to the floor so she’s at his eye level as he starts to recite the story, a living piece of history.

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The next morning, Rey goes looking for Kylo Ren. The storm has abated completely, the sunny, cornflower sky seeming to dare her to recall the thunderclouds. Porgs are flying over the cliff-peaks, shrieking a mating call as she walks down to the black metal spacecraft that’s still obstinately parked over the blowhole in the rock shelf.

The door’s open, so she already knows he’s not on board. She walks up the ramp and her eyes alight on a scene of total destruction – there are shards of broken glass all over the floor, refracting white light onto the sparkling, crumpled dashboard of the ship, wires exposed and ruptured by the beam of his lightsaber. Metal sheets, singed and melted from the heat of the laser, lie scattered across the ground as though they were ripped out of the walls, which they probably were. Gods, he’s a brute.

Rey puts her hands on her hips, assessing the damage with a scavenger’s eye. It’s mostly cosmetic, but this, plus the water damage to the underside engines, makes the spacecraft a complete write-off. It will never fly again.

If this is the kind of crap he regularly pulled in the First Order, she’s surprised he lasted a month without being kicked out. The damage bill for the dashboard alone would exceed 20,000 credits. Wow.

She marches back down the ramp and up the long flights of stairs to the village. But as she nears the top, she spies several fish nuns, pushing wheelbarrows full of fabric along the path between huts. She doesn’t really fancy a confrontation with the fishwives, and Kylo’s not there anyway, so what’s the point?

So where is he? There’s only so many places to be on this island. She closes her eyes and reaches for the mental maze of the Force, searching for his signature. A familiar darkness tugs at her, calling to her sweetly, and she opens her eyes.

Of course.

It doesn’t take long to trek down to the bottom half of the island, to the well above the mirror cave. She can see him long before she arrives at the well, sitting cross-legged beside it as though meditating, black curls blowing in the salty breeze. Of course he’d be drawn, like she was, to the place where the dark energy congregates. It had called to him just like it called to her. But he hasn’t immersed himself in it; he’s stayed on the edge, not diving in. Rey considers whether this is a metaphor.
‘You were an irresponsible idiot, destroying your ship like that,’ Rey starts as she walks up behind him, arms behind her back.

He doesn’t turn around, his eyes fixed on the opening of the well, draped with seaweed. ‘It was never getting off the ground again anyway.’

‘True,’ Rey concedes, not wanting to spark another display of his temper. ‘Why did you come here?’

Kylo closes his eyes temporarily, taking a deep breath. Then, letting it out, he says, ‘It’s the only place I can’t sense Luke.’ His expression darkens. ‘His signature’s smeared all over this island; it’s like bantha dung.’

‘Well, he did live here for years,’ Rey reminds him, and he lifts the corner of his mouth in a sneer. ‘Pathetic, how he ran away from everything to hide out here like some kind of half-wit recluse.’

It’s meant to insult, but Rey can’t help but smile. She walks to the opposite side of the well, standing above him. ‘You know, when I first came here, when I first met Luke, I tried to give him his lightsaber back, and he tossed it over the cliff?’

Kylo opens his eyes, and she’s once again struck by how dark they are – irises so brown they could easily be mistaken for black, but not in the sun – in the sunshine, they light up with the tiniest flecks of gold. ‘Why?’

She tears her gaze away from his. ‘He didn’t want the reminder, I guess. His past was eating him alive.’ She looks down at the well, then back up at Kylo, formulating a plan. ‘Must run in the family.’

His fists curl, so easily triggered by just the mention of his uncle. But Rey doesn’t let it deter her. ‘Last night, I went onto the Falcon, and I spoke to R2D2. Do you remember him? He told me about your grandfather – about Anakin. And your grandmother. Padme, is it?’

She’s not trying to needle him, not deliberately, but he reacts as if she is, getting to his feet and stalking around the well until he’s in front of her. ‘Oh? And what sordid tales of our family history did the droid tell you?’

Rey considers how to respond, digging her nails into her palm behind her back. ‘I’ll tell you,’ she answers finally, ‘if you come down this well with me.’ She looks into the dark hole, just making out the eddying of water at the bottom. They’re standing right on the lip of the well, one wrongly placed foot away from falling in.

Kylo stares at her as if she’s spoken gibberish. ‘What? Why?’

‘Because, Ben Solo,’ she replies, trying to make her voice sound bolder than she feels, ‘before we talk about the past, I think you need a reminder of the future.’

And she shoves him over the edge.
Chapter Twenty-One

He hits the water face-first, and it’s like a smack, the prickling shock of the impact, and the cold. The water’s freezing, and his eyes fly open in shock, blurry and stinging from the saltwater. A trail of bubbles streams from his nose and mouth, while other, tiny bubbles congregate on his arms, until he thrashes, swimming upwards, and they shake loose, fizzing and sparkling.

He breaks the surface, shaking his head wildly to get the dripping locks of hair out of his eyes. His cheeks are red-raw from hitting the water so hard, eyes tearing up, and he manages to dodge to the left just as another body hits the water, this one tucked into a smooth divebomb. A fountain of water sprays up at the contact and douses him again.

Seconds later, Rey resurfaces, grinning like a Cheshire cat, and starts to swim towards the shelf of rock that leads to the cave. She’s clumsy and awkward in the water, paddling more than doing any particular stroke, but she makes do, and within a minute they’re both standing on the rocks, dripping everywhere, soaked to the skin. Kylo looks and feels like a drowned rat, hair plastered over his face, and he’s fuming as he strips off his outer layers of clothing, removing the sodden surcoat and armbands that weigh him down, until he’s shirtless again. This is not the time to be precious about modesty, he decides. Especially after last night, which they are decidedly not talking about.

Rey follows his lead and removes her own armbands, and the ash-grey wrap dress she always wears. The fabric of her undershirt shifts, sticking to the wet skin of her back, and Kylo is shocked to notice a pattern of purple-brown bruises climbing up the column of her spine, before the shirt resettles and they disappear again.

‘Rey-‘ he starts, but she’s already marching ahead of him towards the cave, fists clenched with determination, or trepidation, he can’t tell which. He quickens his pace to catch her. ‘Stop for a second, just-‘ he seizes her elbow and she swings round, her eyes bright. She’s too focused on what they’re about to do to think about inconsequential things like bruises. That he gave her.

‘Turn around,’ he orders, and when she doesn’t, he spins her himself, throwing caution to the wind and pulling up the hem of her shirt to reveal where the bruises start, an artwork of autumnal colours, bright blood poppies on her spine. ‘Rey, fuck, I didn’t mean-

‘I don’t care,’ she interrupts harshly, and she jerks her arm out of his grip again.

‘But you’re-‘

‘I’ve gotten worse bruises from falling off chairs,’ Rey shoots back over her shoulder as she walks. ‘So save the apology for later.’

Easy enough for her to say, she wasn’t the one who used the Force to throw him down a ramp. Often, he forgets that she’s not his equal in physical strength – what would barely mark him can easily bruise her, as waifish as she is. She overpowers him so often in every other aspect that he doesn’t even consider it half the time. In every other way than brute strength, she could have him on
his knees in a heartbeat.

But the time for self-flagellation is not now. They are standing in front of the mirror from his dream, from her memories. Opaque and tinged with green, it is a malevolent thing, and Kylo doesn’t want to touch it. He’s already worried enough after the death of Cianh and the cut-off communications from the First Order. Learning what fate has in the cards for his future is the last thing he wants right now.

On the other hand, if the mirror could give him answers as to who is killing his Knights and sabotaging his leadership, that could prove useful. And seeing what could become of him in the distant future couldn’t hurt, either. If he can see his future, see the different paths that lead to it, he can burn any that do not end in the ideal outcome. He doesn’t care who he has to kill to do it.

Rey turns to face him, and her eyes unmistakeably track down to his torso for a second, before returning to his face. ‘Before you touch this mirror,’ she says, a note of uncertainty in her voice, ‘you should know that it doesn’t always tell the truth.’

‘Really?’ he replies, tone dripping with sarcasm. ‘A Dark-side object isn’t entirely trustworthy? I am dismayed.’

Rey rolls her eyes in a ‘why do I bother’ expression, and he can’t help but smile a tiny bit. ‘Fine. But I’m going first.’

Kylo stares directly into the mirror, at their figures standing side by side – him, shirtless and towering next to her, diminutive but fierce in her stance, in wet grey clothes. The longer he looks, the more their reflections seem to warp, silhouettes merging together until they could be two halves of a whole.

Rey reaches out and touches the mirror.

‘Show me my future,’ she whispers, and then, adorably, she tacks on a ‘please’ at the end. He nearly laughs, just managing to keep a straight face as the glass of the mirror swirls and fogs, opacity increasing, and as much as he hates to admit it, he’s scared. Scared of what the mirror will show, scared of what Rey’s future will be – he’s never been one to skip to the ending of a story.

The fog starts to dissipate, tendrils curling away to reveal-

Just the two of them. Their reflections. The exact same as he’d seen in the mirror not twenty seconds ago.

‘Ben,’ Rey gasps, and he realises.

Something’s different.

Their reflections are holding hands.

His eyes flick down to their real hands – or what he thinks are their real hands. The mirror has an uncanny way of making their reflections seem like the true versions of themselves, and if he looks at the glass from the right angle, their reflections split into infinite copies of them, Ren and Rey, holding hands into some insubstantial eternity.

The current versions of them are not joined, though, so without giving it too much thought, Kylo takes Rey’s hand. Their mirror reflections do not copy them as they move.

‘What the hell does this mean?’ Kylo growls at the reflection.
Rey shushes him, her mirror image raising a finger to her lips. The mirror is fogging up again, their reflections disappearing like illusionists in puffs of green-tinged smoke as something else replaces them.

Kylo and Rey both watch, gripping eachother’s hands tightly, as a dark shape begins to form, striding towards the still-obscured mirror. As it gets closer, it shrinks, becoming child-sized, and a small, black-outlined hand presses against the glass-

Rey cries out and falls to her knees, almost tugging Kylo down with her, their hands still joined. Her fingers gone from the mirror, it immediately reverts to its resting state, milky and obscure, not showing a single reflection.

Rey gazes up at him, tears forming in her eyes. ‘It can’t be,’ she whispers. But Kylo isn’t paying attention. He’s focused on the mirror. This is it. This is proof enough that the mirror is capable of showing truth. Because this is what he’d seen in his Force vision, the moment they’d touched hands.

He’d known that they would stand together, of course, side by side. They’d both seen that. But-

‘There was never a- a child,’ Rey chokes out now, still kneeling on the ground, her hands splayed over the wet rocks. ‘Not in my visions, not anywhere. It was always just you and I.’

He drags his gaze from the mirror and squats down next to her, reaching out to cradle her face. She leans into the comfort, despite her misgivings – he can feel how it grates her to be vulnerable in front of him, even after all this time. ‘There was in mine,’ he tells her, and his voice is gentler than he thought it could ever be again. ‘When we touched hands, I saw myself training you. And I saw you, older, with a child – a boy.’ He pauses for a second, unsure how much to reveal to someone who is still technically his nemesis, by her own admission. ‘He looked like me, when I was young. I wasn’t there with you, though. So either the mirror or the vision is wrong.’

Rey pushes his hands away and hauls herself to her feet, a new look of defiance in her expression, her lips pursed into a thin white line. ‘Or maybe they’re both wrong,’ she says, glancing back to the mirror and lifting her chin. ‘Because I cannot see a future in which I would be happy to have a child with you.’

That stings, more than he’d ever let on. ‘No?’ He looks her, very deliberately, up and down. ‘Must I remind you of the thing we’re pretending never happened?’

Rey blushes scarlet, her face twisting into a scowl. ‘You don’t get babies from that, you fool,’ she hisses. ‘And-

‘Shall I ask the mirror whether you will always insult me at every turn?’ he asks cynically. ‘Because I would like to avoid repeating the mistake of my parents’ union. They were always sniping at one another, too.’ Rey quiets at that and, emboldened by the vision, Kylo finds himself touching her face again.

His fingertips trace the outline of her cheekbones, brushing her still-damp hair back over her ear. She lets him, which is astonishing in itself. The effortlessness of her beauty has struck him countless times in the past, but it isn’t until now, touching her face with more tenderness than he’d thought he was capable of, that he realises the true extent of it. Standing here, with her eyelashes stuck together from the saltwater, damp hair frizzling out in unruly clumps, her cheeks cherry-red from embarrassment, she’s the most wondrous thing he’s ever seen. His eyes have a will of their own, landing on her pink, bitten lips and staying there. He wants to kiss her again, badly, but it’s not worth the probable rejection. Plus, they’re standing in front of a mirror, and he doesn’t really want to see a thousand versions of himself clumsily kissing a girl.
‘Rey,’ he says, and she looks up at him, her eyes teeming with confusion. ‘The mirror didn’t show me anything I didn’t already know. I know you are in my future. I chose that future the day I killed the Supreme Leader. But I-‘ his voice cracks a little, despite his best efforts. ‘I can’t be who you want me to be. I’m never going to be that person again. I can’t come back to the Light. It’s too late.’

Rey stares at him, searchingly, her eyes roving all over his face – from eyes to forehead to cheeks and finally to lips. She looks like she’s gearing up to say something crucial, something that will take them out of this standoff they’ve been in since the day he first met her. She shakes her head slowly, as if in amazement.

‘It’s never too late,’ she says, and just when he’s started to think he’s going mad, the truly impossible happens.

Rey kisses him.

Chapter End Notes

TFW you were never a fan of Rey having kids but you start writing the mirror scene and a WILD REYLO CHILD APPEARS. But don't worry guys, the future isn't set in stone... just in glass :P
Also the original outline for this chapter was NOT meant to have another kiss so soon, I was intending to go more into Kylo's vision of what's going on with his Knights, but the FEELS GOT AWAY FROM ME I TELL YOU and it suddenly all made sense?? So yeah, hope you guys like it as much as I do! Kylo's reckoning is coming...
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Two

The kiss starts off confused, hesitant. Rey has never been more aware that she kind of, really, doesn’t know how to kiss. But he is no more experienced than she is, after all, so who cares if she makes a fool of herself? He tastes like salt, from the ocean, and sadness, and she opens herself to it, trying to take those negative emotions away, replacing them with just – this. And it works, because Ben Solo kisses her back.

This time, there’s no running away, no throwing punches. There’s just him and her, darkness and light, intertwining in front of the mirror, as if they are the ones predicting the future. It’s not the future she dreamed of, the potential she coveted, but it’s something, and after seeing herself with a child, her feelings for Kylo Ren are the lesser of two revelations.

At first, she kept her lips tightly closed, but now, as the last bit of tension melts away, she relents, descending into this strange connection they have, bound by hate and love alike, and he parts his lips at the touch of hers, as she chases that still-burning spark from the last time they did this, her tongue tracing his lower lip before diving deeper, until he pushes back against her, fighting for control like he always does. She’s used to that by now.

That heat is starting to build between her thighs again, and Rey sighs against his lips, dizzy from the carbon dioxide exchange. His mouth moves off hers, across her jaw, trailing kisses down to her neck, to the place where it meets her collarbone. And stars, why does it feel even better there? She closes her eyes, going limp as the sensation overcomes her, and without warning, he’s got her pressed against the mirror, and he spins her around, pulling the neck of her shirt aside to see the bruises that bloom across her shoulders. And then he’s kissing them, too, and it’s painful, but a balm at the same time, and she can taste the apology in these kisses, it’s palpable, and she spreads her hands against the mirror, flipping over again so that her back is against the glass, and there’s so much fire in his eyes, he could almost be a Sith-

‘Rey-‘

‘Shut up,’ she tells him, and she hooks an arm around his neck, reeling him back into another kiss. She doesn’t want to think, just feel. His hands slide down her sides and cup her butt, and he lifts her up easily, pressing her against the mirror, and she’s being held at his eye-level, so she can see every mole, every eyelash up close, and-

he’s beautiful.

She already knew that – his was the kind of dark, dulcet beauty that’s hard to ignore, especially when she’d spent her first few encounters with him wondering what kind of hideousness was hidden by his mask. When he’d removed it in the interrogation room, she’d been thrown by the sight of him, dusky curls and bright eyes and pretty-boy lips, and every time she’d seen him since, she’d noticed him growing into that beauty more. Even with the scar that she gave him, the one that drags from forehead to cheekbone and below – somehow, it completes him.
She traces a finger over it, the healed white stripe of the scar, and he doesn’t take his eyes off hers, liquid brown and full of emotion. All artifice stripped away – at least until she realises with a thrill how close his hands are to there, the space that’s become so inflamed she’s surprised he doesn’t feel the heat rising. He realises at the same time too, eyes flicking down, and she catches the slight blush on his cheeks before he looks back at her, an unasked question in his eyes. *Should I...*

*Yes.*

She watches his face closely as he lets one of his hands slip lower, off the curve of her ass and upwards, and his eyes widen imperceptibly at the wetness that’s soaked through her clothes, the *heat*. Rey gasps when his fingers brush over the crotch of her trousers, the barest sensation making it through the layers of fabric, and a whole spectrum of emotions colour his face at that, the blush deepening. The cloth that separates her from his hands has become a cursed thing, and she wants it gone.

She wriggles above him, unable to remove any clothing when he’s got her pressed up against the mirror like-

The mirror. It hits her like an anvil to the skull. They can’t do this in front of the mirror. Kissing was fine, but not what she’s thinking about doing, what they’re *both* thinking about, not with an audience. It’s almost a sentient thing, and it’s *dark*. She doesn’t need any more ties to the Dark than she already has.

Kylo, reading her train of thought, lowers her back to the rock floor. Their bodies touch on the way down, Rey feeling the unmistakeable swell of his erection, and she shivers, wondering if she made the right choice. But once she’s on firm ground, straightening her clothes and breathing deeply, getting the oxygen circulating in her brain again, she knows it’s right. All too easy to get carried away and pass the point of no return.

‘Sorry,’ she says breathlessly, but Kylo just stares at her in disbelief, like she’s a miracle standing right in front of him.

‘What the hell are you *sorry* for?’ he barks, his hair completely dishevelled, eyes wild, and Rey claps a hand over her mouth to stifle her laughter.

‘Okay, I guess I’m not sorry,’ she admits, and she steps to his side again, facing the mirror. ‘But it’s your turn.’

‘Fine,’ Kylo replies, eyeing her at his side, and if Rey didn’t know better, she’d think he was being kind of playful. ‘But we’re discussing this later,’ he warns, ominously.

Rey agrees. They’re a bit past pretending that there’s nothing between them. They need to talk.

Meanwhile, Kylo raises his hand back to the mirror. It’s trembling slightly, whether from residual arousal or from fear, Rey can’t tell.

‘Show me who’s behind all this,’ he says, looking intently into the glass. ‘Who killed Cianh.’

‘...I don’t think the mirror works that way...’ Rey trails off as Kylo’s fingertips make contact, as the fog behind the glass begins to coalesce, turning a deep jade. She sees him chew on his lip anxiously as the mist swirls seemingly without end, as though the mirror is making up its mind on what to show him.

The fog disintegrates as another dark figure walks toward him on the opposite side of the glass. Tall and lithe, it isn’t a silhouette Rey recognises.
Kylo, without meaning to, holds his breath.

The last of the fog lifts, the mirror becoming clear as water as the face of someone Rey has never seen becomes recognisable. This man is all in black, just like Kylo, with the First Order’s insignia emblazoned on his collar. He has a harsh, pallid face, with eyebrows and hair the colour of carrots.

‘Hux,’ Kylo whispers, and the single syllable is more murderous than anything he’s ever said. His hand shakes, pressed against the mirror, and Rey feels a tsunami of hatred rise in him, practically choking her, as Kylo stares at the face of the man who murdered his Knight.

She wants to ask who Hux is, but she doesn’t think the question would be well-received. Kylo is shaking all over now, and she *feels* how much energy it’s costing him to not crack apart, break into a thousand pieces at this revelation, and-

An earsplitting crack tears the air, and for a second she thinks it’s happened, he exploded, he’s a pile of bone-dust. But Rey’s eyes focus on his hand, touching the glass, and the enormous cracks spiderwebbing out from his fingers, the mirror squealing horribly as the fissures widen into deep wounds. *He broke the mirror.* Without moving a muscle, he broke the mirror, the darkest object on this island. Rey’s heart leaps into her throat and stays there, panic eating at her ribcage as shards of glass begin to fall from the frame, splintering into crystalline slivers like raindrops on the rocks. Rey covers her face to protect from any rogue shards, and all the while, Kylo stands there, unmoving, hand still raised, and in the Force, she can see darkness, a black shroud covering his Force signature, all-consuming. Blotting out the stars.

She has to snap him out of it.

‘Ben!’ Rey shouts. She throws all her energy at him through the Force bond, trying to knock him back out of whatever dark realm his mind has slipped into. He’s motionless, but she feels him stir.

‘Ben, come on, you have to-‘

He lowers his hand and everything stops. What’s left of the glass in the mirror shivers, destabilised. But he doesn’t turn around.

‘Ben?’ Rey says softly, feeling an overwhelming sense of déjà vu for the last time they did this, her trying to coax him away from the dark, him with his back to her, being consumed by it.

‘We have to get out of here,’ he murmurs, and Rey frowns.

‘Yeah, I agree, there’s glass everywhere-‘

‘No,’ he cuts her off, turning around, his fists balling up. ‘I mean we’re getting off this fucking island *right now.*’

Rey blinks several times. ‘Excuse me, *what?*’

He doesn’t respond, striding past her, gathering up his discarded clothes and practically somersaulting back into the water at the mouth of the cave. Rey follows him uneasily, her stomach churning with something unpleasant. She doesn’t have a good feeling about this, at all. His demeanour’s done a complete one-eighty from where it was only moments ago, before he shattered a Dark-side mirror and probably cursed them both for a few aeons.

She paddles out of the cave, looking for Kylo as she strikes out towards the shoreline at the base of the cliff. There are rudimentary stairs there, cut into the cliff-face, and he’s already ascending them, showering droplets of water on the stone as he climbs. Rey has an inkling as to where he’s going, but
she really hopes she’s wrong as she clammers onto the shore and races up the steps, making it to the top just in time to see him descending a different set of stairs – the stairs that lead to where Rey parked the Millennium Falcon.

‘No!’ she screams, sprinting after him. He’s managed to lower the ramp through the Force and is just about to walk up the ramp when Rey barrels into him, tackling him from behind. The collision makes both of them topple over, rolling down the ramp and landing with a thump on the rocks. Rey’s back explodes with fresh pain, bruises pooling with yet more blood, and she groans as the sharp edges of the rocks dig into her hips, her ribs.

Concern flashes through Kylo’s eyes as he looks down at her, but it’s gone in seconds. He stands up, towering over her, and says, ‘We’re going, Rey.’

‘Where?’ she gasps, trying to lift herself off the rocks, pain screaming through her bones as she does.

‘To kill General Hux,’ Kylo grinds out, his fists balled up so tightly she’s surprised he hasn’t forfeited all the blood supply to his hands. ‘That motherfucker killed my Knight. He’s double-crossed me, and it won’t end there. I have to stop him before he kills anyone else.’

‘No!’ Rey shouts, hauling herself onto her feet. She pulls out her lightsaber, grasping the hilt. ‘I will not let you take my ship to the First Order!’

‘It’s my ship!’ Kylo roars, finally flying off the handle. ‘You stole it! It’s my legacy!’

‘It’s Han’s ship,’ Rey growls back. ‘And Chewbacca’s. And mine. Are you going to fight me for it, Ben? Or are you going to file a theft report?’

She ignites her lightsaber in a show of defiance, the sudden gush of yellow light making her eyes water. Kylo stares at her, all the fury seeming to leach out of him, into the atmosphere.

‘I’m not going to fight you, Rey,’ he says softly, and he turns around to walk up the ramp again.

Rey throws out a hand, compelling the Force to stop him getting any further. He walks into an invisible wall.

‘Rey,’ he says her name again, beseechingly this time. ‘Don’t.’

She grimaces, holding the saber aloft. ‘Then don’t leave.’

‘You expect me to let that filth-’

‘I expect you to not go running back to the First Order with my ship!’ Rey yells over the top of him. ‘It could be a trap! Whoever that man was, he could be using your Knights to get to you! Or-’ a sudden realisation stuns her, ‘-or this could all be some big fabrication to get me to come back to the First Order with you, like you wanted when you flew here.’

‘Is that what you think?’ Kylo spits, turning around, his eyes blazing. ‘You think this is still about games? Seductions and power plays?’ He stalks back towards her, becoming every inch the dark knight she confronted on Starkiller Base. He ignites his own lightsaber, the quillons exploding outwards into twin streams of energy, the hum and crackle of his unstable sword filling the air. He never takes his eyes off her.

‘Then so be it.’
*insert Evil Kermit meme*

Me: I... I'm so happy! They kissed and they saw their future and now everything will be okay, wow, I'm so keen for this!

Me to me: FIGHT! ANGST! FIGHT! ANGST! *claps*
Chapter 23

Meanwhile...

The message sits in her correspondence box like a letter bomb, entitled, ‘Attention: Leia Organa and associated rebel scum.’

Leia stares at the sender’s address for at least a few minutes, but the letters refuse to rearrange themselves into any words other than Grand Marshal Armitage Hux. The grand marshal of the First Order has sent her a personal message over the HoloNet.

Grand Marshal? The last time they’d heard any gossip about the First Order, the man in question had been only at the rank of general. That’s a considerable raise in rank in the space of a month – but not unheard of. It’s likely that the First Order would be in a constant state of fluctuation after Kylo Ren took over the role of Supreme Leader; perhaps this promotion was a way to keep his second-in-command happy?

Supreme Leader Kylo Ren.

_Ben._

Gods, if she’d only known what he would become, what sending him away would do to their family... if she had the ability to time-travel, she’d go back to when she was a young mother and boot herself firmly up the behind.

She’d told herself that family came first, as she’d rushed from one strategy meeting to another diplomatic dinner, often staying out well past midnight, arriving home when Ben was already asleep. She was doing this _for them_ – to make the galaxy a safer place for her son, her pride and joy, her whole heart. But it had backfired stupendously, and now _he_ is the thing that stands in the way of a safe and peaceful galaxy. It still seems so strange to Leia, the Supreme Leader - this _man_ who bears her son’s name, but is so at odds with everything she ever knew of him.

Ben had been so unlike the other children she’d see, playing rambunctiously around the gardens of their apartment complex on Coruscant. While other kids were hellions, he was shy and quiet, preferring to hole up in his room with a book. Where others were oblivious, he was sensitive, tuning in to other’s emotions easily and mirroring them. She remembers when he was only six, all bright black curls and rosy cheeks, and they’d play together on his bedroom floor, flying model starships around the room, bouncing them off the walls. He’d always let her use his best and favourite ship and make up the story of the day, because he wanted her to have fun, too.

It doesn’t seem right that a son so sensitive and sweet could have devolved into such cruelty, such rage. Surely it couldn’t _all_ have come from her sending him away... but she blames herself anyway. She hadn’t had time to see him in the flesh on Crait before Poe shepherded them away, but she’d sensed his presence in the Force: his signature like an angry wound, oozing dark. He’d been so _furious_ at the sight of her twin, his uncle, and she still doesn’t understand _why_...

But there are a lot of things she doesn’t quite understand, lately. Like how Rey had left the
Resistance base without warning, taking the Millennium Falcon and disappearing into the ether, turning off her comms system, all over a moment of shared memories. Leia had told the young Jedi that she understood why she was running away, but she didn’t, not really. Rey had reacted with such horror when the general had touched her, as though the simple skin-to-skin contact had poisoned her to the core.

Leia doesn’t know what to make of what she’d seen when she touched the Jedi, either. The general has had forty-odd years of experience with other Force-sensitives, so she’s no stranger to sudden shifts in the balance, unexplained visions or tingling senses for things others can’t discern. But what she’d seen – it had been so indistinct. It had involved her son, and that was the part she couldn’t get out of her mind. Rey had shared something with Ben, at some point, and her mixed feelings about that had seeped into Leia’s head when they touched. But the contact was so brief, it had been like trying to hold water in a sieve – the memories had slid through Leia’s mind like grains in an hourglass, and she’d been barely able to hold onto one memory before it was replaced by the next. The only truly concrete thing that remained after Rey had pulled away was her son’s voice - darker and more masculine than it had been when she’d known him, but unmistakeably Ben - whispering, You’re not alone.

She’s been puzzling over the context of those words in the past three days, incessantly. And she’s doing it again now.

But this is no time for tangents. There is an urgent message sitting in her inbox, and after a quick sweep by the computers to make sure there’s no tracking virus attached to the message, Leia clicks to open it.

The body of the email is just two underlined links to some kind of video channel and an addendum – Warm regards, Grand Marshal Armitage Hux. With a smiley face attached.

Leia stands up and walks out of the computer room, fists clenched.

--

‘I am calling you two chuckleheads in here under the strictest of confidences,’ Leia warned them before she practically frogmarched Finn and Poe into the computer hub. Finn’s completely befuddled, but Poe’s enjoying the mystery of this – his eyes are sparkling with amusement.

‘Now listen up. The only reason I’m showing you this is because maybe you can help me shed some light on what’s going on.’ Leia says now, arms crossed authoritatively. ‘You, Finn, have insider knowledge of the First Order, and you, Poe, well, I’m counting on your charming wit and good looks to help erase this video from all our minds at the end. Because whatever it is, I don’t think it’s gonna be wholesome.’

Poe laughs, and it’s so infectious that Finn can’t help smiling along with him. ‘Oh, come on, General, you make it sound like you’ve called us in for a private viewing of some Huttese porn-vid!’ he teases.

Leia doesn’t react, her face stony. ‘Laugh it up, Captain. I’ve got a bikini all picked out for you.’

That shuts him up. Finn touches Poe’s knee in solidarity under the table when they pull their chairs closer to the computer screen. It’s just Leia, Connix, him and Poe in the room, and none of them have any idea what’s about to appear on the screen in front of them – only that they were sent mysterious links to a channel run by the First Order.

‘Did you run system checks for any tampering?’ Poe asks, the thought just occurring to him, and
Leia nods curtly.

‘It seems to be just a couple of harmless links. But why the grand marshal of the First Order is linking us holovids is anyone’s guess.’

‘Let’s find out,’ Finn says definitively, leaning closer to the screen. Connix clicks the button to begin streaming.

A First Order propaganda video flashes up on the screen, complete with black asterisk insignia. It revolves for a few moments before a scrolling red banner replaces it, emblazoned with text that reads: RESULTS OVER RELIGION. Another banner, this one in navy blue, unfurls underneath the first: MATESHIP OVER MAGIC. As the foursome watch incredulously, a third banner arises, this one reading: JOIN THE FIRST ORDER AND HELP BRING AN END TO OUTDATED RELIGION IN THE GALAXY.

The banners float away, replaced by a moving image of none other than General Hux, Finn’s public enemy numero uno. But he’s dressed differently than usual, replacing his stiff black uniform for a set of ornate robes in ruby red. It clashes horribly with his hair, but Finn thinks the guy’s a bit beyond fashion sense. He’s giving an impassioned speech about the First Order’s mission to bring peace to the galaxy, and that their new focal point is eradicating radical extremists in the galaxy-

‘Oh, my days,’ Leia whispers, her eyes wide as she stares at the general’s stoic face. ‘He’s talking about wiping out Force-sensitives galaxy-wide.’

These users of the so-called ‘Force’ are nothing more than religious fanatics using parlour tricks! Do we wish to subscribe to a religion that dictates that one can use magic to get ahead, to be placed on a pedestal above the everyday man? A religion that advocates violence against those that do not agree with its ancient methods? These people stir up hatred and incite class wars throughout the galaxy – they are extremists, and we must destroy their movement before any more damage can be wrought in our fair universe.’

The general folds his hands behind his back then, and Finn can see him working to keep the triumph off his face as he continues. It is now public knowledge that one such zealot managed to infiltrate the First Order, and rise to the position of Supreme Leader through deceit and cold-blooded murder. Rest assured that we do not take such betrayals lightly. The crazed terrorist Kylo Ren will answer for his crimes against the galaxy, along with all other members of the religion that stand against the First Order. Details on rewards for the capture of these murderers and traitors will be issued shortly.

Lastly, an appeal. The ginger general lifts his chin, gazing directly into the camera. If you value traditional values over fantasy stories, then join the First Order. If you would uphold your right for freedom against the tyranny of religion, then join the First Order. And if you are weary of old mythology dictating the future of the galaxy, then by all means – join the First Order. We will welcome one and all with open arms. Thank you for your attention.

The screen cuts to black, and the four rebels sit in stunned silence, waiting for the bomb to drop.

Everyone starts talking at once.

‘What in the blue fuck was that?’ Poe exclaims.

‘Hux is the leader of the First Order now?’ Finn shouts.

‘I’ve got a bad feeling about this...’ Connix says bleakly.
They all turn to Leia, who’s biting her fingernails anxiously. She looks up at the three of them with a bizarre kind of light in her eyes. It looks like hope. ‘Where’s Ben?’

--

They break for coffee and come back to the computer room after a tense fifteen minutes, everyone stirring sugar and cream into their bitter beverages. Some of the initial shock from the propaganda video has worn off, but it’s left them with even more questions, questions they bounce off one another in the quiet room, the incessant beeping of the computer monitors the only other noise source.

‘Okay, so riddle me this,’ Connix breaks the silence. ‘Why in the name of every god in existence is Armitage Hux suddenly trying to spread dissent about Force users?’

Finn takes a sip of coffee, burning his tongue. ‘Ouch. As the person with the most experience with Hux – generally, in the FO, they don’t look too kindly on Force users as it is. Kylo Ren was pretty much the only guy in the joint with any kind of power, and Hux hated him. Which is fair, because the guy was a total bully.’

‘What I don’t get though,’ he continues, setting his mug down, ‘is why he’s suddenly replaced Ren as the leader of the Order? A month ago, all the propaganda videos raved about Kylo Ren, the hallowed Supreme Leader. And if I know Kylo,’ he sets his jaw grimly, remembering with knife-sharp clarity the night in the ice forest, ‘and I think I do, he’s not gonna take demotion lying down, especially not from Hux. A shitstorm’s coming.’

‘The speech made it seem like he’s not even with the Order anymore, though,’ Poe points out, catching Finn’s eye. ‘So where is he?’

A thrill of fear shoots through Finn, sending tingles up his recently-healed spine. He stands up abruptly. ‘What if – what if he’s gone after Rey? She’s Force-sensitive too, both the Order and him could be after her, we can’t-’

‘Calm down, Finn,’ Leia orders, fixing him with a commanding stare over the rim of her cup. Her eyes are red-rimmed, and Finn looks away guiltily, realising that she spent the coffee break weeping.

Poe looks awkward; too, he’s never seen the general cry before, didn’t even know she could. She’s always been the backbone of the entire rebellion, the unbendable bulwark at its centre. But now, her hands are shaking as she lowers the mug of coffee back onto the conference table, and her eyes are filling with tears.

‘It’s time I told the three of you something that I’ve kept secret for a long time. This is need-to-know information only, and it’s classified, so if any of you spreads this, I will find out and bring all manner of hell down on you.’ Leia locks eyes with each of them in turn, extracting nods, before she continues. ‘Kylo Ren,’ she exhales deeply, kneading her forehead, ‘is my son. And Han’s. His name is Ben.’

There’s a moment of exquisite silence. Then the room erupts.

‘But – but Han! He... he killed his own father!’ Finn exclaims, his face twisting with confusion.

‘WHAT?! The sonofabitch that tortured me and almost bloody killed Finn was your son all this time?’ Poe shouts, banging his fist on the table.

Leia quirks an eyebrow at Poe’s slip-up, despite the gravity of the situation. ‘Careful who you call a bitch, Dameron. You’ve only seen my polite side so far.’
Poe reddens at his gaffe, muttering an apology under his breath.

Leia squares her shoulders and continues. ‘Ben Solo has not been my son for a long, long time. Seven years ago, he left the Jedi order and became an acolyte of Snoke’s, the former Supreme Leader. He murdered Han at Snoke’s instruction, and he tried to kill me when his TIE squadron bombed the bridge of the *Raddus*. He is not my son,’ Leia says fiercely, as if she’s trying to convince herself of that as much as them.

‘But... if he is no longer with the First Order, then...’ Leia trails off, thinking through what she wants to say.

‘Then we should go pick him up and we’ll all skip happily off into the sunset?’ Poe finishes sardonically.

Leia’s eyes flash to his in warning. ‘Thin ice, Dameron, thin ice.’

Poe shakes his head, getting up from the table. ‘I’m sorry, Leia, really I am, but – damn!’ he exclaims. ‘You hid this from all of us for so long-’

‘Oh, for Force’s sake, Poe!’ Leia snaps, standing up so fast her chair falls over. She slams her hands on the table, glaring hard enough to burn a hole straight through Poe’s pretty face. ‘I had to survive being outed as the daughter of Darth Vader when I worked for the Galactic Senate. Do you honestly think that the Resistance would have stood a chance of being rebuilt if it came out that the secret weapon of the First Order was my son, too? Use your head.’

Connix retrieves the general’s chair and she lowers herself back down, breathing heavily to calm herself. ‘If what the propaganda says is true, and Ben is no longer with the First Order – then he is in more danger than he’s ever been. A galactic army has his name on their sh!t list. We can offer him protection – in exchange for insider information,’ Leia adds, as Poe is starting to protest again. She looks at the three of them with a gleam of determination in her eye. ‘I will not be fought on this. We need to find out where Ben is, and Rey. If the First Order is calling for a cull of Force-sensitives, both their lives are in grave danger.’

‘General,’ Connix interrupts, pointing to the computer screen. ‘There was a second link in Hux’s message. It might help.’

‘It’ll probably just be more propaganda bullshit,’ Poe grumbles, but they all shuffle their chairs back over to the computer, while Connix sets up the other holovid. This one takes longer to load, an unlisted holovid rather than a public one, and it’s not attached to the First Order’s propaganda channel, rather an anonymous account. Uploaded just for them, it seems. It buffers for what seems like an age, and when it does load, it’s in terrible quality, just a video of a dark room-

‘Wait,’ Leia breathes, looking at the screen as someone walks into view.

Finn recognises the figure in the holovid immediately, even cast in the eerie darkness that the video is filmed in, and a spear of pain shoots up his spinal column. *Kylo Ren*. The bastard responsible for Finn’s stint in a bacta suit a month back. He’d put him in a coma, and if it weren’t for Rey stepping up to defend him, Finn’s pretty damn sure the Darksider would have murdered him.

Poe reflexively reaches out to touch Finn when he flinches, running his hand over the stapled-together rip in the jacket Poe gifted him, the one he’d painstakingly put back together while Finn recovered in the med-bay. Finn relaxes slightly at Poe’s touch, leaning back a little from the screen to give everyone a clearer view of-
Kylo Ren, talking to the walls of his room...?

‘What the...’ Poe whispers, eyes glued to the computer screen. They all strain their ears to pick up the audio.

‘This isn’t a good time, Rey,’ the Darksider spits, his fists clenching. Finn’s blood runs cold at the mention of his friend’s name in that monster’s mouth. *Is he in contact with her?* Finn wants to put his fist through the computer screen and throttle the snivelling bastard right here and now.

‘I’m not kidding. You – is that the *Falcon*?’

Leia gasps at the word *Falcon*, clearly shocked by this turn of events, even though her son is talking to literally nothing. The video fades, and for a second Finn thinks that’s it, but it’s too good to be true, of course, and the holovid is replaced by another one. It looks like security-cam footage, grainy and dark, and in this one, Kylo Ren is sitting unmasked in a room with a bed, still as a statue, and Finn’s fists clench because he’s sitting on a bed and what if-

*You’re not alone*, Ren’s whisper carries through the audio remarkably well, and then he’s taking off one of his gloves and holding out a hand and-

Rey’s there. She’s there, right in front of them in the video, and she’s holding hands with him.

‘*No!*’ Finn yells, leaping to his feet. He spins to point an accusing finger in the general’s direction. ‘*I told you* not to let her run off in the Falcon! She’s with him! We have to go find her!’

‘Finn, stop,’ Connix quiets him, placing a restraining hand on his arm. Leia has paused the video feed, so that the screen is frozen on Kylo and Rey, their faces turned slightly towards the camera with faint surprise.

Leia maximises the screen. ‘I agree, Finn,’ she says calmly, getting to her feet again. ‘We need to get Rey back. But all of this-‘ she gestures to the screen, ‘-is old news. It’s already happened. I saw it when I touched Rey’s hand, but these videos put all the missing pieces together. Rey was in contact with Ben through the Force somehow, I know that much. And now that he’s left the Order, I’d be willing to bet she’s with him. It’s why she left us so fast. And so we need to find them, before the First Order does.’

The screen unfreezes then, looping into a video of, unbelievably, a decidedly topless Kylo Ren. Poe cries out and covers his eyes while Finn looks on in horror.

Leia strides towards the door of the computer room, calling over her shoulder, ‘Gather the rest of our strategists. Tell them to plan for a rescue mission. We’re pulling out all the stops.’ She pauses in the doorway. ‘And tell them to be prepared for war.’

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! So I've got a few things to put in the chapter notes if anyone gets confused about why Poe and Finn didn't know Kylo was Leia's son. Before I wrote that sequence I wanted to make sure they didn't know, so I did what any fanfic author does and googled the absolute heck out of it. Apparently, according to this link: https://thecantina.starwarsnewsnet.com/index.php?threads/how-will-poe-react-when-he-learns-kylo-ren-is-leias-son.10058/ Pablo Hidalgo is quoted as saying that he doesn't
think Finn or Rey heard the conversation Ben had with Han on the bridge, so Finn most likely doesn't know that Kylo is Han and Leia's son. As for Poe, that's what the question in the link was asking - does he know who Kylo is? And the general consensus is no, so that's the canon I'm operating under with writing this chapter. Also yay for Grand Marshal Hux!

Also, it did cross my mind that people could possibly be offended by me referring to Force users as 'radical extremists' given the climate we currently live in. I just wanted y'all to know that I'm basing Hux's calling Force users that off an interview that Adam Driver did a while back, where he says that he viewed Kylo Ren as a kind of extremist/had conversations about terrorism with regard to his character. That was interesting to me, so that's what I'm playing with a bit here, with Hux's view of Force-sensitive people like Kylo and Rey.

Lastly, I'll still be reading any and all comments all you lovely people leave, but the amount of inbox notifications I've now gotten is becoming too many to reply to individually without eating into the time that I'm writing this every day. So I'm gonna save replying to each individual comment until I reach the end of the story - but by all means keep leaving feedback (especially GIF comments because they are life), I read it all and I LOVE how excited everyone is about this!
'Then so be it. A new game. I defeat you, and I take the Falcon, and you, to the First Order.’ He levels his lightsaber at her, the crimson blade crackling.

‘I’d like to see you try,’ Rey scoffs, hefting her yellow saber. ‘Given our previous battle tallies, I think I know who is going to be victorious. So when I win, you will get on my ship, and we will fly back to the Resistance. We’ll ask them for help with whatever’s going on with your Knights.’

‘I will never return to the Resistance, for help or otherwise,’ Kylo snarls, dropping his centre of gravity into a defensive stance.

‘You are coming, or so help me, I’ll drag you back there kicking and screaming like a child!’ Rey shouts, and she attacks.

She lunges forward, swinging the yellow saber violently with both hands, forgetting all the forms, all the grace and poise she thought she’d have when she duelled again, and just attacking with brutality, trying to disarm him, slam the red saber out of his grip. Kylo parries her strikes effortlessly, dodging her next strike and putting her on the backfoot with a particularly hard counterstrike, a savage downswing that nearly makes her lose her grip on her own saber. She shouts and spins out of reach, her thumb almost slipping off the ignition button, but she recentres herself and attacks again, the clash of gold against red creating an inferno between them, a flurry of orange sparks flying from their locked sabers.

She pushes against his saber with all her strength, until they’re face to face, a brutal reminder of their first battle. His eyes are fixed on hers, fierce and brown and aglow with the red light of his saber.

Rey pushes closer, glaring at him through the interlocked beams. ‘You’re not trying very hard to win.’

His eyes narrow. ‘I don’t need to try when you’re trying too hard. You’re using all your energy trying to destabilize me. You’ll tire in minutes.’

‘Oh, yeah?’ Rey challenges, and she wrenches her lightsaber away, twisting to the right and slashing ineffectually at Kylo’s hand. ‘Do I look tired to you?’

Kylo twirls his saber, blocking her strike with ease. ‘You look like a hormonal gorilla,’ he mocks, recycling her earlier insult about his fighting style. Rey lets out a bark of surprised laughter as she slashes again, knocking him back a couple of centimetres.

‘You’ve got quite the sense of humour, Supreme Leader,’ she calls as she dodges a half-hearted strike from him. ‘Maybe you should abdicate the throne and pursue a career in entertainment.’

‘And maybe you should learn to keep that tongue of yours under control, lest someone cut it out of your head,’ Kylo retorts, whirling to the left as she jabs at him with the tip of her saber.
That makes her face burn. ‘That’s funny, you telling me to keep my tongue under control, when you’re the one going around sticking yours where it doesn’t belong.’ She shifts her hands on the hilt of her lightsaber, changing to a one-handed grip and slashing again at him, just out of reach.

‘Really?’ he smirks, twirling his saber absent-mindedly. ‘Who kissed who in the mirror cave, hmm?’

Rey’s face flames hotter than her saber. ‘You kissed me first!’ she cries. ‘You invaded my head! You made the Force bond between us! Any and all feelings I have towards you now are because of that!’ She attacks him with a flurry of blows, haphazard and too-strong, and he deflects every one. She falls back, panting.

‘That’s bullshit and you know it,’ he growls, taking his finger off the ignition switch. The crackling of his saber is suddenly gone, and everything is silent ‘Stop lying to yourself, Rey.’

‘I am not,’ she pants, switching her own saber off, ‘lying to myself.’

‘You are,’ he insists, and his voice so intense, it makes her heart skip a beat. ‘It’s all you do. You spent years in denial about your parents, and you’re doing the same thing now. But you can’t fight the Force, Rey. The longer you deny it to yourself, the worse it’s going to get. This is beyond you or I. It’s destiny.’

Rey stares at him, her chest heaving. ‘Maybe you’re right,’ she says, the hand holding the saber dropping to her side. ‘Maybe it is destiny. But I will spend the rest of my life fighting that destiny if you take this ship and return to the First Order.’

‘You’ve done an excellent job of fighting it so far,’ Kylo deadpans, stepping closer. ‘You came to me on the Supremacy. You reached out to me through the Force bond, countless times in the last week alone. You led me to this island. You think about me when you’re in your bed at night. If that’s your idea of fighting this, I’ll expect to see you on the Star-Eater in a week, ruling at my side.’

‘I will never be your empress,’ Rey whispers, her hands shaking. ‘And you don’t want me to be.’

‘You have no idea what I want,’ he spits, stalking towards her.

‘I do, though,’ Rey argues. ‘You like me like this, the free-spirited scavenger. You like that I challenge you, that you can’t predict or control me. I’ve seen your mind, Ben. If I were to join you, you’d be bored in a week. You don’t want an equal.’ She pauses for effect. ‘You want an opposite.’

Kylo stops stock-still in front of her, looking at her with an expression that’s almost... lost. ‘None of this matters now,’ he says heavily, resigning himself. ‘I have to confront Hux. He obviously waited until I was out of the way to start sabotaging me – I can’t stay away any longer. And I need the Falcon.’ He holds out a hand, and Rey notices he still hasn’t put his gloves back on. ‘I need you.’ A note of desperation creeps into his voice. ‘Please, Rey.’

She bites her lip, her thoughts swirling chaotically. And she extends her hand in turn, touching her fingertips to his.

‘Rey,’ Kylo breathes, taking her hand in his and pulling her closer. She tilts her face up to his-

And ignites her lightsaber with her other hand, slamming it down on the hilt of his, just missing his hand.

He drops the scorching-hot hilt.

Rey flicks her saber up, pointing it centimetres away from his shoulder.
‘I win,’ she grins.

Kylo lets out a tortured groan, pushing her away, not frightened in the slightest by the glowing saber that could have cut him in half. ‘Damn it, Rey–’

Rey stretches her other hand out, calling to the Force, and Kylo’s saber hilt leaps into her hand. She switches her own saber off and tucks both of them into the waistband of her pants, so he’d have to go there if he wanted to get his weapon back. The thought of that makes her grin harder.

‘Come on.’ She strides past him, up the ramp to the Falcon. ‘Let’s at least get into the air before we go for round two.’

--

Kylo is oddly quiet while Rey navigates the Falcon out of Ach-To’s gravitational field. Gracious in defeat, he is not, but at least he didn’t try to start up a second sparring match when she forced him to go and retrieve the Jedi Texts – not trusting him to not fly off without her if she fetched them - before they left the planet.

Rey doesn’t let her guard down for a second, keeping her senses attuned to the Force as she presses all the different controls that will keep them airborne. She knows Kylo, and he’s just as stubborn as she is. He doesn’t need a lightsaber to fight her – all it would take is one surge of dark energy while she’s not paying attention, and he could overpower her, seize command of the ship.

They can’t jump to hyperspace, which is an issue. Rey now knows, due to the presence of the man beside her, that the First Order can track the Falcon’s jumps, down to the exact coordinates. But without hyperspace channels, going from the Unknown Regions to the Cerean Reach in the Mid-Rim will take days, if not weeks. She doesn’t think she can deal with an increasingly irascible Kylo Ren until then.

She wonders why he’s so up-in-arms about the death of his Knight. Truth be told, she’s observed that he doesn’t seem to have a great many friends. He’s probably the loneliest person she knows, other than herself. So why does he care so much? Is it because of what the Knight represents? Another tie to the First Order that the man called Hux has hacked away?

She decides to stop mulling it over and just ask. ‘Who was Cianh, anyway?’

His eyes flicker to hers, and she reads surprise there. ‘Why do you ask?’

Rey shrugs. ‘Curiosity, long spaceship trip, many reasons,’ she says vaguely.

Kylo clears his throat. ‘Cianh was my best Knight, and the most loyal. He was one of the padawans I took from Luke’s temple that night.’

Rey furrows her eyebrows, startled by that admission. ‘So he was strong with the Force?’

Kylo nods, a curtain of black hair falling over one side of his face with the movement. ‘Yes and no. Not like you or I, but he had power.’

He lapses into silence again, and Rey sucks on her knuckle contemplatively as she steers the Falcon around a small chunk of asteroid debris. But eventually the curiosity gets the better of her again.

‘Why do you think that man – Hux – killed him?’

Kylo’s face darkens visibly. ‘I don’t think he killed him,’ he says gruffly. ‘I think he had him killed.
Hux doesn’t ever get his hands dirty. Just as well – he’ll be easier to kill that way.’ Kylo’s own hands flex, and Rey can tell he’s imagining all the different, equally gruesome ways he can tear the man apart. It’s depressing.

‘Why, though?’ Rey brings him back on topic. ‘Why would he kill a knight of the Supreme Leader?’

‘He’s trying to dispatch my allies so that there will be a schism in the First Order, obviously,’ Kylo huffs. ‘My knights are loyal to me above all, fellow Padawans from my time as a Jedi. Weeks ago he had them moved to the Finalizer without reason, so if he hasn’t already blown that ship half to hell by the time we get back, then-’

‘You would have felt it if any more had died,’ Rey remarks, and Kylo trails off, his fists clenching on his knees. Rey senses it’s unwise to talk with him further about it, so she changes the subject.

‘So, hey. I guess I promised you that if you came down the well with me, I’d tell you what Artoo told me.’ In the corner, Artoo squeaks and whistles, as if chastising her for spreading his secrets.

Kylo rubs at his temples in irritation. ‘What could that droid possibly know that I don’t? The rise and fall of Darth Vader is practically public record.’

‘Yes. But what about Anakin Skywalker, before he became Darth Vader? And your grandmother, Padme? I bet you don’t know everything about that,’ Rey challenges, looking at him out of the corner of her eye.

Kylo swivels the chair so he’s facing her. His expression is aloof, but Rey can see the little spark of interest there. ‘Your attempts to distract me from the issue with the First Order are pitiful,’ he says. ‘But go on.’

Rey does a final sweep to make sure everything on the dashboard is functioning correctly, then turns to him.

‘Did you know that your grandfather was a Jedi first, too, before succumbing to the Dark?’

Kylo scoffs. ‘Of course.’

‘And did you know that he only turned to the Dark because he was in love with Padme Amidala, the queen of Naboo, and wanted to protect her?’ Rey glances over at Artoo, whose beeping is getting steadily louder. ‘Artoo was originally her droid, you know. He accompanied her on a mission to Tatooine, where she met Anakin Skywalker as a child, living in slavery in the desert. Kind of like me,’ Rey adds thoughtfully.

Kylo glowers at her. ‘Rey, this is all ancient history, it doesn’t-‘

‘It does,’ Rey interrupts definitively, staring him down. ‘It does matter, because Anakin Skywalker killed Padme when he turned to the Dark Side. He loved her, and he killed her, because she wouldn’t follow him down that path. See any parallels here?’

Kylo leans forward so suddenly in his seat that Rey flinches, unsure what he’s going to do next. ‘I would never,’ he says vehemently, ‘kill you. Force Bond or not. Can you say the same, Rey?’

Rey leans forward too, trying to match his intensity. ‘Anakin didn’t mean to hurt Padme, either. But he used the Force on her, choked her until she passed out. The mother of his children, Ben.’ Rey can feel herself tearing up as she recounts the story. When Artoo had told her, shown her his archived holos of Padme and Anakin, she’d cried, too, but this is more personal, confronting him with his own history like this. ‘He didn’t mean to kill her, but she died anyway. And he spent the rest of his life in
agony, trying to pay for that mistake.’ She narrows her eyes. ‘And you’ve already hurt me, so you’re well on your way. You Force-threw me out of your shuttle.’

His eyes flash, and she can see she’s hit her mark. ‘And you scarred my face with your lightsaber, shot me with a blaster, left me for dead on an exploding planet, and then again on an imploding Star Destroyer. Call it even.’

Rey doesn’t reply, just looks him dead in the eye, and eventually he softens.

‘For what it’s worth, I am sorry about the bruises,’ he murmurs. ‘I didn’t mean for you to land on the ramp. I was trying to get you out of the way.’

‘My hero,’ Rey says acidly.

Kylo doesn’t reply, just looks at her with a curiously hurt expression on his face. Gods, she can read him like a book, even without the aid of a Force Bond. It suddenly makes her uncomfortable, how open he is.

Rey fiddles with the dials of the radio, switching it back on after days of silence.

The blare of sound nearly makes them both fall off their chairs. Message after message floods the system, from Leia, from Finn, urgently telling her to return to the Resistance base, because-

‘Rey, the First Order has put a price on both your heads,’ General Organa’s last message crackles across the transceiver, her voice full of worry. ‘Hux is calling for a cull of all Force users across the galaxy. He wants Ben dead. Please respond.’

Chapter End Notes

tfw it's been 24 chapters and 53,000 words and these two space idiots haven't had sex yet.

IT'S COMING I PROMISE
Chapter 25

Chapter Twenty-Five

‘What?!’ Rey shrieks, grappling with the controls of the Falcon’s radio, trying to find the frequency for the rebel base. ‘She can’t be serious!’

Kylo is on his feet. He doesn’t remember standing up. He is shaking with fury and he can’t stop. The magnitude of this betrayal has rocked him to the core. General Hux. He should have known the bastard would overthrow him as soon as he left for Ach-To. Of all the saboteurs in the galaxy, of course it would be the ginger general. After all, he’d had Phasma assassinate his own father with a bite from a Parnassos beetle. Not that Kylo is one to talk about patricide. His fists curl, torn between anguish and a rage so deep that it feels like it vibrates in his bones.

Not only has Hux been killing his Knights on the sly, but he’s actively usurped the throne of the First Order and stolen the proverbial crown. And nobody can lift a finger to stop him, because the whole of the First Order prefers Hux to Ren, anyway.

Rey is frantically trying to get a signal from the Resistance, yelling into her radio. ‘Hello - hello? Come in, General, or Finn or Poe or whoever! What’s going on?’

She replays the last message from General Organa and it makes him want to scream, or cover his ears, or both. The sound of his mother’s voice is anathema to him, especially now. She was right. She was fucking right about everything and he can’t stand it, he’s going to-

Rey glances over at him, then does a double take that would be comical if he weren’t about to detonate. ‘Ben?’

‘Don’t,’ he forces out, every muscle clenched to hold back the inevitable explosion, but it’s coming and he has to get out of here. But there’s nowhere to run – they’re on a spaceship with very limited room, and outside that, the eternal void of space. A thought flashes through his mind – he could open the airlock and space himself. It would save the First Order a manhunt-

He stalks out of the cockpit. Rey doesn’t follow, so she’s smarter than he gave her credit for. He bypasses the airlock, not without hesitation, and the smuggler’s panels, trying to avoid the memories associated with them. But then he finds himself in the crew quarters, sees the bed he used to sleep in as a child, and all is lost.

He slumps to the ground, back against the bunk-bed frame, and rests his head on his knees. Being back on the Falcon feels like regressing back to a more innocent time, when he used to come on smuggling runs with Han, playing with his figurines in the cockpit of the space shuttle while his father worked to outrun imperial ships. He’d had no concept of right and wrong, then, didn’t know his father was a thief and a scoundrel. But then, there’s no honour among thieves, either, and Kylo Ren is far worse than a simple smuggler. The things he’s set in motion cannot be undone in a thousand lifetimes. Hearing his mother’s voice had impressed that upon him.

She’d sounded so... old. So world-weary.
That’s to be expected, of course – he’d been taken aback, too, when he’d seen his father on that fated bridge, by the shade of his hair and the wrinkles carved into his once-youthful face – but it’s no less jarring to see the evidence of ageing. He half-expected his parents to stay in stasis for the past six years.

Like him.

The last six years had passed so quickly, a blur of lessons, airstrikes, war machinations, and supplication at the feet of his master. It had become normal so fast – it still felt like it had only been months since he’d destroyed Luke’s temple, taken the padawans and fled to join Snoke and the burgeoning Order. Yes, he was now a member of the First Order, residing on a starship instead of a planet, but he’d had the newly christened Knights of Ren under his wing, Snoke perhaps sensing that he’d needed something old to ground him, bring forward into this shadowy era. The Knights of Ren were not his friends – Kylo imagines they were terrified of him – but they were Force-sensitive, enough like him to count as allies, and he valued them. And Cianh – he’d been closest to him, if you could call it close. They’d trained together, first as Jedi, then as dark knights of the Order, and they’d shared the kind of camaraderie that is only found in war and bloodshed. No, they weren’t friends. But they were blood brothers.

That’s why it cuts so deeply that Hux has killed one of them, and apparently plans to kill more, while Kylo is helpless to stop him. Because what Hux is really destroying is Kylo’s history. His ties to the First Order. He’s erasing the past, something that Kylo himself has sworn to do – he’s just tried to erase the wrong parts.

It’s all so obvious now. Snoke was a master manipulator, but even his sugar-coated words hadn’t been enough to completely sway Kylo at times. He’d killed his father for him, and immediately known he’d made the wrong choice. He’d tried so hard to reconcile himself with that act, to tell himself that in killing Han, he’d been killing his past, that monstrous thing that tortures him every day – but it wasn’t his past that was the monster. It was Snoke. And, by extension, the First Order. And so when Snoke had threatened Rey, he’d killed him, freeing himself from his influence. Yet nothing had changed.

And why? Because he hadn’t left the First Order. He hadn’t chosen a side, wasn’t ready to when Rey had asked.

Well, now the choice has been made for him. He is no longer a member of the First Order. That’s that. He has gone from the Supreme Leader to a wanted criminal in the space of a week. His first thought is that Han would be proud, and that makes him cry, tears welling up from some festering pit in him, a secret well of pain he’s sealed off for far too long.

There is nothing on the Millennium Falcon for him to break. So he does. He grits his teeth against them, fights them off with all he has, but the tears still come.

His body is wracked with sobs so strong; they seem to be ripped from his soul itself, from a part of him he’s suppressed since he joined the First Order, when he learned to bottle up his feelings, bad and good, and weaponize them. Now it’s all come crashing down in a spectacular heap and a bout of grief so crushing it could crack his heart in two.

His throat burns and his chest aches, and this is crying on another level, it feels like purging something that’s been rotting him from the inside out. It’s not like it’s been a long time since he last cried, either, but this is different, it goes deeper than everyday sadness. It’s existential.

How the fuck is he supposed to live with this? The fact that he, among other Force users, is now a target to be exterminated by the First Order, just like all the other people he’d stood by and let die
because the war machine willed it.

And what about Rey? She will be hunted too, more mercilessly than anyone else, especially if Hux still believes that she was the architect of Snoke’s demise. He should never have told that dictator that Rey was the one behind it all, but there had been no other way forward. And at the time, he’d hated her for leaving him behind. Heartbroken, too.

Speaking of hearts.

It hadn’t slipped past him that when she’d been drilling his own family history into him, she’d drawn a comparison between his grandfather’s relationship and theirs. He loved her, and he killed her, because she wouldn’t follow him down that path. See any parallels here?

Was she implying that he is in love with her? Because if so... Kylo angrily wipes the wetness off his face, mulling things over.

Or, does she love him? Why else would she say that? But if she does, the Jedi doesn’t do a very good job of showing her affections - she’d literally challenged him to a lightsaber battle today, came perilously close to cutting off his hand. Not to mention abandoned him while he was unconscious on the edge of a chasm, slapped him countless times, tried to shoot him, cut his face with a saber... But then, she’d also initiated their kiss in the mirror cave, plus opened their Force bond during a very intimate moment, one that’s constantly at the back of his mind; too dangerous to bring to the forefront because of the way it makes him feel. She came to him on the Supremacy, prepared like a bride, and she’d told him he wasn’t alone. That was the most telling of all.

His heart, that traitorous organ, beats out of rhythm, and some of the ache that’s been building over the last month of silence between them recedes. Kylo clenches his fists; hating himself for letting one offhand comment do this to him, make him think the impossible.

Hope is such a dreadful thing. It will hurt twice as badly if he’s wrong about this. About her.

*But what if he’s not?*

It’s laughable that he should be focusing so much on this one tiny comment when the rest of their lives are literally being torn to shreds. If General Organa’s message is to be believed, they’ve entered a new reality in which it is life threatening, rather than revered, to be Force-sensitive; Hux is crusading against him and possibly Rey, too; the entire framework of his life is now obliterated. He can’t go back to the Resistance or the First Order – he’d face a firing squad either way. They might as well just float out here in deep space forever – except they have limited food and water. And fuel.

But they’re together.

He’s in the middle of the galaxy’s biggest clusterfuck, and yet all he can think about is her.

*So what else is new?*

Desperate to distract himself, he turns to the other elements of that conversation – Rey’s revelations about Anakin Skywalker. He hadn’t known much about his grandfather’s relationship with his grandmother – just that she died in childbirth and cemented his position in the Dark Side. He’d had no idea that Anakin had been the one to kill her. As much as he’d wanted to dismiss it, the thought is frightening to him in a visceral way – especially after the close brushes with death he’s had with Rey, at the start of all this. On Starkiller, when she’d taken the blue saber and fought him, he could have easily killed her – knocked her over the edge of the cliff and into the core of the exploding planet.

He hadn’t done it, though. Hadn’t even really considered it. Instead, he’d offered, in his own
roundabout way, to be her teacher. And look at them now. If anything, she is teaching him. About history. About goodness. Even her stupid Jedi manuals she reads every day have taught him new things about the Force – the idea that one does not have to be irrevocably devoted to either the light or the dark is something that has eaten at him over the past few days.

And looking in that mirror... seeing that child, seeing them holding hands, facing down the rest of the world. For such a long time, he’d had little hope that that future could ever eventuate, but he wants it to. Badly.

His grandfather had killed Padme, the woman he loved, when she was close to giving birth. The idea that he could do something like that, that he is a product of that legacy, shatters his faith in himself. In his power.

And in Darth Vader.

It’s so painful to think that, after all his hero-worship, his devotion to the figure of his grandfather. But it’s true.

*The potential of your bloodline...*

*You’re no Vader. You’re just a child. In a mask.*

The memory of Snoke’s gravelly voice ripples through his mind, spewing words that only a month ago had torn at his self-esteem, but now make him lift his head, a fierce kind of pride stirring in him.

*You have too much of your father’s heart in you, young Solo...*  

Perhaps Snoke, in his final days, got something right. Kylo leans his head back against the bed-frame, closing his eyes.

He’s still resting there when something comes rolling down the hall. He stiffens, but it’s only R2-D2. Rey probably sent the droid to check up on him.

The astromech wheels up to him, beeping a strange sort of greeting. It’s so bizarre seeing the droid after so many years – the last time he’d seen him, he’d been a Jedi-in-training at his uncle’s temple, decked out in white robes and with a blue lightsaber. Lost years condense into a few moments as R2-D2 comes to a halt directly in front of him, and Kylo reaches out tentatively to touch the old droid, half-expecting a swift prod from the built-in electroshock probe.

R2-D2 just whirs softly, almost as if he’s happy to see him.

Kylo decides to push his luck further. ‘Will you show me what you showed Rey?’ he whispers. ‘Show me Anakin... please.’

R2-D2’s head swivels until his holoprojector is facing Kylo. And, bathed in the blue light of the recorded footage, Ben Solo’s world is made anew.

Chapter End Notes

*We’re getting somewhere with this sad-boi I think...*
Chapter Twenty-Six

She’s still wrestling with the transmission, trying to find the proper frequency to connect to the Resistance base. Why did she have to turn it off in the first place? The Falcon’s radio was tuned to the base frequency and she switched it off without even a thought. Impulsive. Stupid. She could contact anyone if she gets the frequency wrong; could broadcast her position to any random pirates or smugglers in the galaxy.

Kylo’s stalked off by himself, and Rey keeps an ear out for any sounds of breakage, but all is quiet aboard the starship. Thank the stars she still has his lightsaber.

He can’t be taking it well. Being a hapless passenger on his family’s old spaceship, his father’s most prized possession, is probably bad enough. But finding out that he’s been effectively kicked out of the First Order, with a bounty to his name, on top of that? She wouldn’t even have been surprised if he’d gone mental.

Not to mention the revelation she’d just handed him about Anakin Skywalker. Rey could tell from his facial expression that he hadn’t known about his grandfather’s love for the queen-turned-senator; hadn’t known that it was Anakin’s lust for power that killed her, or that in his quest to protect her, his turn to the Dark side was what destroyed them both. If they hadn’t been interrupted by the urgent pleas from the Resistance, Rey thinks they might have been able to have a rational conversation about it.

Rational? Kylo? Once, she would have said the two were like ice and fire, but now...

There is something softer about him. Something sweeter. When he’s not reacting to the deaths of his underlings or fighting her for dominance, he can be calm, tolerant and yes, rational. More so than her at times. She’s not sure whether it’s the result of the Force bond either, him absorbing her qualities and vice versa. Over the last three days, with their uneasy truce and him interpreting the Jedi texts for her, she’d noticed him becoming quieter, more docile – like the weight of the First Order’s biggest dreadnought had been lifted off his shoulders. It’s as plain as day that he doesn’t belong with them, as the Supreme Leader or otherwise. But Rey doesn’t think he belongs with the Resistance, either.

She chews her lip as she tries again to find the right frequency. It’s a system of trial and error at this point, clicking through channels of people talking in strange, tongue-twisting dialects; men speaking the smuggler’s cant, and once, she’s pretty sure she heard the telltale grunt of a Hutt over the speakers. What a Hutt is doing on a spaceship, she’ll never know. Still no word from the Resistance. She may have to wait for them to try to reach her again.

Can they really go back? Leia had begged her to return to the base, and Rey’s pretty sure she’d included Ben in that plea as well. The general knows Rey’s with him – it shouldn’t be a surprise, they are mother and son, however estranged. But can she really expect an olive branch to be extended to the Jedi Killer? The man who killed Han, blew up the Raddus, killed an unnamed number of Resistance fighters and renounced his family to become a symbol of death?
And Kylo has made it plain he doesn’t intend to go back to the Resistance, now or ever. He’d rather stay floating between galactic sectors, out of reach of either faction, a pair of refugees. But they can’t stay out in space forever, burning precious fuel they cannot afford to replace. There’s got to be some kind of middle ground. Rey just has to find it, and appeal to his sense of reason along the way. Not so simple a task.

She gets up from the pilot’s chair and rummages through the cockpit’s drawers for a map of the galaxy. Surely there’s one somewhere.... *ahh.* She pulls out a crumpled, caf-stained map, scribbled all over with black pen, no doubt the handiwork of Han Solo. But it shows all the systems, up until last year’s date. Ach-To is a far-flung planet in the Unknown Regions, so much so that it’s not even on the map, but moving inward... her fingertip traces the Outer Rim: Malachor V. Geonosis. Tatooine. Tatooine is a desert planet much like Jakku, disinterested in the politics of the galaxy. Could they get away with stopping there? Would anyone even recognise Kylo Ren without his distinctive helmet and cowl?

They have options, and that’s enough for now. She’s just refolding the map when her comm-system screams to life, popping with static, as someone from the Resistance makes contact-

‘Wait!’ Rey yells, tripping over her chair as she makes a wild grab for the controls, seizing the transceiver and slamming the button to connect. ‘HELLO!’

‘I rep-WHOA!’ a startled voice reacts to her greeting, and Rey laughs out loud, elated. She’d recognise that voice anywhere.

‘Finn!’ she cries happily. ‘I’m here, I’m here – I got your messages!’

‘Rey?’ Finn asks, and her smile slips – the tone of his voice is far from happy.

‘Yeah, it’s me! Where’s Leia and Poe?’ She grips the transceiver in a sweaty hand, shaking from adrenaline as she programs the radio to remember this frequency.

‘I’m on broadcast duty, so it’s just me for now.’ Finn’s voice is quiet, and he still doesn’t sound happy to hear from her. ‘Rey. I have to ask.’ He pauses for a second, gathering resolve. ‘Is Ren with you?’

Rey frowns at the transceiver, confused. ‘Why are you asking?’

‘Oh my god!’ Finn exclaims, his voice raising in pitch. ‘Are you serious? You flew off under the cover of night and went running to Prince Dickface?’

‘Finn, what are you talking about?’ Rey scowls, slumping down into the pilot’s chair. And where did he learn to swear like that? Must’ve been Poe’s influence.

‘I know everything, Rey. We saw you; Hux sent the general some weird holo-footage of you and that bastard holding hands. Organa says you’re connected to him. Through the Force.’ Finn pauses his tirade, breathing heavily on the other end of the line. ‘Tell me that’s all it is.’

Rey’s face flames, equal parts embarrassment and indignation. How dare he interrogate her like this? ‘It’s none of your business, Finn,’ she seethes, and Finn actually *laughs*, his voice climbing an octave in amazement.

‘None of my business? Rey, you’re my best friend. And you didn’t tell me any of this. You just disappeared! Went off the grid! And the next thing I know you’re with Kylo Ren and I’m being told you guys are bound by the Force and General Hux wants both of you dead for murdering his boss! Am I supposed to not care about any of that?!!’
‘Oh, and what was the alternative?’ Rey snaps back, gripping the transceiver and practically spitting into it, anger welling deep in the pit of her stomach. ‘I was supposed to spill my guts about everything? About him and I, like it wasn’t the most complicated, unbelievable thing that’s ever happened to me? I needed time, Finn!’

‘I gave you time!’ he’s shouting now, his voice distorted by the static. ‘But you shut everyone out, Rey, you had to do it all on your own instead of asking for help! And now the First Order’s after you and – gods,’ his voice cracks, and Rey can just see him sitting at the Resistance base’s radio, shaking his head. ‘I don’t get it. Do you even remember what he’s done? Who he is?’

So they’re back to that. ‘Oh no! I seem to have become temporarily amnesic and have no recollection of any of the events of the past month,’ Rey says caustically. ‘Of course I bloody remember.’

‘Then what the hell are you doing, Rey?’ Finn asks simply, but with such weight to his tone, it could crush planets.

She sits, squeezing the transceiver until her knuckles turn milk-white.

‘Rey?’ he prompts.

‘I don’t know,’ she mutters. She actively tries to loosen the muscles of her forehead, so knotted in a frown.

Finn sighs on the other end. ‘Whatever. Just – come back to the base with Kylo, I guess. Try not to get killed on the way.’

The line goes dead. Just the hiss of static that could be inside her own head; her brain, normally racing, has flatlined.

‘I can’t go back,’ she whispers to herself, and once it’s said, the words given voice, she knows it’s true. She can’t go back. At least not right now.

And not just because Finn’s furious with her. That would be a petty reason not to return. But there is nothing for her there, on Glitterfall. If she and Kylo go there, he’ll be tried for his crimes, no doubt, even with Leia’s influence. And the Resistance is so few in numbers that involving them in their new situation – being hunted by the First Order – would be tantamount to killing them herself. She needs to speak to Leia, learn more about the First Order’s cull of Force-users, but she can’t do it in person. It’s equal parts self-preservation and altruism, really. The rebels cannot help them now.

They have to help themselves.

She buries her face in her hands, shaking, trying to clear her head. What can they do? Where can they go? What happens if they’re caught? What happens if one of them dies?

*If you break a Force bond, it doesn’t go away. It persists, like phantom pain in a missing limb, but worse.*

He’d said that the only way to break a Force bond was to die. But that the pain would endure, creating a void in the one left alive that can never be filled. The link that once connected them would stretch into eternity, beyond the black veil. There would be no way to end the torment except for following him into the abyss.

So dying is out of the question. They both have to survive this, intact.

*She said you’re bound by the Force. Tell me that’s all it is,* Finn had implored.
But it’s not.

It’s not, at all.

She wants Kylo Ren to survive, and that means keeping the Force bond between them alive.

She wants him to learn from the mistakes of his predecessor, to take those lessons and apply them to his choices so that he can see a future without the Dark, without loneliness and fury.

She wants him to leave the First Order, and in a way, he has. Not because of a change of heart, but a change of circumstance.

She wants the future she saw in the mirror cave.

She wants him.

Selfishly, with purposeful disregard for the circumstances.

Possessively, to be the first thing that is hers and hers alone.

Carnally. To explore every inch of him, to taste his kisses without guilt, to have him pressed up against her, bodies and souls intertwined. To ease the pressure, the curiosity, that’s been building for days. Finn’s disapproval be damned.

He had seen right through her, over a radio connection.

It’s time to be honest with herself.

She stands up, steels herself, sets the Falcon to autopilot, and leaves the cockpit.

He doesn’t hear her come in.

When she rounds the corner into the crew quarters, she instinctively stops, sensing that she’s stumbled into something significant.

Kylo is sitting, propped up against the bunk-beds, and R2-D2 is in front of him, projecting a panorama out over the room, a holo-cast in shades of blue. Dust motes float in the air, catching the light like specks of glitter, and as Rey watches from the corner, she sees the telltale figures of Anakin and Padme, from the same holo recordings she watched last night. She’s caught him in the middle of the last one.

It’s not a happy scene, and she grits her teeth, watching Kylo’s reaction as much as the hologram.

The robed, blue-tinted figure of Anakin Skywalker is pacing back and forth in agitation in front of the smaller, straight-backed figure of Padme Amidala, who stares at him in terror.

Don’t you see? The figure of Anakin asks gently, leaning towards Padme, but she recoils, her expression fearful. We don’t have to run away anymore. I have brought peace to the Republic. I am more powerful than the Chancellor, I can overthrow him. And together you and I can rule the galaxy. Make things the way we want them to be.

Padme shakes her head and backs away from the cloaked figure. I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Obi-Wan was right. You’ve changed...
The fallen Jedi towers over her. *I don’t want to hear any more about Obi-Wan.* His voice takes on 
an undertone of malice, a threat issuing from his lips. *The Jedi turned against me. Don’t you turn 
against me.*

Padme starts to cry, trembling where she stands. *I don’t know you anymore. Anakin... you’re 
breaking my heart. You’re going down a path I can’t follow!*

Anakin draws himself up, proud and terrible. *Because of Obi-Wan.* It’s not a question.

*Because of what you’ve done,* Padme cries. *What you plan to do. Stop – stop now, come back, I love 
you!*

They both turn, as a third figure enters the fray, just visible at the edge of the holo-recording. Rey 
knows now that this is Obi-Wan Kenobi, Anakin’s master. He is imposing even in holo-footage, a 
lithe, tall man in Jedi council garb.

*LIAR!* Anakin shrieks, looking from Padme to his master, enraged. His scream makes Kylo flinch 
visibly. *You’re with him! You brought him here to kill me!*

Darth Vader lifts his hand and contracts his fingers, and before their eyes, Padme starts to choke, 
grasping at her throat, and Obi-Wan cries for Anakin to let her go.

But he doesn’t. He chokes her closer to death, as she pleads and gasps for oxygen that doesn’t come, 
until he finally releases her and she slumps to the ground, heart still beating, but barely. Rey resists 
the urge to turn her eyes away from this private moment, Kylo bearing witness to the hidden truth. 
His inheritance.

The holo-recording ends with Obi-Wan challenging Anakin to a duel, and R2-D2 shuts his projector 
off, wheeling out of the room. Rey makes her entrance, padding softly over to where Kylo’s still 
sitting, shellshocked, and there’s a glimmering trail on his cheeks that can only be left by tears.

Rey swallows her trepidation and holds out her hand wordlessly, offering to help him off the floor. 
He looks at her like she’s a miracle made flesh, standing above him with the overhead lights 
reflecting off her hair like a halo.

Slowly, he reaches out and his fingers curl over her palm, and he pushes onto his feet without her 
help. Now he is the taller one, looking down at her with such a raw kind of heartbreak in his eyes, 
she can’t stop the other hand from reaching up and touching the wetness on his cheek.

*His gaze doesn’t falter when he tells her,* ‘*I can’t come back to the Light. But I don’t want to be like 
him.’*

Rey looks at him steadily. ‘*Then don’t.*’

And she seals her lips to his.

He reacts with surprise, starting backwards, but the second she thinks she might have acted too 
rashly he’s on her, crushing his mouth against hers, and his bare hands are in her hair and the spark 
she’s been chasing for so long finally catches, fanned into flame. Her knees practically give out as he 
kisses her with an uncontrolled fury, and they knock back against the frame of the bunk-bed, never 
once breaking contact, undoing the last of her buns with gentle fingers and bruising her lips with 
rough kisses at the same time. He’s gifted like that. Rey matches his ferocity, sucking his lip into her 
mouth and biting, and it makes him press her back into the bed-frame with a low moan that makes 
her *throb.* She breaks the kiss, gasping for breath, but she can’t get any air because he’s mouthing 
down her jaw and neck, sucking purple marks into the delicate skin there. The animal sound that
leaves her lips is enough to make her blush, but he covers her mouth with his before she can apologize, kisses her until she’s quivering, her knees weak, threatening to give out.

‘I can’t stand-‘ she gasps, and he picks her up, lifting her off the floor, and she wraps her legs around him as they slam back into the wall of the crew quarters, her back against the cold metal as his warm hands peel her tunic from her shoulders, until she is nothing but skin from the waist up. She expects him to lean back and take in the sight of her topless, but he surprises her, instead sliding his hands up her spine until she shivers, his mouth kissing lower and lower across her neck and chest until he reaches the swell of her breast, and he circles a nipple with his tongue, as it pebbles under his attentions, and he wraps his lips around it and sucks.

Rey gasps and squirms closer to him, wrapping her arms around his neck, fisting her hands in his black tunic, and she’s silently begging him to undress, too, it isn’t fair if she’s the only one-

He reads her line of thinking and helps her undo the surcoat and lift the undershirt over his head, dark curls tumbling around bare shoulders now, and she can see the scar she gave him, an off-white slash that tracks down his right shoulder, and the left is marred by a purplish-red burn from her saber, the other, less-serious blow she landed on him.

Rey’s intake of breath doesn’t go unnoticed, and his eyes flick up to hers, an unspoken agreement to put this behind them, and he captures her mouth again, one arm wrapped around her, securing her against the wall while the other plays with her exposed breasts, cupping them one by one and squeezing, hard enough that it should hurt, but it just makes her toes curl-

‘Bed,’ she gasps against his lips, and without hesitation he lifts her higher, sweeping her legs under his other arm and bridal-carrying her over to the bunk-bed, depositing her on the bottom one. He follows, disentangling her arms from around his neck so he can move over her, finally drawing back to take in all of her, with amazement splashed so plainly across his face it makes her giggle and then want to slap herself for sounding so girlish.

‘Rey-‘ he starts to say, his voice so low and desperate it gives her chills, but she puts a finger to his lips and he quiets.

‘No talking,’ she insists, and he nods, dark hair falling over his face as he keeps himself poised over her, arms tensed, pale and lightly scarred but muscular, and Rey lets her finger trail from his lips to his chin and down, snaking down his throat to the hollow spot where it meets his collarbones, and she pitches up and kisses him there, the scent of him intoxicating, like the darkest, richest wine. Her hands run over the muscles of his chest and stomach, lower and lower, to the trail of dark hair that leads below the waistband of his pants, and her eyes flit up to his, bright meeting dark, before her hand slips lower, palming the hard length of his cock through his pants.

She can see his pupils dilate; she doesn’t take her eyes off his as she rubs her palm back over him, and he whispers something that could be her name or a curse. Either way, it drives her crazy. She hooks an arm around his neck and tugs him violently down onto her, the sudden weight of him pressing her deep into the mattress, and she cries out when his hand grasps her thigh, squeezing hard before ascending until his fingers are on her still-clothed sex, and he lifts himself off her again to pull her trousers down in one smooth stroke, taking her underwear with them. She lifts her legs so he can slide them off, and in that one movement she’s stripped completely bare, every centimetre of her on display, and she should be scared but this is the furthest thing from scared she’s ever felt, she’s burning up on these sheets as his eyes rove over the smooth, sun-tanned skin of her belly and legs, before his hand parts her thighs to see the most hidden part of her, glistening wet and pink and-

He touches her there, his brown eyes coming back to hers as his fingers part her folds to feel how slick she is, how her heartbeat pulses there, and she groans, flinging her head back into the pillow as
He presses his fingers into her, watching the way it makes her cheeks redden and her breath come in unsteady gasps, and that’s *before* he slips lower and circles her entrance. When he does that, she almost screams, he’s *teasing* her and she can’t stand it, and she bucks her hips forward just as he curls two fingers into her sex, sinking up to the knuckle, and his eyes darken perceptibly, becoming black as obsidian as she tightens around his fingers, desperate and wanting.

‘Kiss me,’ she pants as he pulls his fingers out slightly before driving them into her again, losing her tenuous grip on her composure and letting out the most feral of moans as he claims her lips with his mouth again, kissing her furiously as he strokes her sex, sliding his fingers out to circle her clit again until she’s writhing under his hands, unable to keep still, it feels like she’s exploding, a supernova on the mattress before he tears his mouth off hers and ducks down and-

*Oh!*

It happens so fast she could swear they jumped to lightspeed, but his mouth is on her and his tongue flicks over her clit and she trembles, her toes curling so hard the bones crack, this is better than any kiss as his lips caress the sensitive flesh, teeth grazing the bundle of nerves until she wants to scream, to tear her skin off because it’s all too much and she’s being eaten alive, and he isn’t helping, shifting so he can slide his fingers back into her at the same time, making her thighs shake and her breath catch, her heartbeat throbbing both in her head and her cunt as his fingers stretch her, and her hands are going numb as a wave of pleasure starts to surge up her spine and into her shoulders, locking every muscle, and the bond between them unfurls, so that she can taste an echo of herself on his lips and tongue, a strange kind of sweetness, and she feels how it excites him and Rey cries out, her voice rising to a scream as he slides his fingers deeper still, stroking a spot inside her that sends her into a frenzy of spasms, coming undone in a shower of sparks, tears streaming down her cheeks as her entire body quakes, walls clamping down around his still-moving fingers.

Her eyes flutter closed as he withdraws, hands coming up to cup her face and impulsively kiss the tear-trails there, and she can sense that he’s worried by them, scared he’s made her cry for the wrong reasons.

‘It’s okay,’ she gasps, trying to quell the shaking of her legs. ‘Not those kind of tears.’

He doesn’t reply, just kisses her, gently this time, cradling her face in his hands, until the shaking stops. Rey opens her eyes to a whole new reality, an upside-down universe where Kylo Ren gave her the greatest orgasm of her life.

‘Have you ever done that before?’ she asks, no, *demands*, and he smirks.

‘No.’

‘Well, good,’ she says, struggling to sit upright and hitting her head on the top of the upper bunk-bed. ‘Ow. I haven’t either.’ Her face is hotter than the centre of the sun. She’d screamed so *loudly*.

Kylo just stares at her silently, before his eyes slip down to her breasts again. *One-track mind.* ‘I didn’t know you could blush there,’ he remarks idly, and Rey looks down to the red flush that’s spreading across her chest.

‘Goddammit.’
*screams*
*bangs the bongo drums*
"KYLO AND REY, SITTING IN A TREE, F-U-C-K-I-N-G"
"4000 WORDS"
"STAR WARS: THE LEMON AWAKENS"
*has become insane from lust and coffee*
*explodes into pile of pink glitter*
Chapter Twenty-Seven

He’s incapable of thought, of speech. Everything that just happened was guided by instinct and testosterone alone – the moment she’d said the word bed his brain had switched off, and the backup generator had kicked in, the only goal to get as close to her as possible, explore every centimetre of her, claim her body with mouth and hands and cock. He’d never held a girl this close before; never done the things he’d just done in the tiny, cramped little bunk-bed. He’d always imagined that his inexperience would make him clumsy, that he wouldn’t know what to do if presented with the opportunity - yet somehow, he’d known what to do, and instead of clumsiness, each touch was a revolution, and he’d intuited just which spots to focus on, the parts that drove her wild until she’d actually screamed – he’d felt the vibrations of that scream right down into her throbbing, wet-

Fuck. He’s painfully reminded of his own lack of release, harder than he’s ever been in his whole life. No wonder. Going from little to no stimulation, physical or otherwise, over the years spent under Snoke’s tutelage, to suddenly having all of his senses overwhelmed by this girl – it’s enough to send anyone into a tailspin.

She lies beneath him, still panting and rosy-cheeked from their exertions, her chest and neck stained adorably pink. She’s one of those people that blush all over when they’re embarrassed, and he didn’t know that could be so cute. But of course it’s cute. It’s her.

He couldn’t stop his gaze from moving lower if he wanted to, and he definitely doesn’t. He’s pictured her like this before – always a perilous thing, when there’s a Force bond between you that could open and reveal your thoughts at any moment – but the mental image doesn’t do her justice. She’s a comet, wrapped up in hot, sun-browned skin, flaxen hair strewn over the pillow like silk thread. She’s tanned in all but the most private places, breasts pale and tipped with dusty rose, and the same goes for the space between her thighs, hidden only by a sparse dusting of curly hairs. The way she’d tasted there is still all over his lips and tongue, that ambrosial kind of sweetness, and gods, remembering the way she’d writhed, pressing herself against his mouth – it was the most erotic thing he’d ever experienced. It’s like discovering the best kind of religion, something that fills a void you didn’t know you had, and now that you’ve found it, you can’t live without it.

Yeah, it’s like that.

Rey looks up at him questioningly, and her cheeks are still stained pink – obviously worried that he hasn’t said anything. Her pupils are blown wide, almost eclipsing her irises, and it makes him obscenely self-satisfied to know that that’s the effect he has on her.

‘Well,’ she says, still breathless, ‘we can’t come back from that.’

He frowns, her words triggering a memory of the holo-recording he’d just seen, the last thing he wants to think about right now, when he’s literally in bed with Rey in a state of total undress. But if there’s one thing his brain loves to do, it’s torment him when he’s at his weakest.

Stop – stop now, come back, I love you!

Darth Vader, the idol he’d worshipped for the past seven years, had killed his wife, the mother of his twins, because she wouldn’t rule the galaxy with him. When he’d seen the evidence, played out in
blue holographics, he’d thought he might throw up. Snoke had told him of Darth Vader’s moment of weakness – choosing his son over the Emperor, and Kylo had scornfully dismissed it as sentiment. If he’d known about this... it is the furthest thing from sentiment. It’s a tragedy.

And gods, the similarities between that moment and what had happened with Rey in the throne room. If his only redeeming quality was that he hadn’t Force-choked her when she refused his hand – what does that say about him? He’d still vowed to destroy her, framed her for Snoke’s death, and even if that was just him acting out, it’s still abhorrent. The lesson has been learned too late.

He’d said he was immune to the light, that he would not be seduced. He shouldn’t have said it out loud; because it makes it even worse that he’s here now, defying his words, half-naked and hard, with the taste of her arousal still heavy on his tongue.

She came crashing into his life like the clumsy, chaotic creature she is, and shone brightly enough to drown out some of the darkness in him. Not all, but some. And she fought her way into his heart and stayed there, despite both of their best attempts to extricate themselves, to shut down the bond between them. Well, mostly her attempts. He was just along for the ride.

But he doesn’t deserve her. He never did.

She is the embodiment of light, no matter how much she flirts with the dark – she will never embrace it. And he can never be light, never be anything more than a broken shell of what he used to be, before he made the choices that have come to define him. He may not have damaged Rey yet, but everyone else – countless people have been irreparably scarred by his actions.

Han, who is nothing more than ash, scattered among the dark matter of space after Starkiller exploded, who’d touched his face as he’d died, impaled on his son’s lightsaber.

Leia, who believed the best in him, had been hurled out into the vacuum of space during his squadron’s airstrike, and no matter whether he fired the critical shot or not, she nearly died because of him.

He’d almost orphaned himself in an attempt to prove his loyalty to a master for whom absolute devotion would never be enough. Snoke used him up, convinced him to murder everything that was good about him, broke him down systematically over the years, until he no longer sees a way back from where he stands, one foot in the howling rift, the other toeing the edge of the abyss, clinging to the last shreds of humanity he has left.

When you hate yourself enough, the darkness is a comfort. A friend. It would be so easy to submit and submerge.

‘Ben?’

Her voice brings him back to himself, jarringly. He blinks – she’s still naked and blushing, her bare breasts perilously close to his chest. He could gather her in his arms and hold her close, bury his face in her neck, breathe in the perfume of her skin and forget all of this. He really could.

But he doesn’t want her to be the next thing he ruins.

It’s all too much, all too sudden. He climbs awkwardly over her and out of the bunk bed, retrieving his undershirt from the floor. He tugs it over his head, facing away from her, because if he turns around and sees the look on her face he’ll collapse – he’s already proven that he’s too weak to resist when she takes him by surprise like this.

You have too much of your father’s heart in you, young Solo.
Yes, he does. And he has to stamp it out, because if he falls any further he’s going to make the same mistake as Han did with Leia. The smuggler and the princess weren’t made to last any more than a dark knight and a Jedi.

He hears the bedsheets rustling and knows without turning around that Rey is getting dressed, too. He grits his teeth and waits for his erection to subside, until he knows she’s completely covered, and then addresses the empty air.

‘We should discuss contingency plans.’

‘Um, okay,’ Rey agrees, a question in her voice that he refuses to acknowledge. He gets a glimpse of her feelings, a faint resonance that runs through the bond – the afterglow of her climax dulls her sense of confusion and slight rejection. On the plus side, at least he knows what works to cheer her up if she’s ever feeling negative. ‘What did you want to discuss in particular?’

He turns around, meeting her curious gaze with harshness. ‘Are you still hell-bent on taking me back to the Resistance base?’

Rey chews on the inside of her cheek at that, looking almost... guilty. ‘No,’ she admits. ‘I don’t think it’s a good idea right now.’

He cocks an eyebrow. ‘Wow. What changed your mind?’

Rey waves a hand, but he doesn’t miss the flicker of anger that passes over her face. ‘Not important. Let’s go to the cockpit and have a look over the star-charts. We can come up with a plan from there. I should probably listen to Leia’s messages again, anyway.’

Kylo nods and strides out of the crew quarters, and only once he’s put sufficient footsteps between himself and her does he allow himself to breathe properly. He kneads his temples for a moment, trying to ease the muscles that have tensed up before they can blossom into a headache.

He can hear Rey in the cockpit, replaying the messages from the Resistance. She skips over the ones from her Stormtrooper friend, FN-2187, he notes with curiosity. Maybe she’s ashamed of what they’ve done. The thought of that sends those awful pains through his chest again – just when he thought he was rid of them. Being around her isn’t healthy, but he forces himself to enter the cockpit, too, sit in the other seat, and suffer through his mother’s voice as Rey listens to the distress calls.

Their situation is even more bleak than he’d initially thought. Rey’s already pulled out a star-map, stained and scribbled all over with his father’s chicken-scratch handwriting. Currently, they’re floating somewhere in the unknown regions of space, far off the star-charts, and neither of them can pinpoint exactly where they are in relation to the systems of the Outer Rim. It could take weeks of travel before they even reach the Outer Rim, because they can’t jump to hyperspace, as they risk being tracked by the First Order’s computers. And all the while, they’re burning jet fuel.

Meanwhile, Armitage Hux has put an astronomical price on their heads, a sum so high that pretty much every bounty hunter in the galaxy has probably taped their pictures to the backs of their eyeballs. They’ll be recognised on sight if they disembark on any of the planets with HoloNet connections.

How the fuck did Hux find out about their collusion? That’s the one thing he hasn’t been able to nut out for himself, and he hates to admit it, but he might need to ask Rey to ask his mother about it.

Rey reads his thoughts as easily as breathing, not even looking up from the Falcon’s scanner as she pilots around a thick belt of asteroids. ‘He had security cameras all over the Supremacy. He put them
up on the HoloNet and sent the Resistance a copy. Finn said the whole galaxy has seen us talking through the Force bond.’ Her voice is inflectionless, but the Force bond works both ways, and he can sense the pit of acid in her stomach, the churning regret and embarrassment she feels.

*Of course* Hux had spied on him. He’d often suspected the illegitimate little bastard of bugging the ship – why hadn’t he thought to use a scrambling device to block any audio from being captured, or to comb his room for cameras? He’d gotten complacent, distracted by the developing bond with Rey, put too much faith in the side he’d chosen.

He won’t make that mistake again. If he is to be caught between the two sides of a war, a refugee, he’ll trust nobody but himself.

‘So,’ he says coolly. ‘No First Order. No Resistance. No allegiances, no commitments. It really is just us now.’

Rey shivers a little at that, and he can tell she’s thinking of their confrontation in the forest. When he’d confronted her after the murder of Han, bleeding profusely from the bowcaster bolt Chewie had fired into his abdomen. When she’d called him a monster, her eyes brimming with hatred.

‘No allegiances?’ Rey repeats, looking askance at him. ‘I might not be dragging you back to the base, Ben, but my loyalties still lie with the rebels.’

That stokes the coals of his temper, although it’s more of an effort to be angry with her nowadays. ‘Really?’ he asks, keeping his voice soft. ‘After all of this, you’re still so naïve. The Resistance doesn’t care for you any more than the First Order do for me now. You’re nothing but a cog in their war machine, as I was.’

‘Oh?’ Rey says sweetly, but the glint in her eye makes it clear there’s no love lost between them. ‘I don’t recall taking part in the genocide of an entire planetary system, or doing a demagogue’s dirty work. You were a puppet of the First Order, but I always had a choice.’

‘So you *chose* independently to go to Luke Skywalker and coax him out of solitude, bring him back to the noble fight, is that it?’

‘Don’t you *dare* use Luke against me,’ Rey hisses. ‘Not after what you made him do. If he hadn’t died, I could still be his student, instead of having to settle for you.’

‘You really think you could have become a real Jedi under his instruction?’ Kylo scorns. ‘I’ve already taught you more than that clichéd old fool ever could, about the light and the dark. He was frightened of his own shadow.’

‘Because of *you,*’ Rey snaps. ‘Because of what happened to you.’

‘Luke Skywalker is entirely responsible for what happened to me,’ he snarls, face flushing.

Rey just looks at him, with a hint of pity in her eyes. ‘No, he wasn’t,’ she says simply, and she reaches over and takes the star-chart from in front of him, calmly tracing the various planets, trying to locate their relative position.
Chapter 28

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sincerely, what the *kriff* is going on with him?

Kylo has departed for some other part of the *Falcon*, leaving Rey to ponder his abrupt exit from the bed they’d shared, with no small amount of chagrin, if she’s being honest. Did she read the signals wrong?

Rey hadn’t exactly expected him to sort through his reaction to Artoo’s video evidence in the space of an hour, but she hadn’t expected him to run out on her before she could reciprocate his efforts, either. Especially when only moments before he’d been kissing her like that. Like she was water and he was dying of thirst.

*I can’t come back to the light,* he’d said.

She’d thought her actions had made it clear that she wasn’t *expecting* him to return to the light anymore, that she was making overtures to accept him as he is, to learn to love all the jagged edges along with the more polished parts, his trauma and his truth. But he’d shied away, and it had thrown her, more than she was willing to admit.

*I don’t want to be like him.*

Was that the issue? Did she put him off by drawing comparisons between them and the relationship between his grandparents?

This is ridiculous. For gods’ sake, they have a *Force bond*, she can read his thoughts, she shouldn’t have to puzzle out the reasons behind what he does anymore. But when she considers plumbing the bond, opening it up to see the truth in him, she can’t.

She’s afraid. Of what she’ll see. Or what she won’t.

What if she was wrong about it all? What if his feelings changed, took an opposite arc to hers?

Once upon a time, when they’d first discovered the depth of the bond between them, she’d despised him, insulted him, even tried to shoot him with her pocket blaster. But like a tumour, he’s grown on her, and a small, base part of her had been flattered to see, so clearly written on his face, that he was attracted to her. It stroked an ego she didn’t know she had, to have the Supreme Leader of the First Order on his knees, practically begging her to speak to him again when she’d cut off their connection. When it wasn’t terrifying or annoying. Which was most of the time.

She doesn’t love him. Not yet. Maybe not ever, depending on all those little things like chemistry and personality and the benevolence of fate. But she’s done denying that there is a spark between them, a thread of attraction that runs blood-deep, an intense, electric energy that they crave to explore. Or, at least, she does. She’s not so sure he does anymore.

She didn’t expect the rejection to hurt, but it does, a subtle knife twisting in her guts. And what’s worse is that she doesn’t have *time* to be upset. There are more important things to consider than whether he wants to fuck her, as Kylo himself would so eloquently put it.
For instance, they’re running dangerously low on fuel. She estimates that the supply they have can last about a day and a half, and that’s without jumping to hyperspace, which is banned until further notice. If they want to travel incognito, they can’t jump, but they also can’t travel at all without jet fuel. Assuming they’re close to the Outer Rim, they could stop off at any of the more civilised planets and refuel, but with the First Order circulating their photos like cantina gossip, they’re liable to be recognised. And the Millennium Falcon doesn’t exactly come equipped with a costume-box of disguises.

She chews on her lip, thinking hard. Kylo had been of absolutely no help, of course – typical. He’s the one who made her get dressed to talk strategy, and then once she was in the pilot’s chair he just reverted straight back to needling her about Luke and the Resistance. Sometimes she really wants to shove him out of the airlock and let him have a bit of a float through the silence of space, so he can think about what an ass he is.

She circles a planetary system with the end of a pen. If only she knew where they were, things would be a whole lot easier. She should be panicking more about the fact that they’re low on fuel and food, but piloting is so calming for her, a reminder of the thing that gave her purpose on Jakku; scavenging parts, fixing starships and test-flying them. Half the time they broke apart before they could leave the ground, so whenever anyone calls the _Falcon_ a bucket of bolts, she’s kind of astonished. This ship is practically a miracle of engineering – old, yes, but more functional than it should be for a well-used freighter. She often wonders whether the Force has had a hand over the years in keeping the _Falcon_ working.

The Force seems to have a hand in a lot of things, lately.

She rests her chin on her hand and gazes out, through the screen at the stars swimming right outside her viewport. They burn yellow-hot, bathed in coronas of light, illuminating the way through space like strings of lanterns. She can never forget the first time she saw the stars this close, when she left Jakku with Finn, to deliver BB-8 back to the rebel base on D’Qar. The journey, the droid, the friend that started it all.

She’s suddenly overcome with a rush of remorse towards Finn. Gods, how must he be feeling? They’ve never feuded before – it must be hurting him as much as it does her. And she can understand, logically, why he’s upset – he would see Rey spending time with Kylo Ren as an enormous betrayal, he’s only just recovered from the time he spent in a coma, immersed in the bacta-suit to heal the lightsaber slash to his spine...

Maybe they should go back to the Resistance. But Kylo would never agree, and there’s enough conflict between them already.

She wants to talk to Finn again, or Leia, get their advice, but she can already predict what they’ll say. _Come back. Fight with us. We’ll protect you._

No. She needs to protect them. The rebels are weak in small number. They need more fighters.

She pulls the star-map back towards her, circling the Ileenium System, the star system that D’Qar was classified under. She looks at the planets closest to the destroyed rebel base: Sullust. Dagobah. Naboo.

Naboo, where Padme Amidala was queen. The peaceful, pastoral planet, unaligned with the galactic empire or the First Order. Loyal to the Republic. To the rebels.

An idea starts to take shape, and a spark of excitement starts in her belly. A plan? It _could_ work. And after all, what have they got to lose?
She picks up the transceiver and clicks over to the right frequency.

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‘Naboo.’ Kylo repeats, gaze flicking down to the map and back up to her face. They’re sitting in the cockpit again, this time with mugs of elderflower tea. Rey had negotiated with the Resistance for at least half an hour over the comms system, and at the end of that, she’d broken into the last of her stash of supplies. A soothing tea was required before having this next conversation.

‘Yeah, Naboo,’ Rey says excitedly. ‘It’s perfect! It’s a peaceful planet at the border of the Outer Rim, so it’s not likely to have a lot of people eager to spy for the First Order. It’s close to where we are – I think – so it wouldn’t take long to reach, and if our fuel supplies run out we can get help. And a lot of the people there are Resistance sympathizers, so they won’t care that the First Order’s marked me – I heard Leia talking about it a few times. I’ve already cleared this with the general, too, by the way,’ she adds, cautiously.

Kylo, to her surprise, looks like he’s actually considering it. She thought he’d at least kick up a fuss about her talking to his mother.

‘I sent a message to the base and she’s given permission,’ she continues. ‘She’s got ties to Naboo herself, and she’s letting the queen know I’m coming, and to keep my presence off the radar. If I could, I don’t know, get a private audience with her or the council or something, maybe they could spare a few fighters for the rebel cause? And maybe lend us a starship that won’t be tracked!’ she adds, her eyes sparkling at the thought. Being able to jump to hyperspace again without a care.

Kylo raises an eyebrow. ‘You expect me to stand idly by while you rabble-raise for the rebels,’ he surmises flatly.

Rey rolls her eyes. ‘For Force’s sake, Ben,’ she huffs. ‘You’ve been ostracized by the First Order as much as I have. We share an enemy now. General Hux has to be stopped. The Resistance can help, but they need more people on their side. Am I making sense here?’

‘So we’re meant to, what, go on a diplomatic mission to Naboo in the middle of a galaxy-wide manhunt? While Force-sensitive people are being obliterated, including my knights, who I’m meant to be saving? Entrusting their higher-ups to not turn us over to the First Order? Why do you suppose nobody came to the aid of the rebels on Crait, Rey? Because none of the governing bodies wanted to risk the wrath of the Order, or a repeat of what happened to the Hosnian System. The rebels have nothing. We have an army.’

‘It’s not we,’ Rey snaps, ‘it’s they. You aren’t one of them anymore, General Hux has seen to that. You’re a nobody, like me. A powerful nobody. A Force-sensitive. You finally have a chance to choose the right side, Ben. To do the right thing. Are you really so pigheaded that you won’t help me now, after everything?’

He stares at her impassively, not replying. Rey throws her hands in the air, exasperated.

‘You wouldn’t even have to do any work! I would be the one talking to the council, if that’s the way things go. You can’t, obviously, or you’d be arrested for war crimes, so I’d have to keep you secret. Leia even said that we could use her house in the lake country for a few days, to lay low while I try to get us another starship. And let’s face it, Ben – where else are you going to go? This ship is almost out of fuel, and even if it wasn’t, you can’t fly it to the First Order like you wanted - you’re excommunicated.’ She lifts her chin proudly. ‘Whether you like it or not, you’re stuck with me.’

That seems to penetrate his thick skull, at least. He frowns, and Rey can tell he’s working over the
details, looking for loopholes. But the plan’s watertight, at least as much as it can be when they’re two outlaws on the run from a fascist army.

‘What about the Knights of Ren?’ he persists, mulishly. ‘The whole reason we left Ach-To was to rescue them.’

‘No it wasn’t,’ Rey snaps. ‘We left because you were hell-bent on killing General Hux and couldn’t be reasoned with. And I won our sparring match, remember, so I decide what happens now. We aren’t going to waltz into the ranks of the First Order in some misguided attempt to save your knights. We can’t help them right now, not without backup. We are going to Naboo and we are going to get reinforcements for the rebels, and that’s how we’re going to fight Hux and the Order.’

‘Fine,’ he bites out. ‘But I’m agreeing to this for you, not the rebels. And if this goes pear-shaped, which it will, it’s all on you.’

‘That’s sweet, Ben,’ Rey gives him her best jubilant smile. ‘And don’t worry. I’ll protect you from the big bad politicians. You can stay at Leia’s house while I go to bat for the cause. Be my secret companion.’

‘I’m overcome with joy,’ he mutters, getting up from the cockpit and stalking off into the bowels of the ship.

‘I’ll take that as a compliment,’ she calls after his retreating back. Bloody hell.

Rey shakes her head, picks up the comm-system again and types in the code Leia gave her for the government of Naboo. Time to sweet-talk people for the third time today. If this is politics, Leia can keep it.

Now comes the hard part – harder than convincing the government of Naboo to go to war, or to give her a free starship, without any diplomatic experience. Sneaking Kylo Ren onto Naboo unseen, that’s the real challenge. Even without his distinctive mask and cape, the First Order has circulated his likeness through the galaxy, and he doesn’t exactly look like a cookie-cutter everyday man. Those ears alone are a dead giveaway, she thinks, and snickers to herself.

She programs a new course into the computer, crossing her fingers that they’re close enough to the Outer Rim to swing this. Right now, it’s the best chance they’ve got to retain their freedom and resist the First Order’s tyranny.

*And if this goes pear-shaped – which it will – it’s all on you.*

She is the last Jedi, the last beacon of hope in a dying galaxy. It’s already all on her.
This plan is doomed to fail. He doesn’t know how she can actually expect this to go the way she thinks. Naboo may not be one of the Core Worlds, and so the propaganda from the First Order may not have spread to the same extent, but it’s a lot to leave to chance. And how does she propose to hide him from the inspectors when they reach the planet? The planet may be neutral, government-wise, but no government is so neutral that they don’t inspect every ship that breaches their airspace. Or accept the presence of Kylo Ren, dark warrior, without batting an eyelash.

These are all questions that he should be asking her. But he’s sick of the cycle of fighting, snarking back and forth. Half the time it feels like their relationship has regressed right back to the start, vacillating between friends and enemies. She’s just so goddamned obstinate.

The object of his thoughts sits, narrow shoulders hunched, in the pilot’s seat, programming the Falcon’s flight trajectory. In the distance, a nebula revolves lazily, clouds of gold ionized dust blown out into the emptiness. He has no idea where they are; just that she’s betting they can reach the Outer Rim before their fuel supply runs out. He’s learning, more and more each day, that Rey is more of a gambler than a planner. Rash. Reckless.

All things he’d been accused of being, once upon a time.

Her hair brushes her shoulders, loose from the buns she’d worn it in the first time he’d met her. It’s longer than he’d thought, and a prettier colour, walnut-brown rather than mousy. It looks soft; light from the dashboard bouncing off it; and like it would be nice to comb his fingers through. His fingers twitch, rebelling against him, wanting to touch. He balls his hands into fists to keep them to himself.

It’s maddening, how his self-control is scattered to the winds when he’s around this girl. He’d already promised himself he wasn’t going to touch her again, give her the wrong idea. It’s too dangerous.

Too bad he likes danger. It’s practically his middle name.

What they’re doing now is dangerous – she’s contacting Naboo’s starship control through the comms-system, trying to make them aware of her approach. They’re not even close yet, but she doesn’t hesitate, obviously thinking honesty is the best policy here, rather than cloaking themselves and dropping right out of the atmosphere, blitzing the planet’s shields. That’s more his style.

And Han’s. If there was one thing his father had taught him, it was the importance of a grand entrance. Believable from a man who’d once dressed as a Stormtrooper and swaggered right onto the imperial Death Star.

‘You’re smiling,’ Rey’s awestruck voice breaks through his reminiscence. He realises she’s been staring at him and whatever smile he had quickly reverses itself.

‘It suits you,’ Rey decides, eyeing him up and down before turning back to the dashboard. He growls under his breath.

The shape of a planet, smaller than a marble, has become visible in the upper quadrant of their screen. The sonar system tells him that this is Naboo, where his grandmother was apparently from. Queen of. Whatever.
Rey whoops. ‘We didn’t even need to jettison anything!’ she exclaims. ‘We’ll make it there easy.’

‘Excellent,’ he says unenthusiastically, and Rey shoots him a look over her shoulder. It’s fun to antagonize her, but he swiftly shuts up when the comms-system pings with an incoming message from Naboo, and Rey has to answer it in her most professional manner while he’s standing right behind her, judging. She digs her fingers into her palms the whole time she’s communicating with them, to the point that he actually feels the imprint of her nails, and he’s glad when she cuts the connection to focus on flying them closer. A very tense hour passes as Naboo expands before their eyes, from marble-sized to a gargantuan, turquoise sphere. Rey guides them expertly through a turbulent patch before they breach atmo, the engines sputtering as the fuel reaches dangerously low proportions.

They’ve been instructed to land in the Theed Spaceport, one of the semi-defunct trade federation structures on the planet. Rey drops them lower in the sky as the port becomes visible, a maze of roads built at the base of towering cliffs, dotted with trees and the veins of tourmaline lakes. It’s picturesque – Naboo is one of the fairest planets in the galaxy, but neither of them have time to stop and admire the view, because they’ve got a problem.

The Theed Spaceport is visible in every direction, the network of landing strips surrounded by vast, open grassland. Getting him off the ship without detection is unlikely – and it’s not like he can weave a magic spell and turn invisible, either. Limits of the Force and all that.

‘We can’t land there,’ he says tensely, and Rey nods, and bizarrely, she looks happy.

‘Hold onto your hair,’ she advises him, before the punches the thrusters and the ship roars, leaping forwards into high speed and whizzing back up into the air, breaking its descent pattern. She roughly spins and jerks the shuttle a few times for good measure, destabilizing their flight path, and Kylo realises what she’s doing – making herself look like an idiot, an unseasoned pilot, to minimize the outcry from air traffic control. Trickery comes naturally to her. He wonders what Luke Skywalker would have had to say about that.

Rey laughs as she spins the ship through an actual 360 rotation and Kylo has to grip the back of the other seat to keep from being flung into the shuttle wall. She’s a fucking maniac, she’s going to kill them both – they’re skimming over the biggest lake now, churning up foam with the engines, and just when he’s about to loosen his grip on the back of the seat, she decelerates sharply, so that they practically fall out of the sky and onto the grassland at the edge of the lake, landing with a jolt that could shatter teeth.

Everything’s spinning, vertigo gripping him as hard as Rey does when she gets out of the pilot seat and drags him out of the parked shuttle, throwing a blanket from the cockpit over him to hide his face. ‘That bought us some time, but you’ve got to get out of sight,’ she grits, pulling him towards the shore, where a few small houses dot the edge of the lake. She chivvies him up the front porch step of the closest one, a modest, sprawling ranch house opposite Translucence Cove. ‘Get in there and wait for me while I make the apologies for whatever government decree we’ve just flouted.’

‘Are you serious?’ he actually asks her, still reeling with dizziness, but she just gives him one of what’s fast becoming her signature looks and shoves him through the door, before sprinting back off in the other direction. He shuts the front door when he hears the Millennium Falcon’s engines whine, then the gush of the engines as it takes off without him.

She could have at least left him his lightsaber. The door was left unlocked, the house is dark – there could be any manner of weird Gungan squatters here, so something to protect himself would have been helpful. But Rey’s focused on protecting the rebels now, and that clouds her judgement. It’s not the first time.
All it took was a few comm-conversations for her to forget everything that’s happened, the reason they left Ach-To and shot themselves into space in that old rust-heap. Well, his mind doesn’t work like that. He holds grudges, and doesn’t compartmentalize, so all of his problems are ever-present, carved into the matter of his mind. The Knights. Hux. Vader. The new and unwelcome presence of his mother in his life, making plans with Rey over the comm-link and not including him at all – not that he’d want to be. He could happily go the rest of his life, however long he has left, without speaking to that woman.

They were supposed to go to the First Order, not make a trip to Naboo. All right, so maybe Rey was correct and they can’t take on the whole of the First Order with lightsabers and mind-tricks to rescue what’s left of his knights. But they could have at least tried. And no, he doesn’t know what trying to rescue them would entail, beyond sneaking into the Star-Eater’s captain’s quarters and ripping Hux limb from scrawny limb, consequences be damned - but she hadn’t even considered it. But that’s not surprising. Jedi don’t waste empathy on the plight of Dark-siders, that much has been true for millennia.

But she is not a Jedi yet. She’s barely begun her training, and even with him teaching her, it’s not as if he had completed the trials before his uncle betrayed him. He’s a master of nothing, aside from the knights of Ren. And even that’s in pieces now.

What is Hux doing? Surely he realises that going after all Force-sensitives in the universe is an unthinkable folly? It’s like waging war on a deity and expecting to win. In fact, that’s exactly what it is – nobody can stop the Force. To do so would mean ending all life in the galaxy, and unless Hux is on some sort of cosmic kamikaze mission... the man’s a fool, but he isn’t incalculably so. Up until now, his military strategies have been sound.

Maybe killing Cianh was his attempt to draw Kylo out of hiding. If Hux has a rudimentary understanding of the Force, he’d know that when one develops a close relationship with another Force-sensitive, it is felt when their light goes out, causing an imbalance. He’d know that insubordination would enrage him, make him fly off the handle and probably fly back to the Order just to rip Armitage Hux several new assholes. But he underestimated one crucial thing – Rey’s bossiness. They aren’t going anywhere unless it’s on her terms, at least while she’s still breathing.

But there are other, more insidious, things that Hux has underestimated. For instance, the fact that the rest of his knights, those who are Force-sensitive, would have felt the death of Cianh Ren as keenly as he did - and if they had any sense of self-preservation at all, they would have fled, the second they could leave the Finalizer. The fact that he hasn’t felt any of the others’ signatures leave the Force means that they’re safe... for now.

If he could get a message to them... connect across the stars the way he connects with Rey. But it’s not possible. He’d never formed a Force bond with any of his knights – none of them could ever worm their way inside his head. Until her.

He could check on them, at least, if he meditates. After all, he’s in solitude, in the peace of an empty house. There’s no better time for reflection.

He’d been to Naboo before, of course. He’d known, in the innocent way children know things about their parents, that Leia had family ties to the planet, that they had royal blood – his mother was a princess of Alderaan, but here, she was treated like a queen. Or, as he now knows, the daughter of one.

This isn’t the same house he’d visited when he was a child, though. Back then, at only seven, they’d flown to Naboo for some treaty discussion or another, although his mother had pitched it to them as ‘a holiday for the family’. The house he’d lived in then had been right on the border of the lake, an
enormous terracotta villa, with dome-shaped towers and balustrades hung with climbing roses. He’d pretended to be a knight, running amok all over the place with a plastic sword, thinking of tricks to play on the officials who visited Leia there, lords and ladies with handkerchiefs and jewel-bright clothes. Han had been dragged along for the ceremony of it all, and complained bitterly about it – it was one of the only times Ben could remember him preferring to play with him rather than go off by himself.

That house must have belonged to Queen Padme. Why didn’t they just tell him? He’d thought the Jedi order was full of secrets – well, that’s nothing compared to the Organa-Solos. So much of his heritage is still a mystery to him – Darth Vader’s origin is just one of many examples. If he’d known about this side of his lineage...

But there’s no use speculating. What’s done is done. This is a different house, in a different time, under different circumstances. He’s far from a prince these days.

A monster.

He begins to move around the house, inspecting the different rooms, gathering dust. This house has not been occupied for quite some time. He wonders why Leia had it built, if she could have had the villa from his childhood. But then, maybe she’s not fond of reminiscing about that either. The past is dead. Better to build a new house and make new memories.

There is almost nothing of her here – the space obviously serves as just a crash pad for when she comes to Naboo on political envoys. It’s a blank slate, sparsely furnished with blue-upholstered furniture and wooden tables, but there are no paintings on the walls, no memorabilia. He walks out of the sitting room and across the hall, into the bedroom. Same story: a tiny dresser table and a bed with a navy-blue coverlet. Other than the bedroom and sitting room, there’s a small, sanded-wood kitchen and a modest refresher, all cobwebbed, all ageing. It’s more of a smuggler’s hideout than anything else.

So it’s perfect for him.

He ventures back into the bedroom and sits on the edge of the mattress, his thoughts looping back to the problem of his knights. It’s dark and cold in this room, and it’s easy enough to settle back on the bed, let his mind drift, until he is ready to reach out to the Force. He’s not used to meditation anymore, so it takes time to get in tune with himself, but once he does, it’s all too easy. It’s an excavation, gathering up all the fear and the pain and the fury, and reaching out with those feelings, hoping someone, or something, answers.

Here.

The web of the Force is endless, a matrix that he’d get irreversibly lost in if he tried to explore too far. It is not a grid, ordered and segmented, more like a net of tangled strings, pulsing with light at various nodes, and dark at others. He sees the pearlescent point of Rey’s Force signature, relatively close in his estimation – which is to be expected, given they’re on the same planet. When his mind brushes up against it, her signature, the Force seems to sigh, the web trembling slightly, vibrating on some higher plane. He moves away from her quickly, focusing on the other points of light and darkness in this maze.

How far can he actually push himself? Supreme Leader Snoke could find other Force-sensitives across whole galaxies. They’d both sensed Rey’s awakening in the Force, but Snoke could actually scry out where potential threats were located. It was a miracle he’d never found Luke. What if he could find the knights that way? Find out where they are, and if they’re not with the First Order, he could...?
He can’t scheme and meditate at the same time, so he pushes the half-formed plans out of his head and focuses. He follows a thread of darkness, lets it play out for an unknowable amount of time, exerting himself by trying to stay patient, calm, as he explores the depth of the Force. All the while he keeps the name of one of his comrades at the forefront of his mind: Traea Ren. He was strong with the Dark side of the Force, and Kylo had known his signature well. Surely it can’t be that hard to just see it...

But it is. The threads lead nowhere, circling back to Rey’s signature and his own, the extent of his senses. He is not some omniscient god; he cannot see the Force in its entirety. He withdraws, coming back to himself, and sits up on the bed, against the headboard, contemplating.

There are only a few planets that the First Order ships ever visit. Arkanis is one. Pillio is another. Hays Minor and Kerroc are also possibles, but Hux wouldn’t have authorized a recent visit. If he had any form of HoloNet connection, he could research their movements, put a timeline together. But those are luxuries he no longer has, and so he must rely on deductive skill alone. In the time they’d had together, Hux had thought him an unstable, idiotic child. He probably had not expected Kylo Ren to have the capacity for putting together a mission, at least not after the skirmish on Crait.

But he’s wrong. At least, he will be.

He sits in the dark room for what feels like hours, making and tossing aside variations of a plan. He’s still at it when the front door slams, carrying Rey in with the wind that eddies off the lake.

‘Ben?’ she calls softly, her footsteps padding through the sitting room.

If he truly wanted to be cruel, he could paralyse her right now, freeze her with the Force when she least expects it, steal his lightsaber back and make off. But without a ship, where could he go? He has to wait for the opportune moment – something that, until now, he’d failed to grasp.

He’s not going to waste any more time being a backseat participant in his own life. He has to forge his own path, and if he has to do it without her by his side, so be it. Maybe she’s right and going after his knights, confronting Hux, is suicide. But so what? He’s flirted with death for years.

If he dies trying to carry out this plan, it will break the Force bond – that’s what she wants, right? Everybody wins.

She can stay here and read her Jedi books and drum up numbers for the rebels and be protected by the government. He has other, grander ideas.

When that moment for revenge comes, he’ll be ready and waiting.

He takes a deep breath and steps out into the hall.

Chapter End Notes

Updates will be a fair bit slower after this one, guys, just to warn you. Life is getting in the way a lot!
Chapter Thirty

If there’s one thing Rey isn’t, it’s diplomatic.

She’d flown the *Falcon* back to the Theed Spaceport, and had been flagged down in minutes by a set of very angry looking officials. After touching down, she’d been escorted by those same officials up the cliff-side and into the palace, which was a surprise. She’d expected to have to argue her way in after breaking the planet’s rules so flagrantly, but the guards took her right through the gates. She’d marveled at the architecture: the aquamarine-capped towers and gilded statues in the courtyard, at the vines that grew over the facades of the buildings, festooned with flowers. She’d been led up a set of stairs and through endless, cavernous rooms before finally being delivered to the palace throne room.

Now, she enters to find the Queen of Naboo, seated directly opposite her at the head of a long marble table, and she’s promptly robbed of speech. Every grand notion she’d had about convincing the queen to send reinforcements for the rebels, about borrowing starships, go out the window at the sight of the monarch, and she’s acutely aware of her shabby dress and scuffed boots. The Queen is a vision in imperial purple, dressed in a set of ombre robes that shift from the palest lilac to the deepest violet. Her hair, black as a raven’s wing, is in two buns, twined with gold thread and secured by an understated crown, set with a single opal. Her face is powdered white, with a single decorative stripe leading from her black-lipped mouth to her chin. Leia had said she’d fought alongside Queen Soruna in the airforce, years earlier, but none of those years show on her face. She is beautiful, ageless, and stern. Her mouth does not curve into a smile at the sight of Rey.

A tall, dark-skinned man sitting at the queen’s elbow gets up, greeting her, and Rey feels her face flushing, unsure what to do or say. The rebels and the general are one thing, meeting *actual royalty* is another. She has no idea of the customs and probably looks like some dumb, uncivilised desert-youth. But she shakes the man’s hand as he introduces himself – ‘Governor Donta Gesset. We’ve been expecting you.’ – and at his invitation, she pulls out a chair at the opposite end of the table. She wrings her hands under the marble slab as she sits, nervous beyond measure.

‘Leia Organa made me aware of your arrival, and of what you might have to ask,’ the queen’s voice rings out like bells in the quiet room, and Rey squeezes her hands tighter, struggling not to shake. This is terrifying – give her a lightsaber and a set of enemies any day. ‘But before I pledge any of my fighters to your cause, I require a set of assurances.’

Rey bites her lip. ‘Um, okay? Yes, I mean. Your Highness.’ *Oh my days, why!*

That melts some of the queen’s frost, and her painted lip twitches into a smile.

‘Don’t be intimidated, Rey,’ the governor says wryly. ‘Soruna’s just toying with you.’

‘It’s working!’ Rey exclaims, making them both laugh.

‘Let’s get into it, then,’ Donta nods at the queen, who splays her lily-white hands on the table in a gesture of openness.
'First of all, Rey – you were present at the recent battle of Starkiller Base, correct?'

Rey fidgets in her seat. ‘Correct. Yes.’

‘And before the battle, you were on-board one of the First Order’s flagships as a prisoner?’

Leia must have already gone over the details, so why are they asking her this? ‘Yes.’

‘When you were aboard the starship, did you hear anything that would indicate the First Order have the resources to build a second superweapon?’

*Oh*, that’s what this is about. They’re scared if they pledge their allegiance to the rebels, the First Order will retaliate by firing on their system. Ben was right. She shouldn’t be surprised – as the son of a senator, he’d understand the ins-and-outs of political alliances better than she would. It’s a shame he’s a war criminal or he could be sitting here in these negotiations.

She could open the bond...? No, he’d have nothing nice to contribute. It’s not worth it.

‘Rey?’ She’d zoned out, and the Governor brings her back to reality, a curious look on his face.

‘Sorry,’ she blushes. ‘No, I don’t think they have any intention of building a second Starkiller. They’d need to take over another planet to even start work on one, and the First Order don’t seem to be concerning themselves with takeover at the moment.’

‘Indeed,’ Donta nods. ‘Their mission right now is centred on eliminating Force-users like yourself, stars know why. As a Jedi, I imagine that must be very distressing for you.’

Rey worries at her bottom lip. ‘I’m not-‘ she blurs, and then flushes redder. ‘Yes, I suppose it is. That’s why we’re trying to fight them.’

‘Forgive me,’ the queen interrupts, lacing her fingers together. ‘Are you not on the First Order’s wanted list yourself? I recognize your face. Why are they targeting you?’

Rey squeezes her hands so tightly she’s surprised her finger bones don’t crack. This is more of an interrogation than a diplomatic meeting, but she senses it’s necessary. Finding the right answer, though, that’s hard. Does she go for honesty, and implicate herself in the death of Snoke, the rise of Kylo Ren? Or does she tell a white lie and make things easier for both her and Ben?

She opts for the lie. ‘Their leader doesn’t like Jedi, or any Force-sensitives. They’ve even turned on their own Supreme Leader, Kylo Ren, because he is strong with the Force. That shows how committed they are. If the Resistance doesn’t try to stop them, they’ll kill everyone, anyone who’s got an aptitude for the Force. They want to wipe it out entirely. They can’t succeed.’ She leans forward in her seat, getting worked up despite herself.

‘But why?’ Soruna probes. ‘The First Order’s goal, since they first rose from the ashes of the empire, has been to establish a new rule in the galaxy. Not wipe out what’s left of an old religion. Why the ideology shift?’

Rey twists her fingers together frantically. Her commitment to the lie is breaking apart rapidly – is there any point in concealing anything? It won’t help them get a new ship and get out of here. Soruna isn’t going to fall for any white lies – she’s too old and too wise for that.

*Screw it. Honesty is the best policy.*

‘Because Kylo Ren is a former Jedi, the nephew of Luke Skywalker, and he killed their old Supreme
Leader,’ Rey whispers.

‘And how do you know this?’ Queen Soruna leans forward, resting her chin on her steepled hands.

‘Because,’ Rey says, shrugging off the last of the lie, ‘I helped him do it.’

Now, as she walks up the steps to Leia’s lake house, she mulls over the conversation that had followed that truth. Soruna had adjourned their meeting shortly after, but is expecting her back at the castle tomorrow for further talks. At least she’d seen fit to grant Rey a new spacecraft, without having to bow and scrape too much.

Soruna had bid Donta Gessett take her down to the shipyard with a few more government officials, and authorized the temporary trade of the *Millennium Falcon* for an unnamed Naboo freighter. They’d initially considered giving her a starfighter, but Rey doubted it would have fit Ben alongside her, and luckily, they’d offered her a freighter, assuming it was what she was used to flying. A half-truth.

So she’s secured them a fully fuelled starship, and it won’t be tracked, but they can’t leave yet. She still needs to meet with the queen and negotiate the terms of an alliance with the rebels. Luckily she’s got a trick up her sleeve in that regard.

Ben’s not going to be happy about staying, and Rey dreads telling him as she walks through the front door.

This house has a strange vibe, and it’s obvious Leia hasn’t used it in a while. But there are little touches – the shade of blue paint on the walls, the lacquer of the wood, that make it homely. She pads through to the kitchen, opening the cupboards – there’s *food!* And she’s just about to start cataloguing it when Ben comes into the kitchen, and she shivers at his presence, but not unpleasantly.

‘Three days,’ is all he says, his voice inflectionless.

*What? ‘Um, what?’*

He steps through the doorway, levelling her with his gaze, devoid of feeling. ‘On Ach-To, you gave me three days to teach you the ways of the Jedi. Now I’m giving you the same. Three days on Naboo, then I’m leaving, with or without you.’

Rey sighs, but won’t be distracted from rummaging through the cupboards, pulling out different condiments. ‘And in those three days I gave you, *did* you teach me everything you knew?’

He huffs behind her, annoyed. ‘That was an impossible task. You cannot teach someone all there is to know about a religion in three days.’

Rey turns around, hands on hips. ‘Then it follows that it’s also impossible to convince a government to form an alliance in three days, right?’

Ben steps forward, so they’re practically chest-to-chest, and it’s less like a sizing-up and more like uncomfortable intimacy. ‘*When* are you going to stop sacrificing your own wishes to save a dying rebellion? They don’t matter now. Hux going after Force-users – *that* matters. And I know how to stop him.’

‘By all means, if you have some grand rescue mission planned, tell me,’ Rey snipes, abandoning her
condiment search and crossing her arms.

Ben glares at her. ‘Arkanis. Pillio. Both are First Order-allied planets, both are drop-off zones for the troops on-board their Star Destroyers. I’ve been stationed at both before in between active missions. If we were to sweep those systems, I can find the Knights of Ren, I’m sure of it. If we save them, that’s a good six more Force-sensitives safe from Hux, and we stand a better chance of fighting the First Order.

‘Everyone in that army, they’re just men. They don’t have what we have. If we came together, used the Force against them, we could win the war.’ He’s getting more excited, brown eyes gleaming with something resembling bloodlust. Rey doesn’t like it.

‘It sounds like you’re suggesting forming a third faction,’ she says brusquely. ‘Separate from the rebels and the order. And if you think eight people can take on an army, you’re completely insane. We need the rebels, Ben, if we’re going to have any chance of winning this.’

‘We don’t need anyone,’ he declares. ‘We didn’t need anyone when we took down Snoke. That was just you and I. It would be the same for Hux, if we could slip under the First Order’s radar and reach him.’

‘So we what, cut off the head of the hydra and it’s all over?’ Rey challenges, lifting her chin to meet his gaze, hot and impassioned. ‘They have hundreds of officers and thousands of troops. We’re a barely-trained Jedi and a Jedi Killer, no offense. Even with your Knights, that’s eight people against potentially millions.’ She pauses, sighs, her eyes flitting away from, then back to, his. ‘Look, you should talk to Leia.’

‘The lava pits of Mustafar will freeze over before I seek out my mother’s advice,’ Ben hisses, and Rey rolls her eyes.

‘I mean it. She’s an excellent strategist. She knows what will work and what won’t, better than you or I could. And you’re going to have to work with her eventually. We’re enemies of the Order now. If you want to win, the enemy of your enemy is going to have to be your friend.’

‘I can’t-‘ he starts, but Rey spins, picks up a jar of cinnamon and brandishes it at him.

‘Can we please,’ she emphasises the plea, widening her eyes, ‘have just one night without arguing incessantly? I know we have different ideas about everything, but – damn!’ she exclaims. ‘I’ll agree to the three days – truthfully, I don’t think it’ll take much more than that to convince Soruna, but Ben, you’ve got to meet me halfway here.’

She places the cinnamon jar back on the counter. ‘Counterproposal. For these three days, for as long as we’re inside this house, we forget about the war, about schemes and fighting. After that, we fly out of here and rejoin the cause, sweep the Arkanis sector, whatever. But until then, we’re neutral territory, okay? You and me. Truce.’ She flicks her finger back and forth between them.

He narrows his eyes, and she thinks he’ll refuse. But what other choice does he have?

‘All right,’ he says, calmly enough, his expression indecipherable. ‘What do you suggest we do, then?’

Rey starts sorting through the kitchen drawers, busying herself. Her fingers alight on something smooth, layered with dust. She pulls out a bottle of Corellian wine, grinning.

‘I vote we start with this.’
Chapter End Notes

My apologies for this chapter taking a while, I recently came down with an ear infection that's pretty bad, still recovering from it so the next chapter might take even longer while I'm stuck putting wet cloths on my ear and taking antibiotics and shizz. But ah well, no better time to escape into writing fantasy than now!
They hadn’t actually started with the wine. After sorting through the rest of the general’s considerable food stash – it’s as if she were preparing for the apocalypse despite hardly ever visiting this house – they’d found a stack of ready-meals, Dantooine cuisine, believe it or not. But once they’d finished those, Rey disappeared into the kitchen, returning with a pair of wineglasses and the pretty green-glass bottle.

Kylo rolls his eyes. ‘Are we really doing this?’

Rey grins broadly as she unscrews the lid of the wine bottle. ‘I’m told this is a rite of passage into adulthood.’

He groans and leans back on the couch. ‘Rey, you’ve been on battlefields. You’ve tasted blood. You’ve flown starships by yourself. I would think that those are better markers of adulthood than drinking wine.’

His words don’t deter her. ‘Stop being so cynical. On Jakku, there’s no wine, just cheap methyl ethyl they sell in the Niima outpost bars. I’ve tried that. But wine is for rich people, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, and definitely not for Jedi,’ Kylo points out, raising his eyebrows.

Rey scowls. ‘As you’ve told me countless times, I am not a Jedi, yet.’ Her face brightens again, the sudden reversal of expressions throwing Kylo for a loop. ‘So hey, this is the exact right time to do this!’ She pours a little of the rich, purple liquid into each glass. ‘So think of this as a last hurrah.’

‘Indeed,’ Kylo mutters to himself as Rey hands him a glass. He doesn’t touch it, waiting with mild amusement for her to make the first move.

She holds the glass to her nose and sniffs, looking every inch like the snooty connoisseurs of Coruscant’s upper-class. Then, she sips. Her face contorts.

‘Ugh!’ she holds the glass at arm’s length, sticking her purple-tipped tongue out. ‘It’s horrid!’

Laughter bubbles up in his chest and he can’t contain it – the outraged look on her face is just too perfect. The sight of him laughing makes her expression turn to one of astonishment, before she gives in and starts giggling too, and he can feel that she’s happy for whatever reason, content in this moment, and some of that contentment travels across to him, like a virus, and he’s suddenly much happier than he’d been half an hour ago, when they’d discussed the terms of their truce.

He gingerly tastes the wine himself – it’s not that bad, a little bitter but rich and heady – and Rey copies, lifting the glass to her lips again. This time, she swallows properly, without grimacing.

‘You know what,’ she says thoughtfully, ‘I think it’s better the second time.’

‘Just wait until the third,’ he teases, and he wants to chastise himself for toying with her, being so...
flirtatious.

He doesn’t really know how to flirt, so maybe that’s not what he’s doing at all. His innocent, girl-wooing days are long past, even if he’s never done more than kiss one. But being playful like this, teasing her, eliciting a reaction from her, is as intoxicating as the wine that’s slowly diminishing in front of them.

Soon enough, Rey’s refilled both of their glasses, and she pulls her legs under her on the couch, propping herself up with an elbow on the cushion. She fixes him with her gaze and asks, seemingly out of nowhere, ‘What was it like in the Jedi Temple?’

Kylo balks at the question, and his first instinct is to snap back, shut the topic down before it wounds him. But the wine has dulled the edges of his conscience, and his inhibition, and so he decides to indulge her.

‘It was boring. I was one of twenty padawans, and the oldest by a good seven years. Skywalker cared more for the littlest ones - they needed more affection, I suppose. I was by myself a lot.’

‘So basically not a lot different from living on the Supremacy,’ Rey muses, furrowing her brow.

‘Yeah,’ he admits, but he hesitates, not wanting to go deep into this, not with her.

Rey didn’t get that memo, though. She settles further back into the couch, clearly mulling things over. ‘So what were you to the First Order? You never wore their uniform, or followed their rules.’

He shrugs, scowling, wishing he’d put his foot down and said no to the wine, maybe even to the truce. ‘I was just... I was there because Snoke wanted me there. Where he could keep an eye on me, so I wouldn’t... why are we discussing this?’ he bursts out, setting the wine glass down on the table.

‘I thought we were supposed to be pretending there’s not a war raging beyond this planet. Talking about the First Order defeats that purpose, don’t you think?’

He expects her to argue back, but Rey looks surprisingly contrite. ‘You’re right, I’m sorry,’ she agrees, and then she surprises him further, getting up and shuffling closer on the couch. ‘Why don’t we try something else?’

He leans back slightly, keeping the distance between them. ‘What do you mean?’

Rey’s hazel eyes glitter with mischief. ‘If we’re going to forget the war, forget everything, then we have to forget each other too. Let’s pretend that we don’t know each other, that we’re meeting for the first time.’

He looks at her with what he’s sure is total disbelief. ‘Why?’

Rey shrugs, losing a little of her confidence. ‘I want to know more about you. Not taking into consideration the dark-side warrior version, but all the other stuff.’

‘What other stuff?’ he half-shouts in exasperation.

Rey huffs. ‘I don’t know – your favourite foods! Favourite colour. Best planet you’ve been to. That sort of stuff!’

Kylo buries his face in his hands. ‘Damn it, Rey, you want us to act like we’re two strangers on a fucking restaurant date or something.’

Rey just looks at him, an odd expression on her face. ‘Yeah, so?’
He groans, reaching out for the wineglass and pouring another. ‘All right. Fine. You first.’

Rey smiles, resettling herself on the couch. Then, she extends her hand. ‘Hi, I’m Rey.’

He glowers at her, but takes her outstretched hand. ‘I know.’

‘So, wait, let me make sure I’ve got this right,’ Rey gasps, in the midst of a fit of giggles. ‘Your favourite colour is, in fact, not black. But orange.’

He glares, but his vision’s a little blurry, so he can’t hit her with the full force of his frown. ‘Yes. What’s so hilarious about that?’

Rey practically shrieks with laughter. ‘I’m picturing you in the same clothes, but in orange. I’m imagining an orange Kylo Ren following me through the woods. I’m thinking about your helmet being orange. Oh, stars— she slaps him on the arm, cackling, ‘I’m imagining you in orange underwear!’

He growls, grabbing her arm. ‘Stop imagining me in underwear.’

Rey howls. ‘Whatever you say, Kylo Orange.’ She concentrates for a second. ‘Kylorange.’

‘Clever girl,’ he says tartly, letting go of her arm. Rey droops into the couch cushions, still giggling.

‘Okay, now guess my favourite colour.’

‘Blue,’ Kylo drones.

‘No!’ Rey protests, suddenly imbued with kinetic energy and launching off the cushions, almost falling off the couch entirely before Kylo reaches out and steadies her. ‘You just assume that because I’m a Jedi.’

‘I assume that because this guessing game is ludicrous,’ he slurs under his breath, but she’s too far gone to hear him.

‘It used to be green,’ she burbles, shakily pouring another glass of wine. Oh, gods. ‘That really pretty deep green you see in the forest, or underwater. But now I like brown.’

He’s barely listening, but he has to tune in when Rey reaches out and almost pokes him in the eye. ‘Your eyes are brown,’ she matter-of-factly tells him.

There are any number of sarcastic replies just waiting to be used, but he’s got some tact left in him, and he’s tipsy and she’s veering towards drunk, so he just says, ‘I know.’

Rey laughs, a low, husky laugh at odds with the peals of giggles that came before it. She slides noticeably closer again, and this time he doesn’t pull away, doesn’t question it. He can see where this is going, and it’s fucking terrifying, but he’s excited at the same time.

Rey stares directly into his eyes, biting her lip, fighting to get the words out. ‘Ben...’

‘What?’ he whispers, afraid to say anything else.

‘Do you...’ she stumbles over what she wants to say, the wine making her flush a terrific pink, ‘did you want to...’ Her voice trails off and she blushes even deeper, her hair falling over her face like a
shroud, hiding her embarrassment.

It’s up to him, this time.

He reaches out, timidly, to touch her face. His fingertips brush over her cheekbone and she shivers, and he brushes the strands of hair off her face, tucking them behind her ear. Her eyes flutter closed, dark lashes fanning out, and her mouth curls up in a half-smile when his fingers trace over her forehead, her nose, her chin, before he touches her lips.

She parts them hungrily, wanting more, and she leans forward unconsciously, trusting him to bridge what’s left of the gap between them.

It’s now or never.

He pulls her forward into a kiss, and it’s different from the others – he tastes wine and intent on her lips. This is wilder, less inhibited, more honest, and she presses against him insistently, her hands coming up, fingers tangling in his hair. She’s making all the first moves, right from the start, and now she invites him to reciprocate as Rey settles herself over his lap, kissing him harder, deeper.

The room is spinning, and it’s not just the alcohol. This is happening and this is insane. His lips part unconsciously and he feels the tip of her tongue glide over his lip before diving deeper, and where did she suddenly learn to kiss like this? Thanks to the bond, it’s impossible to tell who’s feeling what as Rey shifts atop him, pressing even closer if possible, until she envelopes all his senses and the only thing that’s left is the feel of her lips on his, soft and sweet. Her hair tickles his face, that distinctive scent of her, and he snaps out of the wine stupor enough to realise that this is Rey, the girl he’s not supposed to touch anymore, she’s too good for him-

But fuck, the feeling of her straddling his lap, rubbing against the growing lump in his trousers when she moves-

‘Oh – oh, no,’ he moans, and Rey breaks the kiss to laugh at him, pulling back enough so only the tips of their noses are touching.

‘Oh no what?’ She doesn’t disentangle her fingers from his hair, either, close enough that if he moved two centimetres they’d be kissing again, but-

‘We should stop,’ he says, slurring a little, ‘before this gets out of control like last time.’

‘Do you want to stop?’ Rey asks, eyes sparkling.

‘No,’ he admits, ‘but I…’

I don’t want to break you.

She hears the thought and her smile widens, and she kisses him quickly, flirtatiously.

You can’t break me. I’m too strong for you.

He frowns at that, worrying. You don’t want this. Surely you realise I’m not good eno-

Shhh. She presses her forehead against his, and he closes his eyes, soothed somehow. You think too much. Her thoughts take on a sombre tone. Ben, if you honestly want to stop, then we stop, easy. But if you’re trying to save me from you in some kind of weird dark knight chivalry, then cut it. You won’t hurt me.
He opens his eyes, right into hers, and an understanding passes between them, that same, strange energy from the interrogation room, an eternity ago.

Rey gets off his lap, standing up and holding out a hand to him. She smiles, coquettishly.

‘Join me?’ is all she says.

Speechless, he takes her hand, twining their fingers together as he stands.

Chapter End Notes

*inside my head*

Michael: oh my GOD, okay it's happening, everybody stay calm-
Dwight: What's the procedure, everyone, what's the procedure-
Michael: STAY FUCKING CALM!!
Chapter 32

Chapter Thirty-Two

It’s an uncoordinated race to the bedroom. Rey can’t walk in a straight line, but it’s the funniest thing ever and she can’t stop giggling, until she’s in the room with the blue bed and suddenly everything’s real and technicolour-bright, from the coverlet to the paint on the walls to the precise shade of Ben Solo’s lips as she falls against him, both of them collapsing back onto the mattress.

She tugs her wrap and undershirt over her head, clumsily, and when she looks over she can see that he’s removing his shirt as well, the movement making his mane of black curls even messier. She wants to run her fingers through it, and she can, so she does, pushing him down onto the pillows and kissing a line down his cheek and chin. Both their mouths are stained purple from the wine, and his lips look so kissable, she can’t resist crushing her lips against his, hard and fast, and he pushes her down from where she sits atop him until their hips are aligned.

She can feel how hard he is, it makes her vision swim, and she breaks the kiss to let one of her hands brush over the swell of his erection, tracing the shape of him under his trousers. Sitting astride him, her hands travel up his stomach to his chest, and if she had time, she’d count the smattering of moles and freckles there – there are so many. He has a little pattern of freckles next to one of his nipples, and she brushes her fingertips over them, grinning.

‘You’re less scary with all these freckles,’ she informs him, and he growls, deep in his chest. Rey looks down at him, at the smooth expanse of his skin, creamy and pale, under her more sun-browned hands. She traces the muscles that swim under his skin, fingertips tip-tapping up over his collarbones, to the lightsaber burn on his shoulder, smaller and less noticeable than the last time she’d seen it. The scar on his face has faded, too, she realises as she touches it, her eyes flitting up to meet his.

He’s healing.

They both are.

‘Why are you worried about hurting me when you’re the one with all the scars?’ she whispers, but she doesn’t really need an answer. She leans over him again, her hair dusting his cheek as she kisses him, as gently and softly as she knows how. He kisses back, soft too at first, then harder as the intensity builds between them, the heat and the passion and the power. She rocks her hips experimentally atop his, and bites back a giggle at the filthy moan that escapes him. It’s almost as head-spinning as the wine, the effect she has on him, reducing a dark-side warrior twice her size to a panting boy on the mattress.

‘Stop teasing,’ he orders, but his voice has a bit of a crack to it, and Rey smiles harder, running her hands back over his abdomen and down to the waist of his trousers. Thank the stars, she still has enough hand-eye coordination to unzip his pants, keeping eye contact with him the entire time. He helps her slide them off, and now he’s only in underwear, and there’s that little patch of freckles on his thigh again. Rey runs her finger over them and she could swear he shakes from the contact, she’s so close to touching him there, and before she can second-guess she’s sliding his underwear off, too.
Her heart skips beats at the sight of Ben Solo stripped bare, lying next to her, every inch of skin exposed. The V of abdominal muscles that was previously concealed by pants now points like an arrow to the length of his cock, and yeah, she’s seen it before, in stolen Force bond moments, but not like this, directly in front of her, completely hard because of her. For her.

She suddenly remembers that she’s still half-clothed, and hurries to shimmy out of her pants and underwear. This time, with a combination of alcohol and already having been naked in front of him, she’s not shy, and Rey slides up next to Ben, running a finger up his bicep, making him shiver.

He twists to look at her, a slight glaze of nervousness in his eyes. Rey knows he’d never admit to it, but he’s scared to make the next move, the deciding one. The ball’s in her court again.

She kisses him swiftly, then clambers atop him again, lowering herself down until they’re at the correct positions. Gods, his skin feels amazing against hers, especially there, his length against her sex, wetness pooling between them, heat rising. Their height difference is erased when they’re horizontal like this, and they’re eye to eye as Rey laces one of her hands through his, the other reaching down to guide him to the part of her that aches the most-

Oh...

She can feel the head of his cock at her entrance before she lowers herself down onto him, centimetre by centimetre, the width of him stretching her in a way that should be uncomfortable, but just makes all of her nerves spark. She doesn’t take her eyes off him, watching his eyes widen as she slides lower onto him, until there’s that brief moment of resistance, the reminder of her virginity and his, before she grips his shoulders and he takes hold of her hips and, with a momentary flash of pain, the resistance is gone and she takes him to the hilt, the sudden fullness making her cry out.

He shakes under her with pent-up energy, and Rey takes a moment to recover before she starts to move, slowly, rocking her hips up and back down in a sensuous rhythm, taking her other hand and twining her fingers through Ben’s, watching him beneath her, mouth falling open slightly with every move she makes. His breath is quickening rapidly, and when she cants her hips higher, sliding up his length almost to the tip and then down, he lets out a small, bitten-off moan.

This is dizzying, climbing to new heights, the feeling of him inside her, the bond that connects them making every sensation multiply, the sounds they’re making in the quiet room blush-worthy. She keeps her movements deliberately slow, because she can feel what it does to him, the sweet agony of it. His fingers curl around hers in a bone-crushing grip, but Rey maintains the upper hand, sliding forward so she can grind against his pubic bone on the way down, and he bucks under her, losing patience-

‘Still think you can break me?’ she whispers her defiance, adjusting her grip so she’s holding his wrists to the mattress. His eyes are so dark when he looks up at her; the black holes of his pupils drink in every inch of her nakedness, breasts bouncing above him as she moves.

Ben doesn’t reply, but breaks her grip on his wrists, one of his hands snaking down to where they’re joined, and he-

‘Oh-’ Rey gasps as his fingers slip between them, rubbing her clit as she moves over him, and the friction intensifies, the wet slide of flesh on flesh combined with the quick circling of his fingertips on her centre - stars, he’s good at that - and she moans, half wanting to clap a hand over her mouth at the feral sound, but her hands are going numb, as she finds a new, profane religion in the swirl of his fingers and the throb of his cock inside her.

Ben’s shed the last of his self-doubt, and when she rocks forward and bottoms out against him,
letting out a high-pitched whine, he grabs her hips suddenly. Without warning, he lifts her off him, flipping her over so that she’s trapped under his arms, panting and wriggling, and the switch of positions makes her heart jump and her head spin, and he pushes her thighs apart and positions himself at her entrance, pausing long enough to look her directly in the eyes. His are completely black, devoid of light.

‘Do you want me to fuck you, Rey?’

‘You know I do,’ she gasps, squirming under him, missing the fullness of him inside her.

‘How badly?’

She whimpers, unable to control herself. This is humiliating, she’s pushing herself up against him with desperation, trying to get him to enter her again, but he’s resolute on teasing-

‘Very badly,’ she pants, and he pushes into her slightly, just enough to make her feel it, but not enough to satisfy the terrible ache, the emptiness he left.

‘How much do you hate me right now?’ he murmurs next to her ear, withdrawing slightly and then pushing in again, teasingly.

‘A lot,’ Rey shivers, wrapping her legs around him and trying to pull him in deeper, but he’s holding on-

‘Say it.’ His voice has never been so low, so rough. It makes her shake with want.

‘I hate you, Ben Solo,’ she groans, and then he’s all the way inside her, keeping her still as the new angle lets him thrust deeper and harder, and she can’t speak, it feels so incredible and new, the bond between them flourishing with the contact, and she can feel his pleasure mounting as well as her own, can feel her muscles contracting around him, how tight she is, and she soars as he takes hold of her hips again, nails digging into her sides, and thrusts harder, faster, pushing her back into the mattress.

She couldn’t move if she wanted to, her body’s about to shake itself apart. She’s starting to crest the wave of emotion that’s been building up, tears springing to her eyes, flinging her head back as Ben takes one of her earlobes between his teeth, letting out a feral groan as his hips drive unforgivingly into hers. She can feel herself starting to clench around his cock, stars bursting behind her eyes, and the pressure makes them both insane, the bond between them transforming their touch into a kind of synaesthesia, where every brush of skin is a colour, and each moan or sigh has a taste, heavenly and perverse.

‘Fuck,’ Ben spits as she starts to come undone, the vibrations rocketing down her spine and into her legs, quivering as she cries, her climax hitting her like an avalanche, frissons of ecstasy coursing through her, turning her muscles into jelly, and Ben thrusts into her hard as her walls flutter and spasm, contracting around him.

Ben Solo dies a thousand bittersweet deaths as her cunt grips him, milking his cock to completion, arms shaking as he tries to avoid collapsing on top of her. He almost passes out from the intensity of his climax, stomach clenching sweetly as his seed pumps out in thick spurts. Rey feels the sudden, burning warmth and moans, her entire body trembling.

He presses his face into her neck, light-headed and breathing hard. Rey weakly lifts a hand to pat him gently on the shoulderblade; bright lights still sparking like embers on the backs of her closed eyelids. She smiles, and it’s the freest kind of smile, blissed-out and giddy.
His mind is completely open to her, in this post-coital nirvana, and Rey can read from the timbre of his thoughts that he’s also feeling a definite wow, alongside the feeling of being utterly exhausted. Lazily, without expending any effort, she explores his emotions, surface ones first, the satisfaction and the slight tinge of self-consciousness, before delving deeper, stirring up a flurry of emotions like bubbles in their shared connection, and her mind alights on something, an emotion that she’s only just begun to recognise in herself is mirrored in him-

Oh.

The last of the alcohol is burnt out of her. Rey blinks and withdraws as Ben rolls off her, their bodies sticky and still buzzing from the comedown. When he slips out of her, a trail of his cum, viscous and white, slicks the upper part of her thighs, and he looks like he might pass out. Rey helpfully summons a towel from the wardrobe with the Force, mopping herself up as he curls up next to her on the bed, an arm snaking under her waist, pulling her close to him as he shuts his eyes sleepily, settling onto the pillows.

Their exertions may have completely drained him, but Rey’s never felt so alive. She realises with a little thrill that this will be the first time they’ve slept together, in the literal sense. They’ve been in separate beds for far too long.

She’s completely encircled in his arms, so she throws the towel aside and makes use of the Force again to pull the bedsheets up and over them, before she closes her eyes, thinking about everything she has to do tomorrow. She has to talk to Queen Soruna again, convince her to honour the alliance; she has to test-fly the new starship they’ve been given; she should probably talk to Finn, too... that’s not going to be an easy conversation, with all of this added subtext.

But tomorrow, through all the hard conversations, she can imagine that somewhere, in an alternate universe, they’re still in this room, tangled together under blankets, or kissing in the dark. Time is frozen there, and she is so happy.

She sighs, snuggling into the pillows, and eventually she succumbs to the temptation of sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I just have one thing to say.
https://imgur.com/P1QYppj

Okay, two things to say.
I listened to the stripped-back version of Halsey's 'Colors' over and over while writing this scene, so if you're feeling the mood I highly suggest giving it a go. It's gorgeous.
Chapter 33

Chapter Thirty-Three

By the time he resurfaces, she’s gone. No note, no explanation. Just her discarded clothes on the floor and the smell of her hair on the pillows.

He groans and rolls over, the comforter sliding off the bed and landing on the floor. Damn it. She could have at least woken him up before she’d pissed off to gods-know-where, evidently to suck up to the decision-making body of this planet. And now he’s expected to stay indoors all day and pretend he doesn’t exist, until she gets home and they get to fight about their plans all over again.

Well, they could fight.

Or they could fuck.

One or the other, it’s becoming rather a perpetuating cycle with them.

And here he thought he’d never end up like his parents.

He rubs his eyes and sits up in the bed, exhaling sharply at the strange muscle aches that start up at the movement. Muscles he hadn’t even known he’d had were pushed to the limit last night, and he still feels slightly light-headed as he stretches, trying to loosen the tension that built up overnight.

Last night.

They hadn’t had a chance to talk about it, what it meant, if it even meant anything at all. It’s probably best to put it out of his mind, but he’s a brooder by nature, and damn, if this isn’t something to ruminate about for days on end. He just had sex. For the first time. And he’s pretty sure it was her first time, too. And that’s terrifying and thrilling, simultaneously.

What if he’d hurt her? All right, so she hadn’t seemed like she was screaming in agony, exactly, but he’s new to this and, even with the added benefit of a mental link, she’s not easy to read. She never was. He can’t help smiling a little to himself, thinking of the time he’d tried to read her mind, how strongly she’d blocked him. Her entire body was laid bare for him last night, but her mind is still a mystery most of the time.

Well, until he can explore her mind, he’ll just have to be content with the memory of exploring her body. He doesn’t have anyone else to compare her to, but anyone else would pale in comparison anyway – she’s exquisite. Beautiful. All the adjectives a person uses to describe the perfect girl.

He’d thought about her like that, naked and spread beneath him, before. Many times over the last month, if he’s being truthful about it. But his mental depictions had done her no justice – he’d skipped over all the little details, like the half-smile she gets when he suckles at her earlobe, an unexpected sweet spot; or the splash of freckles across her nose and cheeks, only visible when he’s as close to her as he had been. Other things, like the way she’d felt, squeezing around him as she came apart so violently and beautifully, he’d definitely thought about before, but fantasy doesn’t compete with reality. At all.
So that’s it. They had sex. The final stage. Does this mean that they’re – together? They’re staying in a lakeside house together for the next two days, almost like some kind of warped, illegal tryst. From a bystander’s perspective, he, a Dark-sider, is caught up in an affair with the last Jedi of the Light. How poetic.

The thought of that is sobering, along with the headache that’s clinging to the lining of his skull, ready to set in when he stands up. The Corellian wine definitely took a toll. He wonders if Rey is suffering a worse aftersickness – she was quite drunk at one point. It isn’t what he expected of her, getting drunk and playing games with him, and it makes him realise, more than ever, that he doesn’t really know her yet. Sure, he knows the taste of her lips and her favourite colour and her immediate goals in life, and he’s seen glimpses of her childhood memories through their bond, but he’s only known this girl for a little over a month. There’s a whole life to catch up on.

Then again, she doesn’t really know him either.

Does she want to?

Or is that not what this is?

These circling thoughts are going to drive him insane long before midday. He needs to get out of his head and outdoors for a while, take his mind off things with another, more easily solved, puzzle. Surely she can’t expect him to stay inside all day like an adolescent. It’s not as if the First Order have got sophisticated enough tech to spy on him from outer space, and if anyone else catches sight of him, well, he’s not responsible for whatever fate befalls them. It’s not like he’s going gambolling through the wildflower fields, either. He’s got other ideas.

He dresses quickly, forgoing his usual layers and just sticking to the undershirt and trousers, and strides out of the bedroom, straight to the sitting room and the window that overlooks the lake. Rey’s pulled the shutters down in an attempt at privacy, but he quickly peeks past them, glimpsing the telltale shimmer of the lake, diamond-bright in the midmorning sun. If he squints into the glare, he can make out some of the spires of the castle he visited as a child. It looks unoccupied, and it had yesterday when he’d looked, too. Looks like a much more luxurious space to hide out in than this tiny, cramped lakehouse, too. His grandmother’s house has intrigued him since Rey made him come to Naboo, and the curiosity – and sheer boredom - is getting the better of him.

The sun’s rising. No time to waste. Without a second thought, he dashes barefoot out the front door, runs onto the sand and splashes out into the shallows, a spray of droplets rising like dewdrops in the air, before he’s deep enough to dive in.

The water’s fresh, not briny, and it’s heaven on his eyes when he opens them underwater, letting his breath stream out as bubbles before he starts up a rhythmic breaststroke towards the castle built at the edge of the lake.

Within minutes he’s reached the shore, and his feet sink into the sand, droplets of water showering the dunes when he shakes his hair out. He walks up to the outer wall of the castle, a rich yellow sandstone, and even though the place looks utterly deserted, it’s worth doing a sweep – he presses himself against the stone, both to conceal his shape from any prying eyes and to get a better sense of any occupants. He shuts his eyes, delving into the web of the Force, seeking any signs of life.

None. The place is uninhabited, probably just a historic relic for tourists to gawk at now. Something about it calls to him – something not entirely related to his childhood history here. It’s an innate urge to explore his roots, a bone-deep longing...

He scales the outermost balcony easily and drops onto the polished floor, bedecked with stone
balustrades and terracotta vases full of trimmed red roses. So someone maintains the castle, but nobody lives here. Strange.

The door leading off the balcony is locked, but that doesn’t stop him. A mere wave of his hand and it opens for him, revealing a carpet the colour of sunbursts and a huge four-poster bed with a white gossamer canopy.

Wow. Rey would have liked to be here for this, he thinks, rather than off discussing diplomacy. Padme Amidala was royalty, as well as a senator, and she lived accordingly. He takes another step into her bedroom, mindful of the fact that there’s sand stuck between his toes, and his hair is still steadily dripping down his back. This place is sacred to Naboo; he can sense it in the very air. He feels like a drowned sinner lurking at the gates to paradise. And maybe that’s just what he is. An heir by birthright, but not by deeds. Looking at her possessions, the healing crystals lining one shelf and the thick books stacked on another, he gets the impression that his grandmother would have considered him a grave disappointment. And that makes him think about the holo-vids he’d seen of Anakin, and that turns his stomach.

He absent-mindedly opens a cupboard and his eyes are suddenly assaulted by the brightest display of fabrics he’s ever seen. Ball gowns, robes and casual dresses in every imaginable colour of the spectrum, from palest pastel to the most starless black, are hung in a gradient along the racks of the wardrobe. A faint scent, like sunblossoms and cinnamon, wafts up when he runs his fingers along the rack, the fabrics rustling and whispering. Padme’s perfume?

It’s too much, too soon. He slams the wardrobe door and spins round, looking for something else to take his attention off his dead ancestor’s clothes. Opening a drawer reveals pile after pile of dress shoes, the one above it stuffed full of crumpled letters in elegant cursive. He could sit down and read the correspondences, he’s sure some of them would be from Anakin – there’s no better way to learn about old lovers than through clandestine letters – but that’s just going to make him feel worse.

He slumps down on the foot of the bed, torn between urges. To leave and pretend he’d never come here, before he finds out any more unsavoury truths around his family tree? Or to stake his claim over this historic house, relocate himself and Rey for the short time left that he’s agreed to stay on Naboo, and - if things go as well as they did last night – potentially defile this room the way it probably hasn’t been in half a century?

He lies back on the bed properly now, knowing that his damp clothes will leave a big wet patch on the sheets, but not really caring. The breeze drifting in from the balcony is warm, summery. Fingers of light steal across the carpet, turning it to molten gold, and the presence of the light makes him think of Rey, of course, and the things they’d done to eachother in a room much like this one; a ray of unbendable light in an otherwise dark universe.

He was supposed to be getting out of his head today. He wasn’t supposed to think about Rey and whether last night had meant anything, yet those oblique thought patterns are back with a vengeance. He still remembers the slip of the tongue on the Falcon only days ago, when she’d compared him to his grandfather and his covert relationship with Padme. He remembers her telling him her favourite colour was brown, because his eyes are brown. Before she’d nearly poked his eye out. He remembers the way she’d kissed him after he’d seen those harrowing holos of Darth Vader – like she was trying to tell him something important, but with actions, not words.

Coming to this castle was a part of trying to forget that, to replace the whole clusterfuck with his knights and Hux and Rey with something less complex, but he should have realised it would make him turn inward even more. Digging up the past has never done any good for his mental health.

*Let the past die. Kill it, if you have to.*
But that’s the thing. He doesn’t want to, anymore.

And that’s potentially catastrophic, and nightmarish, to remember the worst of what he’s done in the past. What his ancestors have done. What’s been done to him, and what’s made him who he is today, lying in his dead grandmother’s boudoir while the sun shines brightly.

But it’s also cathartic and healing and, hopefully, healthy. Healthier than bottling everything up and rigging himself to explode.

He won’t be another Darth Vader. He will be better.

For her, but also, for himself.

_Ben?

_She has excellent comic timing; entering his mind at just the right moment, sound draining out of the bedroom. The bond is flexing between them, adjusting to the mental link when until recently not been more than a few feet apart.

_Where are you?

_He grins up at the canopy, stretching his hands behind his head. _I’m in the castle across the lake. Come over._

_You left the house? _He laughs at how strident her mental tone is._ Do you have some kind of a death wish?_

_And it’s funny, because up until recently - so recently that he can’t place when it changed – yes, he did. Only in moments so empty and desolate Snoke didn’t pry his way in, he would question what the point of it all was, if destroying every shattered part of his past was going to leave him even more broken than when he’d started. Those times, he’d contemplate ending it all in some crazed kamikaze mission or another. Fight a Rodian blindfolded. Crash his _Silencer_ into a supernova. Run himself through on his own lightsaber. When he’d been defeated by Rey in the ice forest, he’d silently begged her to finish him off, deliver the killing blow with his grandfather’s lightsaber. But he’s happy she didn’t._

_He’s happy._

_Despite the odds stacked against them, the total shitstorm she promised they’d re-enter the day after tomorrow, he’s happy._

_He forgot what that felt like._

_Ben? _she snaps in annoyance._

_Sorry. _He smiles softly to himself. _But come over here. I have something to show you._

_That sounds menacing, _Rey says, but there’s a teasing note to her thoughts._

_I promise it’s not, he tells her, and he gets up off the bed, leaving behind a wet spot in the shape of him, and walks out onto the balcony, looking out over the glistening, blown-glass surface of the lake. On the other side, he can vaguely see Rey, angrily tossing her boots on the front porch of Leia’s beach house and wading into the water._

_Once she’s neck deep, he remembers with a stab of terror that she can’t swim, and he’s about to hurl
himself over the balcony when she growls into his mind, *Don’t even think about it.*

*You can’t swim, Rey.*

*Can’t I?* she challenges, and she windmills her arms crazily, sending up huge spouts of water, spluttering and coughing but slowly moving towards the shore. Ben creases up laughing at the expression on her face, flushed and set with determination.

She hauls herself up onto the sand eventually, staggering barefoot up the beach and wringing the water out of her hair and clothes. She stops below the balcony, so that she’s looking up at him from below, as he stands on the balcony, hands braced against the balustrade. She stares up at him silently for a while, eyes glittering in the sunlight, but then she smiles a smile so big it takes up half her face, and tells him that the fairytales got it backwards – he is the prince in the rose-encrusted fortress and she is the Jedi Knight, come to rescue him.

He laughs and extends a hand to her as Rey climbs her way up to the balcony, using the climbing roses as leverage. She grips his hand and he pulls her over the railing, and when she’s standing he doesn’t let go, savouring the touch of her skin against his. And he’s not ashamed of that anymore, and Rey understands, stepping closer to him, putting her other hand in his and reaching up on tip-toe to kiss him, chastely and sweetly and over too soon.

‘Ben...’ she sighs against his lips, and the sound of his name, said such a breathy exhalation, totally makes his cock twitch. But, regrettably, she continues.

‘I really need your help,’ she tells him as she pulls back from the kiss, her eyebrows slanting in a frown.

‘Hmm?’ he says absent-mindedly, preoccupied with her eyes. In the sunlight, they’re a vivid green, like imperial jade.

‘I kind of got invited to a ball.’

‘Yeah... what?’

Chapter End Notes

*Rey, you shall go to the ball! Benerella is your personal fairy godmother!*
Chapter Thirty-Four

Apparently, they’ve been unlucky enough to visit Naboo smack bang in the middle of their festive time of year. Donta Gessett had informed her in passing when she’d arrived at the palatial chambers that tomorrow night is the annual Naboo Festival of Light, a celebration held in honour of the planet’s becoming a part of the Galactic Republic. Then, just as she’d thought they’d forgotten about it and they were getting stuck into negotiations, Queen Soruna had personally invited Rey to the celebrations, citing it as ‘pertinent’ to her cause.

‘The Festival of Light attracts delegates from all over the galaxy, young Jedi. Representatives from other Resistance-allied planets will congregate tomorrow evening in the palace ballroom.’

‘The ballroom?’ Rey had parroted, feeling faintly queasy, guessing where this is going.

‘Yes, the ballroom,’ Queen Soruna had answered, waving a hand impatiently. ‘A room in which balls are typically held. It would be a perfect opportunity for you to network with other rebel-aligned leaders, and that is why you came here, is it not?’ The Queen eyed her, a sly look coming over her face. ‘Unless you have some other undisclosed purpose, Rey?’

‘No, I don’t,’ Rey blurted, hoping she succeeded in keeping the blush off her face at the thought of her personal undisclosed purpose, back at Leia’s lakehouse. She’d left him in the early hours of the morning to trek up to the palace of Theed, his hair spread over the pillows like a black cloud, his sleeping face more serene than she’d ever seen it in waking. He also slept naked, the sheets just barely pulled up to his middle so his entire chest had been on display, scarred and muscular – but she couldn’t think too hard about that then, or she’d burst into flames in the middle of the Queen’s conference room.

‘Splendid. Then let us compromise. If you attend this event, Rey, I will promise you the allegiance of the Naboo army, half our starfighter fleet – those that do not remain behind to protect this planet in the event of an invasion – and my vocal support, which will influence the governments of other planets to assist you. The regency of Naboo is powerful – other planets will fall into line behind me.’

Rey looked her directly in the eyes, shrugging off all shyness. ‘That seems like an awfully sweet deal, Your Highness. Why do you want me at the ball so badly?’

The Queen regarded her with a smile that hinted at pride. Rey realised that she liked her. ‘Because you are the last remaining face of the Jedi. A symbol of hope for the cosmos. You can make people believe in the idea of an end to this ageless war. And,’ she leaned forward, lacing her fingers together, a conspiratorial glint in her eye, ‘because these events are dreadfully dull, and you are entertaining.’

Rey grinned at the queen’s boldness. ‘All right. Deal. Will you let Leia know?’

Soruna bowed her head, eyes cast down, so that Rey could see the brilliant, sunset colours of her painted eyelids, gold and pink, matching her ceremonial dress. ‘Leia Organa is always at the top of my communications list. I will speak with her.’
‘Thank you.’ Rey stood up, and was about to leave the room when Soruna called after her. ‘Yes?’

‘One more thing.’ The timeless queen had smiled, wily and fey-like. ‘You might want to dress a little more... fancy. I’m sure you’ll something appropriate in Leia’s wardrobe. The old girl has impeccable style.’

Rey curses inwardly as she stomps back to the lakehouse. Dress more fancy? What she’s wearing isn’t good enough? And where exactly is she supposed to come up with a new outfit? She’d already peeked in Leia’s drawers yesterday; there are no ceremonial clothes there, at least not ones worthy of a palace ball.

She opens the door forcefully and strides through, keeping an eye out for Ben in case he pops out of nowhere and scares her again. But she can’t feel his presence, and he’s not in the bedroom where she left him. Not anywhere in the house.

Did he go outside? He’s an idiot, then, he’ll be spotted in minutes and blow the whole operation, just when they’re a day away from leaving in their new starship.

Or... did he leave? The tiniest of daggers pierces her heart then, that sudden injection of worry that he would do that, betray her and leave her behind without a word – because it’s still what she expects of him. Ben Solo is a storm in a teacup, wild and unpredictable and beautiful, and even after everything, she doesn’t fully trust him to keep his word.

But he did teach her the ways of the Jedi, at least some of them. He did stay for the three days on Ach-To. And he’d been honest with her, unfailingly so, up until now.

She checks the bedroom for a note, anyway. Nothing.

She sits down on the bed, closes her eyes, and reaches out, to the bond and to the Force, whichever answers. Her spine tingles, her mind warming.

Ben? Where are you?

His voice, tinged with humour, enters her mind.

I’m in the castle across the lake. Come over.

He truly is an idiot. You left the house? Do you have some kind of a death wish?

He doesn’t reply, but she can sense his feelings, that overarching mischievousness and even a little dash of...happiness. Rey blinks, startled, but she quickly gets back to the task at hand. He’s telling her to swim across the lake and trespass in Padme Amidala’s castle. And she should protest, tell him how wrong that is, to be setting foot in ancient relics, uninvited – but who is she to talk? Walking through the graveyards of other people’s property, taking it apart skeleton piece by skeleton piece – that used to be her whole life.

She walks out to the lakeside, shielding her eyes from the opaline glare of the lake, and kicks off her boots. She wades into the water, eschewing Ben’s protests about her not being able to swim. She’s hardly an expert at it, but she manages, flailing her way to the other side of the lake, sweaty and dripping wet. The water is warmed by the sun, refreshing her as it soaks her skin – much nicer than the freezing, briny oceans of Ach-To.

She clambers up onto dry land, scanning the castle for any signs of him. There – up on the balcony, he’s looking down at her, lips quirked at the edges with amusement. The jet-black undershirt he’s wearing is wet from his swim, clinging to the outline of his chest, and Rey can’t take her eyes off
him. Seeing him on the balcony, wreathed with roses, reminds her of one of the books she’d read on Jakku, a trite little fairytale about a princess locked away in an ivory tower, and the Jedi Knight who’d come to liberate her. She’d sometimes recited that fairytale to herself at night, to help her sleep, and it makes her smirk to think that, going by that story, she is not the princess of this one. Who would have thought?

She tells him as much, and to her surprise, he laughs. He does that more, these days, and she doesn’t think she’ll ever get sick of the sound of it; that excited, almost high-pitched laugh he has when she genuinely amuses him. She starts to climb up to the tower, her scavenger’s instinct guiding her feet to the right nooks and shelves in the stone, and he extends a hand to help her over the balcony. Rey doesn’t let go of his hand when she’s on solid ground.

Gods, he’s gorgeous, with the sunlight in his face, every freckle illuminated. Back on Jakku, they called them sun-bites, and they were a marker of hard work. She has many herself, but hers are ordered, a small spray across her nose and cheeks. His are all over the place, a random pattern that she can’t wait to piece together, connect the dots.

She stretches up on tip-toe and kisses him quickly, just because she can. It’s thrilling, the closeness they have now; it makes butterflies beat in her chest.

‘Ben...’ she murmurs, half thinking about what Queen Soruna had said and half about peeling the sticky, wet shirt off him and taking him back to bed. But the dress dilemma wins, and she comes back out of orbit.

‘I really need your help,’ she confesses, though what help he can be, she isn’t sure. He’s at least had experience with this kind of social occasion, she assumes, and it’s a start.

‘Hmm?’ he says, and he’s not even really listening, she can tell, but his eyes are locked on hers with pure appreciation, and she almost giggles.

‘I kind of got invited to a ball.’

‘Yeah,’ he says, almost dreamily. Then – ‘what??’

Now she laughs properly, a deep belly laugh. ‘Yes. I got invited to a ball. Personally, by the Queen, for the annual Festival of Light. I’m pretty sure she bribed me to come, actually. She’s offering half the Naboo fleet in exchange for my presence.’

Ben just looks at her in astonishment. And then, the corners of his lips twitch. ‘Well, that’s convenient.’

‘What is?’

‘I’ll show you.’ He holds out his hand and she wraps her fingers through his, and he pulls her off the balcony and into a side room, and Rey realises quickly that it’s someone’s bedroom, with a huge bed draped with a cream canopy, a burnt-gold carpet and rich, dark wood accoutrements. Padme’s?

The answer becomes clear when Ben swings open the wardrobe door and a multitude of gowns are displayed before her on a wide rack, fabrics more delicate and beautiful than she’s ever seen in her life: clinging dresses made of silk so fine she could rip it in two with one ill-timed twist of her hips, gowns of fluffy fabrics in sky-blue and baby-pink, a floaty dress that’s the colour of a paling sunset, a gradient that slides from pink to softest purple. She moves her hand over them without touching them, fingers hovering; terrified if she touches one she’ll ruin it.

But there, at the end of the rack, is one last gown. She looks up at Ben, questioning. ‘Are you sure
we should be doing this? Touching her things? They’re probably sacred.’

He shrugs, leaning against the other wardrobe door. ‘We’re already trespassing. Add it to the list of wrongdoing.’

Rey chuckles. ‘I mean, we are criminals now, after all.’ Stars, that’s not something to laugh about. But it’s funny anyway.

‘And technically, these are mine,’ Ben points out. And theoretically, yes, they are his by birthright. But the Naboo aren’t likely to see it that way.

‘Or Leia’s,’ Rey muses, thinking of what Soruna had said to her in the conference room. Perhaps this is what she’d meant by Leia’s wardrobe... which implies she knew Rey would go rummaging through Padme’s stuff. She worries at her bottom lip anxiously, but she reaches out and lifts the hanger of the last gown off the rack, pulling it out.

The gown is woven of stars.

It’s made of a deep black fabric, like satin but lighter, and it’s overlaid with a net of silver thread, sewn with a thousand tiny pearls. In the sunlight that filters into the room, the dress glimmers like constellations, and she can tell when she holds it at eye-height that it’s floor-length, sweeping out into a flared skirt, trailing gems.

‘Put it on,’ Ben commands, and his expression is so intense. She wonders what he’s thinking.

She doesn’t have to wonder for long.

Slowly, placing the dress on the bed, she removes her grey wrap and shirt, keeping the cloth that binds her breasts in place for now. She slides off her pants without breaking eye contact with him, and she picks up the dress again, undoing the buttons at the back with trembling fingers, willing herself not to accidentally rip the netting.

She gathers the fabric and it whispers against her skin as she slides it over her head, pulling her arms through the sleeves and letting it settle over her frame. Padme was more well-endowed than her, but only slightly, and the bodice fits her like a glove.

She twirls around, feeling self-conscious, but without the aid of a mirror she can’t see how she looks, just the overall drape of the fabric over her hips. The weight of the skirt is uncomfortable.

She still needs to do the buttons back up to see how it fits properly, but she doesn’t want to wear it for any longer than she has to. It’s stunning, but it isn’t her. She isn’t some jewel of the Alliance to be paraded around in star-spangled ball gowns.

But she can pretend. For one night.

Meanwhile, the grandson of the woman whose dress she wears is looking at her with undisguised lust. It dawns on Rey all over again that they’re in a room, alone in a castle, with a bed in the background. Hmmm.

Their eyes catch, a wordless communication, and she, slowly, starts to try to pull her arms back through the sleeves. Ben catches hold of her wrist as she struggles.

‘Leave the dress on.’ His voice, husky and insistent, dark with want, makes her belly clench, that now-familiar wetness starting in her underwear. But she can’t.
‘Don’t you think that’s crossing the line a little? Taking me in your dead grandmother’s clothes?’

He blinks, realizing. ‘True.’

She lifts her arms and he eases the dress over her head, and it’s barely off before he’s kissing her, throwing the dress to the side and pushing her back against the wall as his hands work to undo the fabric strip that binds her breasts. He’s everywhere, all at once, and her scope of the universe shrinks down to this bedroom, to her back pressed against the wall, to the feel of his hands when they cup her bare breasts, his thumb circling a nipple until it pebbles, while his other hand dives into her underwear.

Rey gasps loudly as his fingers immediately find the sensitive bundle of nerves that make up her core, as he teases her with the swift slide of his thumb over her clit, his breath hot on her neck where he’s kissing her until the blood blues and she bruises. He wants her so badly, she can feel it in the press of his clothed erection against her hip, he’s been thinking about this all day, and it occurs to her that it’s probably wrong to do this in Padme’s old room, but it’s slightly less messed up than having sex in his grandmother’s dress, so she lets it slide, succumbing to the sensation of his mouth on her neck and his fingers sinking into her, right to the knuckle, the heat-

His other hand roughly yanks her underpants down to her knees. She tugs insistently on his shirt in response, and he withdraws to pull it off while she steps out of her panties, and they join the fast-growing pile of discarded clothes in the corner.

Shirtless, he pins her against the wall again, but this time his hands slide under her butt and he lifts her up until she’s at his eye level. It’s as though she weighs nothing in his arms, and they stare at each other for a long moment, his eyes reflect her reflecting him, and that’s just the way it should be.

She cups his face in her hands and kisses him, thumb stroking over the scar, her lips parting to let their tongues meet, her head knocking back against the wall from the force of his kiss, violent and passionate and everything Ben Solo is when he’s not being careful.

He’s not worried about breaking her anymore. Which is good. Because she’s not a little china doll. She’s Rey, and she’s fierce and resilient and his equal in the light.

Together, they are the balance.

His mouth moves again from her lips to her jaw and to her earlobe, teeth nipping at the sensitive cartilage there, and she sighs. ‘You know all my secrets now,’ she complains.

‘I doubt that.’ He kisses lower over her neck and collarbone, sucking at the skin there before he pushes her up higher and his lips find the buds of nipples, rose-pink and hardened, and he takes one in his mouth, sucking gently while she wraps her legs around his torso. He kisses a line up her sternum, saying against her throat, ‘It’d take a lot more than one hidden erogenous zone for me to figure you out.’

‘We do have a Force bond,’ she points out, running out of breath from the attentions he’s now focusing on her neck, leaving tiny bite marks.

‘Hmm,’ he murmurs against her neck. ‘Is this the key to cracking your mind, then, scavenger? Because if I’d known this was what I had to do in the interrogation room...’

She rolls her eyes. ‘Don’t start.’

He palms her ass roughly, and then one arm sweeps under her knees and he carries her to the canopy bed, setting her down and climbing on top of her. Rey wriggles on the much-softer mattress before
his hands grip her wrists and she stops struggling.

He settles over her, his knees on either side of her thighs, and the look on his face is entirely wicked as he shifts his grasp so that both of her wrists are held immobile in one hand. ‘As I recall, you were in restraints, just like this...’ he says silkily, his other hand tracing over her abdomen, down past her pubic mound and across the slick outer folds of her sex.

‘And as I recall, I broke out of them, just like this,’ Rey retorts, breaking his grip with a jerk of her arms, helped by the Force she imbues her movements with. Her grip on her powers is tenuous at best, though, with his thumb rubbing dizzying circles over her clit, his eyes dancing as they look into hers.

‘You should have let me keep you,’ he whispers, still kneeling over her, watching her expressions change at the precise press of his fingers. ‘We wouldn’t have wasted so much time.’

‘We weren’t ready yet,’ she argues breathlessly, but he shakes his head, black curls falling into his eyes.

‘You felt it, though. I know you did. The change in energy. Fate,’ he breathes, the circles he’s rubbing getting smaller and tighter, making Rey’s toes curl as she writhes against the bed, unsure where to place her hands now that they’re free. ‘That was the moment I knew.’

‘Knew what?’ Rey gasps, riffs of pleasure running up her spine, making her shake under his hands. She balls up her fists as he presses even harder, if that’s possible, driving the heel of his hand against her swollen nub until she wants to scream, or bite him, or both. His hand is gone as suddenly as it appeared, and she gasps at the absence that leaves her throbbing and sore, as he places his hands either side of her face, trapping her with his gaze.

‘That we were destined to end up this way,’ he mutters, his eyes black with intensity. ‘I didn’t know how, and I didn’t know why. But I knew.’

*It is you.* Rey recalls his expression when she’d called the heritage lightsaber in the ice forest, the utterly dumbfounded way he’d looked at her.

‘I tried to fight it, too, at first,’ he continues, as Rey lifts her hands, tracing the definition of his chest, hard and pale as marble. ‘You have no idea how hard.’

Her eyes flit down to his crotch. ‘Actually, I think I do.’

She pushes him away and sits up, her fingers moving quickly to get him free of his trousers, and within moments she has her hand wrapped around his cock, feeling every inch of it, how hard and thick he is, how fluid beads at the tip, making it easier for her hand to glide over and down, striking up a tempo that’s as easy as breathing, but makes him gasp like he can’t.

She stops momentarily so that he can get completely free of his pants, and then she’s shoving him back into the pillows and straddling his legs, her hand finding that rhythm again, enjoying the way he only gets slicker the more she teases, pearls of pre-cum lubricating her strokes as she grips him, smiling because it’s her turn now, she gets to take revenge for the ache he created between her legs, and she isn’t feeling like playing fair.

She swirls her thumb over the head of his cock and he groans, eyes fluttering closed, and his reaction spurs her on - the bond is an incredible help to her, she can *feel* what works for him, the exact spots to target that make him moan the most. It’s the kind of power nobody can wield responsibly, especially her, and Rey grins evilly as she lowers herself on the bed, guessing what he wants next
before he even fully knows himself, and she wraps her mouth over the swollen tip of his cock, starting to suck.

She can’t repeat his thoughts, because they contain profanity.

He cranes his neck up on the pillow to look at her, his eyes so wide Rey thinks he might strain himself, pupils blown out in eyes already so black she can’t tell the difference.

‘You...’ he begins, but then his head falls back onto the pillow as Rey grips him at the base and begins to move her hand up, tipping forwards on the bed to take him deeper into her mouth, sealing her lips tight around him and bearing down, tasting salt and skin and – just – him.

The combined friction of her hand and the suction of her mouth and throat are close to tipping him over the edge – it doesn’t take much, she’s noticed, he’s so sensitive.

His hands creep into her hair, trying to steady her so she doesn’t go so fast, because he doesn’t want it to end this soon, and he’s almost at the point of no return. Rey brings her mouth off him quickly, the sudden rush of cool air on his saliva-slicked cock making him hiss, before her hands resume their work and he’s dissolving into a mess on the mattress, thighs trembling, way too close, and-

‘I can’t-’ he chokes out, because it can’t end like this, with him spilling over her hands instead of inside her, and Rey nods, that simple understanding passing between them again, this bond is the best gift they’ve ever been given, and she takes her hands off him, removing all stimulation, climbing up his frame until they are perfectly aligned, and she takes him in hand again, positions his cock at her entrance and sinks.

He groans something unintelligible as her warmth envelops him, as he stretches her from the inside out, and Rey sucks her lower lip into her mouth, biting down on the gasp that wants to escape when she bottoms out against him, before he bucks his hips up and rubs up against something deep inside her, something that makes multicoloured sparks explode behind her eyes, and she cries out, gripping his shoulders and forcing him back down onto the bed, determined to maintain control in a situation that’s rapidly turning into all-out war.

Ben grips her at the hips and keeps her still while he thrusts up into her, the most incredible expression coming over him, almost like the dawning of a new conviction. Somehow, he manages to hit that same mysterious spot, over and over, until she can’t control the sounds that the friction tears out of her, lioness-wild and furious, and she rocks forward, her hair falling into her eyes as they tear up, the pace changing as Ben starts to fall apart, his thrusts uncontrolled and arrhythmic, and Rey cries out and contorts, her orgasm so sudden and so devastating that her vision whites out for a second, before she feels that sudden gush of sticky warmth and knows that he’s finished, too.

She collapses on top of him, burying her face in his hair as tears well up and spill over, her whole body shaking. One of his hands, hot and tentative, reaches up to caress her back, a comfort, and she finds the strength to climb off him, slumping bonelessly beside him onto the other pillow, bathing in the afterglow.

Speech comes back to her slowly; bright spots still blooming at the corners of her vision when she whispers, so quiet she’s not sure he hears her, ‘I wish we met in a different lifetime.’

He doesn’t move for a time, staring at the cream canopy above them. But just when Rey thinks he won’t ever reply, he says, ‘Why?’

‘Because we wouldn’t have all this terrible history. Be from opposite sides of a war. We wouldn’t have been enemies. We could have been happy.’
He turns to face her on the pillows, his brown eyes bright with emotion. ‘Aren’t you happy now?’

She furrows her brow, considering. ‘Yes,’ she admits grudgingly. ‘But only because we’re away from everything. Once we go back, it all just reverts to the way it was.’

Ben looks at her searchingly, eyes roving over her face. ‘You’ve changed your tune since last month.’

Rey sighs heavily, pressing her cheek into the pillow. ‘That was before we were branded criminals and forced back into conflict with the First Order. Negotiating with Soruna... it’s making me realise just how hard this is going to be. If we’re going to come out of this alive, we have to be the people the galaxy expects us to be now. Like me going to this stupid ball-’ her voice takes on a mocking note, ‘-the Last Jedi, the symbol of peace, jewel of the Resistance. And you...’ she trails off, despising the reality of it, ‘... to the rest of the universe, are still Kylo Ren. You’ll save your knights and take out Hux, and then what? When he’s dead, will you claim the throne again?’

‘Do you really think this is a good time to be discussing war tactics?’ Ben prompts, reminding her that both of them are still completely naked. ‘It was your idea to pretend the war didn’t exist for these three days.’

‘Well, it’s a little difficult when I’m doing war negotiations up at the palace all day,’ she fires back. ‘Especially since I don’t know what your end game is.’

‘What end game?’ he snarls, sitting up in the bed now. ‘You imply that I have some kind of diabolical scheme to leave you in my ion-trail and become the Supreme Leader again. Fuck, Rey, if that’s really what you think of me, then I don’t-‘

‘I don’t know what I think!’ Rey bursts out savagely, sitting up too, her face flushing red.

Ben looks at her like she’s utterly transparent to him. ‘Yes. That much is obvious.’

His tone is so condemning. It makes her tears spill over again, and she wipes her eyes angrily, trying to hide even though she’s literally stripped bare in front of him.

‘Hey.’ He pulls her hands away from her face, and his eyes are gentle once again, and she hates how much relief that gives her. He reaches out and brushes her hair back behind her ear, fingertips lingering on her tear-stained cheek. ‘You think too much,’ he says, echoing her words from yesterday. ‘But if it’s reassurance you want, then no, Rey, I’m not abandoning you to go and lead the First Order again.’

‘Because you can’t, right?’ she mutters, keeping her eyes averted from him.

‘Because it’s not what I want anymore,’ he says simply.

Finally, she looks up. ‘What do you want, then? If not to rule the galaxy?’

He stares at her like she’s insane.

‘I want you.’
Holy almost 5,000 word chapter, Batman!

TL;DR: Rey is terrible at pillow talk. Ben isn't much better.

But at last, we might have some COMMUNICATION between these two space numbskulls.
Chapter Thirty-Five

Rey blinks once. Twice. ‘Oh.’

He stares back at her, chin lifted in defiance, not saying a word.

‘Well, then,’ Rey says calmly, but the pretty blush that’s staining her cheeks pink hints at her true feelings. ‘Maybe we should come up with a proper plan then. Together,’ she offers as an afterthought.

Not the offer he expected her to come back with, after such a monumental – to him, anyway - confession. It stings, a barb to the heart, but he’ll torment himself over the reasons for that later. ‘I agree. But I would prefer to be clothed for that discussion.’

‘Good point. Let’s go.’

She slides out of the bed and gathers up her clothes from the corner, struggling back into the trousers and winding the strip of beige fabric back around her chest. She tosses him his – still slightly damp – undershirt and pants, and she gingerly lifts the dress she’d worn off the floor, sliding it back onto its coat hanger and returning it to the wardrobe, a fleeting look of regret passing over her face. He feels it, too.

She’d looked magnificent in that dress. Every inch the empress she could have been, if their paths had converged in a different way. She was already the embodiment of light, but in that dress, she’d looked like every star in the sky, a living, breathing asterism, her silhouette draped in black and glittering like constellations. Like he’d stolen every star from the cosmos and had them sewn into the netting of the gown as a sign of devotion, because that’s definitely something the Emperor of the galaxy would do.

But he isn’t the emperor, and she isn’t his empress. She’s something else, maybe something even better.

He pulls his shirt back on, even though it’s pointless, it’s just going to get wet again when they swim back across the lake anyway. Rey doesn’t want to stay here, he can tell – the ghosts of the previous occupants are too much of a deterrent. So any and all discussion of plans will have to take place back at his mother’s house.

Rey walks out onto the balcony, not waiting for him as she swings one leg over the balustrade and starts to climb back down to the foot of the castle. He watches her, making sure she doesn’t slip, which would necessitate catching her with the Force, but she’s far more agile than he – half the time, she makes him feel like a lumbering oaf in comparison to her gracility. He follows her down, and they’re about to jump into the water again when Rey shouts and points to an alcove at the side of the castle.

There’s a boat.
Of course there’s a boat.

Ben rolls his eyes as Rey rushes over and unties the little boat from its tether, dragging it across the sand and pushing it into the shallows. It would have helped if there had been a boat at the other end, too, but you can’t have everything.

She clambers into the boat and it rocks precariously, and when she calls out to Ben he shakes his head – there’s no way that tiny dinghy will keep both of them afloat. His weight alone would capsize the thing and then they’d both be drenched all over again, he can see it happening.

Rey’s still holding out her hand to him, so he wades over and pushes the boat hard, giving her a head-start. The boat rocks as she straddles the seat, trying to keep her slight weight evenly distributed, before a small tidal wave nearly turns her upside down, and she yells, gripping onto the sides of the boat.

‘What the hell are you doing, Ben!’ she gasps, as he resurfaces next to her, having dived into the deeper waters.

‘Swimming, what does it look like?’ he huffs, shaking his hair out of his eyes, sending out a spray of water droplets.

Rey giggles. ‘You look like a puppy.’

‘Don’t make me flip that boat,’ he warns her, before turning and striking out towards the middle of the lake, and he’s enjoying this more than he has a right to. In some bizarre sense, their time on Naboo does feel like a holiday, a break from their respective roles before they have to return to reality, to the truth of him and her, and he can’t help but wish, deep down, that it didn’t have to end so soon. It’s been far easier than he thought – too easy – to slip back into the life of Ben Solo, son of a princess and a smuggler, for these three days, leaving the war behind and the atrocities that are tied to his new name. Before her, he would have revolted at the notion of letting those parts of himself see the light of day, the parts that still feel the pull of the Light. The parts that are not entirely Kylo Ren, scion of darkness, the last Skywalker.

The rational, adult part of him knows that it’s not that simple – even if he’s on a different planet, being called by a different name, it doesn’t wash away the things he’s done, the things he’s still yet to suffer for. The things that made Rey call him a monster, once upon a time. But, just as she can slip into a borrowed dress and become someone else for an evening, he can slip into another identity, if only for three days. He can be what she wants, for a while.

And that’s if she wants him at all. Her evasion in the bedroom has given him new reasons to doubt that.

Meanwhile, Rey is struggling with the oars, not having the slightest clue how to paddle, so he grabs the wooden bow with one hand and kicks hard, propelling the boat at a snail’s pace through the water.

‘These are so odd,’ Rey remarks, holding one of the oars aloft, and he has to duck as she swings it experimentally over the bow of the dinghy.

‘Careful with that!’ he snaps, nearly letting go of the wood.

‘Sorry!’ She sets the oar down and leans towards the front of the ship, placing her fingers over his atop the bow. ‘And thank you.’

‘For what?’ he puffs, wet hair dripping into his eyes as he treads water, pulling the boat along.
Rey, foolishly, bends down further, over the bow, and reaches out with one hand, touching his face. Her fingers are like live wires. ‘Everything,’ she says quietly, and she stretches forward to kiss him.

The boat tilts.

_Splash._

He catches the rim of the boat before it can trap her underneath, throwing it aside before Rey resurfaces, spluttering and coughing, face turning puce.

‘You ass!’ she gasps, because he’s laughing uproariously. ‘Did you do that on purpose?’

‘Rey, I swear to every god in existence, I did not tip the boat,’ he splutters.

Rey smacks her hands on the water. ‘Well, that’s great. Now we’re both wet.’

‘Yes,’ he agrees, giving her a significant look.

Rey smacks her hand on the water again, sending a spray of water in his direction. It hits him in the face and he growls, scything his hand over the surface to send an even bigger spray back at her. She shrieks, covering her face, and concern flashes through him before she grins and slaps the water again, sending a fountain up and over them.

‘Stop it,’ he commands, but she just splashes him again. Gods, she’s like a _child_, a particularly annoying one, incapable of taking instruction— _and_ she’s splashed him again.

‘I am _this_ close to drowning you,’ he informs her, holding two fingers a centimetre apart.

Rey cracks up at that, starting to paddle away from him, towards the shore. ‘I’d like to see you try,’ she calls over her shoulder, her dark hair floating in the water like a mermaid’s.

He rights the boat and pushes it towards the shore as he swims – it’s a lot easier without someone sitting in it. At least now she has a way to transport his grandmother’s dress from the island, if she decides to wear it.

This _ball_ sounds like the underhanded design of the Queen of Naboo, to him. He’d never met Queen Soruna, but his mother had been on good terms with her, one noblewoman to another. Queens didn’t get to where they were without being two moves ahead on the chessboard, so he doesn’t doubt there’s some kind of cunning motive for the queen, to display Rey at this event, just before she’s due to leave Naboo. But he’s not complaining. He’d put up with a lot to see her in that dress.

They can figure all that out once they’re on dry land.

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Later, as twilight deepens into dusk outside, a tentative new alliance has been formed.

‘All right. So I’m to go to this ball, and while everyone’s distracted, you’ll sneak onto our starship,’ Rey asserts.

‘Yes. If this is truly the Festival of Light, and not some ploy by the Queen, most of the inhabitants of Theed should be attending the festivities, not skulking around the spaceport. There won’t be a better moment for me to board unseen.’

‘I wish you could come to the ball,’ Rey says grumpily. ‘You at least have experience with these sorts of things.’
‘I assure you I don’t,’ he says drily, recalling the horror he’d generally reacted with when Leia had asked him to attend some cotillion or another. He’d been to one or two, but only under sufferance as a young adolescent, and that seems like a whole other life. Rey will do fine, she is far more charming – and aesthetically pleasing - than he. ‘Don’t worry about it too much. All you have to do is put in an appearance, and when you’re done, sneak off to the spaceport. I’ll have the ship ready and waiting.’

‘Sure you won’t leave without me?’

‘I might, if you keep asking me that,’ he threatens in jest, but all the wind goes out of his sails when he sees the fragility behind her eyes, and he wants to punch himself for his stupidity. Her parents abandoned her. She doesn’t need him to joke about doing the same thing.

‘No. I won’t leave you behind on Naboo.’

Her eyes brighten slightly. ‘Okay. What next, assuming Soruna holds up her end of the deal and sends her battalions to the Resistance?’

He straightens in his chair. This is where his plot comes into play. ‘We sweep the sectors of Arkanis and Pillio, so that I can try to sense my knights. I still have not felt any of the others die, which means they’re safe and probably hidden from Hux. I will go down to the planet and search for them, while you make contact with the Resistance, and tell them to prepare for an assault on the First Order’s fleet. The Resistance should give you coordinates to jump to whatever sector of space they’re occupying.’

Rey frowns, puzzling it out. ‘What will I tell them about you?’

‘You won’t,’ he decides. ‘The Knights of Ren will fight separately from the rebels.’

‘The third faction,’ Rey mumbles, cottoning on. ‘So you are leaving me.’

He chews on his cheek for a moment. ‘Yes. It’s easier if we split up – temporarily - after I find them. You won’t have to deal with explaining to the Resistance why you’re harbouring a war criminal on your starship, and I won’t have to explain to the knights of Ren why I’ve joined forces with a Jedi.’

Rey smirks at that, some of her spunk reappearing. ‘Worried what your friends will think?’ she asks, a teasing note to her voice.

‘I couldn’t care less what they think,’ he declares, taking the bait. ‘But it would certainly be a more... smooth transition if they don’t know, especially given their whole purpose under Snoke was to scrub every trace of the Jedi from the galaxy.’

‘That’s fair.’ Rey nods slowly, piecing things together. ‘But... how will you get onto Hux’s Star Destroyer? They generally have pretty watertight shields.’

He waves a hand dismissively. ‘Pillio is an arms capital for the First Order. I’m sure there’ll be any number of crafts to commandeer in the factories. Once I have a ship, I can make contact with yours, and we’ll coordinate plans from there.’

Rey scratches at a spot on her arm and looks down at the couch cushions, frowning. ‘I don’t know. It’s a lot to leave up to chance. There’s so much that could go wrong...’

‘What are you so scared of?’ he huffs, although he’s pretty sure he already knows the answer.

‘You, you moron,’ Rey says fiercely, her eyes burning back into his. ‘I’m scared of Hux hurting you.’
He laughs, disguising a beat of uncertainty. ‘I’m insulted you think Hux could harm me. Have you seen him? The man's got less muscle than an Ewok.’

‘Don’t underestimate Ewoks,’ Rey mutters uneasily. ‘And he has the entirety of the First Order at his disposal. You could be killed before you even come within a parsec of him.’

‘I’ll have highly-trained Force users backing me. What does he have? An army of brain-dead troopers who couldn’t hit a target if they had heat-seeking rockets built into their blasters. Hux will lose,’ he grinds out. ‘And he will die.’

‘And then what?’ Rey presses, leaning forward with urgency. ‘We’ve dealt with the plans up till then, but what about after? What will you do if you win?’

He stands up then, creating some much-needed space between them, starting to pace in the cramped sitting room while he mulls it over. He’s never been adept at thinking on his feet, but he senses she needs some kind of answer, some reassurance beyond what he’d given her back at the castle. Although why he should be the one to give her comfort, he doesn’t know, given she’s constantly leaving him in existential agony. The scavenger can’t even say a simple three words-

He turns to her, folding his hands behind his back, too formal for this little blue cottage room. ‘I told you on Ach-To that I would never return to the Resistance. That still stands. But it’s become clear that I can no longer rejoin the First Order in good faith, either.’

Rey looks up at him, eyes wide as planets. ‘So what will you do?’

He shrugs, trying to act as though it doesn’t eat at him, the uncertainty, the lack of a concrete plan, of a future, that now stretches into nothingness before him. Oh, of course, there are options – he could turn himself in to the Republic and effectively end his life, ensuring his execution; he could overthrow Hux and resume his place on the throne, dedicating himself to crushing what remains of the rebellion that he’s currently indirectly helping to build; he could kneel before General Organa and beg her forgiveness, use her compassion as a means to escape the firing squad and instead be sent into exile. But those aren’t options he can choose without losing what remains of his pride. And at this hour of his life, being hunted throughout the galaxy by the organisation he spent the last six years as a member of, his private moments with Rey broadcast over the Holonet to all and sundry in an attempt to defame him, his pride is all he has left.

‘Ben?’ Rey repeats. ‘What will you do?’

‘I don’t know,’ he bites back aggressively, and she flinches away. ‘Do I look like a clairvoyant? No-one can predict the future, Rey – all you can do is try to change reality.’

‘That’s not true,’ she argues, her eyes too-bright. ‘We’ve both seen the future. Twice.’

‘Yes, and not the thousand-odd choices we’d have to make to get to that future,’ he points out, gentling his tone, sensing that she’s on the verge of tears again.

Rey laces her fingers together where she sits, looking steadfastly down at her hands. Her voice is soft when she speaks again, finally. ‘This is what I meant when I said I wished we met in another lifetime.’ She raises her eyes to his, and they swim with tears. ‘How can you say you want me if you don’t know how to keep me? If you can’t see a future with me in it?’

Ahhh, so that’s what concerns her. A fleeting current of relief runs through him, an electric shock to a tired heart. Perhaps his confession earlier is reciprocated after all.

But her words remind him of what they’d seen in their shared vision in the mirror cave – Rey, with
the little boy beside her, but without him. What does it mean? That they will be together for a time, long enough to conceive a child, but they will end their lives apart? That’s bleak, even for him.

And who says they’re together now, anyway? She’s never so much as said so, and neither has he. Most everything he’s ever assumed about her feelings has come from extrapolating out from various offhand things she’s said. She’d kissed him and touched him and fucked him, sure, but all that could just be out of loneliness, and the fact that they’re entirely stuck with each other right now. If you’re the last two people on a planet, love will find a way.

But she doesn’t love him.

If she did, she wouldn’t have stayed silent when it counted. When he’d told her all he wanted was her, and she said nothing. Maybe he was wrong, and the roles the galaxy expects them to play are always going to keep them star-systems apart.

‘Ben!’ Rey shouts, snapping him out of his ruminations. ‘Answer me!’

He doesn’t have the best control over his temper, but hers isn’t much better. If he stoked it enough, she could probably burst into a fury that would rival his. He’s seen the way she fights, feral and loud. Perhaps that’s why he’s always pushing her buttons – seeing her enraged is so strangely attractive.

‘What do you want me to say, Rey? That after I kill Hux I’ll come running back to you and we’ll live on Naboo together, and hang the consequences?’

‘Maybe, yeah,’ Rey says confrontationally, standing up abruptly, balling her fists at her sides.

‘That’s nice, but it’s not how the world works. You were right before. This-’ he flips a finger between them, ‘is all we’re ever going to get. Some borrowed time on a far-flung planet before we’re parted again.’ A realization strikes him, his temper flaring. ‘And all this talk about what my future holds after the war ends, and nothing of yours. Will you still want to be a Jedi? To build a new order?’

‘The galaxy will always need the Jedi Order, as long as there are people like you in the universe,’ Rey grinds out, stalking closer to him until they’re nearly chest-to-chest. Sizing each other up. The crown of her head barely reaches his chin. How can somebody so small be so cripplingly strong?

‘You’re proving my point,’ he says furiously. ‘There will be no future for us because every step you take will drive us further apart.’

Rey looks him up and down contemptuously. ‘From where I’m standing, you look pretty close.’

He looks back at her, breathing hard. What kind of game is she playing?

‘Come closer.’

He’ll never know why he said it, but she does, taking one last step so that she is pressed against him, and he wraps his arms around her, the conflicting emotions that that elicits threatening to consume him. He can’t hold her forever, this fleeting wisp of a girl – the Force is sadistic in its cruelty, seemingly unable to make up its mind between pushing them together and tearing them apart. But he could try.

‘Rey,’ he starts. ‘I can’t promise that things will go the way you want them to. But I meant what I said before. I want you in my future. I don’t want to go back to the First Order.’ He leans away from her, one hand moving under her chin, tilting her face so she’s looking at him. ‘So can that just be enough? For tonight?’
She nods slowly, making a silent promise to herself. And then she steps back from him, extending a hand.

He frowns.

‘When a strategy is agreed upon in the Resistance, you’re supposed to shake on it,’ Rey clarifies, holding out her hand, a smile playing at the corners of her lips.

That smile is all the encouragement he needs. He lifts an eyebrow.

‘I have a better idea.’

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Hours later, Rey flops back onto the pillows, breathing heavily, strands of hair falling over her flushed face.

‘I would just like to state for the record that that is not how strategies are agreed upon in the Resistance,’ she declares, her voice quavering.

He looks up from between her thighs. ‘The real reason I never enlisted.’

Rey laughs, then gasps as his mouth finds her sex again. ‘You’re almost funny.’

‘Shut up and let me enjoy this,’ he murmurs, the vibrations of his voice sending tremors through her. And he spells out the promise he’s made on her skin, with fingers and lips and tongue. Taking it one day at a time, making the most of the time they have left, because one of these days, the memories of this moment will be all they have.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! Sorry this chapter took so long to write. It's another long one, and I struggled very hard over the content of it, because the last few chapters have been very fluffy, which I felt was deserved after so much angst in the buildup, but then I knew that this was going to be the last of the fluff before the angst sets back in for the foreseeable future D: (I've plotted out the rest of the story now, so I know how it's going to end). But yeah. Had to try to progress the plot somehow! Hopefully it makes sense.

Updates will continue to be pretty slow (by my standards anyway), maybe twice a week, as I've taken on a sub-editing role on my university's magazine and it's keeping me pretty busy! I'm thrilled to see so many other amazing Reylo fics coming out now though - my favourite author, Silvershine, is writing a new one and I'm so addicted already <3
Meanwhile...

Her holopad pings at the table when she’s eating breakfast, and Leia almost drops her mug of caf in her hurry to get back to the comm-room, where she can take the call in private. She’s been expecting this one.

She presses the button to accept and the figure of Sosha Soruna, the queen of Naboo, stretches up from the pad in a haze of blue.

‘Leia Organa. Long time, little correspondence.’

‘Sosha. To what do I owe the pleasure?’

‘You don’t sound pleased to hear from me, Leia. I’m wounded.’ The blue-outlined figure places a hand over an approximation of their heart.

‘That’s because I still remember the last time we caught up,’ Leia says wryly. ‘Which is surprising, given how many brain cells were obliterated that night.’

The queen laughs, a joyous sound, like carolling bells.

‘I’m calling in regard to the little Jedi emissary you sent me. She has agreed to grace the Naboo with her presence at our inaugural Festival of Light - in exchange for half my army and my best freighter. I like this one. She’s got spunk.’ The queen taps her lips thoughtfully. ‘She will make quite the impression on the representatives from the Core Worlds, I think. Who, might I add, you should be pestering too, if you want to gain any amount of numbers to boost your rebellion.’

‘Oh gods, the Festival of Light,’ Leia groans, slapping a hand to her forehead. ‘I promised you I’d come this time, didn’t I?’

The queen quirks her mouth. ‘Indeed you did. And I’m holding you to that.’

‘Don’t you think I’m getting a little old to go gallivanting around a ballroom in puffed skirts?’ Leia teases the silhouette of her old friend.

The blue-cast image of Queen Soruna purses its lips, trying to affect a look of stern disapproval. ‘I dislike that question. If you’re getting old, what does that make me?’

‘An absolute fossil,’ Leia quips, bringing her mug of caf to her lips, balancing the holopad in her other hand, praying she doesn’t drop it and accidentally disconnect the call.

‘Leia. General or princess, you will always be welcome on Naboo, and an invitation will always be extended for the Festival of Light. Many old friends would be thrilled to see you there. Like one Lando Calrissian, for instance,’ the Queen says slyly, all-out smirking now.

‘You little minx,’ Leia laughs, raising the holopad to fix the Queen with a beady eye. ‘You know perfectly well that Lando is to me what a flame is to gunpowder. Not a good mix.’
‘But an explosive one,’ the Queen raises an eyebrow suggestively.

‘If you’ve got Rey, why do you want me?’ Leia complains, but she’s secretly enjoying the banter. It’s been too long since she got back into contact with this particular old friend – Force, why does she always let so much time go by without catching up? - and already it’s like nothing’s changed since the day they last spoke, when Leia made her last envoy to Naboo, speaking with the Gungan Council and asking them to pledge their allegiance to the Republic. She has less patience for the odd platypus-like aliens than her mother did, and the meeting hadn’t gone well, but the nectarwine in Soruna’s chambers later had made up for the loss of morale.

‘And here I thought the gift of my troops and the allure of my company would be enough to convince you,’ Soruna mock-pouts. ‘Very well. Your young rebel messenger has been acting rather... strange... since she arrived on Naboo. Flying out to the Lake Country instead of docking in my spaceport, requesting a ship that needs a minimum of two people to pilot... and lately, showing up to my conference hall with some very vivid marks on her neck. It seems, unless she is suffering from some kind of terrible stigmatic affliction, she’s not alone in your lakehouse.’

Leia’s breath falters, her heart starting up a staccato beat in her chest. The jig is, evidently, up. ‘I don’t—’

‘Leia.’ Soruna says firmly, but her expression is so wonderfully kind. ‘I know. I’d recognise him anywhere.’

‘Ben,’ Leia whispers, her eyes pricking uncomfortably. ‘So he did go with her.’ She blinks a few times, refocusing on Soruna’s hologram. ‘I won’t lie and say I was going to tell you sometime. I’m under no illusions about who he is. And I’m not trying to be rude when I ask this, Soruna, but – why in gods’ name haven’t you had him arrested?’

The Queen shrugs, feigning an air of indifference. ‘He has not harmed any of my citizens, as far as I’ve seen. Just broken into Castle Varykino on occasion.’ She smiles at Leia’s expression of consternation. ‘He looks much the same as he did as a boy. I remember him hiding under your skirt when you brought him to the palace. I recall thinking to myself, ‘He doesn’t need to hide – he could fly to outer space with ears that big.’’

Leia breathes out a sigh of relief. ‘He got those from Han, just so you know.’

‘I imagine so,’ the Queen agrees. ‘In any case, the First Order has a bounty on your son’s head higher than any ever heard of in the galaxy previously. Having him arrested and publicly executed myself would be an unwise move, politically speaking. And I would not allow the death of a friend’s child before they had a chance to say goodbye. Hypothetically, if this friend could make their way to Naboo, they might just get that opportunity, while the rest of the nation is distracted by the festivities.’ She suddenly drops all pretence. ‘Rey is planning to leave Naboo tomorrow night, presumably with your son in tow.’

‘Soruna,’ Leia murmurs, floored by her friend’s generosity. ‘Why are you doing this?’

The Queen smiles at her then, a smile so warm and heartfelt that Leia tears up all over again. ‘Because I remember him as he was. I think you deserve a chance to do the same, before this dreadful war destroys us all.’ Her smile quickly becomes mischievous. ‘And because this is the thousand-and-somethingth Festival of Light, I’m bored halfway to my grave, and I’d love to see an old friend.’

‘I can’t leave the base, I’m the lea-’ Leia protests half-heartedly, but Poe’s appearance interrupts her. The commander blasts through the door to the comms-room in his usual whirlwind of orange flight-
suit and manic energy, not noticing that he’s interrupted a private conversation until Leia turns in her seat and glares at him.

Poe blinks at her, grinning. ‘What’s up, General?’

It’s hard to keep her face straight, but she intensifies the glare. ‘Poe. Out.’

Poe’s smile drops into the most comical expression of surprise, his eyes popping as he backs out of the room, muttering apologies.

Leia turns back to the holopad, stifling giggles.

‘Scratch that. I’ll make it work. Just gotta find a dress somewhere around this dump,’ Leia tells the Queen. ‘And Soruna? I don’t know how to thank you.’

The Queen rolls her eyes. ‘Just don’t start any shootouts in my palace.’

The holo-call is disconnected before she can think of a comeback. She’ll just have to give it in person.

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‘I won’t be gone long. Just a few days, to try to treaty with the representatives from the Core Worlds and get us some political backing. And some sign-ups. So don’t fly off on any impromptu missions while I’m gone. I’ve got your number, Poe Dameron.’

‘I’ll do you proud, General,’ Poe salutes as Leia boards the hastily borrowed freighter, Chewbacca already at the helm.

Leia grimaces, but when Poe winks at her conspiratorially, she has to smile. The man could charm the boots off the late Grand Moff Tarkin.

She ascends the platform and joins Chewie in the cockpit, and as they start to rise, the ship’s thrusters working overtime in the icy climate, she sees Finn take Poe’s hand as they wave goodbye. She grins to herself, intrigued, but not surprised.

‘Ready, Chewie,’ she says deferentially, and the Wookiee bombards her with instructions. She’s not as competent a co-pilot as Han, but she does her best for her friends.

They break atmo, blue-hot flames licking at the exhaust pipe.

This feels like exactly what it is.

A last chance.

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‘Son of a bantha,’ Leia growls as she tries – for a third successive time – to properly outline her eyes. It’s not easy to do one’s makeup while a starship is rocketing through hyperspace, but she’s not going to have time to get ready when they land on Naboo – according to her calculations, the festival will already be well underway by the time they make their entrance.

She narrowly avoids spilling powder on her dress and curses, twisting out of the way. The smooth, rich red silk of her gown would show any stains like fingerprints at a crime scene, and she’s already going to look enough of a hot mess next to Soruna. Best to keep clean.
Chewbacca roars from the cockpit and Leia nearly trips over her hem as she returns to help him as he drops out of hyperspace. They’re almost there, the iridescent green of Naboo revolving in their viewport, and a thrill of fear courses through her.

What will she say to the man that killed Han Solo?

What will she say to the boy she sent away?

Worst of all, what will he say to her?

Does he hate her?

She wouldn’t blame him if he did.

Stars, she didn’t think this through.

There’s no time now. All she can do is white-knuckle her chair as Chewie flies them closer to reckoning.

Chapter End Notes

Okay I low-key ship Soruna and Leia now. What is happening.
‘I feel like a kriiffing doll in this,’ Rey mutters savagely to herself, lifting her skirts and glaring at her shoes. She’s sure she’ll trip over this ridiculous dress within the first five minutes of this stupid ball, or someone will step on the trailing fabric and rip the damn thing halfway up her backside.

Ben would undoubtedly enjoy that. She’s suddenly glad he’s not coming to the festivities.

She opens Leia’s wardrobe again and stares at the figure that’s reflected in the mirror affixed to the door. The dress flows over her shape in a ripple of midnight black, overlaid with pearls. When she turns, the train of the dress sweeps the floor, spreading and pooling like an ocean under stars. She’s managed to comb her hair and style it into a semi-neat bun, but her face is entirely bare - Leia doesn’t keep any makeup lying around. Which is probably just as well, because Rey wouldn’t have the faintest idea how to apply it anyway.

It’s maddening. Some vain, shameful part of herself wants to look pretty, wants to look like Queen Soruna does, breathtakingly elegant and pale as a calla lily, wearing silks and chiffon like she was born in them. But she just looks like a girl playing dress-up in her mother’s clothes - her skin unevenly tanned and dusted with freckles, the ugly scar on her arm standing out against the black of the dress. Her face bare of any makeup, bitten lips pale, tendrils of hair already spiralling out from her bun, as if her body is rioting against her attempts to tame it. But at the same time, she’s proud that she doesn’t suit these clothes, this lifestyle. What use would a pretty dress and matching shoes be on Jakku? She could hardly climb the skeletons of Star Destroyers in these pearl satin slippers. There’s no space on this gown to holster her lightsaber, either. What if there were Stormtroopers at this ball? How can she fight if she keeps tripping over this blasted train?

‘This is absurd,’ she announces to thin air. ‘I can’t go to this stupid ball. I can’t even bloody walk.’

The bond flutters to life as his voice breaks, uninvited, into her thoughts.

‘Unless you want to scorn the queen, you have to go.’

‘I realise that,’ she snaps back out loud, twisting in the mirror, trying to do up the last buttons at the back of the bodice. ‘Are you going to make unhelpful remarks or are you going to help me?’

‘Damn it.’ She fumbles blindly for the buttons, managing by some miracle to fasten them without ripping the netting. Ben had spent most of the day going back and forth across the lake; first, to bring her the dress, and then, to do god-knows-what inside the castle once owned by his grandmother. He’d wanted Rey to come, but she’d left him to it, recognizing that the exploration was probably something he needed to do by himself. Padme’s dresses were likely only one of many mementos from the past in that castle. It’s his history, and he deserves to be alone with it.

Besides, she has to focus. On what she’s going to say to a roomful of strangers whose only knowledge of her is built around the legend Luke Skywalker left behind. To the Republic, she is a
nameless, faceless figure of peace. Just a girl with a lightsaber, the closest the galaxy has to a Jedi knight in this day and age.

She turns her attention back to the dress, smoothing it over her hips. This had better be worth it – Soruna had agreed on half the Naboo starfleet, but she’d better throw in at least a couple of assault bombers as well, because Rey’s going to a lot of effort here. She’s going to be shown off like some kind of circus exhibit, the last Jedi, the rebellion’s trump card, Leia Organa’s messenger girl.

She wonders if Soruna kept her word and spoke to Leia about the ball. When Rey had informed Leia of her plan to touch down on Naboo, the general had warned her about Soruna’s duplicitousness. ‘She’s an old friend, and she’s loyal to a fault, but she’s got a manipulative streak. So try to stay on her good side.’ Rey has to wonder if the queen has some master plan that she’s unwittingly been made a pawn of. Why else would she be invited to this festival, especially on the night the queen knows she’s leaving? She’d said it was to help her network, encourage more planets to align with the resistance, but couldn’t she have done that herself? The queen has more poise in one pinky finger than Rey does in her whole body. Even in this dress, she doubts she could enthrall a group of politicians enough to sway them to the rebellion. Is there even any point in trying?

What would Luke have done? She snorts at the thought. Probably give some lofty speech about the Jedi being above such displays of vanity and hurried off back to his island. Maybe she could Force-project herself to the ball? There’s a tempting thought. She’d probably perish, yes, but at the cost of saving her dignity.

She bends carefully to open one of the dresser drawers, and the hilts of two lightsabers roll to the front. Hers and Ben’s. She’d hidden his here the first night they’d arrived, and she’s surprised he didn’t upend the place looking for it. Distracted, I guess.

She takes one in each hand and walks out into the hallway, being cautious of where she places her feet. She opens the door to the outside world, dusk setting in, the whizzes and bangs of the first fireworks sending showers of pink and green sparks through the darkening sky. The green seraph-class flash-speeder Donta Gessett had lent her for transport idles by the porch, reminding Rey of the makeshift repulsorlift speeder she’d made years ago, to carry her back from scavenging expeditions into the Goazon Badlands. Let’s hope this one is a smoother drive.

There’s another whizz and crack of fireworks as she closes the front door, and when she turns around to walk down the steps to the speeder, Ben’s already there, blending seamlessly into the night in his black clothes, his pale face the only contrast. He looks at her wordlessly, and Rey doesn’t need the help of a Force connection to know what he’s thinking, dark eyes scanning her from head to toe. Suddenly, she doesn’t feel like such an impostor in this monarch’s dress.

She blushes.

She wishes she knew how to stop doing that.

She holds out his lightsaber, a parting gift. ‘Promise me you won’t use this.’

He takes it from her, gloved fingers wrapping over the black metal. ‘What if there are guards at the spaceport?’

‘I’m sure you can take on one or two security guards without using your lightsaber,’ Rey snaps. This isn’t a joking matter. If he kills someone and it gets linked back to her, that’s the alliance with the rebels torn to shreds, and Naboo will slap another bounty on them faster than the speed of light. ‘Just... try to be good. I’m trusting you.’
‘So naïve,’ he mutters, but he puts the lightsaber away. Rey gathers her skirts and climbs into the driver’s seat of the speeder, waving aside Ben’s vitriolic thoughts as he’s relegated to the passenger position. Rey raises the collapsible roof over them, shielding them from any prying eyes.

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The speeder screeches to a halt at the mouth of the spaceport. It’s dimly lit, only the backup power generators working, as all other electricity has been funnelled to the palace for the festivities. Rey scans the port for any signs of life, but it appears to be completely empty. Ben was right, again. Gods, she hates it when he’s right.

‘This is it,’ she says grimly, as she lifts the roof of the speeder. ‘You should be able to find our freighter – it’s parked in the bay next to the Falcon. You know what system checks to run and how to prime the engine?’

‘I do know how to pilot, Rey,’ Ben murmurs, an edge to his voice.

‘Okay, okay. Just don’t set off any alarms, and whatever you do, don’t use that lightsaber,’ Rey repeats as he climbs out of the speeder.

She catches him rolling his eyes as she peels out of the spaceport, gunning the speeder’s engine like a total rev-head. These seraph-class speeders have got a real kick to them, and Rey whistles admiringly as she presses the throttle, sending it jumping forward into a higher gear. A speeder of this caliber would have come in handy on Jakku, but would have cost more than even the richest traders could afford. Plus, its emerald-green colour would have been too noticeable against the backdrop of the desert; some sticky-fingered Teedo would have stolen it in a heartbeat.

She screams up to the castle, downshifting into park with a squeal of brakes. The speeder wobbles and dies as Rey clambers out, lifting her skirts right up her thighs to avoid getting tangled in the door. Guests are already flocking to the palace like brightly-coloured birds – women in jewel-encrusted dresses, men in crisp suits, glitter and balloon fragments scattered over the courtyard. As Rey ascends the steps to the castle, there’s a loud popping noise, and an explosion ignites the sky overhead, orange sparks raining to the ground as fireworks pinwheel through the night. She jumps, nearly tripping over her dress again as she slides through the doors into an alien, opulent world.

Music crashes through the hall, loud and strident brass notes splashing against the walls like paint. Figures whirl in rainbow circles, flared dresses spinning out like unfurling petals as people dance across the ballroom floor, their footwork far too complex for her eyes to follow. A chandelier, dripping quartz crystal, trembles above the heads of the revellers, more balloons floating to the ceiling, trailing silver strings, and everything looks like light. Rey revolves where she stands, the pearls on her dress gleaming under the lights of the chandelier, soaking in the brilliance, and despite all her earlier misgivings, she’s swept up in the life of the party.

This is amazing! I’m glad I came.

The bond warms with her happiness, a burning star at the back of her mind.

Better you than me, Ben comments idly, and Rey frowns at the intrusion.

Shouldn’t’ you be focusing on the getaway plan instead of spying on me?

Right, because there’s so much to do.

I’m sure you can find something to occupy yourself.
The suggestiveness of that comment doesn’t escape either of them, and Rey curses herself. She tugs uncomfortably at her bodice, about to retract that comment, when he replies, seemingly out of nowhere:

*You look like heaven in that dress.*

The sincerity of his words floors her, and Rey freezes where she stands, heart stuttering wildly. She’s about to question him when there’s a tap on her shoulder, and she wheels around, losing her balance and almost hurtling face-first into –

An unfamiliar man in an electric-blue suit grabs her by the elbow, steadying her. Rey burbles apologies as she runs her eyes over him – he’s older, with salt-and-pepper hair and a rich, dark complexion that suggests Socorrian ancestry. He smiles widely at Rey and sticks out a hand, interrupting her stream of sorry’s.

*Lando*, Ben says harshly in her head, just as-

‘Lando Calrissian at your service,’ he says, laughter colouring his voice. ‘And you’re Rey, aren’t you?  

Rey takes his hand sheepishly. ‘I am.’

‘I’ve heard a lot of things,’ Lando grins. ‘Some that I suspect are tall tales.’

‘Like what?’ Rey inclines her head, drawn in despite herself. This man *exudes* charm. He could just as easily be one of the merchants in the Niima outpost, cajoling sand-vipers to dance.

‘I heard you can fly the Millennium Falcon with a skill that would give Han Solo a run for his money,’ Lando says, and she can’t decide whether he’s joking or paying her a compliment. ‘I heard that Chewbacca himself is fond of you, which, take it from me, is hard-won. I’m hoping I don’t run into that fuzzball tonight. I rather cherish the use of my arms.’ He winks at her conspiratorially, and Rey can’t help smiling back, basking in the comforting aura this man gives off, making her feel more at ease in this roomful of aristocracy.

‘Did you know Han?’ she asks, and Lando’s smile fades at the edges a little at the past tense. Rey feels Ben’s emotions burn through the link, that roiling undercurrent of anger at the mention of his father’s name.

*Stop eavesdropping!*

*I can’t, you keep projecting-


‘Well... we haven’t really talked all that much,’ Rey says evasively, trying to spare his feelings, and Lando throws his head back and guffaws. Rey watches him, bemused.

‘I’m sorry,’ Lando wipes his eyes with a powder-blue handkerchief, pulled from the breast-pocket of his suit. ‘Of course they didn’t tell you about me. Han would have wanted all the attention squarely on him, and Leia...’ he shakes his head admiringly, the sentence trailing off.

*Leia despised him*, Ben says scathingly through the bond, and Rey makes an angry sound, trying to get him to shut up, he’s distracting her.
Lando blinks at her, caught off-guard, but he quickly recovers. ‘Have you ever been to one of these functions, Rey?’

‘No,’ she answers truthfully, and she’s relieved when Lando holds out his arm gallantly.

‘Allow me to show you the ropes.’

She accepts his arm and they step into the fray. Lando guides her through the room, pointing out scores of political figures – ‘Aryhinda Price, the governor of Lothal’ as Rey follows his gaze to a smartly-dressed woman with a severe haircut, and ‘Candon Binks, Gungan Ambassador’, pointing to an odd, duck-billed red creature in midnight-blue robes – as they make their way across the ballroom floor, dancers twirling like dervishes around them, patternless and free.

Rey spies the queen, clad in a honey-gold gown, matching jewellery at her crown and her ankles, gold thread woven through her dark hair, her imposing face painted with rouge, and her heart drops. She doesn’t want to see the queen right now, when she’s dressed in Padme Amidala’s clothes, or when Ben’s cropping up in her head every five minutes.

Lando, sensing her discomfort, smoothly steers her in the opposite direction, towards a group of men in purple robes, holding flutes of some kind of sparkling drink. Lando makes the introductions – the advisors of Bespin’s high court – and Rey smiles shyly, trying to keep up with the threads of conversation as Lando jokes with the advisors about some kind of casino business. His easygoing friendliness reminds her of Finn, delivering a stab of guilt straight to her stomach. She still hasn’t made contact with him since their angry exchange over the comm-system. She wishes he was here. His sense of adventure could make anything fun, any dire situation less serious. They could have danced together-

As if on cue, Ben’s occupying space in her mind again, and Rey feels an acidic flash of, bizarrely, jealousy as he glimpses the subject of her thoughts.

*FN-2187,* he says contemptuously. *That bumbling idiot would have tripped over his own two feet trying to impress you.

‘Shut it,’ Rey retorts.

Out loud.

The advisors stare.

Rey opens her mouth, scrambling for some way to rectify the situation, when a younger man, with slicked-back brown hair and a thin, rather pinched face, steps in. The advisors bow deferentially as he greets them, before extending his hand to Rey.

‘Admiral Jamieson Centi of Chandrila,’ he says, by way of introduction. ‘Would you like to dance?’

Rey looks at his outstretched hand for a long moment. The admiral is wearing a pair of cream gloves, and it reminds her of a different hand, held out to her, asking her to join in an entirely different kind of dance. A battle of wills, a clash of souls.

She doesn’t want this hand, but she takes it anyway, stepping together out onto the ballroom floor.

She feels Ben’s sharp intake of breath as the admiral puts his hand at her waist, the dress shifting as she moves, skirts clouding around her legs as he guides her into a slow dance.

And as quickly as she’d felt his presence, he’s gone. Rey feels a prickle of guilt, but pushes it aside,
focusing on the young man who’s got his hand on her side. She doesn’t like him touching her, but a quick glance at the other couples moving around the dance floor proves that this is normal, he’s supposed to hold her waist like this. She tries to think of something clever to say – Chandrila is one of the strongest rebel-allied planets, and she is here to network for the alliance, after all.

‘So, I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Rey,’ she says warily, and the admiral grins toothily.

‘I know,’ he says, stepping closer to her as they pass a particularly exuberant pair of dancers. ‘All of Chandrila knows about you, thanks to all this propaganda.’

‘Oh, dear.’ Rey worries at her bottom lip, thinking about what kinds of vitriol the Order could have spread about her – they’ve certainly had ample time to smear her name in the past month. She really should have asked Leia for the details.

‘You’re the Jedi Knight who killed that tyrant, Supreme Leader Snoke, with nothing but a lightsaber. Who defeated his Red Guard single-handedly, not to mention Kylo Ren. The fighter who flew the Millennium Falcon on the battle of Crait and rescued the Resistance.’

Rey startles at his words – he’s got it all completely wrong. She’s glad Ben doesn’t seem to be listening in anymore, because he’d probably be enraged at the admiral’s assertions. She forces herself to focus on what he’s saying, to cherry-pick his words to her advantage.

‘So Chandrila supports the rebuilding of the Resistance?’ she asks bluntly, as he spins her, her skirt trailing on the ballroom floor, narrowly avoiding being stepped on by a passing Gungan.

‘Of course we do. Chandrila has always been a vocal support for Leia Organa and the rebel alliance.’

‘If that’s true, why didn’t you answer the distress call on Crait?’ Rey asks, as the admiral guides her through a series of quick steps, the cadence easy enough to follow once Rey gets the hang of it.

‘The High Chancellors forbade it. We couldn’t be sure that the First Order wouldn’t retaliate, and after Hosnian Prime...’ the admiral bows his head respectfully. ‘We didn’t want another tragedy on our hands. But with the sudden change in leadership... the heat has been taken off the Republic. We’ve had intel that the First Order is planning an assault on the Chrelythiumn system. Far away from here.’

Rey falters, nearly stepping on her dress as the admiral switches up the rhythm, pulling her into a brisk two-step. ‘I’ve never heard of that system.’

‘It’s Wild Space, a lot of it’s uncharted. But one of the planets in that system, Mortis, is known for its race of Force-sensitives.’

Rey’s heart sinks like a stone.

‘Oh.’

The admiral nods meaningfully, lips pursed. ‘Indeed. I imagine this is unwelcome news for a Force-sensitive such as yourself.’

‘You’d be right.’ Rey nibbles on the inside of her cheek, considering. Had Ben known about this? Battle plans such as these didn’t get made in the space of weeks. But honestly, she doesn’t think he would have agreed to this plan. More likely that Hux pushed it through without his approval. In which case...
‘Then the Resistance will need your help,’ she says staunchly. We already have the support of Queen Soruna, and half the Naboo fleet. But the First Order has thousands. They can’t be allowed to get away with this. It’s genocide.’

‘We are sympathetic to that,’ the admiral assures her, stopping suddenly in the middle of the dance floor. ‘If Naboo stands with Leia Organa, then so does Chandrila.’ He appraises her carefully, and Rey feels the burn of his eyes as they rest on her décolletage. She cringes inwardly, feeling vulnerable, and, of course, the bond springs to life, and this time-

Ben appears beside the admiral, fists clenched at his sides, his brown eyes boring into hers with stunning intensity.

‘Might I add that you look radiant in that gown,’ the admiral says formally. ‘Not the traditional dress for a Jedi Knight, I dare say.’

She can’t tear her gaze away from Ben’s when she replies, ‘Thank you.’

The admiral gives her one last once-over, then bows and strides away, making a beeline for Queen Soruna, who still stands at the top of the steps, surveying the party, Donta Gessett at her side.

Rey looks back at Ben, at the murderous expression on his face.

She laughs.

He’s breathing heavily, glaring at her with a mix of accusation and want. It makes her heart skip.

*Are you enjoying this?*

She tilts her head, teasing him. *Enjoying what?*

*You know perfectly well what.*

She rolls her eyes. *Oh, relax. He’s fine. A little improper, maybe, but fine.*

*Aren’t you done yet?* he asks, and Rey’s not mistaking the petulant note in his voice.

*Tortmenting you, you mean?* she grins, spinning around for effect. *Never.*

Ben opens his mouth to reply, but something distracts him. His head whips around to the right, staring at something she cannot see.

Rey feels a pulse of shock race through their link, an electric humming in her skull. She feels him gather the Dark around him, a defense mechanism, as he senses something in the web of the Force. She gets an echo of it - a strangely familiar presence, a pale blue gleam.

*Ben, what’s wrong?*

He doesn’t look away from the invisible spot - but at his sides, his hands are shaking.

*My mother. She’s here.*
You didn't think I'd leave you with just that interlude chapter, did you?
Chapter Thirty-Eight

He’d made it to the freighter unscathed. He’d hoped it might be more of a challenge, that he’d have a chance to use the lightsaber, just to be contrary. It’s been so long since he’s been able to put it through its paces – he and it have both grown soft in the past month, despite his efforts. But there were no posted guards, no visitors, nothing but him and an empty shipyard.

Rey had told him which ship was theirs, and it was easy enough to find – a Naboo freighter, silver and more streamlined than the YT-class his father had flown. He’d lowered the ramp and climbed aboard, and within the span of around ten minutes he’d primed the engines, checked the fuel gauge and performed every other mundane task he’d done a thousand times when preparing for flight. Rey treats him like an idiot, as though he’s never flown anything more complex than a TIE. But the Millennium Falcon was his before it was hers. Before he’d been shipped off to the Jedi Temple, he’d flown that pile of scrap metal hundreds of times, putting it through its paces – the fastest ship in the galaxy, as his father would often boast. It was speedier than it looked; he’d give it that.

Now he’s bored. R2-D2, having been transferred from the Falcon to this ship, is resting in the corner of the cockpit, lights blinking sleepily. He could wake up the little astromech and punish himself with more archived footage from the Clone War days, but he isn’t feeling like uncovering any more skeletons in the family closet, not after revisiting Padme’s castle. Love letters, ball gowns and ghosts of what once was – that was what he’d spent the last few days immersed in. He’s slowly coming to terms with exactly who Anakin Skywalker had been – the good and the bad of his grandfather, the monster and the man. He doesn’t need any more reminders of his predecessor’s mistakes when he’s been neck deep in them for days.

So what else is there to do in the meantime?

He could inspect the ‘fresher, make sure it’s in working order.

He could lie down in the crew quarters and meditate for a while.

Or he could sit right here, in the pilot’s seat, thinking about Rey.

His choice is entirely unsurprising.

Thinking about her makes the bond between them fluoresce, his mind an electrical circuit, seeking out its other half. She’s preoccupied, and so he only gets glimpses of her thoughts, flashes of insight through her eyes as she spins in a slow circle, looking up at a ceiling draped with gaudy streamers, sparkling crystal. The palace ballroom.

This is amazing! I’m glad I came.

He snorts. Better you than me.

A bright flare of annoyance. It makes him smile. Shouldn’t you be focusing on the getaway plan instead of spying on me?
He looks pointedly around the cockpit. *Right, because there’s so much to do.*

*I’m sure you can find something to occupy yourself,* Rey says huffily.

Lord, the things she says sometimes. It’s as if she has no filter, has no concept of the term *innuendo.* He smirks, imagining exactly what kinds of things he could do to amuse himself in her absence.

Rey’s obviously riding the same lurid train of thought, and she smoothes her hands over the fabric of his grandmother’s dress, falling silent. She’s so awkward in that gown; he could see it written all over her face at the lakehouse. She’d dressed up in someone else’s story, in the fairytale life of ballrooms and royalty. She thinks of herself as a fraud, a plain little sand-rat playing at being a princess.

But she’s not.

She looks celestial; dark curls tumbling down from the bun she’d tried so hard to keep neat, eyes huge and amber, afraid, but trying to be brave anyway. The train of the dress sweeps over the floor like a net of captured stars, and the universe cascades over her body, clinging in all the right places and flowing out in others. If he didn’t know better, hadn’t seen the dark side of her close up, he’d think she was an angel.

He has to tell her.

*You look like heaven in that dress.*

Not quite what he intended to say, but close enough. He registers her confusion at that, the unexpected compliment. It grates at him that after everything they’ve done, she still doesn’t trust him to be honest with her, to be nice with no ulterior motive.

She parts her lips, about to reply, and his traitorous heart skips a beat.

Someone taps her shoulder, stealing her attention, and he wants to strangle whoever interrupted them. But when he sees who she’s talking to, surprise overrides his anger – it’s *Lando.*

Lando Calrissian, the two-faced crook who double-crossed Han Solo, then turned tail and double-crossed Darth Vader. Leia had been known to wax lyrical about how Lando had done nothing to prevent Han’s being frozen in carbonite and shipped to Hutt Space, for which she’d never quite forgiven him. He’d fought with the rebel fleet in the battle of Endor, even piloted the *Falcon,* but he’d never managed to redeem himself in his mother’s eyes. The few times Ben had met him, their interactions had always been fraught with tension. Fuelled by disgust from his mother’s side, and something entirely different from Lando’s.

What the kriff is he doing here?

Of *course* he’d be trying to worm his way into the Queen’s good graces, schmoozing with all the other senators and admirals at this event. He’s already put Rey under his spell; he can tell by the way she laughs as he directs her around the ballroom, pointing out notable figures. Ben’s fingers twitch, wanting to wrap themselves around the usurper’s throat and squeeze. But he can exert no influence from the starport, so he’s forced to sit through flashes of Rey’s experiences as Lando brings her to a group of men in imperial purple. Bespin courtiers, he can tell by their robes. They don’t show much interest in Rey, and the lack of interest is mutual.

Her thoughts are far away, focused on another person entirely. The rogue Stormtrooper he’d fought in the forests of Starkiller.
The same emotion he’d felt when that traitor had run to Rey, cradling her in his arms, completely disregarding the Dark-sider with a lit saber behind him, surges through Ben then. Hate, mixed with a bittersweet ache deep in his chest. Jealousy. Not a pleasant feeling, nor a common one for him. What does he have to be jealous of, if not her? She’s thinking about dancing with him, that it would be fun. She’s so wrong. His temper simmers.

*FN-2187,* he sneers, remembering the name he’d come to learn after the rebel pilot had escaped with him. *That bumbling idiot would have tripped over his own two feet trying to impress you.*

It’s true, too. The fool had fallen to his blade in less than a minute, only managing to get a strike of his own in out of pure luck, and the fact that Ben had not been fighting at anywhere near his full capacity, wounded by Chewbacca’s bowcaster. He remembers backing the traitor up against a tree, the gleam of fear in his eyes when he’d realised he was cornered. The anticipation of slowly lowering the quillions of his saber into his rival’s shoulder, the decadence of his screams...

He cuts the memory off before Rey can see and hate him all over again. She’s angry enough already. *Shut it!*

She shouted it aloud, and he almost bursts out laughing. What a way for the ice to break.

But his laughter dies in seconds as someone else captures her attention. He can’t see who it is, just the image she’s projecting of a hand, fingers encased in cream cloth, and there’s a wistfulness to her thoughts that comes across, striking right where it hurts.

She takes the offered hand, and he can do nothing to distract himself as this unseen man pulls her out onto the ballroom floor, and – he flinches – as he feels echo of a hand, touching her waist as they get into formal positions. He takes a deep breath at the sudden contact, jealousy brewing in the cesspit of his stomach again, and he sweeps at his clothes, brushing away the sensation of that unwelcome hand.

Why is she *doing* this? She’s crueller than he is, sometimes, but in far more subtle, heartrending ways. She toys with his feelings on purpose, testing his limits, making him feel a whole spectrum of new and unpleasant emotions. Times like these, he wishes he’d never met her.

He tries to block the images of her dancing with this other man, talking with him, out of his mind, and he must want it badly enough, because the transfer of information stops, and all is quiet again. He rubs at his temples, aggravated, and it’s been a while since he’s wished their connection away, but he’s certainly wishing it now. She makes him weak in the worst way possible, because she’s constantly in his head and his heart and there’s nothing he can do to get her out. He’d used to think of her as a kind of troublesome ghost, one he can’t get rid of, haunting his every move. And she still haunts him, but it’s different now. He’s touched her, kissed her, tasted her – and she possessed him, body and soul, so slowly and surely he didn’t even notice. And now he’s forced to feel her interacting with someone that isn’t him, someone who probably has the most dishonourable of intentions – who wouldn’t, when faced with such an enchanting creature?

And she might have bewitched him, but she isn’t his. She’s made that abundantly clear. It makes him smile gloomily, to think that she is the one thing he isn’t conflicted about. He wants her, badly enough that it makes his chest ache, all that’s good in in him crying out for her, but she isn’t sure about him.

He feels a flare of uncertainty from her, the shared negative emotions drawing him in, and now the bond flexes, tugs, Rey appearing in front of him, unearthly and beautiful in her star-studded gown, her expression wary as she slips her hand out of the unseen man’s grasp, her eyes flying to Ben’s.
A masculine voice, echoic and distant, travels across the bond.

*Might I add that you look radiant in that gown. Not the traditional dress for a Jedi Knight, I dare say.*

He feels the heat of the man’s eyes on her, running over her form, resting too long on certain areas, and he’s never wanted to throttle someone more in his life. Make it last and make it hurt, make them suffer. Whoever he is, he’s lucky Ben can’t see him, because the kind of violent ends he’s plotting for this unseen man would make his blood run cold.

Rey’s eyes, full of some emotion he can’t discern, are on his when she murmurs, ‘Thank you.’

What kind of torturous game is she trying to draw him into? He can’t even pretend to have ignored the whole exchange; she can read his thoughts, know exactly how much this bothers him.

*Are you enjoying this?* he growls, because one of them should be.

The little succubus has the nerve to play innocent. *Enjoying what?*

*You know perfectly well what.*

Rey rolls her eyes at him, which is even more incensing. *Relax, he’s fine. A little improper, maybe, but fine.*

Improper. That’s not nearly a strong enough word. He wants this to be over. The unexpected reminder of Lando Calrissian, Rey’s teasing, this jealousy, it’s too much for one night. He’s drained, and he’s only been sitting in this spaceship.

*Aren’t you done yet?* he intends his words to be harsh, but they come out like a plea.

*Tormenting you, you mean?* she grins impishly, twirling around so the pearls on her dress catch the light, glinting like dying stars, breathtaking. *Never.*

He’s about to reply when a ripple runs over his consciousness, a string drawn taut in the net of the Force. He tears his attention away from Rey – ha! – to focus on the source of the disruption, and when he does, his heart stops beating, before the shock jump-starts it and it runs rabbit-fast, the too-familiar aura overwhelming, making him want to cry, want to scream, want to break something, anything-

*Ben? What’s wrong?*

He shakes where he stands as he feels the Force signature of his mother draw closer to him, and he wants to recoil, wants to run to it in equal measure.

*My mother. She's here.*

He feels Rey’s shock, acute through the link, before it is ripped from him, replaced by the Force connection he’s always had with his mother, as she becomes vaguely aware of him, too. She’s here, in the starport, and he grips the levers of the freighter’s control panel, the plastic covering over the gearstick crumpling.

How the fuck is she here? Who invited her? The queen?

*Did Rey know?*

Is this why she’d made him wait in the spaceport?
The idea that she could be a part of this, a betrayal of this magnitude, makes that film of red start to descend over his sight again, a filterless rage, and if it’s true – he doesn’t know what he’ll do if it’s true.

He can see the general through the viewport of the freighter now – stepping out of some borrowed cruiser, Chewbacca following closely behind her, arms weighed down with his bowcaster and a trailing ammo belt. They walk the painted lines toward the exit when his mother stops, making sure she’s not wrong. He feels her Force signature, solid and sure, brush against his own like a kiss.

She turns.

He’s glued to the spot as she turns.

She looks right at him.

The expression on her face is indecipherable, but he knows it’s matched by the look on his own.

Everything, every atom, every cell of his body is screaming for her not to approach, but when was the last time his mother paid attention to what he wanted? She strides toward the shuttle, Chewbacca speeding up so he’s flanking her now, bowcaster raised, and how did this all go so wrong, so quickly?

‘Ben.’ His mother intones from outside the freighter, but somehow, inside his mind. ‘Lower the ramp.’

No fucking way. His gloved fingers twitch over the button for hyperspace jumps. He could press it and lightspeed the hell out of here, leave her in the dust, escape from everything he doesn’t want to face. It would be easy.

But he promised Rey he wouldn’t leave without her.

He can’t break any more promises.

‘Now. Or we raise the alarm.’

Now she’s speaking his language – blackmail, not exactly a tactic becoming of a senator, or a war general. He could call her bluff – after all, she was the one who lent the use of her lakehouse to hide out in while Rey consorts with the Naboo, turning them in would mean incriminating herself – but he isn’t entirely sure she’s bluffing. He’s never been able to tell with her. If she raises the alarm, all hell will break loose, and everything they’ve planned will be in tatters.

He slams the button to release the airlock with his fist, nearly shattering it, and the ramp descends with a smooth buzz, completely at odds with the discordant noise in his head. He’s never felt so alone, so trapped.

But Rey left him his lightsaber.

He summons it to hand just as his mother and Chewbacca walk up the ramp, gripping the hilt tightly as they enter the ship’s corridor. He pushes the button again and the door re-seals itself, trapping the three enemies inside the one spaceship, together.

He takes a deep breath and holds it as his mother and her furry friend round the corner, spotting him in the cockpit.

His grip tightens on the lightsaber hilt.
'Hello, Mother.'

His mother stares at him, her fists clenched, and in that moment, she reminds him more of himself than she ever has. Her temper is barely under control, and he fully expects her to scream at him or lash out, strike him, he would welcome it – but the anger never comes. Instead, she just shakes her head, and the lights of the dashboard glint off the silver threads running through her hair – the telltale signs of ageing. He wonders how many of those hairs he is responsible for, along with the deep grooves etched into her face like lines in sand.

‘I thought I’d know what to say to you,’ she finally whispers, and her eyes are focusing everywhere but on his face. ‘For years, I thought about what words would be enough to get through to you.’ She blinks, sniffing, still not meeting his gaze. ‘But you’re a stranger.’

Chewbacca has his bowcaster trained on him, and it makes his already fragile hold on his temper slip. ‘Why don’t you start by calling off your guard dog? Or do you hold all strangers you meet at gunpoint?’

Chewbacca lets out a guttural snarl, and Ben can’t blame him, after the circumstances under which they last met.

‘Chewie,’ Leia murmurs, and the Wookiee slowly lowers his weapon, making his displeasure plain with another roar.

‘Thank you,’ Ben says icily once the bowcaster is no longer pointed at him. He claws back some of his composure, enough to ask, ‘Who asked you to come here?’

Leia looks at him now, and her brown eyes, twins of his, are full of ire. ‘The Queen of Naboo sent us personal invitations, if you must know.’

‘Why?’ he presses, because he needs to know, needs to make sure Rey didn’t orchestrate this, it would be so painful-

‘The contents of our discussions are not for the enemy to know,’ Leia raps out, her voice full of venom. ‘Assuming I can still count you as an enemy of the rebellion, that is. Are you still calling yourself Kylo Ren these days?’

He doesn’t know what to do with all these emotions, warring inside him, making it harder and harder to breathe. And so he laughs; a short, sharp bark that’s entirely devoid of humour. ‘What does it matter if I am?’

His mother tilts her head to the side. ‘At least you’ve ditched the mask. Baby steps.’

His mouth twists into a snarl of its own accord, his grip tightening yet again on the lightsaber, nearly buckling the metal of the hilt. ‘Did you force this meeting just to antagonise me?’

Leia laughs now, an equally humourless laugh, her eyes hard and hateful. ‘Me, antagonise you? That’s a joke if I ever heard one, Ben.’

His temper is fraying at the edges, acid eating away at his stomach lining. It is so hard to look at her. ‘Just say whatever the fuck you’ve come to say,’ he spits. ‘And then go.’

Leia steps forward fearlessly, and Chewbacca raises the bowcaster again before checking himself, returning it to his side. His mother’s eyes roam over his face, settling on the scar, off-white and raised, that Rey had branded him with, a forever reminder of her.
‘How could you?’ his mother whispers, and he knows she’s thinking of Han. Why wouldn’t she? It had taken Rey to make him realise exactly what his mother had lost; he is still coming to grips with the enormity of it.

He closes his eyes, half to re-centre himself in the dark, half to hide the tears that are beginning to blossom as they always do. He plumbs the depths of himself for the darkness, the security of it, and draws it around him, like dark wings.

He opens his eyes to Leia’s devastation.

‘It was easy, if that’s what you’re wondering,’ he says harshly; trying to make her flinch away, cry, disappear. ‘A split-second decision—’

‘The biggest mistake of your life,’ his mother interrupts, her voice coming back stronger than before. She looks at him now, really looks at him, her gaze piercing far deeper than he wants, uncovering his secrets – gods, he wishes he still had a mask. ‘Don’t lie to yourself, Ben. You regret it. I feel it. What you did to your father – it’s eating you alive.’

He snaps. ‘Don’t you ever tell me how I feel!’ he yells. ‘You know nothing—’

‘Actually, I know quite a few things,’ Leia bites back acerbically, cutting him off. ‘I know that you killed Snoke. I know about what happened with Rey. And god help me, Ben, if you hurt that girl—’

‘Don’t mention her! Rey is not a part of this,’ he snarls, the muscle under his eye twitching horribly, the biggest giveaway.

Leia stares at him, and the look in her eyes is full of wonder. ‘You love her,’ his mother realises, probing to the core of him again. He wants to throw up a wall between them, something to hide behind, to stop her reading him like this. It’s why he always wore a mask – his face was too much of an open book, every muscle betraying his feelings. ‘It’s all over you.’

‘I—’ he splutters, but - what’s the use? If he denies it, she’ll only look deeper, see the truth in him. Either that or she’ll be so terrified for Rey’s safety, she’d probably order Chewie to shoot him now, finish what he started. But he’s not going to discuss his intentions toward Rey with his mother, in this or any other parallel universes she might like to dream up. ‘Did she put you up to this? Did she tell you to come here?’ he blurts out, and his words have nowhere near the fury he intended, sounding more plaintive than anything else.

Leia shakes her head slowly, never taking her eyes off his. Another realisation dawns on her, breaking across her face like a sunrise, and she smiles sadly. ‘You’re so afraid. Even now.’ She looks away from him for a brief moment, out the viewport at the last remnants of the fireworks. Ben fights to remain motionless, to contain the energy that’s rioting inside him. ‘For what it’s worth, no, Rey didn’t ask me to come. Soruna is an old friend of mine, I’m sure you remember, and an excellent spokesperson for the rebel alliance. She asked me here tonight to help raise support for the coming war.’

‘What war?’ he spits, the hand that isn’t holding his lightsaber balling into a fist.

‘The war against the First Order,’ Leia replies coolly. ‘Did you think it was over because you were ousted from the ranks? Every leader is replaceable. Hux is going to do even more damage than you did, if we wait. He’s already scheming to destroy what remains of the Force in the galaxy.’

Ben laughs, a real laugh this time, but laced with scorn. ‘You and I both know that’s not how the Force works. Nobody can stop the Force, it’s not alive. It’s energy. Destroying that would be like
destroying gravity.’

‘Then I suppose you already know he’s advancing on Mortis?’ Leia retorts, stopping him in his tracks.

Ben loosens his grip on the lightsaber, the blood burning back into his fingers. ‘What happened to not sharing details with the enemy?’ he jabs, because he can’t help himself.

‘For gods’ sake, Ben, don’t be so obtuse,’ his mother snaps, and her annoyance transforms her face until she doesn’t look any different than when he was a child, and she used to stand in his room, hands-on-hips, telling him to tidy up the toys he’d thrown everywhere in one of his tantrums. The only difference is the setting – the middle of a starship’s cockpit instead of his bedroom on Coruscant. ‘You’re a dead man walking – there’s a bounty of two hundred thousand credits on your head, for anyone who finds you to bring you back to the First Order alive. Now would be a good time to choose a goddamn side.’

His teeth clenched, he manages, ‘I will never fight on the same side as the Resistance. Nor on a side that protected and idolized Luke Skywalker.’

*That* stirs something in her, he can sense it, a question she’s been mulling over since the disaster on Crait. His mother’s eyes have become inexplicably gentle when she asks, ‘Something... happened... between you and Luke, didn’t it?’

He doesn’t reply, scarcely dares to breathe. He is standing on the edge of the precipice and trying not to fall, but gravity will drag him down anyway. He doesn’t want to relive this, but Leia’s insistent.

‘I sensed something on Crait. Pain. You were hurting so badly. Because of Luke.’ Leia moves forward again, suddenly, and he steps back instinctively, pressed back against the dashboard. ‘What happened?’

She’s too close, she’s far too close, it’s making every disparate piece of him fly apart, and if she takes one more step he’ll detonate.

‘You wouldn’t believe it if I told you,’ he murmurs, bitterness colouring his voice.

‘Try me,’ Leia grinds out, her eyes almost black with intensity.

He’s teetering at the edge of the cliff. Gravity is begging him to let go, leave it all behind. Tell her everything.

‘He – he –’ he can’t say the damning words. Tears are springing to his eyes. ‘He – it doesn’t matter what he did,’ he explodes, slamming his fist down on the dashboard, which lets out a string of angry beeps. ‘He’s gone and it’s over. Luke Skywalker is dead. He doesn’t matter anymore.’

But it does matter.

‘He was your uncle-’

‘Yes, he was, and he betrayed me!’ he shouts, and it’s all he can do not to self-destruct. He’s about a second away from igniting his lightsaber and setting fire to everything in this vessel, himself included. The momentum of his rage carries him over the edge, and the words he’s wanted to say all along are on the tip of his tongue. ‘You really want to know what happened at the temple? Fine. He tried to kill me in my sleep. I woke up to your precious brother standing over me with a fucking lightsaber.’
Leia is staring at him, her eyes wide as moons, and he can see the tears starting to well up, but he can’t stop now, this has been building up for seven years, this poison, the hate that is rotting him, and he has to open every vein, get it all out until the blood runs clean. ‘That’s why I destroyed his temple. That’s why I went to Snoke. You left me alone with him, and he sneaked into my bedroom at night, read my mind and decided he had to kill me, for the good of the galaxy. He was always afraid of my power. The dark side.’ He lets out a hollow laugh, turning away from Leia to face the dashboard, the painted lines of the spaceport, and where the fuck is Rey, how can she leave him here with the general like this, it would serve her right if he did just fly off without her-

‘It’s funny, isn’t it,’ he says dully, still facing away from the general. ‘Luke Skywalker, the catalyst for Darth Vader’s reclamation, is the reason for what I became. Don’t think about it too hard, it’s quite the paradox.’

He feels his mother moving closer behind him, and he tenses, hands braced against the dashboard. The air is full of tension, so thick you could cut it with a knife, as Leia reaches out and touches his shoulder, the barest brush of contact.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says quietly.

He waits for her to say something else, but she’s silent, her fingertips still touching his shoulder, her touch searing through his clothes, straight to his skin.

‘What are you sorry for?’ he growls, not turning around.

‘For sending you away. For not trying harder to bring you back home. For-‘ behind him, her voice wavers, dies, then returns, a smidgen stronger. ‘For being away so much, when you were little. You have no idea how much I regret that.’

He forces a laugh, spinning back around. Leia steps back smartly. ‘You think that matters now? You’re about fifteen years too late with that apology.’

Leia just looks at him, silent and thoughtful, her eyes travelling over his face, looking for a point of reference. She finally settles on his eyes, wide and brown, so like hers. Some say that the eyes are the only things about a person that will never change, no matter how old and wrinkled you become. Ben’s eyes never changed in the seven years since she’d seen them last. They are still brown, still too expressive.

Still the eyes of her son.

‘It’s never too late,’ she says, finally.

She’s unknowingly quoted Rey, and he would never have expected those words to be the ones that proved his undoing, but they were.

They are.

The damnable tears are starting to sting his eyes, and this time he doesn’t stop them as they spill over his scarred cheek. Crying in front of his mother. And just when he thought he couldn’t stoop any lower.

Leia reaches out to him, her fingers hovering in the air next to his face. She doesn’t trust him not to lash out if she makes contact, exactly like what he’d done to Han. And that makes him feel even guiltier – all this blood on his hands, all this death, this despair – but Leia steps closer, the lamb walking into the lion’s den, and cups his cheek with her hand, the pad of her thumb wiping away the tear that’s trembling there.
The moment his mother’s fingers touch his skin, the Force shifts. He feels it change, a ripple spreading out from the centre, from them, as though her touch were a stone skipped across a pond. Some of his anger subsides – not all, but some – as her fingers brush over the scar, the same place his father had touched before he’d fallen from the bridge, and he closes his eyes, hearing, indistinctly, an unearthly kind of singing, a wordless requiem, an incandescent white light bathing him in brilliance-

Ben? What’s happening?

Rey’s worried voice shatters the momentary peace in his mind, and he flinches, eyes flying open. He comes back to reality with an unsettling jolt, shying away from his mother’s touch.

Rey has appeared in the cockpit to the right of him, still in her heavenly gown, her hazel eyes full of confusion, and something else, something like sorrow.

Are you okay? I felt something-

Get back to the ship. You have five minutes or I’m leaving without you, he orders without turning to acknowledge her.

But-

Just do it, Rey! he snarls across the link, and then turns his back on her, returning his attention to his confused mother, standing a foot apart from him, her hand still raised.

‘Get out,’ he tells her in an unsteady voice; swiping a hand over his face as Chewbacca growls a question and his mother takes a few more steps back. The hold on his temper is slipping, shaken up by that song, that moment, Rey standing right behind him-

‘Ben...?’ Leia frowns, befuddled by his sudden mood swing. She shouldn’t be. This is exactly what she should expect of him.

‘Now!’ he roars, finally igniting his lightsaber, a blaze of hellion-red against the gray durasteel, Rey’s shocked intake of breath ringing in his ears like a gunshot. She’s seen this scene play out before, on Ach-To.

Ben, don’t-

Leia doesn’t move, but her eyes take on the red glow of the saber, angry and flickering. ‘You don’t scare me, Ben,’ she growls, looking him up and down, and it feels like being cut down to size. It wouldn’t be the first time.

His mother turns on her heel, beckoning to Chewie with a curl of her fingers, and they march out of the cockpit. Just before they round the corner and disappear from sight, his mother wheels back around. ‘You can still come home, if you make that choice,’ she says, resolutely, as though she’s trying to convince herself as much as him. ‘I know you’re sorry for what you did.’

She takes a deep, rattling breath. ‘You’re still our son.’

Before he can respond, she’s gone, marching out of the freighter, entirely unphased by his display of temper or his lightsaber, spitting sparks.

That was just typical of Leia. She’d always been an expert at ignoring his outbursts. Growing up, it had felt like she’d never really seen him, and it’s no different now. Nothing’s changed, they are and always will be at loggerheads, and it makes him so furious he can barely see through the darkening film of red.
You can still come home, if you make that choice.

Fuck that. There is no universe in which he’d ever make that choice.

With an immense amount of self-restraint, he switches his lightsaber off before he can change his mind, take to the walls of the freighter and tear the ship apart. Rey has disappeared from the corner he’d seen her in – she’s either running for the freighter before he leaves, or running as fast as she can in the opposite direction, after bearing witness to that facsimile of a family reunion.

He doesn’t know if he cares which.

He slumps down into the pilot’s seat, propping his elbows on the dashboard and covering his face with his hands as he tries to deconstruct what’s just transpired between him and his mother.

Reconciliation? Not krieffing likely. Leia still looked at him like he was dirt, and she has every right to.

But she’d reclaimed him as her son.

Reckoning? It had certainly felt like one, when she’d touched his face and he’d slipped into the network of the Force, some of his darkness, his fury, burnt away by that blinding light. But it wasn’t Leia’s light, not her energy he’d felt. It was stronger, more pearlescent, at once more familiar and more strange than...

Footsteps are coming up the lowered ramp again, and he feels her Force signature then, and recognises where the light had come from. As if it could come from anyone else. It isn’t even a surprise at this point, as her energy immediately soothes him, the knots of tension that had formed in his muscles during the confrontation undoing as she nears the cockpit. It’s infuriating that he allows her to influence him like this, but he can’t stop it. It goes deeper than will, the way their emotions are intertwined.

He turns around in the chair and Rey is there, in the flesh, panting hard from running, her face red and her hair loose. She hobbles up to him, and his eyes track down to her feet, visible only because she’s clutching the skirt of her dress, holding it up above her knees.

One of her slippers is missing. He raises an eyebrow.

‘It fell off when I was running here and I didn’t have time to go back and get it,’ Rey explains, hopping into the co-pilot’s seat next to him, completely ignoring the look of incredulity he gives her.

‘Leia came to you.’ Her words are expectant.

‘We are not discussing that,’ he says tartly, pressing the buttons to engage the thrusters.

‘Why not?’ she challenges as she pushes up the lever for the repulsor, the ship starting to hover.

‘Because it’s none of your business,’ he replies, warningly, as the engines start to whine beneath them, Rey setting a course for Pillio into the system drives.

He expects her to argue with him, to start a shouting match, or to use one of the many wiles at her disposal to coax the truth out of him, but she just sighs.

‘Whatever,’ she says flippantly, pressing the button for hyperspace as the stars outside the spaceport melt into streaks of light. ‘But for the record, I’m proud of you.’
He stiffens, turning towards her with an expression of abject shock. ‘Why?’

Rey grins at him, completely at ease. ‘You didn’t use your lightsaber.’

He blinks at her, caught off guard. ‘Did you miss the part where I turned it on?’

Rey flaps a hand at him. ‘And you turned it off again. You didn’t use it on anyone. Admit it, Ben – you listened to me. You kept your promise.’ She smiles widely, eyes dancing. ‘And here you said you couldn’t change.’

He rolls his eyes, pointedly focusing on the blue vortex of hyperspace to avoid her gloating face. It was going to be a long flight.

Chapter End Notes

Congrats to you if you read this because this is a 6,000+ word chapter and I don't know where half of it came from. Wow.
Chapter Thirty-Nine

She didn’t think it was possible to get motion sickness in a spaceship, but she’s done it. Staring out at the whorling hyperspace stream for hours on end has given her a queasy stomach, so she’s relieved when she can finally take them out of the lightspeed lane, smashing back into realtime as the ship jolts, the whirlpool of hyperspace replaced with the glistening of millions of stars.

Her co-pilot, who had long ago fallen asleep at the wheel, jerks awake, cursing. ‘What the f-?’

‘Just dropping out of hyperspace,’ Rey replies absently, checking the system readouts to make sure they’re still on-course. In another three hours or so, they’ll reach the Jinata system, which Pillio, a small, First-Order aligned aquatic planet, is just barely a part of. It’s blissfully empty in this corner of the universe – they haven’t crossed paths with a single ship in all the time they’ve been travelling. It really feels like they are the last two people left in the galaxy at times like this, holed up together on a borrowed spacecraft.

But, she reminds herself, nibbling at a fingernail as she scans the computer readings; it’s all coming to an end. If their sweep of the planet picks up on his precious knights, Ben will use the escape pod to fly to them, much the same as she had when she’d delivered herself to him on the Supremacy. She’ll shoot him out into the void of space, and he’ll return to his knights and she’ll rejoin the Resistance, and that’ll be that. As discussed.

What a stupid plan. Since when did separating ever do either of them any good? Even just being apart for the duration of the ball had been a bad experience – him popping into her head every five minutes, appearing whenever she was emotional, spying on all her conversations. And, if she’s being truthful with herself, rewinding all the way back to the month spent freezing on Elbara Nine - that estrangement had been particularly hellish. Pretending the bond no longer existed, cutting herself off from her friends, his emotions flowing through her, the rage, the guilt, the loneliness...

When they are together, they balance each other out. The Force had been telling her that all along, but she’d been too stubborn to pay attention. Well, she sees it now, in exquisite clarity. She’d felt it, last night, when she’d been curtsying to the Queen and her brain had suddenly been swarmed with images, feelings – Ben’s mother stretching out a hand to touch his face; the ghosts of his grief as the enormity of what he’d done, what he’d been through, had crushed him; she had felt his darkness consuming him and instinctively answered with her light, some deeply-buried part of her reaching out to help him, and it had worked.

He drives her to distraction half the time, but she can’t deny that he also ignites something in her. A spark, an impulse. He makes her more impulsive, less afraid. And in return, she calms him, cools his hotheadedness, his passionate nature into something approaching rhyme and reason.

Passionate nature...

He probably thinks she’s forgotten what he’d said to her in the bedroom of Castle Varykino – either that, or that she’d ignored it, and he’d be half correct. She couldn’t process what he’d said to her
back then, especially when seconds earlier, they’d been fighting viciously, and she’d been crying – his mood swings, coupled with hers, are still quick enough to give her whiplash on the best of days. But he’s naïve if he thinks she didn’t mull over those words, turning them over and over in her head like pebbles, until they were polished and smooth from her constant attentions.

What do you want, if not to rule the galaxy?

I want you.

The way he’d said it had been so guileless, there’s no point even entertaining the thought that he could be manipulating her for his own gain. For all his faults, Ben Solo had always been honest with her – sometimes too bluntly, too candidly, but always honest.

And what would he have to gain from telling her that, anyway? He’d pretty much put his shrivelled black Dark-side heart on the floor in front of her and invited her to stomp on it. Which, by ignoring what he’d said to focus on game plans, she kind of had.

He wants her.

In what way?

Add that to the list of things you probably should have asked, Rey, she chastises herself.

A month ago, when he’d offered her his hand and asked her to rule the galaxy with him, to stay with him, she’d been horrified, distraught that he was turning down that path. The last thing she wanted was to rule the universe, and she’d misjudged him, thinking it wasn’t what he wanted, either. Before that fateful day on the Supremacy, as they’d grown closer through their shared visions and stolen moments through the Force, she’d allowed herself to hope that he just wanted, like her, an end to his loneliness. Someone to belong with.

To love, even.

And now that hope has come to fruition.

Stars, it happened so slowly, she barely even noticed.

Rey sneaks a glance at the man sitting beside her, sleepy-eyed and quiet as he looks out of the viewport at the chaos of space, the nebulae and the constellations wheeling beyond their window. His hair is in disarray from sleeping on the dashboard, and there’s a crease pressed into the skin of his cheek from where he rested his face on his arms.

He is dark and enigmatic.

He is volatile and occasionally cruel.

He is everything she wants.

Maker, what a beautiful mess.

As usual, her timing is impeccable – realising things when it’s far too late. They have only hours until they’re in range of Pillio, when they have to resume their roles as Jedi and Jedi Killer. Worlds apart, at least until Hux is gone and the bounties on their heads removed. After that... she doesn’t know what comes after that.

She knows what she wants, though, even if it’s entirely impossible, marred by his wilfulness and her
morals. In the deepest, darkest part of her heart, she wants the future with him - with Ben Solo. She wants an eternity of moments like the ones they’d shared on Naboo, both the good and the bad. She wants to wake up every morning tangled, inescapable, in his arms. She wants to kiss him and taste his lips, like ripe plums on her tongue. She wants to uncover the secrets of the galaxy together, free and promised to nothing but each other. Exploring anywhere, everywhere, knowing that just being together is enough.

But he is a war criminal. And she is a rebel.

But maybe it doesn’t matter.

Maybe, just maybe, the fact that he wants her overrides those differences. Maybe the fact that she wants him by her side is more important than the parts they have to play.

Maybe, at the end of it all, they can make it work.

Suddenly, she wants to cry. Not because she’s sad, although there is a bittersweet tinge to her thoughts, but because she’s so amazed by the depth of her revelation.

He senses the change in her feelings, looking at her askance as Rey quickly wipes at her eyes, dashing away any tears that have accumulated.

‘Rey...?’

He’s confused, and she chuckles to herself, picturing how surprised he’d be if he read the tone of her thoughts right now. But he doesn’t seem inclined to search her mind, not when he’s still drowsy.

As if on cue, he yawns and gets up from the chair, heading into the main hold and the kitchen attached to it. Rey’s left in the cockpit alone, and after one last check of the sonar, making sure they don’t have company, she gets up, too, walking into the spacious crew quarters to finally change out of Padme’s dress. Thankfully, Soruna’s servants delivered her belongings to the freighter yesterday, and her gray outfit, freshly washed, is neatly folded on one of the beds. Not cramped bunk beds like on the Falcon, either, but proper single beds, practically paradise in comparison.

She struggles out of the dress, bending over backwards in her attempt to undo the buttons, and once it’s off, she instantly feels more like herself. She kicks off the remaining slipper, feeling a pang of guilt for running off without retrieving the other one – so much for showing respect to a queen’s treasures. But once she’s back in her regular clothes, tugging on her boots and strapping her saber back onto her belt, she’s relieved. This is more like it.

She carefully packs the dress into one of the storage cupboards, then leaves the cabin, walking into the kitchen to find Ben, who has discovered the food. He’s pulled out boxes of cereal, but he’s not eating, just sitting at the table and staring at the box, chin propped up on one hand. He’s clearly brooding about something, brows knotted, darkness rolling off him in waves, everything about his body language practically screaming DO NOT ENTER: HAZARDOUS AREA. She hovers in the doorway, unseen, unsure whether to interrupt and risk life and limb, or just leave him be.

She picks the second option, heading back into the cockpit. R2-D2 whistles at her approach, and she rubs a hand over his domed head as she checks the computers again. The steady readouts of planets and stars gives her an idea.

‘Artoo, what can you tell me about a planet called Mortis?’

The astromech beeps happily, scanning through his archives for any relevant information. Within moments, he’s informing her that Mortis is, as documented in the records of the Republic, the
fulcrum of the Force, and the galaxy as a whole. A monolith had been raised there during the Clone Wars, alerting the Jedi to the presence of a race of powerful Force-users. Mortis was thought to be where the Force originated from, and Rey wonders if Luke had known that – it certainly contradicted his teachings.

She recalls what Maz Kanata had told her, in that hasty, panic-stricken moment in her cellar, after Rey had touched the heirloom lightsaber and seen her first Force vision.

*I am no Jedi, but I know the Force. It moves through and surrounds every living thing.*

*Close your eyes... feel it...*

She hadn’t been willing to comply, given that only seconds earlier, she’d closed her eyes and seen a startling vision of a masked Kylo Ren, striding towards her on a blood-caked battlefield, through torrential rain. He had seen her, connected with her, when she’d thought she was only a passive observer, and it had terrified her, enough to run away, deep into the woods of Takodana, which, ironically, had led to their first real meeting.

The Force has a strange brand of humour.

Anyway. Mortis. The admiral had told her that the First Order were planning to attack it. Could they actually do any damage, or is their declaration of war a total act of folly? If they had another weaponized planet like Starkiller at their disposal, she’d be more worried, but as far as Rey knows, no such weapon has been built. She should probably ask the Resistance to confirm that, though.

She’s never heard of the planet, but the more Artoo tells her about it, the more it interests her. A conduit for the Force, encased in relativity, so that time would pass differently there, like a dreamscape...

That begs the question, though: how did Hux know about Mortis? From what Rey had been told of him, the man wasn’t the slightest bit attuned to the Force, he disparaged it. So unless he had a team of advisors researching which planets carried the most Force-sensitives, how would he know it existed?

She ponders it for a time, but she’s not getting any answers without at least talking to the Resistance.

She fiddles with the radio transmitter, tossing up whether to contact the rebel base. She should wait until she and Ben have parted ways, it was the original plan, and will make certain conversations less complicated. But the moment of reckoning with Finn is coming, no doubt... she sighs, thinking about him. He already knows everything, or at least, he knows enough to form an opinion about it. She wonders if he’s still upset with her. She doesn’t want to know. Conflict avoidance has never been her way up until now, but she feels very small and scared, knowing that her best friend is so furious with her, so critical of her actions, her choices.

*For gods’ sake, just talk to him. Reach out,* she scolds herself, but she can’t make herself click over to the frequency. She drops the transmitter and buries her head in her hands, groaning. Why is it all so hard, so futile?

‘You should eat,’ Ben’s voice issues from across the room, and she peeks out from between her fingers, sees him leaning in the doorway to the cockpit. There are dark circles under his eyes, bruise-purple, and he looks pale. Whatever he’s been thinking about is weighing on him heavily. But at least he’s ventured out of his shell enough to come to her.

‘So should you,’ she tells him, getting up and walking past him, stretching her hand back for his as
she heads for the kitchen. The unopened box of cereal is still on the countertop, and she pours them both bowls, finding a carton of blue milk in the fridge and grinning as he wrinkles his nose at it.

‘Ugh,’ he grimaces when he lifts a spoonful to his lips. ‘I hate this stuff.’

‘Drink up, buttercup,’ she japes as she shovels her own bowlful down at record speed. She’s not self-conscious eating in front of him anymore – after all, she’s sitting across from a man who’s seen her completely undone, sweating and squirming all over the place like a wild thing, so a simple trait like how messily she eats doesn’t even score on the embarrassment scale.

She studies his face while she slurps her milk, noting the downward turn of his lips, the tiredness of his eyes, the lids pale lilac and webbed with veins. He didn’t sleep well, obviously, and she doesn’t have to guess at the reason. He’d reunited with Leia, and it had obviously been a tumultuous time for him. The fact that he’s coping with his feelings about their reunion quietly, processing them instead of flying into a sightless rage, is a bit of a miracle. Yet more proof of their balancing act.

Miracles are becoming more and more of a regular occurrence around these parts.

He catches her staring, and Rey wiggles her eyebrows at him.

Ben frowns at her. ‘Why are you making that face?’

Rey grins, wiggling her eyebrows harder, trying to annoy him.

He looks at her hard, trying to figure her out. He must decide she’s being playful, trying to cheer him up, because the hint of a smile flickers over his face, some of the shadows in his eyes lightening.

Objective achieved. Rey sits back in the booth, proud of herself. She stretches her arms over her head, mock-casual, as she remarks, ‘We’ve got two and a half hours until we reach Pillio.’

‘So?’ he replies, his eyes flitting back up to hers, not understanding.

‘So...’ Rey draws the syllable out, putting her elbows on the table. ‘What do you want to do?’

He looks at her for a long moment, eyebrows furrowed, before it dawns on him. ‘Oh.’

Rey wiggles her eyebrows again, but this time there’s a whole different meaning attached.

Ben stands up and, this time, she takes his hand. He leads her into the crew cabin, and they shed their clothes like skin, and by now, this feels entirely natural, to fall into bed together, bodies twining round each other’s until they’re 412 bones and two beating hearts, until she’s kissed into senselessness, his hands warm as they wander over her, exploring, touching everything. Her own hands bury themselves in his hair as he licks into her mouth, as he grinds his erection against her belly, hot and insistent, until she is spreading her legs wide and inviting, seeing stars collide behind her eyes when he pushes into her, gentler than he’d been in previous incarnations of this moment, and Rey sighs, pressing her lips to his throat as he covers her body with his, hands snaking around to grip the small of her back as she tilts her hips up to draw him in deeper, and gods, the soft little moan he makes when she kisses that secret spot directly under his jaw makes her light-headed.

He’s reining himself in, trying to be tender with her as he moves with deep, slow thrusts, and Rey finds herself craving the explosive passion he normally has when they’re intimate like this. He’s being careful, treating her like she’s breakable again, and she doesn’t know how to ask him to be more violent. But that’s the benefit of having a Force bond.

As soon as she realises what she needs, he’s there, and she catches a flash of his smile as his thrusts...
turn rough and he grips her arms with vicelike fingers, biting the side of her neck when she exposes it, her head flung back into the pillow, and yes, she thinks, this is how it’s supposed to be, as her legs curl over his and she sinks her teeth into the skin of his shoulder, leaving a little circle of bite marks as he grows and pins her hands, fingers digging into her wrists as he forces her back into the mattress.

Rey lets out a little mew of pleasure as he thrusts deeper, and she’s desperate, suddenly, to be close to him, to absorb any and all contact, because after this, they’ll be apart for who knows how long. She yanks her arms out of his grip and wraps them around his neck, pulling him down into a searing kiss, and he loses his balance momentarily before he repositions himself, the new angle allowing him to thrust even deeper, faster, closer, and he moans into her open mouth as Rey gasps back into his, the pressure of his pubic bone against her swollen, neglected clitoris making her shake, and she can’t tell who reaches their limit first because they are one and the same, a blinding light eclipsing both their minds as Rey screams and they’re collapsing into each other, light pulsing through her in seismic waves as her orgasm strobes, as his seed spills inside her, as she buries her face in his chest, hearing his heartbeat and hers in unison, and all she can think is stay.

She parts her lips to say it, and-

Realises that the computer in the cockpit is beeping. Loudly.

‘Oh, shit,’ she gasps, struggling out from underneath Ben and hurling herself into the hallway, stark naked. She runs to the cockpit, squatting down, eyes frantically scanning the computer screen – are they being pursued? Is it the First Order? Is a tractor beam going to pull them in any second? – but it’s just an alert from the rebel base, forwarded to her by the Resistance at exactly the wrong moment. She reads it quickly, annoyed – and she’s just standing up again when Ben comes up behind her, worry writ all over his face, clothes rumpled from haphazardly throwing them back on.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing. Just some stupid bulletin about the First Order,’ she says irritably, turning around and placing a hand over her heart, beating rabbit-fast. ‘Kriffing hell. I could have had an aneurysm.’

She expects him to crack a smile, or laugh at her, anything, really, but instead he frowns, bending to read the report. Rey can see him stiffening up, all the contentment from their lovemaking draining out of him as he reads the specifics on what the Order has been up to in his absence. They’re moving further towards Wild Space, conducting strip-mining in the Kessel sector, and the report from the Resistance indicates that there have been increased shipments to Arkanis. The Stormtrooper academy. That doesn’t bode well.

‘Don’t say it,’ Ben says sharply as she opens her mouth. She snaps it shut again, chagrined.

‘How much further till Pillio?’ he asks.

‘Check the readouts,’ Rey says curtly, crossing her arms. He does, consulting the sonar as she’d done for any neighbouring ships. The computer estimates another two hours, and R2-D2 wheels in between them, giving his own approximations of the climate of the aquatic planet, along with database scans for active First Order operations in the area. Thankfully, there’s nothing – most of the fleet seem to be occupied in the Outer Rim. Tactically, there’s no better moment to search for the Knights.

Ben carefully doesn’t look at her as he steps further into the cockpit, and Rey remembers she’s still naked. Heat rising in her cheeks, she retreats to the crew cabin, to clean herself and put her clothes back on.
She’s in the ‘fresher, wiping traces of his seed from where it had trickled onto her thighs, when Rey realises something. That little thing called contraception; they’ve forgotten it. Not just once, either, but three times. A lump the size of an iceberg forms in her throat, thinking of what that might mean.

On Jakku, immuno-implants were far too expensive, and when would she have had a chance to get impregnated anyway? Her moon cycle was barely ever regular then, as skinny and starved as she was, her body had done away with it in favour of preserving her strength. Not to mention, she’d never let any of the men on that planet within ten feet of her, vile, uncouth pigs that they were. And she’d never been around the Resistance long enough to receive an implant. She doubts Ben has one, either — they are each other’s firsts he’d had no need of contraception before then, and plus, the thought of him having an implant is laughable. The mood swings the hormones are known to cause would probably have him vacillating between suicidal and maniacal in the space of minutes; he’s already enough of a tempest as it is.

But this is the third time he’s finished inside her. Bad things come in threes, Rey thinks to herself, and she shivers. She’s never been overly superstitious, but there has been an element of serendipity to her relationship with Ben, right from the start. And the Force had shown him a vision of a child, a boy... the little handprint she’d seen in the mirror.

Stop it, she tells herself, trying to screw a logical head back onto her shoulders. Catastrophizing never helped anybody. She finishes washing herself off and, skin damp, she pulls her clothes back on, fussing with the way her wrap hangs, pulling it this way and that until she gives up and slumps down onto the bed, cheeks glowing with humiliation even though nobody’s here to see it. Especially not him.

She’d almost said it. If not for the interruption, she’s certain she would have blurted it out. Stay.
Don’t go to Pillio.

I want you, too.

She’d been so focused on the feeling; she hadn’t considered his possible reaction. What if he rejected her again? Like he had when he’d used his mouth on her for the first time, in a freighter’s crew quarters just like this? It had hurt, back then, to open herself to him, bare the most naked part of her soul and receive nothing in return. After a lifetime of abandonment cycles, his rebuff had left her raw and wounded.

But then, she’d done the same to him in the castle only days ago.

She draws her legs up onto the bed, wrapping her arms around them and resting her cheek against her knees. Gods, they’re both total idiots, they’ve wasted so much time, and now it is slipping through their fingers like sand through an hourglass, only two hours until they might have to part, and now that she’s facing the reality of that, a thousand terrible outcomes start to run through her mind, as if on a movie reel – Ben dying in the attempt to fight the First Order; the escape pod malfunctioning when he leaves the freighter, the vacuum of space crushing him; getting sucked into a black hole and slowly devoured; donning another mask and transforming into Kylo Ren again, returning to the Dark side and reclaiming the throne; and worst of all, him forgetting her after all of this is over. After all, they’d never made any promises to each other beyond the framework of this war.

Say the words, and I’m yours.

Those tantalizing words from her Force vision steal through her mind, and Rey groans, squeezing her eyes shut at the memory. Those three words, if she had the strength to utter them, were a promise that could bind them together, as strongly as any Force connection. The promise of love, a string tied
around their fingers, linking them through time and space, destined to fall back together again and again, lifetime after lifetime.

Seven hells.

I think I love him.

She can hear the scoffs of the other scavengers now. Pitiful little sand creature, what do you know of love? Love could not nourish her on that death-trap planet, and she’d been starved of it for as long as she could remember. Abandoned by her parents, an orphan, a nomad for close to nineteen years, how would she even know what she feels is love, that mysterious chemical romance?

He doesn’t make her swoon, like the fairytales. He doesn’t make her want to be kind or nice or sickeningly sweet, writing poems and kissing cheeks.

He makes her rage, makes a fire ignite in her blood, makes her unravel in every possible way, breaking down to her basest elements. Makes her want to strap herself into an escape pod and fly to rescue him in the face of certain death. Makes her want to wrestle him to the ground and kiss his stupid face, or knock him out, either one.

Maybe she was never supposed to have a simple, nice, easy kind of love. Maybe her heart will always be drawn to the dark, to the slow, seductive descent into madness, to the chaos and the passion.

To Ben Solo.

The reality of it crushes her, and Rey is afraid.

Scared that if she says it, he won’t reciprocate.

Scared that he will, and what that would mean if this ends badly.

Scared of the intensity of her own feelings, caught in her own creation, in the inescapable web she’s woven herself. She does love him, and that is a terrible thing, because the more you love, the more you have to lose. That was a lesson she’d learned too young.

A single tear leaks out of her eye, making a damp circle on the knee of her trousers.

Meanwhile, the Force has shifted, the atmosphere of the freighter changing – Ben has begun to meditate as they fly closer to Pillio, trying to scry out the location of his knights, see whether they’re planetside. She can feel him, drawing on the dark side of the Force; his energy signature fusing with it, and she feels her inner light rise in answer, harmonizing.

She focuses on her perception of the Force, taking her mind off this new dilemma, off her insecurities, her awareness moving away from the throbbing node of dark energy that is Ben Solo, towards the greater cosmic outlay, the spaces between the stars, and the further she stretches into that void, the more she recognizes it has a heartbeat, pulsating with stellate energy...

Rey floats with the lights of stars, serene.

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She stays like that, lost in the immensity of the Force, until his voice calls to her, curbing the constellations in her mind, and she returns to reality.
Rey... it's time.

She opens her eyes, and they are already wet.

She stumbles out to the cockpit, out of place in her body after so long spent outside it, at one with the universe. Pillio is a large orb in their screen, speckled blue and brown, and Ben looks up at her questioningly as Rey bites her lip, choking back everything she wants to say but can’t.

‘Are they there?’ she asks at last, settling on the easiest of her questions.

‘I think so. I felt something,’ he confirms, a troubled look on his face. ‘An aura. I won’t know for sure until I’m planetside, but there’s something there.’

‘Want me to wait for you, just in case?’ she offers, a stirring of hope starting, but it’s quickly quashed when he shakes his head, firm.

‘It’s best not to complicate things.’

Rey shadowed him as they walk to the rear of the freighter, where the escape pods are kept. They’re close enough to Pillio now that the planet’s gravitational field should receive him without an issue, but still, she’s preparing herself for the worst. She programs the necessary coordinates into the pod’s built-in computer in silence, her hands unsteady, and all too soon it’s ready and he’s set to depart.

So this is it. He’ll slingshot into space and she’ll return to the Resistance, and this will be the last time they see each other for a while. She doesn’t know what to do, what to say for the best as she fidgets on the spot.

Ben stands awkwardly in front of her, clearly at a loss for how to say goodbye, too. These past weeks spent together have been surreal, existing in a separate reality from the one they now occupy as their time together draws to a close. It’s hitting them both too hard, too fast, so he just grabs hold of her arm and pulls her into him, some of his ferocity bleeding through as his arms encircle her tightly, and Rey hides her face in his shirt, blinking hard.

When she draws back, she has collected herself, having donned a mask of her own. ‘Goodbye, Ben.’

He nods, not looking at her, and climbs into the escape craft, having to fold his huge frame unnaturally to fit. It would be comical if she weren’t so sad. Rey waits until he’s settled, waits to feel the ship shudder under the pressure exerted by Pillio’s orbit, and then she presses the button to eject the craft.

He’s gone in a blaze of starfire.

Rey doesn’t allow herself to cry as she walks slowly back to the cockpit, programming the frequency for the Resistance and broadcasting a request for their base coordinates. Only when she hears her friends’ excited voices over the returning transmission, sounding excited as they send her details, does she finally break down and sob, as if something has been torn out of her, ripped from her hands just when she was beginning to like the permanence of it.

She hadn’t even kissed him goodbye.

Chapter End Notes
If anybody cried at this chapter, I'm sorry - just know that I bawled my eyes out too, a lot. What kind of strange person cries at their own writing? I don't know, but it definitely happened.
Chapter Forty

The claustrophobic little escape pod lands with a bone-jarring thud on the soil of Pillio, the interior of the craft cushioning the impact, but still making his head slam back against the headrest. He bashes the button to release the airlock, practically falling out of the pod in his hurry to escape the tiny space. He’d thought he’d slip into insanity inside it, orbiting the aquatic planet in smaller and smaller circles until finally gravity dragged him down onto the planet’s surface. It had felt like hours since he’d seen Rey, and being trapped and immobile inside the little pod had given him far too much time to think. Which of course led to him questioning his choices, which of course then led into mental self-flagellation. He wishes he could power down his brain sometimes.

But now he’s here, breathing in the briny air of the planet, and he’s partially refreshed, purposeful. Yes. This is the way it needs to be. He has to find the Knights; he cannot let Rey shake his resolve, no matter how important she’s become to him. He has to stick to his oath, to make his own way in the galaxy, with or without her.

He doesn’t miss her. He doesn’t.

Fuck.

He hadn’t expected their parting to hurt this badly. He’d thought it had been bad enough when she’d closed the door on their bond a month ago – that was bliss compared to this. Him leaving was all it took to start up that awful ache in his chest, as if all the intimacy between them had vanished along with the freighter as the escape pod shot like a meteor into space, carrying him away from her, a falling star.

And now he’s planetside, alone, on a mission he’d engineered for himself, and must stay committed to. If he can gather his Knights, they have a chance against Hux. If Hux is gone, the First Order will crumble – or at least the part of the regime that’s focused on eradicating Force users, them included. With the warrants gone, Rey will be free.

In a warped, selfish way, he’s doing this for her. He has to remind himself of that when this heartache becomes harder to bear.

He should have at least kissed her before he left, but if he’d so much as looked at her, he would have drowned in her eyes, in the desolation there, and so he’d rushed things. He regrets it bitterly, but he pushes it to the back of his mind as he walks across an outcropping of crystallised red minerals. He focuses instead on what he knows of Pillio; from the times the First Order had made stops here, back when he was still Snoke’s acolyte.

The planet plays host to one of the late Emperor Palpatine’s observatories, and is a major site of starship construction and weapon exportation for the First Order. It’s covered almost entirely by coral growths, an endless expanse of red reef and milky-blue pools of calcium-rich water. Ben has been here before, sent by Snoke to interrogate one of the veterans of the Galactic Empire, but he’s never ventured beyond the walls of the First Order’s complexes, except when he’d browsed through the
memories of others.

Now, he squints up at the burning sun, trying to discern which way is north. He doesn’t have much time – the aura he’d sensed while aboard the Naboo freighter was faint, hazy, on the brink of disappearing. He has to find them.

He heads east, towards the sun, keeping an expert finger on the pulse of the Force, scanning for the signatures of his knights. He scales a series of terraces, cut into the rock face by the steadily flowing water, ascending into the sky. Once he’s at the top, he has a bird’s eye view of the next few miles in every direction – and he can see the spires of the observatory, far off in the distance.

He sits at the top of the plateau, so as not to lose his balance and topple off, and closes his eyes, reaching out to that mysterious aura he’d glimpsed before. It had been pinkish-red, like watered-down blood, and it had reminded him of the knights. Traea. Cianh. Zahra. Jael. Sorcha. Malik. Brothers and sisters in arms, all their energy signatures had a red glow, to signify the bloodshed that had bound them, when they’d banded together to strike down the padawans that still believed in Luke Skywalker, the fateful night of the temple’s burning.

When he had stumbled, training saber held aloft, from the rubble of the crushed-in hut and yelled that Master Skywalker had tried to murder him, there had been a schism in the temple – half the padawans had stood with him, half against. The original seven Knights, though they had another name back then, had cut a swathe through the remaining Padawans as they raised their sabers in defence of the Skywalker name and what it stood for.

Now, the Skywalker name is naught but ash. He is the last of that bloodline, and he doesn’t even bear the surname. He is a Solo and he always will be, half-royalty, half-smuggler. And he’s starting to like it that way.

*You have too much of your father’s heart in you, young Solo...*

He’s letting his feelings distract him again. He gathers up all his conflict and hurt, channelling it outwards, into the Force, until it answers, and with his eyes closed, it stretches before him like an endless matrix. He wanders through it, purposeful, searching for that splash of red.

*There. Like a nebula swirling at the edge of his consciousness, there’s that aura, scarlet and stronger than before. He’s close, or they’re getting closer – one of them is. He opens his eyes, standing up, scanning the terrain, the cascading rockpools of water and the fringes of coral. He picks his way down the other side of the plateau, continuing east, towards the anarchic energies. He recognises it now.*

*Fear.*

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Barely an hour has passed, and he’s developing a sunburn. The ultraviolet rays reflect off everything here – the milky water, the jagged reef – refracting light onto his skin, which is now starting to take on a crimson hue. It will hurt like hell tomorrow, but right now it’s pleasant warmth, heating his blood, like he’s some kind of ectothermic reptile, craving sunlight.

The thought makes him smile, and he continues on, pulling his hood over his head to avoid boiling his brain any more than he already has, if he finds *that* funny.

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Unfortunately, exercise is an excellent catalyst for thinking, and his thoughts keep looping back and
forth between Rey and his confrontation with the general, a torturous kind of Mobius strip. One moment, he’ll be thinking about Rey, and how ethereal she’d looked in that ball gown – it’s an image he returns to often, more than he should – and the next he’ll be remembering the expression on his mother’s face, half disillusioned, half hopeful, the touch of her fingers against his damaged cheek, and he’ll clench his fists, trying to get back to Rey, to happiness. These cyclic thoughts will be the death of him one day.

He’s never questioned his choices more than now, when he’s wandering through a sun-scorched wasteland, following a single, unspooling red thread through the reef, his last connection to the life he had before her. The last thing left that ties Ben Solo to Kylo Ren.

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He’s headed towards an oasis, a spot of shade in this otherwise overexposed world. Here, the cliffs rise up on all sides, enclosing a small canyon that runs with more bluish water underfoot, little rivulets in offshoots extending like veins into the calcified rock. Broken shards of coral crunch under his boots as he walks into the mouth of the canyon, and there, finally, he finds them.

Sorcha and Malik sit in a corner of the canyon, spread out over the rocks like a couple of black-shrouded monks. The Seven Light, they should be, but they are just two. Sensing him, they startle, and Sorcha, helmetless, strides forward, sinking into a kneeling position once she’s close to him. She stops just shy of kissing his boots.

‘My lord Kylo Ren,’ she rasps, ‘we have waited so long.’

‘I know,’ he murmurs as the knight of Ren looks up at him, as though he were some kind of desert mirage. ‘You did well to hide here. But where are the others?

‘Malik and I were overseeing preparations at the observatory when I felt Cianh die,’ Sorcha breathes, meeting his eyes – hers a tawny yellow, a classic characteristic of a half-Theelin hybrid, along with the four-fingered hands. ‘I do not know what happened to the others. They are likely still aboard the Finalizer. It’s fortunate we aren’t with them – the two of us disembarked on a routine stop at Pillio days before Cianh’s death. We were supposed to help Gleb with weapons control.’ Sorcha coughs, spittle flying from her mouth to land in the dust at their feet.

Gleb. Kylo knows her. The sour little Aqualish he’d met with the last time he’d touched down on Pillio. A highly-ranked First Order official, she works for Jinata Security and Project Resurrection.

‘She told me there’d been an uprising, that Hux had taken control of the Order and was setting out to destroy Force-users. After Cianh died, I didn’t know if we could trust her, so I took Malik and ran. We stole a speeder from the weapons-yard and fled, and we’ve been hiding here ever since. We ran out of water yesterday.’ She hacks again. ‘In truth, master, I thought we’d perish here.’

Kylo’s fists clench. ‘Where is your speeder?’

‘It’s wreckage now, my lord. Malik is not an overly skilled driver.’

His lips twitch at that. ‘Indeed. But there will be another. I’m sure the observatory is well stocked. Come.’

Malik joins them then, looking like a ghost in the shell of his thick armour, half-dead from exposure and thirst. Kylo feels a pang of guilt for not coming to their aid sooner – while they’ve been dying by degrees on Pillio, he’d been fucking the last Jedi in several different regions of the galaxy. He’s no longer worthy to be their master, but they don’t know that, and he draws himself up, even more
resolved not to tell them about her.

An hour later, they’re within striking distance of the observatory, and it’s time to put together a plan of attack. Malik is slowly sharpening his black diamond-bladed machete against a rock, obviously anticipating some form of slaughter. Kylo would prefer to avoid spilling blood if he can— which is, admittedly, rare for him. But he’s scared if he allows any more unnecessary violence and bloodshed, his mother’s face will haunt his thoughts even more than it currently is, that injured look that riles him up like nothing else. Plus, Rey’s missive about not using his lightsaber without provocation has stuck with him far too well.

*Try to be good. I’m trusting you.*

Damn it.

‘Listen. We’re not going to turn the observatory into a bloodbath; it’ll raise the alarm, and besides, you’re both too depleted to be of any use in an all-out battle. We’ll use camouflage until we reach the starship hangar – stick to the shadows – and on my signal, we’ll commandeer a ship and escape. Once we’re out of range, we’ll chart a course for Mortis.’

Malik makes a small hiss of dissent behind him, his mask distorting the sound into a crackle. ‘I’ve been waiting *months* to use this,’ he complains, swinging his machete half-heartedly.

‘Patience,’ Kylo counsels. ‘There’ll be time for that when we face the Order.’

‘*Face* the Order, my lord?’ Sorcha repeats from behind him. ‘We’re going back?’

The two Knights see their master’s gloved fists curl at his sides – a telltale sign that they should shut up if they value their tongues.

‘I would prefer not to conduct this discussion in the middle of a coral-covered approximation of hell,’ Kylo says quietly. ‘I’ll be happy to expound for you once we’re not planetside.’

The knight doesn’t reply, readjusting her footing behind him – not an easy task when you’re packing twenty kilograms worth of armour and have scimitars strapped to your legs.

They do as their master commands and stick to the shadows as they climb down to the base, noting the clear glass of the observatory – if they can see right in, then any patrolling officers can see right out, making it even more imperative to stay out of sight. The Force is with them, though, because the sun is setting on Pillio, which means the operations at the base are winding down, making it the perfect time to steal a spaceship without repercussions or unnecessary loss of life. Kylo thinks to himself that it’s quite satirical, going from commanding the entire First Order fleet to having to steal a single ship. He is his father’s son, after all.

They make it into the hangar unseen, but things get substantially harder from there – there are several technicians in bright orange flight suits, working on the starships, soldering and hammering, sparks bouncing everywhere. The level of noise would certainly disguise their movements, but a group of three soldiers dressed in black armour isn’t easy to miss in a large room.

There’s nothing for it. Kylo whispers instructions to Malik and Sorcha, and they split off from him, approaching the techs, weapons drawn, while Kylo himself strides up to a tech who’s bent double, fiddling with exposed wiring on the control panel of a suitable-looking Zeta-class cargo shuttle. His
footsteps are too loud on the duracrete floor, and the tech glances over his shoulder, eyes bugging behind wire-rimmed glasses. He scrambles backward as Kylo raises a hand, infusing his voice with the suggestive power of the Force, and murmurs,

‘You will stop what you are doing and lower the boarding ramp.’

The technician’s eyes glaze over, and he parrots Kylo’s words in a robotic drone. He stiffly replaces the panel’s lid, drops his wrench and shuffles awkwardly over to the door of the starship, pushing the button that allows the ramp to fold out.

‘You will now go and inform your supervisors that a scheduled departure is occurring. The ship contains only a Stormtrooper squadron, nothing more. You will then forget you had this conversation.’

The tech nods, dirty-blonde curls falling over his glazed eyes, and walks away. Kylo turns as Malik strides up to him, wiping blood off his helmet’s visor. The knight hisses angrily.

‘Motherfucker tried to run for the panic button. He’s not dead, though, and it’s all smoothed over. He thinks he fell over with a screwdriver and stabbed himself.’

‘You’re a brute, Malik,’ Kylo smiles half-heartedly as Sorcha approaches them. Malik was the youngest among the Padawans that fled with him after the razing of the temple, only fourteen when they came before Snoke, and despite his short stature and youth, he was the most vicious among their ranks. He used to remind Kylo of himself. Now he just seems like a caricature.

He has to admit that he missed this, though - this sense of camaraderie in combat, he muses as the knights file onto the ship, leaving him to take prime position in the cockpit and ready the shuttle for launch. Six years of training as a warrior, and the formative years spent training to be a Jedi Knight before that, have led him to appreciate the fellowship that can only come from battle.

And there’s something else, too. Something that strokes what’s left of his ego, made more fragile this past month than ever before.

He may have lost the title of Supreme Leader, but to the knights, he is still every inch their ruler. To the Seven Light, he is still Kylo Ren, master of the Knights of Ren, heir apparent to Darth Vader. They trust him. They obey his every word. They would follow him into the dark.

And that’s exactly the opposite of where he intends to take them.

He owes them that much.

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Later, when the cargo ship is spinning through the cyclone of a hyperspace lane, they get a chance to sit down together, masks removed. Sorcha and Malik have collectively drunk about an ocean’s worth of water, eaten most of the ration packs in the storage crates and are now reclining in the cargo hold, polishing their respective weapons.

 Masks off, they look eerily like the padawans they’d been when they’d fled the burning temple, the only difference their heavy black armour and the battle-scarred, jaded faces. But there is an observable bond between them, a friendship, even, he realises as he studies their interactions.

He doesn’t know when that could have happened – Snoke would never have allowed it. He enjoyed nothing more than pitting them all against eachother, a puppeteer pulling countless strings, making foe fight alongside foe, much the same as he’d done with Hux and Kylo.
But at some point in the time between Snoke’s death and Kylo’s ascendance, then rapid decline, the two Knights have become close. More out of necessity than anything, Kylo supposes. Once they’d realised their lives were in danger, after Cianh’s death, they would have grouped together for survival. He can’t begrudge them that – after all, it’s no different to what had happened with him and Rey. Sticking together to survive, just the two of them against an unfeeling universe.

But they are together no longer, and he is as much of an outsider as ever as he watches the knights.

Malik and Sorcha are trading insults as Sorcha sits atop a steel box, braiding her hair back. Malik is rubbing aloe over his lekku, sunburnt from days spent in the unforgiving sun before Kylo arrived.

Kylo remembers that he’s also sunburnt as Malik holds the aloe tube out to him. He hesitates for a moment, then strides over and takes it from him, dropping it into a pocket of his surcoat for later use.

‘Thank you.’

‘It’s us who should be thanking you,’ Malik responds, looking up at him with a slightly bemused smile. ‘You rescued us.’

‘Yes, why is that?’ Sorcha rasps from behind him, voice scratchy from disuse. ‘Forgive me for saying so, but it’s not exactly the behaviour I’d come to expect from our Jedi Killer.’

‘On the contrary, I think it’s exactly like him,’ Malik volleys back, stretching his legs out over the crate. ‘Reckless. Unpredictable. Irresponsible.’

Sorcha laughs, the sound like a raven’s caw. ‘You’re right. As usual.’ She drops her pike on the floor of the cargo hold and turns to Kylo, eyes inquisitive. ‘But even so. You are in far greater peril than we are, if Hux is to be believed. And yet you said on Pillio that we would be returning to the First Order.’ She tilts her head to the side, questioningly.

The mention of Hux’s name makes Kylo’s blood start to boil. *Fuck* that usurping little weevil. He’d half forgotten him in the race to rescue the knights, but now the bigger picture comes back into focus – killing Hux. Dismantling the First Order’s regime. Rey, who he still can’t tell them about. The potential alliance Rey would have him make with the Resistance. *Gods.* He groans inwardly.

The knights are still looking at him expectantly, waiting for his response.

‘First and foremost, Hux has to die. Everything else is secondary to that. But in light of the fact that we are missing half our brethren, we will have to infiltrate the *Finalizer,* and we are going to rescue the remainder of the Seven Light. And then, after we’ve breached the *Star-Eater* and I’ve dealt with Hux, we will destroy the First Order.’

Sorcha and Malik exchange a loaded look that he can’t be bothered deciphering. Their eyes come back to him, as does their infernal questioning.

‘Master... you are suggesting an *insurgency.* Against the Order that gave us our name. Why?’

He stares both of them down. ‘Because the First Order has become so corrupted it no longer resembles *its* name. Hux has turned it into a mechanism of complete anarchy, and is trying to wipe out Force-sensitives throughout the galaxy. I’ve had word that he’s moving the fleet into position for an attack on Mortis. The Mortis monolith is sacred; it cannot be allowed to be destroyed. And more than that, I despise Hux and everything he stands for, which now includes the First Order. I want revenge for what he’s done to it, and to the Knights of Ren, and to me. Is that enough reason for you?’

Malik nods meekly, but Sorcha dares to continue her line of questioning.
‘Master, I am not trying to cast aspersions over your skill with the Force, but – how are three people supposed to take on the entirety of the First Order?’

Kylo smiles then, a dangerous smile, wolfish and cunning. ‘I’m glad you asked.’

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait! This chapter went through many, many revisions before becoming the final product that it is now. I know how this story is going to end, but when I wrote this, I spiralled off in a whole other direction, so I had to rein it in and make a fair few changes.

I couldn't stop my nerdy self from adding in some Battlefront II hark-backs in this chapter - I mean, we *are* on Pillio. If anyone's interested in some visuals for the planet and for Gleb, who is mentioned briefly here, I'd have a look at this youtube video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDHJ0V0ZLnw - it shows both in detail and it's stunning. Not to mention it's Kylo's coolest scene in the game. I really need to play this for research.

Speaking of research - if anyone's wondering about Kylo's usage of the term 'The Seven Light' to refer to the Knights of Ren. I was studying the concept art for the KOR and found that one of their draft names, before settling on the Knights of Ren, was the Seven Light. This seemed weird to me for a supposedly dark-side group, but then I thought - hey, if they're all coming from Luke's Jedi temple, it actually makes so much sense for them to be called that. Plus, tbh, that's such a cool name. I couldn't let it go to waste. And I thought Kylo might prefer to call them that, as well - maybe it was what he named them before Snoke took over and imposed his rules? Who knows. All questions that I need answered ASAP, so hurry up JJ Abrams!

Let's get the Space Insurgency underway!
Chapter Forty-One

Rey is so angry she can barely think.

She’s almost back at Elbara Nine, which is a twelve-hour journey from the Jinata System - including hyperspace channels, thank you very much - and she’d taken her time on the trip back, waiting with increasingly high blood pressure for Ben to comm her as he’d told her he would, once he and his knights had found a ship. Yet there’ve been no messages from him in the entire twelve hours he’s been gone. What’s taking him so long? He has her frequency. He must know she’s worried about him. Well, actually, she was worried, for a while. It was a transitory state between crying and between being bloody furious.

He’s probably into that. He probably relishes the power he has over her emotions, his uncanny ability to irk her into oblivion. It would be so typical of him to ignore her like this; Rey fumes as she bangs about in the freighter’s kitchen, making a cup of tea. He excels at getting a rise out of her; he always has, ever since the bond first opened between them. He probably knows exactly how scared she feels, how she can’t stop catastrophizing, and is just biding his time until he can waltz back into her head and heart unexpectedly, riling her up all over again. Stars above, he’s an asshole.

She keeps trying to reassure herself that she doesn’t need to be so nervous. They have the power to communicate across time and space with their minds; they have no need of a comm. But it’s the fact that he promised her, in those discussions they had on Naboo, that he would find a way to let her know when he left Pillio, so they could coordinate their next plan, that has her worried by his lack of contact.

They’d even sealed that promise with a kiss, though not the kind of kiss that Rey was used to receiving, and certainly not there. She blushed a little at that particular memory.

Goddammit, why does it always come back to sex with him? It’s driving her crazy; she can’t even stay angry with him these days, because the rage just gives her a peculiar kind of thrill, a swooping sensation in her stomach. Every time she gets het up, she ends up wanting to-

The system computer starts beeping again. One of these days she’s going to pull a Kylo and smash that thing.

She slams down the mug of tea she’s made and stomps into the cockpit. The Resistance is hailing her, and she fights to regain some approximation of poise as she presses the button to connect with the base.

‘Rey? Is that you up there?’ Poe Dameron’s wary voice blares out of the radio. ‘Our scout ships have eyes on an unlisted silver freighter.’

‘Hello, yes, sorry, it’s me. I forgot to mention I’m not flying the Falcon. I had to leave her on Naboo. The First Order had her on their list for hyperspace tracking.’
‘Well, shit,’ Poe swears, cheerfully enough. ‘Well, in that case, come on down. I assume you don’t need directions for landing?’

‘Not at all,’ Rey replies shortly, but she does feel a little bad when Poe falls silent. The best pilot in the Resistance trusts her flying skills. That should be flattering. She angles the ship downward as Elbara Nine grows wider, taking up all of her viewing screen, a frosted-over white sphere. She breaks atmo smoothly, the ship barely shuddering as she flies down through the sky gradient, the turtle-top dome of the base becoming visible through the flurries of snow.

She pulls the shuttle up and kicks out the thrusters, so that the ship lowers itself onto a snowdrift, mechanical legs extending out to keep the body of the freighter above the wet sleet. She’s barely walked down the ramp when two figures in puffy snow parkas are rushing towards her, and the first one practically bowls her over in a fierce bear hug that takes her breath away.

‘Finn,’ she gasps, as her friend’s arms squeeze even tighter. ‘You’re suffocating me!’

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ Finn keeps repeating as he loosens his grip and Rey pulls back, confused. ‘Just – oh, Rey, thank god you’re okay.’ Every trace of hostility between them dissolves as Finn wraps her up in another embrace, and Rey can feel her bad mood melting away, too, despite the chill of the air. This is the first time they’ve hugged since Crait, before anybody else touching her skin became impossible to bear...

‘Come on, you pair of idiots, hug later and get inside. I’m freezing my tits off,’ Poe whines, and Rey and Finn follow him back into the base. Rey expects to be taken straight to one of the conference rooms – they certainly have a lot to discuss – but Poe marches them straight into the cafeteria, and instead of queuing up, he lifts up the partition and barges straight into the kitchen. Rey and Finn exchange a look, then follow him in.

Out the back of the kitchen, Poe walks into the substantial larder, pulling out a tin of powdered chocolate. He rustles up three mugs, and is starting to boil milk when Rose comes around the corner from the stockroom, carrying a stack of plates. She nearly drops them when she sees Rey, a look of total awe coming over her face.

‘Rey!’ she shouts, and then she covers her mouth with her free hand, eyes popping comically. ‘You’re back,’ she continues, in much more measured tones.

Rey smiles ruefully. ‘I’m back.’

‘Finn missed you so much, he-‘ Rose starts to babble before Finn levels a look at her. ‘Well, you did!’ she argues, looking back at him with a mixture of fondness and annoyance. ‘You wouldn’t shut up about those harebrained plans to fly to wherever she was and bring her home for-‘

‘The ass-whooping of a lifetime,’ Poe finishes, smiling winningly at Rey as he mixes chocolate powder into the hot milk. ‘In his defence, he didn’t know how to react to those First Order holos. Saw more of Kylo Ren than any of us ever wanted to see in a lifetime, didn’t you, buddy?’ He winks at Finn.

Rey shifts awkwardly from foot to foot, taken aback. This isn’t really what she expected to come home to. Rather than stiff interrogations and battle strategies, she’s got hot chocolate, friends and, oddest of all, _playful ribbing_ about her quasi-relationship with their enemy. What the heck _happened_ while she was missing?

‘Right, this is just about done. Grab yourself a mug, Rose, and we’ll head into the conference room. We’ve got a lot to catch up on.’
‘Aye, aye, General,’ Rose mock-salutes, and Rey’s eyes bounce from Rose to Finn to Poe, picking up on the word choice.

‘General?’

Poe grins. ‘Leia promoted me.’

‘Temporarily,’ Finn interjects.

‘Temporarily,’ Poe agrees. ‘Until our princess gets back from her trip to Naboo, I’m the acting Commander-General of the Elbara Nine rebellion.’

‘We’re all very proud,’ Finn drones, as Rose elbows him in the ribs. Rey watches the exchange, and she can’t help the little pit that forms in her stomach. She’s left out, once again, the extra wheel that’s slowing the trio down. She didn’t expect any different. She never really belonged with the rebels, with Finn and Poe and Rose, the everyday heroes, full of bravery and camaraderie and normalcy.

She belonged with Ben. Taking on the world, back to back, two strange, lonely, people who held the universe in their heads. Just him and I.

Too bad he’s apparently ditched her, too.

She swallows her pride and follows the group out of the kitchen, clutching her mug of hot chocolate tightly, letting the warmth seep through her palms, into her blood. It’s necessary – she’d forgotten just how cold it can be at the Glitterfall Base.

Poe leads them down a corridor, past her old sleeping quarters, and it’s strange how so much has changed for her, but everything is the same here. If she opened the door to her room, it would still look like her room. If she sat in the cafeteria, she could still eat the same food. But she’s not the same girl she was when she left, not by a long shot.

Poe ushers them into a conference room, teeth chattering a little at the cold, and they take up seats around an oblong table. He sits at the head, spreading his hands over the edge of the table, and Rey thinks he’s taking his title as commander-general a little too seriously, but whatever. He made her hot chocolate, so that makes up for it. She sips it gingerly, the hot milk burning her upper lip.

‘First of all, Rey, I think we should catch up on what intel each of us has so far. So I’ll start. We know that Kylo Ren is the general’s son. We know that he’s been ousted from the First Order. And we know that the Order has put a price on your heads for killing the old Supreme Leader, and for being Force-sensitive. Anything you wanna add to that?’

Rey fidgets under the table, scraping her nails over the skin of her wrist. She’s not sure where to start, or how much to divulge. Will he be angry with her for spilling his secrets? Does she care?

Harbouring secrets was what got her into trouble the last time she was here. She has to learn from her mistakes, stop isolating herself and trust her friends, be honest and open, if she wants to move forward.

Once upon a time, a dark warrior named Ben Solo had saved her life. Once upon a time, in one of the darkest moments of that life, he’d shouted at her to stop holding onto the armour of lies she’d crafted to protect herself, to be honest, to let go.

This is me letting go, Ben.

She takes a deep breath and begins.
‘Hang on. Let me get this straight. Kylo Ren is going to take on the whole First Order with a couple of random knights?’ Finn repeats, eyebrows travelling up his forehead. ‘Jeez. He’s gonna lose.’

Rey taps on the sides of her mug, clearing her throat. ‘Well, maybe not. That’s where we come in.’ She raises her eyes to meet Poe’s. ‘Leia and I have agreed on an alliance with the Naboo, and potentially with Chandrila as well, that involves an arms trade. Have you received any dispatches from their war generals?’

Poe grins. ‘Yeah, we have. And from Bespin, too. Seems you made quite the impression on their governor, according to what Leia told me.’

Lando. Of course. Rey fights back a smile.

‘So we have the starfleets of three other rebel-allied planets at our disposal. And Kylo Ren will have his knights, apparently,’ Poe muses. ‘We know that the First Order is moving into Wild Space. Maybe now is a good time to turn the tables on them, when they’re out of their comfort zone.’ His eyes sparkle, and everyone at the table can tell he’s scheming, and when Poe Dameron’s scheming, the enemy had better take note. ‘Chandrila has the biggest fleet. If we send half of it to intercept the Order, it could slow them down, put them on the backfoot while they deal with the intrusion. That would give us time to plan our next move, and for you to talk to Ren, get his angle on this.’ Poe drums his fingers on the table. ‘Look, I’m not happy about potentially teaming up with him. Truth be told, if that fucker was on fire I wouldn’t piss on him to put him out.’

‘You’d be the one who lit him on fire in the first place,’ Finn cracks, and Poe snickers indulgingly, shooting Finn a look.

‘But,’ he continues, emphasizing the word, ‘luckily for you, I’m only the acting commander. If what you say is true, and Ren is planning to attack the Order, then he’s technically on our side. Enemy of our enemy and all that jazz. And he’s the general’s son. I know what she’d want me to do, so, speaking for this group of rebels,’ he looks meaningfully around the table, conveniently ignoring Finn’s glare, ‘we’re in. Use this connection you have with him. Talk to him, or don’t, but find out what he’s planning. If he starts an assault on the Order, we’ll back him up, send in the troops. God knows we have enough of them now; I’ve been fielding long-distance comm-calls for two days running.’

Finn rolls his eyes at Poe’s aggrieved tone. ‘He enjoys it really,’ he tells Rose and Rey. ‘He could quarrel with other generals all day.’

‘What can I say, I’m just a glutton for punishment,’ Poe mutters, and Finn laughs. Rose and Rey exchange a loaded look.

‘Anyway,’ Poe recovers quickly. ‘I’m gonna adjourn this meeting, because it’s getting pretty late and I’ve probably missed another two dozen calls. But Rey – we’re super glad to have you back. Now Finn can finally shut up for two seconds.’ He ruffles Finn’s hair affectionately, and Rey notices how much it’s grown in the past month, less of a crew-cut now, the beginning of curls setting in. Some things do change. ‘We’ll pick this up tomorrow, yeah?’

‘Okay.’ Rey nods gratefully, standing up and collecting everyone’s mugs. ‘I’ll just, uh, take these back to the kitchen.’

‘I’ll go with you,’ Finn decides, and Rey’s heart drops a few centimetres, but she doesn’t protest. *Honesty and openness, remember.*
The foursome part ways, Poe and Rose heading off to the comms-centre, Rey and Finn back to the kitchens. Finn waits until they’ve bypassed the doors into the back room and are filling the sinks with soap to speak.

‘So, that was some heavy stuff back there.’

‘Yeah,’ Rey mutters, starting to scrub at one of the mugs with a sponge, wiping off the crust of chocolate powder. Despite her promise to be honest, she’d had a hard time choosing what to share – she’d told the three rebels about the Force bond, about training with Luke, about Ben saving her from Snoke and about his plan to form a third faction with the Knights of Ren, to kill Grand Marshal Hux. But she’d kept back several little details, such as, oh yeah, the fact that she was in love with the man they knew as Kylo Ren. Just a minor spanner in the works. She didn’t think that particular revelation would go down too well with Finn or Poe, as they’d both had personal experience with how unpleasant Kylo Ren could be when crossed. And besides, she hadn’t even told him how she felt – she wasn’t about to share that with the group, like some form of talk therapy before they braided eachother’s hair and drank the base’s supply of wine.

The mention of wine triggers a particular memory of the first time she got drunk. Oh, krief, she’d been such a blithering idiot that night, before they’d had sex – the first time for that, too.

Remembering that makes her stomach drop, but in an entirely different way. She scrubs harder at the ring of chocolate on the bottom of the mug, clenching her teeth so she doesn’t think about Ben Solo’s arms, scarred and strong, the freckles dotting his chest, the way it had felt, to be stretched from the inside out, when she slid down the length of his-

‘...Rey?’ Finn’s voice blessedly ends that train of thought. ‘You broke the cup.’

Rey looks down at what was previously a mug and is now just a china handle in her fingers. The rest of the mug had snapped off, she’d scrubbed it so forcefully, and is now broken at the bottom of the sink.

‘Crap.’

‘Are you okay?’ Finn looks at her with raised eyebrows, and she knows that he isn’t asking about the mug-breaking, or her inattentiveness. She sighs.

‘Not really, no. I’m not okay.’ Admitting it feels like a fraction of the weight lifts off her chest, so she says it again. ‘I’m not okay.’

‘I know.’ Finn squeezes her shoulder as she returns to the sink, picking up another mug and rinsing it. ‘Want to go for a walk, talk about it? For real this time?’

Rey laughs darkly, setting down the sponge and turning to face her friend. ‘You wouldn’t believe it if I told you, Finn, trust me. There’s a lot.’

Finn shrugs, a half-smile turning up the corners of his mouth. ‘I’ve got time. And I saw you lift an avalanche of rocks a month ago, so you’d be surprised what I’d believe, these days. Come on, let’s get out of here.’ He tugs her arm, and she reluctantly follows him back out of the kitchen.

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Rey waits to resume the conversation until they’ve passed the exit doors of the base and are tracking through the snowfall, flakes falling on their cheeks and noses as they look up at the evening sky. She’d forgotten just how beautiful the nights can be here, the heavens arctic and austere, the sky whirling with snowflakes and the occasional arc of solar flares, electric blue. Shooting stars.
Finn is quiet at her side, his breath misting in front of their faces, as he waits for her to start.

‘Once, you asked me how I knew to pilot starships,’ Rey says casually, eyes still fixed on the sky.

‘Yeah, I did,’ Finn agrees, the memory eliciting a wry smile. ‘I couldn’t believe how fast you picked it up. Didn’t you say you used to run flight sims, though?’

‘Yes.’ Rey’s heart beats fast, faster, as she considers how to phrase this, her most deeply-buried theory. ‘I did. But even before the sims, I knew. And when I got into the Falcon’s cockpit, I knew then, too. It shouldn’t have been that easy, it was an unfamiliar design, an old system. But I knew what to do, like I’d flown it a hundred times before.’

‘Why do you think that is?’ Finn asks, toeing at the snow with his boot, kicking up puffs of white.

‘Because of Ben,’ she says quietly, confessing it to herself as much as to him. Something she’d been growing steadily more convinced of, ever since he’d stalked her through the woods, the figure of her darkest nightmares, suddenly corporeal. ‘Because we’re bound by the Force.’

She can feel Finn’s disapproval; it’s practically tangible in the air in front of them. ‘Right. The Force bond thing.’ He pauses, clicking his tongue against his teeth, warring with some impulse.

‘So what’s the deal with that?’ he bursts out. ‘I know what you said in the conference room, but... how does it work? When did it start?’

Rey sighs, casting her eyes out over the snowfields. In the starlight, the dusting of snow on the ground glistens like moon dust, and she pretends that they’re traversing the surface of the moon, rather than this frozen-over planet, having this otherworldly, awkward conversation about fate and the Force.

‘I don’t really know,’ she admits. ‘He thinks it started when he took me to Starkiller Base as a prisoner.’ She steals a glance at Finn, whose frown has deepened, sharp lines and angles. ‘It’s a sort of telepathic link between us. We started being able to communicate through the Force when I was on Luke’s island. But... he appeared to me in visions – nightmares, mostly – long before that. When I was on Jakku. I think that’s how I knew how to fly. I picked up on it from him – from his memories.’

Her heart beats fast as a hummingbird’s wings as she keeps talking, and she’s afraid – she’s never told anyone about the nightmares, the visions – not even Ben, though it’s possible he read it from her in one of their bonded moments. She’d even caught herself wondering, recently, whether their latent connection had run both ways, if he’d dreamed of her, too.

She’d pondered the various hints that indicated yes – like the way he’d looked at her when she’d summoned his legacy lightsaber in the forest, that mix of awe and recognition; it is you – but that particular topic had never come up in their conversations. Too distracted by the lures of the future to focus on the past.

But there’s nobody better to bounce this off than Finn. Even after how disastrously he’d reacted during their comm-conversation. He’s her best friend, who, amazingly enough, has welcomed her back to Elbara Nine with hugs and friendship, not coldness and rejection. He’s kind and thoughtful and a good secret-keeper, and an even better listener. And he deserves her honesty, her trust, more than anybody else in the galaxy.

He came back for her.

‘So you think the bond was always there?’ Finn prompts, frowning as he kicks harder at the snow, getting white flecks all over both of their trousers.
'You really want to know what I think? You won’t like it,' Rey warns him, and bizarrely, that makes him chuckle.

'No, I probably won’t. But try me.' The sardonic little smile he gives her is encouraging, somehow, and so she continues.

'I think that something has always been there. Not the bond we have now, because that manifests differently. But *something*. An awareness. And it awakened properly after he interrogated me.' She chews on her lip, considering her next words, the biggest acknowledgment. Something she’s only just begun to believe, in the most secret part of her. A confession of the soul.

'I think, in some weird, warped way – we were meant to meet,’ she says softly. ‘Luke was always banging on about the balance in the Force – powerful light, powerful darkness. The Force keeps pushing us together.’ She turns to face Finn, resigned to the whole truth. ‘On Takodana, when I ran away from Maz’s castle and into the woods, I’d had a vision of him. I was running away from that – and it brought me right to him.’

‘Yeah, and then he kidnapped you and tortured you for information,’ Finn reminds her hotly, a note of the old bitterness in his tone. Rey kicks some of the snow at him. ‘Hey!’

‘I told you you wouldn’t like it.’ She stoops over to pick up a handful of snow, just for something to do with her hands. She starts to sculpt it into a compact ball, frowning. ‘I’m not denying how it looks. It looks pretty rotten from where I’m standing, too. After what he did to you, to Han... she glares at the snowball as if it’s personally responsible for Kylo Ren’s cosmic crimes. ‘He doesn’t deserve forgiveness.’

Finn cocks his head to the side, sensing there’s a ‘but’ coming. Rey lets out another breath before continuing, a cloud of mist hanging between them, obscuring Finn’s face. It makes the next part easier to say.

‘For what it’s worth, I hated him too, for a long time. I thought he couldn’t be saved. But when Snoke had us both on the *Supremacy*, Ben chose to kill him, to save *me*. I owe him gratitude for that, at least.’ She bites her lip. ‘And that vision I had of him on Takodana – it came true. Part of it, anyway. That’s why I trust the other visions I’ve had since. I’ve seen him turn away from the dark side, from the Order. I think he’s changing.’ She breaks apart the snowball in her fingers, unmaking it until it’s nothing but a little pile of ice crystals. ‘I want to help him.’

‘Because you love him,’ Finn surmises, and the bluntness of it makes her blood freeze as much as the chill wind.

‘I never said that.’ She dusts the snow off her hands, fingertips blue-tinged from the cold.

‘Rey.’ Finn levels her with a stern look. ‘I’m not dumb. You call him *Ben*,’ he adds, scrunching his face up as though he’d just sucked on a lemon.

‘That *is* his name,’ Rey retorts, her eyes narrowing.

‘Yeah, but you say it like...’ Finn gesticulates wildly for a moment, racking his brains for the right word. ‘You know. Like you *know* him.’

‘I do know him,’ Rey says simply, starting to walk through the packed snow again, trusting Finn to keep up. ‘It’s kind of inevitable when he’s popping up in my head all the time.’

Finn’s eyes bug as something occurs to him. ‘Is he here *now*?’ Comically, his eyes dart around the snowbanks, as if expecting a masked Kylo Ren to come striding out of the icy wilderness to
challenge him to another duel.

Rey snorts, but it isn’t funny, not really – it just reminds her of the strange new absence of him that she’s still trying to get used to. ‘No. He’s not here. I haven’t heard from him in a day.’

‘What a tragedy,’ Finn mumbles sourly, and it’s Rey’s turn to glare. ‘Sorry.’

‘You’re one to talk about love, anyway,’ Rey jabs at him. ‘What about you and Rose? What’s up with that?’

‘Rose?’ Finn repeats, frowning in puzzlement.

‘Yeah, Rose. Remember her? The girl who looks at you like you’re a god among men?’ Rey prompts, raising her eyebrows at him.

Finn nearly trips over from surprise. ‘Hell, no. Whatever you think, there’s no love’- he puts the word in air-quotes – ‘going on there. We’re just buddies. Like you and me. We went through some crazy shit together.’

‘Buddies,’ Rey repeats, her eyebrows lifting even higher. It all gels then, and her eyes start to gleam. ‘What about Poe, then?’

Even in the starlight, she can see Finn’s cheeks start to steam up. ‘What about Poe?’ he blusters.

Rey’s face splits in a cheeky grin.

‘Well, well, well. And you’re lecturing me on forbidden love?’

‘What – there is no – even if there was, he – damn it, Rey,’ Finn stamps his foot. ‘Stop projecting. We’re talking about you.’

‘Careful you don’t melt the whole planet with that red-hot love, Finn,’ Rey teases, walking backwards away from him and grinning impishly. ‘We can’t have another Starkiller Base on our hands.’

‘I’m gonna kill you,’ Finn growls, and he scoops up a handful of snow, throwing the snowball at her before it’s even fully formed. It whaps her in the chest, and Rey shrieks as the icy water drips under her neckline, trickling down her ribs. Finn’s already scraping together another snowball, and Rey spins on her feet, starting to run.

Finn chases her through the ankle-deep snow, yelling threats as Rey giggles uncontrollably, twisting and leaping, staying just beyond his reach. The parallels between this fight and the saber-chase through the ice forest only a month ago aren’t lost on her, and she laughs into the wind as she bounds over a snowbank, Finn hot on her heels, pelting snowballs at her. Better snowballs than a crackling laserbeam of death, though – far less is riding on this fight.

Rey skids down a small indentation in the snowfield, throwing out her hands to catch herself. Finn surprises her from behind, pushing her into the snow. Rey’s shout is muffled as she hits the ground face-first, inhaling a mouthful of snow.

She coughs, gasping, as she rolls over, her face caked with white, flakes in her hair like dandruff. ‘You – little - wastoid,’ she chokes, spitting out snow with every word. Finn’s cackling, trying to stuff another handful of snow down the back of her shirt, and Rey throws up a hand, Force-pushing him back out of instinct.

Finn windmills his arms crazily before toppling backwards into the snow himself. ‘Oof!’
Rey scrambles to her feet, and before Finn can get back up she jumps on top of him, wrestling him into the snow. She grabs his arms and pins them, immobilizing him, and it’s just another set of parallels between now and then, and is she always going to be haunted by these memories, by the ghost of him?

Finn is grinning up at her, dark eyes dancing, and all the fight goes out of her. Rey releases his arms, standing up again, starting to shiver as lactic acid pools in her muscles and the adrenaline of the snowfight ebbs away.

‘Why don’t you hate me?’ she blurs suddenly, crossing her arms over her chest.

‘What?’ Finn sweeps the snow off his pants as he gets to his feet.

‘Why don’t you hate me?’ she repeats, her voice cracking slightly on the words. ‘I’m a terrible friend. I disappear on you all the time, without a word. I keep getting into dangerous situations and dragging you into my messes. And I’m trying to save the man who tried to murder you. I suck!’ she exclaims, throwing her hands in the air for emphasis.

‘Yeah, you do,’ Finn replies, trying to keep a straight face, but he’s undone by a snort of laughter. ‘But I suck, too. So we kinda match.’ He reaches out and pulls her into a hug, letting her shiver against his much-warmer body. ‘I’m sorry for being a dick to you about Ren over the comm. I hate that guy, but I don’t hate you. I don’t get you, but I could never hate you. And Poe kinda set me straight about all that the other day, anyway,’ he adds, grinning artfully.

‘Oh, yeah?’ Rey pulls back, eyeing him suspiciously. ‘What’d he say?’

‘He reminded me that you’re a magical girl who can lift an entire landslide out of the way to help us escape a mineshaft, and that you’re stronger than anyone. You can probably hold your own against a horde of angry rathtars, let alone Kylo Ren.’

A slow smile stretches across Rey’s face as Finn blathers on. ‘He also reminded me that you’re pretty self-sufficient, and you like to do your own thing. So I’m not gonna try and hold you back from that. I learned my lesson after the first time I tried to cross you.’ He grins, thinking of the marketplace on Jakku, when he’d met with the blunt end of Rey’s quarterstaff. He’d gone flying into the dust, landing flat on his back and winding himself excruciatingly. That meeting had changed the trajectory of his life completely, veering off-course as swiftly as the Falcon had done when they’d escaped the First Order’s TIE’s, barrelling through the wreckage of an old Star Destroyer. How could he hate her? She’d whacked him with the stick of friendship and he could never go back.

He doesn’t share any of that with her, but Rey seems to read it from him anyway, and she wraps her arms around him again, squeezing tightly before letting go.

‘Help me get my stuff from the freighter?’ she asks, tilting her head towards the parked starship that’s now visible in the distance.

Finn slings an arm around her slim shoulders. ‘For sure.’

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Rey startles awake after midnight, freezing, bedsheets tossed aside in the restlessness of her slumber. Outside her window, the world is black and cold, almost starless until she cranes her neck to look up and sees the multitudes.

She turns back from the window and he’s there, finally, in front of her. A black-clothed spectre in the darkness of her room.
She wants to run into his arms.

She wants to punch him in the face.

She settles on neither, crossing her arms over her chest and assuming a look of disapproval. ‘Well?’

Ben looks nervous. As if the rawness of their bond is still new to him, as if this is his first time appearing in front of her.

She frowns, confused. ‘Ben?’

He sighs, running a hand through his curls. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t make contact sooner. It’s been a weird day.’ He looks like the poster-boy for total disorder; hair in disarray, clothes not straightened, expression wearied but eyes bright with some emotion she doesn’t recognise. The reflection from the window is in his eyes, mirroring the stars, and now he looks even more like a ghost. Standing in her bedroom with eyes like constellations, and how dare he come here and stir up all her emotions at the witching hour? He’s so bloody inconsiderate.

The bond between them hums as he probes at her mind, trying to get a read on her. She glowers at him.

‘Did you find the knights of Ren?’ she asks abruptly, keeping her arms crossed, but more protectively now than angrily.

Ben inclines his head, a lock of hair falling and obscuring one eye. ‘Two of the five,’ he says, oddly quietly. ‘They were half-delirious from dehydration, taking shelter in a canyon on Pillio.’

‘How soon after landing did you find them?’ Rey probes; ready to thoroughly pick apart any answer he gives her.

‘After three hours or so,’ he answers coolly, seeing what she’s attempting to goad him into and sidestepping it with ease. ‘If you’re angry with me, Rey, then I’d prefer you just shout at me, rather than try to trap me in petty disputes.’

‘Ha!’ Rey snorts. ‘Says the crowned king of trapping people in arguments.’

He raises an eyebrow, aloof, watching her dig a bigger hole for herself.

‘Oh, screw you, Ben.’

The eyebrow lifts higher.

‘You’re disgusting, you know that?’

‘You love it.’ Some of the old flame returns to his eyes, burning away the exhaustion. ‘For what it’s worth, I am sorry I didn’t make contact with your ship, or you. I haven’t had’- he turns away from her momentarily, eyes darting to something Rey can’t see – ‘much time alone until now.’

Rey’s turn to raise her eyebrows. ‘And that matters why?’ She taps her lips, pretending to think about it. ‘Let me guess – your little murderous friends weren’t thrilled to hear they’d be buddying up with the Resistance?’

Ben smiles wryly. ‘Not exactly, no. Suffice it to say they were rather resistant to the idea at first.’

Rey groans. ‘That is the worst pun I have ever heard.’ But it’s had the desired effect of defusing some of her anger, and she can’t help a small smile from quirking up the corners of her mouth as she
looks at him. ‘Does that change anything? The fact that they hate the plan?’

He looks at her solemnly. ‘No. It just necessitates me keeping them in the dark about more than just you.’

Her eyes dance. ‘You’re a liar after all, Ben Solo. A more conniving one than I gave you credit for.’

‘I learned from the best,’ he snarks back, and she can’t tell if he’s referring to his father or to her with that remark. ‘Did you make it back to the Resistance all right?’ he asks, and even though his tone is casual, she can see the worry that lurks beneath the question – he’s worried about her, and it’s touching and backwards all at once, and it melts the last of her hostility, and she couldn’t stop herself from hugging him if she wanted to. She walks into his arms, burying her face in his chest, and he might look like a ghost, but he’s as solid as a contract when she breathes in his scent, that mix of sweat and salt and ripe, tempting fruit, and she keeps her cheek against his chest when she replies.

‘Yes. I got back this morning, and I’ve brought them up to speed on the plan. Poe’s running the show while Leia’s on Naboo, and he says Chandrila, Naboo and Bespin have pledged their armadas to the rebel cause.’ She smirks a little. ‘It seems your pal Lando liked me. Or Leia. Either or.’

‘Don’t mention Lando,’ Ben growls, and she can feel the vibration of his words in his chest, her ear pressed against his sternum. ‘I do not want to think about that man right now.’

‘All right. Anyway. Poe’s sending a squadron from Chandrila to Mortis, to head off the First Order, distract them with a skirmish so that you and the Knights can sneak under the radar.’

He stiffens a little then, pulling back, and Rey can see the suspicion marring his features. ‘Poe Dameron wants to help us,’ he repeats, skeptically. ‘Why?’

Rey gulps. She’s not sure how he’s going to react to this particular truth. ‘All Poe wants is to take down the First Order. You’re in this fight for the right reasons, so he thinks it’s reasonable to align with you – it gives the Resistance a better chance of winning.’ She lets out the breath she’d been holding. ‘And he knows you’re Leia’s son.’

She feels a pulse of displeasure across their link, hot and uncomfortable, but he isn’t as angry as she’d thought he’d be. ‘Fucking great. So the leader of the rebellion is going around telling all and sundry that Kylo Ren is her son. That’s perfect.’

Rey narrows her eyes at him. ‘What’s so bad about that? I’d say it helps you out, actually. Makes you look a tad more redeemable in the eyes of the Resistance. And anyway, only the people closest to her know. It’s not like she grabbed a megaphone and shouted it from the rooftops of Coruscant.’

Ben gives a long-suffering sigh. ‘Whatever.’ He runs a hand through his hair again, pushing it back off his face. ‘So you said Dameron’s sending a squad to Mortis. Do you know anything beyond that?’

‘No,’ Rey admits. ‘He was going to wait until I heard from you. And now I have.’ She retreats from him, settling down on the edge of her pallet. ‘After about sixteen hours of constant stress.’

Ben lowers himself onto the bed next to her, and he must be settling on a hard surface somewhere aboard his freighter, rather than the softness of a mattress, because he winces. Rey’s reminded all over again that he’s not really here, that he made the final choice to leave, and sadness wells somewhere deep inside.

‘I still don’t understand why you had to go,’ she whispers, staring at her knees. ‘Why the knights mattered so much.’
He doesn’t reply for a time, his eyes on the floor as well – a different floor, in a different region of space, but somehow, here. ‘They’re all I have left – apart from you,’ he adds quickly as she makes an angry squawk. ‘They saved my life at the Jedi Temple, Rey. The night that Skywalker...’ he trails off, unable to say the last words. ‘They stood with me against the other Padawans. They followed me to Snoke, to leadership and now, to ruin. I’m responsible for them. I can’t just leave them to die at the hands of Hux’s regime. It’s not what-’ he clenches his fists now, struggling against saying something, something that’s clearly been eating at him since he made the choice to go.

‘It’s not what?’ Rey asks in a hushed voice, and he raises his eyes to hers, dark irises glinting like chips of black diamond in the moonlight.

‘It’s not what a good person would do.’

Rey lets out a breath she’d been holding, and her eyes are fever-bright in the blackness of her room. ‘So this is how Kylo Ren redeems himself,’ she breathes, starting to understand. ‘By going back for them?’

He looks at her with uncomfortable intensity, and then he smirks, a trace of his father’s cockiness cutting through the gloom. ‘Not really, no,’ he points out. ‘It’s hardly a heroic act to save a bunch of Dark-siders from a fate you consigned them to in the first place.’

‘Semantics,’ Rey says witheringly. ‘If it walks like a hero and talks like a hero...’

Ben rolls his eyes to the ceiling, the faintest hint of embarrassment on his face, and it’s so goddamn perfect that Rey leans in, twining her fingers through his and lifting his hand up to her mouth.

‘I’m proud of you, Ben Solo,’ she whispers, brushing her lips over his knuckles.

‘You have low standards, Rey of Jakku,’ he remarks, more of a warning against expecting too much of him than anything else. He forgets she can read him like an open book; understand the insecurity behind the harsh words.

She rests her head against his shoulder, sighing softly. ‘This isn’t fair,’ she murmurs.

‘What isn’t?’

She grins a little. ‘You. Coming over all heroic and rebellious when you’re not really here.’

‘Rey,’ he warns, his voice low. ‘You know this doesn’t change anything. I’m still not going to be-’

She places a finger against his lips, and this is the most they’ve ever touched through the Force bond. It begs the question – how far can they push this? ‘Shhh. Don’t ruin the moment.’

He frowns at her, but doesn’t speak. Rey revels in the illusion, the belief that Ben Solo of all people is a hero. She reclines on the little pallet, stretching an arm up to invite him to join her. Wherever he is in outer space, it doesn’t matter as he bends over her, dark eyes wandering over her face, resting on her lips before Rey whispers, ‘Kiss me.’

He does, and Rey tastes faith. He always forgets that she knows the truth of him, that his goodness isn’t an illusion at all, just buried deep, needing to be coaxed out and into the light. She kisses galaxies onto his lips, the promises of what they could be when this war is over - a universe that drips in colour, with them at the centre. No longer purely light or entirely dark.

A balance.
When the bond fades out, taking him with it, she shuts her eyes, a spectrum playing over the backs of her lids.

Chapter End Notes

LONG CHAPTER AHOY! Hope you guys enjoy!
Hey, that rhymes.

Ya girl will be on holiday for the next few days, making very stupid choices with the rest of the squad and probably not having one single sober moment to reflect on life as we know it. When I return, the Reylo feels will pick back up immediately, because these two space idiots are hitting me over the head constantly, begging me to let them have a happy ending. I am but a slave to their collective will.

xoxo
Chapter Forty-Two

In the time remaining before they enter Wild Space, he drills with the knights – they have nothing more to say to each other, and so they’ve fallen back on the only language they know; that of combat. He doesn’t go easy on them, nor they him – their sparring on the cargo deck nearly detaches the entire floor of the shuttle a few times, but the knights just laugh and carry on, unflappable. What does it matter if they space themselves? They’re staring down the barrel of a blaster anyway, in this harebrained scheme to take on the First Order.

He knows they think he’s lost the plot, that they can’t possibly win against the Order, even with the help of the Resistance. Malik and Sorcha have voiced their displeasure about that team-up, not that it matters a jot. If they think that’s bad, he shudders to think how they’d react if they knew about Rey.

Things have been fairly quiet between them since he’d visited her in her bedroom two nights ago. He still gets glimpses of her emotions, snatches of her conversations throughout the day, and unsettlingly enough, he’s begun to dream about her again. Strange, delirious fever-dreams like the ones he used to have when he was younger, before he ever knew her name.

The one he’d had last night, as he’d stretched out flat on a bench in the cargo hold, his back screaming in protest, had been the strangest yet, and he’d privately wondered whether Malik or Sorcha had slipped some hallucinogenic into his food as some kind of prank.

In that dream, he’d been running through the wreckage of a Star Destroyer, sand sucking at his feet, trying to slow him as some hideous desert beast breathed down the back of his neck. Then, at breakneck speed, the Star Destroyer disappeared under his feet and he was left sprawled in the dirt, coughing up particles of stardust. Changed again, sand dripping through his fingers like rain, sunlight burning his skin to brown. Rainbows flexing in a gaseous nebula, black holes opening at the edges of his vision, the metallic walls of a spaceship bending around him as he flew closer and closer to an event horizon, to the inescapable touch of the time-space continuum, wavelengths redshifting and time flipping back on itself in unending acrobatics.

He’d woken up disoriented, unsure which body he was in – his or hers. The unfamiliarity of the cargo shuttle’s ceiling had only added to that perplexity. He’d been off all day as a result, and now, as he spars with Malik on the deck, his footwork is clumsier than usual, his blows less forceful, and the Knight is about to gain the upper hand. The diamond-edged blade of his machete is getting perilously close to his arm as his lightsaber skims off its edge.

Malik grunts as he forces his blade downward, and Kylo disengages at the last possible second, spinning without finesse to slash at the Knight’s exposed back, ripping a burning line into his shoulder. Malik groans and leaps backward, scything the blade, a move that would have separated his shins from his ankles if Kylo hadn’t already been poised to block the downstrike. Maybe he’s not as rusty as he thought, and he grins as Malik sweats and curses, lifting the heavy weapon to strike against Kylo’s coming saber, sparks skittering off the machete as it seesaws down the plasma blade.

The knight suddenly swings upward, breaking the tie and scoring the tip of his machete over Kylo’s
shoulder. The diamond blade rips through fabric and armour to gash his skin, and he winces, breath hissing through clenched teeth as he retreats, bringing his saber up to block the Knight’s swipe. The blood soaking his sleeve smells like retribution, like rust and salt and savagery, and it spurs him onward, feeding off the pain to make him hit harder, to strike stronger, to endure.

Blood sport. It’s what he was bred for.

Within seconds, he’s scored a critical strike; a jagged slash across the back of the Knight’s knees that knocks him forward onto the floor, Kylo’s blade poised over his spine.

‘Yield,’ he says quietly, as Malik rolls onto his back, the breathing filter of his helmet making a hissing sound. But instead of dropping his weapon as is customary, the Knight suddenly swipes at Kylo’s legs, forcing him to twirl out of the strike radius in the most undignified move ever seen in armed combat, maybe ever. Clumsy, but effective, given he still retains both legs.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ he snarls, as the Knight swipes at him again in a savage upswing, aiming for his head. Kylo blocks the strike easily enough, but the kinetics of the swing sends a jolt of force through his arm, and his bones scream as his arm is nearly wrenched from the socket. And Malik keeps advancing, swinging the blade towards his chest, a death strike if it makes contact.

Fuck this. Kylo throws out a hand and sweeps it through the air, Force-throwing the disobedient little shit against the wall of the shuttle. He brings his other hand up, curling two fingers towards his palm, and the Knight is suspended against the wall as Kylo stalks over to him, his damaged shoulder squealing as he lifts his arm, slamming the Knight hard against the wall once, twice.

‘Has your time apart from the Order made you forget the honor code of combat, Malik?’ he seethes. The helmeted knight looks down at him, breathing distorted by his mask. But Kylo can feel the resentment he exudes when he replies, ‘There is no honor amongst thieves, my lord.’

‘Thieves?’ Kylo repeats in a flat, passionless voice. ‘Explain.’

‘Just that we are no longer in the employ of Snoke or the Order, my lord. We aren’t bound by outdated combat rules anymore.’

The knight starts to feel the muscles of his throat collapse, windpipe constricted by an invisible hand as he looks down at his master’s face, so much less formidable without his helmet, and his eyes glow like firestones as he brings two fingers perilously close to each other, cutting off the knight’s oxygen so thoroughly that his head swims, lungs bursting like water-balloons-

Kylo unclenches his hands and the knight slides to the floor, gasping and choking. Kylo squats down next to him, and his tone is poisonous when he says, ‘That may be true, and you are free to exercise all manner of mindless brutality once we face the Order – I encourage that. But in this circle, we are still the Seven Light, and we will honour the code of combat. Understood?’

Malik nods, still breathless, and Kylo gets to his feet, walking over to the wall panel and pulling a kit of bacta patches down from a storage cupboard. He tosses one at Malik.

‘For your knees.’

He takes a couple for his arm and strides out of the cargo hold, thoughts racing. It’s just as well the Force bond hasn’t been manifesting physically as frequently as it used to – he doubts Rey would still be calling him a hero if she saw what he’d just done to one of his own. But there is something more worrying – the knights have grown insubordinate in his absence, clearly, if they are now defying him on basic matters such as combat rules. He’s going to have to drill them harder, rein them in, if they’re
going to present a united front against the First Order.

Malik and Sorcha had been grateful to him when he’d come to their aid, certainly, but some of that veneer of friendliness had disappeared as soon as he’d mentioned the plan to attack the Order with the help of the Resistance. He can’t blame them, really, for their judgement. For seven years they’ve gone against the Resistance in every aspect, and even if Kylo himself hadn’t been particularly bothered with wiping the rebels out, that didn’t mean the Knights felt the same way. To him, the rebels had been nothing more than an irritant – even before their defeat at Crait; their numbers were hardly enough to worry him – nothing but a small obstacle to be overcome on the way to finding Luke Skywalker. But clearly the Knights do not share his sentiments, and they’ve made their displeasure with his leadership quite obvious if they’re now challenging his authority.

No honour amongst thieves. He is not a thief. He resents that implication.

Okay, he did steal them a spacecraft, but that hardly counts – and one would think the Knights would be a little more appreciative of that, given the alternative was being left in the wasteland of Pillio for carrion birds to pick over. And he did not come by the seat of the Supreme Leader by stealing it, either, if that’s what they mean. He took that place rightfully, ascending to the throne after killing his master, in accordance with the Rule of Two. He would expect Armitage Hux to disrespect that holy rite, but not the Seven Light, who understand the ritualistic ways of the Sith and the Jedi. Or, they used to.

How can he count on them to back him up when they come face to face with Hux, if they’re defying his orders right now?

Suddenly, this doesn’t seem like such a good idea. If it ever did in the first place. But it’s too late to turn back now. By his estimation, they are only a day and a half from reaching Mortis, and once there, they have to sneak onto the Finalizer and free the rest of the Seven Light.

He knows, from stitching together the threads of random conversations he’s heard through Rey’s side of the bond, that Poe Dameron has sent a squad of Chandrilan ships to attack the First Order’s fleet, and that the Naboo starfleet is in hot pursuit. So they have backup in place in case this goes pear-shaped. The likelihood of that is growing stronger by the hour, and as he sits down in the crew quarters, removing his surcoat and arm-wraps to apply the bacta patch, he tries to calm himself, centring himself in the Force to distract from the mounting fears.

In outer space, the Force takes a different shape. A tesseract rather than a web, melting with the light of stars rather than the signatures of other sentient beings. He slides into it, the threads of spacetime rippling as he melds with the dark, with the space between, where the void awaits. A maw, not unlike the one he’d traversed a few times, back when he was still Ben Solo entirely, when his father had tried to train him to do the Kessel Run.

‘Steady on the thrusters, kid,’ Han Solo had advised as they’d co-piloted the Falcon, steering it closer to the Maw Cluster, a series of black holes near Kessel, visible only due to the ultraviolet light of nebulae it had eaten. The Maw contained sickening amounts of radiation, along with the mythical beast Abeloth, Queen of the Stars, a tentacled Dark-side entity imprisoned in the black hole. ‘When you feel the suction, punch it to hell, or we’ll be ripped apart in a way that makes a Sarlaac pit look like a tea party. But hold off as long as you can, okay?’

‘Jeez Dad, no pressure or anything,’ he’d muttered, but his irritation had quickly dissipated when he laid eyes on the Maw in its entirety – a glittering cloud of amethyst, interspersed with starlight and set in the black core of deep space. He’d kept his hand poised over the jump button, waiting to feel gravity shake the Falcon like a ragdoll, but out of nowhere, a voice issued from the void – no, from inside his head - a whisper, a siren song. It was calling him, whatever was at the centre of the black
hole, phantom tendrils wrapping themselves around his brain, and-

Han knocked his hand aside and slammed the button to jump, just in time. The ship’s engines screamed as it strained against the suction of the black hole, before the stars dissolved into streaks and they were jolted into hyperspace.

‘Ben, what the hell was that?!’ Han shouted, his eyes wild and hair dishevelled. ‘We almost got sucked in!’

Chewie roared in the background as Ben looked up at his father, opening his mouth to tell him about the voice of the abyss, but... he remembered how Han had reacted the last time he’d told him about one of the voices he’d heard, the dream he’d had – the nightmarish claws and the twisted, malevolent face – and he shrugged, grinning at his dad, and said, ‘Just trying to break your record.’

Han had laughed, ruffling his son’s hair. ‘You’re gonna have to try harder than that, kid,’ he grinned. ‘But you’re almost as reckless as I am, and that’s saying somethin’.’

Ben withdraws from the Force abruptly, that same siren song playing in his thoughts like a lullaby. The memory has rattled him – it seems he isn’t safe from his inner torment, even immersed in the Dark as he had been. Then again, when was he ever safe from his inner torment? Even before he split his soul apart by killing his father. At this point he should probably just learn to live with it.

He schools his heart to beat slower, calming himself through breath control. It’s been a long time since he’d thought about the call of the Maw, his first close encounter with the Dark side of the Force. He still isn’t sure whether it was Abeloth that reached out to him, or the black hole cluster itself. Does it matter which? It happened anyway.

This, right here, illustrates his point to Rey perfectly. He can never be Light, like she wants. Because even in childhood he was always drawn to the darkness, to the hearts of black holes, to collapsed stars and the sound and the fury of total disorder. To the melody of the abyss.

She’s expecting far too much from him if she thinks he can magically transform into a hero now, or ever. He’s simply trying to rescue the knights from the shitstorm he got them into, by letting Snoke get to him, turn his heart from the path he’d sworn to follow. But then, if he hadn’t fallen to the Dark side, where would he be now? A Jedi Master, celibate and bursting with faux-wisdom, defending the Republic with a blue saber? Gag.

And to think that once upon a time he’d wanted that. Is that what she wants? To be a servant of the Republic, pious and devout, kneeling at the feet of regents? Another gag-worthy thought. She wasn’t built for that. She could bend galaxies with the bat of an eyelash. She certainly has a way of bringing him to his knees.

The way she’d looked at him in the darkness of her room. Like he was heaven-sent.

You could get addicted to someone looking at you that way.

It makes him want to be good. To try, at least.

He could do it, for her.

Anything for her.

Ben fists his hands in his hair, tugging violently, almost ripping it out at the roots.

Fuck. No!
He loves her.

He’s in love with her.

He’s been in love with her for so long, he can’t even trace it back to one singular point. To a moment he knew, because he didn’t know, not concretely, until now.

He’d known that he wanted her in all the ways you can want someone – to possess her. To adore her. To make her his as much as he’s already hers. To become as much a part of her as the breath in her lungs and the sunlight stashed beneath her skin. To be one.

But he didn’t know that he could change for her. That he would do it gladly, because she is the only one who sees the good in him, who finds what little light there is and polishes it to a shine for however long she’s there. Because she calms him and balances him. Because she’s the better half of him.

This is love, and it is all-encompassing and terrifying, like being sucked into the maw of a black hole, crushed into a singularity. Inevitable and inescapable.

This is bad.

The stakes are already high enough as it is. Half of him always knew that facing down the whole First Order, even with his knights and a cocksure belief in his own abilities, was essentially an act of suicide. Like Luke Skywalker’s had been. If they do manage to prevail against Hux and the Order, what’s the guarantee of both him and Rey making it out unscathed?

And who’s to say she’d accept his declaration of love? She certainly hadn’t seemed to take his admission of wanting her well, so they’re not off to a good start.

She probably wants the kind of love you see in children’s stories, full of poetry and springtime blossoms and other sappy things. All the things he’s not. He doesn’t do flowers. And besides, he offered her the entire fucking galaxy and she refused. What’s more romantic than that?

Ben groans, burying his face in his hands. She’s too much. This is too much. He has to stop thinking about her, shove her out of his head and complete this mission instead of getting starry-eyed over the Jedi who will never be his. This whole thing they have? It’s star-crossed, and it can’t last. He has to keep reminding himself of that, when it feels like his heart is slowly rotting in his chest, poisoning him more with every day apart from her.

He has to stop being so fucking pathetic. Kylo Ren is not pathetic.

But Ben Solo is.

Ben Solo is pathetic and in love.

And maybe a little bit of a hero.

Chapter End Notes

Back from my holiday and back at it! The break made me recharge a lot, which is super helpful to get my head back in the game and FINISH STRONG. Let's do this.
Chapter Forty-Three

After the tryst in her bedroom, two days pass without contact, but this time she doesn’t let it fester, doesn’t let herself get mad. She’s more hopeful than she’s been in weeks, actually, and it’s all because of that conversation. Ben is calmer, too, more detached – now that they’re apart again, she’d fully expected to go back to receiving fragments of his emotions through the bond, spills of hate and fury and lust. But there’s been none of that, and whether the connection between them has lapsed into disuse over the last two days or not, he’s changing, and it makes her heart sing. She can sense it, him becoming less volatile, less unbalanced.

He’d proven that two nights ago, when he’d revealed his plan to free the Knights of Ren and decimate the First Order. She’d thought him selfish, going back to his Knights, to the old life of Kylo Ren after everything that had happened. But what he’d told her – that’s the opposite of selfish. It’s heroism.

Well, not exactly. A strange kind of heroism, sure, but still more than she’d ever imagined of him. Completing the circle, bringing him back to the beginning. Ending this cycle of pain and death by saving the people he’d inadvertently hurt - isn’t that what some would call atonement?

It’s a start, at least. His first steps on a path that could lead him out of the darkness, out of monstrousness and villainy... and she’ll be there, as much as she can, to illuminate the way.

But she can’t waste time daydreaming about Ben Solo’s sort-of-redemption now when there’s so much work to be done. In the past two days, she’d studied the Jedi Texts extensively, using what little Ben had explained to her to read them in a new way, at least the parts that aren’t written in odd runes. She’d practiced with her lightsaber, carving up the ice outside the doors – Finn had laughed uproariously when he’d stepped outside and seen the melted slush everywhere and told her she’d saved them a day’s work of shovelling snow away from the entrance to the base – and helped Poe and Rose out with flight schematics for the upcoming siege against the Order.

Yesterday, the base had suddenly become a lot busier with the addition of the Naboo starfleet – a set of roughly forty starfighter aircrafts, their wings sleek and tipped with glossy adamantium. Not only that, but the sun overhead is partially blotted out by a flagship cruiser orbiting just outside Elbara Nine’s atmosphere, and, to everyone’s surprise including Rey’s, the smaller craft spotted circling the cruiser is none other than the Nubian Royal Starship, a stunning chromium bullet of a vessel, only used by the Naboo sovereign. The sight of that had sent the grapevine at the base into a frenzy, wondering what was so imperative that the Queen of Naboo had come herself, but Rey had just smiled knowingly at the sight of the starship. Over the three days she’d gotten to know the monarch, she’d seen firsthand how iron-clad the Queen’s will was. If Leia Organa was in charge of the fight against the First Order, then Sosha Soruna was, too. A pair of steel magnolias, those two.

Now, she’s readying herself to leave the base again, to fly her freighter up to meet the Naboo cruiser and join its crew. That’s the ship she’ll call home for the next few days, while they move into
position in Wild Space and wait for the Bespin fleet to arrive.

But this time, she’s not leaving alone. Finn is accompanying her onto the cruiser, along with Rose, while Poe is to join Soruna and Leia on the Nubian command ship. They can only hope he doesn’t put the moves on Soruna as well – the guy could seduce the lid off a rubbish bin. But above all else, he’s a great tactical commander, and Rey (and Leia, obviously) trust him to direct the Alliance to glory.

Finn and Rose are loading ammo crates onto the freighter, BB-8 rolling up the ramp after them like a baby duckling following its imprint, while Rey’s in the engine pit, tinkering with the hydraulic pump, trying not to squirt fluid all over her clothes. She’d changed her clothes, figuring the lengthy gauze wraps and hanging fabric could too easily be caught in things or ripped, and she would prefer not to soil them on the first day, especially not when she’ll probably be seeing Leia and the Queen shortly.

And yeah, the fact that she would possibly be seeing Ben again soon had a little bit of a part to play in the outfit swap, but it wasn’t like it was the only reason.

Screwing back on the cap over the fuel line, she climbs out of the pit, brushing specks of dust off her pants – they’re an impractical cream colour, so they pick up stains and show dust far too easily. But they’re more tailored than other pants she’s worn in the past, and she likes the way they flatter her shape. And they have pockets. Win.

She kept her leather belt, it’s the only adequate holster for her lightsaber, but with Rose’s assistance she’d changed her top, too. She’s quickly growing to like Finn’s friend – Rose is fierce, kind and whip-smart in a way that challenges Rey in the best possible sense - just yesterday they’d had an argument about fusion reactors that had resulted in Rey learning something completely new about ion engines. She’s generous, too, lending Rey her clothes when she had come to her room, bashfully, to ask if she had any spare tops. Her old dove-grey blouse has started to fray after all the action it’s seen recently, and she can’t exactly go shopping for a new one on this desolate ice planet.

Rey is taller and slimmer, but the red shirt Rose gave her is a loose one anyway, made of red silk – ‘for special occasions’, Rose had grinned when she handed it over – with capped sleeves and a modest neckline. Rey had tried to refuse it, citing her past history of ripping garments and losing people’s clothes (the lost slipper on Naboo being a particularly burning example) but Rose had practically jammed it over her head. She’d been left to deal with the mess of her hair herself, though – now that she’s been wearing it out of its neat buns, it’s become unruly, more easily tangled and harder to tame. She’d managed to wrangle it into a single high ponytail, which she comes to bitterly regret, as the tail end of it slaps her in the eye whenever she looks down, like right now as she bends over the dashboard, starting the ignition. ‘Ow!’

Eyes watering, she turns around and catches Finn sniggering at her. ‘What’s so funny?’ she demands, marching over to him and pinching his arm playfully.

‘Nothing,’ Finn snickers, his eyes sparkling with mirth. ‘Nice hairstyle.’

‘You, too,’ Rey bites back as Rose passes behind them, carrying a heavy crate. She flicks her eyes after her retreating back. ‘You know what they say, Finn – curls get the girls.’

Finn stomps on her booted foot in retaliation, and Rey’s about to pounce and beat him into submission when Poe’s voice crackles over the intercom.

‘You’d better not be killing eachother in there,’ he warns, and they crease up as Poe lectures them about flight control when entering the Naboo cruiser. Manoeuvring into the hangar is going to be tricky, as the cruiser’s already chock-full of bombers and scout ships, but Rey’s confident she can
handle it. Flying is easy. Hashing it out with princesses and queens, not so much.

R2-D2 whistles encouragingly beside her as Rey kick-starts the thrusters, the ship whining as it rises into the air, shaking off a coating of icing-sugar snow. She guns it prematurely, just for the satisfaction of Finn’s surprised ‘whaaat!’ as he nearly hits the floor. She laughs, pushing the lever up to increase their speed as they start to spiral upwards, breaking through the ionosphere as BB-8 spins uncomfortably across the shuttle floor like a child’s top.

She punches it once they’re high enough above the cloudbank, and the shuttle’s engines roar eagerly as they soar out of the atmosphere, feinting right to avoid slamming directly into the Naboo cruiser. Rey swings a hard right as they rise to the docking platform, and decelerates sharply as they fly between the jagged lips of the airlock, settling into a steady hum as Rey lowers the ship carefully into a free space on the hangar deck.

Finn stumbles up then, looking nauseous. Rey snorts. ‘C’mon. Try not to puke all over the Queen, when you meet her.’

Finn groans, hamming it up as they exit the shuttle, stepping onto the polished metal floor of the cruiser. Its design isn’t too dissimilar from that of the enemy’s Star Destroyers, but with pewter fixtures instead of black. Silvery halogen lights burn along the corridor as Rey, Finn and Poe walk towards the command deck, only to be met halfway by the Queen and her consorts, Donta Gessett among them, as they sweep along the corridor, spouting advice.

Soruna stops in her tracks when she spots Rey. ‘Jedi Girl,’ she smiles, cherry-painted lips stretching like taffy. ‘I’ve missed your face around my castle.’

Rey bows her head before Soruna.

‘And you’ve brought company!’ Soruna claps her hands delightedly as Finn and Rose look on, taken aback by the Queen’s demeanour, or maybe her clothes, the most elaborate yet – she wears a dress in the same rich red as Rey’s borrowed shirt, chiffon ruffles like the folded petals of a rose flaring down to the floor, interspersed with dewdrop-like gems. Actual rubies, Rey marvels, goggling at them.

‘Come, child, introduce us,’ Soruna prompts, and Rey hurriedly makes the introductions for Finn and Rose, who are quietly deferent as they kiss the hand of the queen.

Soruna tilts her head quizzically, wine-dark eyes flitting between her and Finn. ‘But where is your other companion?’

Rey frowns, befuddled. ‘If you mean Poe Dameron, your guess is as good as mine. He could be any-’

‘No, no,’ Soruna waves a hand flippantly. ‘Your other travelling companion. The surly one in the black clothes. Where is he?’

Rey blinks, gobsmacked. Finn rolls his eyes. Rose looks back and forth between the two of them, intensely curious.

‘Oh, cut it out, Sosha,’ another voice rings out as Leia joins the awkward troupe in the corridor. ‘She’s just winding you up, Rey, don’t pay any attention to her.’

‘But-‘ Rey gasps, her brain in overdrive as she tries to come up with something that’ll get her out of this, but both Soruna and Leia have started to laugh, the kind of raucous laughter that only friends who share a secret joke have. Finn, Rose and Rey all look at them, bewildered, until the two monarchs calm down enough for Leia to explain, ‘Sosha knew Ben was with you the whole time,
Rey. It seems both of us need to up our skills in the art of political intrigue,’ Leia smiles warmly, and it doesn’t allay all of Rey’s fear, but it helps a little bit, and she smiles feebly back.

‘Sorry,’ she squeaks, and that sets them off again. Finn at this point is giving Rey some serious side-eye, and Rose is tugging at his sleeve, obviously wanting to be let in on a joke Finn has no idea about. Soruna knew? How? She’d been so careful. Rey had thought she’d covered up Ben’s existence pretty thoroughly. Aside from his covert visits to the castle... I’ll kill him. If that’s what blew their cover, she’s actually going to kill him. Now she’s disgraced in front of the queen. Splendid.

‘Well, we can’t stand around cackling all day,’ Leia finally breaks up the party in the corridor. ‘We do have a mission to attend to, after all. Where did Dameron go? He was supposed to be advising me on bomb squad numbers. He’s lucky I’m entrusting that to him at all, really...’ Leia mutters, starting to stride off. She beckons over her shoulder for Rey to follow her, and she does, powerwalking to catch up to the general’s remarkably quick pace. For such a tiny lady, she’s got fast legs.

Rey is silent at Leia’s side, unsure what to say, as this is the first time she’s seen her in person since the night she’d fled Glitterfall Base. But so much has changed in the past – what is it?

‘Ten days,’ she says aloud, and her head swims at the realisation. That’s so little. Ten days, give or take quantum relativity, since she left the base and flew to Ach-To, re-encountered Ben Solo and threw the whole trajectory of her life off-course. And then, a month before that, give or take, she’d encountered BB-8 in the sand dunes of Jakku, the catalyst for this entire crazy journey.

A month ago, she’d left the only home she’d ever known in her ion trail.

A month ago, she’d made the best and most loyal friends she’d ever had.

A month ago, she’d discovered she had untapped potential beyond anything she’d ever heard of, even in the legends of Luke Skywalker and the all-powerful Jedi.

A month ago, she’d trained with Luke Skywalker, experienced rain for the first time, been to more planets than she could count on one hand, and fought with a lightsaber.

A month ago, she’d met the boy of her nightmares and her daydreams, and he had been a horror, a phantasm in black, with a viciousness and a loneliness to match her own. A monster, one that came with mercurial moods and star-bright eyes.

And in another ten days, she’d fallen in love with him.

She needs to sit down. This has been the most eventful month-and-a-bit of her whole life, and it’s catching up to her now, an avalanche of changes and choices. Scavenger. Jedi. Lover. Orphan. Pilot. Fighter. Murderer... the corridor reels before her eyes, and she’s dangerously close to fainting.

Sensing Rey starting to slip out of consciousness, Leia spins to face her and grips both of her arms, holding the girl upright. ‘Ten days?’ she echoes, brow knitting in confusion. ‘Are you all right, Rey?’

‘I’m fine,’ Rey gasps, but the silver lights of the corridor are still whirling sickeningly, and she shuts her eyes to keep the bile from rising up her gorge – Finn will never let her live it down if she’s the one to vomit all over the princess. ‘It’s just... a lot in a short time, that’s all. Still adjusting,’ she mutters, gently extricating herself from the general’s grasp. She blinks again, willing those gold sparks to stop fizzing behind her eyes, clawing herself back from the brink. ‘And now we’re suddenly going to war...’
‘Having second thoughts?’ Leia gives her a soft smile, the motherly tone of her voice a balm to Rey’s frayed nerves.

‘Yeah, a bit,’ Rey admits, casting her eyes down at her boots. They’re a grounding sight, still the same dirt-caked and scuffed shoes she’s worn since the beginning, even though almost everything else about her appearance has changed. A lightsaber instead of a quarterstaff, a ponytail instead of childhood buns, a semi-trained Jedi instead of a junk-rat.

She clears her throat, reminded of something. ‘Leia – do you know anything about where we’re going? Mortis, I mean?’

Leia frowns again, and Rey’s heart stammers, thinking she’s somehow angered her. But then Leia wraps her fingers around Rey’s forearm again, and she smiles. ‘Come on. Onto the bridge.’

Rey allows herself to be led down the labyrinthine corridors – kriff, this ship is enormous – and through a sliding steel door onto the bridge of the cruiser, where a circular tableau is in the centre of the room, lit up with a blue and gold-spattered map of space, projected as a hologram over the room. Several officers, including Lieutenant Connix, rotate over the various computers and navigation hubs, far more technologically advanced than the comms-room on Elbara Nine.

Leia directs Rey’s attention to the star-map as she fiddles with the controls of the holoprojector, zooming in one a specific region of Wild Space, where the gold dots disappear, indicating uncharted territory. In the K-2 sector of the map, Rey picks out a small cluster of planets, cast in holographic white, labelled The Chrelythiumn System. And within that, a sketched-out symbol, diamond-shaped, over the sphere that suggests a planet.

‘That’s Mortis,’ Leia confirms, following Rey’s gaze. ‘My brother sent an envoy of Jedi Knights there many years ago; to try to find and open the monolith that seals it off from the rest of the wider galaxy. We think the Grand Marshal is going to try to destroy this monolith if he can – which, if what Luke told me back then is true – would be disastrous for the galaxy, and for the Force that binds it.’

Leia pauses, thinking over her next words carefully before continuing. ‘My son was right when he told me nothing could destroy the Force. It’s energy, after all, and energy can’t be created or destroyed – it can only be converted. It’s the conversion that I’m worried about. Destroying Mortis would create a wound in the Force, and throw it even further out of balance. That’s the last thing we need in this day and age, to have even more evil spread throughout the galaxy.’

‘What’s so special about Mortis, though?’ Rey frowns, puzzled. ‘Artoo told me it was a conduit of the Force. Have you ever been there?’

Leia smiles wistfully at that. ‘No. Too busy playing power games with senators, I’m afraid. But Luke knew a fair amount about it. Our father had visited it as a youngster, with his master Obi-Wan Kenobi. It’s written in the annals of history on Coruscant, if one knows where to look.’ The general winks. ‘Someday, when this is over, I’ll have to take you there, and you can see for yourself.’

‘Coruscant, you mean?’ Rey affirms, and the general chortles.

‘Yes, Rey. Mortis, we’ll be seeing a whole lot sooner.’ She turns her attention back to the star-map; zooming out until the map is gold-spattered again, twinkling with the lights of planetary bodies. ‘Connix, think you can handle charting a course that avoids the recent asteroid showers?’

‘Yes, General,’ the lieutenant defers. Leia smiles, turning to Rey again and summoning her to her side once more as they leave the bridge, heading back out into the corridor. Leia directs her into a
side-room, with a long silver table running from end to end. She motions for Rey to sit, and takes a seat opposite her. Rey nibbles nervously at her lip – this looks like the ideal setup for an interview, or an interrogation, or something, and Rey’s reminded that she hasn’t yet spoken with the general about Ben – that had been left to Poe in Leia’s absence. Arguably more nerve-wracking, given Finn had been in the room for that, but even so – this is the mother of the man she’d run away to be with. Not directly, and not at first, but that’s how it probably looks to Leia.

The general opens her mouth-

‘I didn’t go to him, you know,’ Rey blurts out, and Leia sits back slightly, a flicker of amusement passing over her face. ‘To Ben, I mean,’ Rey amends lamely. ‘He found me on Ach-To. I went back there to try to... to learn the ways of the Jedi on my own.’

Leia smiles wryly, looking much like Ben does when he finds something funny. Usually something she’s done. ‘And did you?’

‘Not really, no,’ she confesses. ‘He interrupted me within the first few hours. We kind of...’ she trails off, unsure how much detail to give – it’s not like she can go spilling the facts about him kissing her in Luke’s hut, or their vision in the mirror cave. ‘... got distracted after that.’

‘Oh?’ Leia’s brow arches. Rey blushes furiously.

‘Not- we didn’t – he found out that Hux was responsible for killing one of his knights and he flipped out. Tried to get me to take him back to the First Order. Then we found out that they’d kicked him out and started a smear campaign against us, so I went to Naboo – and you know the rest,’ she finishes quickly, a red flush spotting her cheeks.

Leia’s mouth twitches, but she spares Rey any more agony. ‘Yes. And now you’re here.’ She leans forward in her chair, placing her hands palm-up on the table. ‘Rey. May I ask you a question? It’s quite personal.’

Several explicit ideas of what Leia’s question might be flash unbidden into Rey’s mind, but – no, the general wouldn’t be so crude as to ask that, surely. She bites harder on her bottom lip and nods.

‘Why do you trust my son?’ she asks earnestly. ‘We’ve agreed to aid him at your word, and because between the Order and Kylo Ren, the First Order is our greater enemy. But do you trust him not to turn on us again, pick up the mantle of the Order if we somehow manage to be victorious? Seven years ago, he turned on Luke and the Jedi padawans, and none of us saw that coming. I’m all for second chances, but what’s to say he won’t repeat history now?’

Rey shuffles through the potential answers to that question in her head. None of them come close to justifying to Leia why she believes in her wayward son when nobody else does. She could never explain how deep the connection between them runs – just trying to recount to Finn that she’d had dreams and visions featuring Kylo Ren since adolescence had been a challenge, one she’d probably failed. To other people than her and him, it would probably just seem like flights of fancy, or worse, the first signs of insanity. It sounds insane – a connection that spans across lightyears, binding their minds, allowing them to communicate telepathically and occasionally touch eachother, when they both want it badly enough.

You’re not alone.

Neither are you.

It isn’t too late...
Leia, although unable to read Rey’s mind as her son can, seems to pick up on the thread of her thoughts. ‘When I touched your arm in the comm-room,’ she begins tactfully, ‘I saw flashes of your memories of Ben. Nothing specific, but tiny glimpses of words and thoughts and images. Would you...’ she inches her hand forwards on the table, more uncertain than Rey has ever seen her act. ‘If I could see him as you do,’ she says timidly, ‘it could help me understand. If it’s not too much to ask...?’

Rey considers briefly. To refuse and hide her memories, keep them to herself as she’d done previously? Or to share them with the person who needs them most, who needs to have hope in her son, to know that he’s not lost to the dark forever? That he’s still capable of compassion and loyalty and kindness...?

Rey reaches out, her fingers hovering over the general’s outstretched palm. ‘Let me show you.’

And she takes the older woman’s hand.

This time, Rey is not a hand grenade of pent-up emotion.

This time, she controls the current of memories, chooses which to show and which to hold back.

And slowly, piece by piece, with building blocks of memory, she instills a new hope.

In both the general and herself.

--

A good twenty-eight hours later, they’re approaching the galaxy’s edge. Standing at a viewport cut into one of the corridors of the cruiser, Rey can see brightly coloured stripes of light dissipating into nothingness as they fly towards the border of the Outer Rim, to the gap between it and the beyond. It’s almost starless where they are, the blackness of space penetrated only by the odd, alien streaks of light that refract around their starship – neon-blue and lavender lines that bend and sway in strange aurorae.

The Chandrilan fleet is six parsecs ahead of them, keeping in regular contact over the comm-link. They’re only minutes away from starting an assault on the First Order’s flagship, just waiting on the word of Queen Soruna and Leia, who are in turn waiting on the word of Rey, not that that’s common knowledge. But she can’t relay any commands until she hears from Ben, and he’s taking his sweet time contacting her. She’s starting to worry a little about that, actually. She knows that if he’s with his knights he won’t contact her directly, but surely he could make use of the bond they share...? He won’t appear to her, though, for some reason she can’t discern.

She can sense his feelings, if she concentrates enough. Rey presses her hands against the viewport window, against the pane of reinforced glass that separates her from the eternal void, and focuses, trying to bridge their minds across the space between. She pushes harder, straining, trying to dissociate from her own mind to become a passive observer of his. It’s almost an out-of-body experience, a kind of astral projection, as she loses herself in their bond.

A flash-burn reel of memory passes through her mind, at first as iridescent and paper-thin as a dragonfly’s wing, before solidifying into something more real. She sees the sketched-out outline of a face, dirt-smeared and laughing, and realises it belongs to her. But she’s looking at a younger version of herself, from an outside perspective, and Rey quickly realises this is Ben’s memory as the dream-Rey kicks up a spray of yellow sand, giggling. She senses an undercurrent of his emotions and blinks at the familiarity, the isolation he feels, and the fascination with this strange little wild thing that lingers in his dreams. She sees herself squatting in her AT-AT, wearing Raeh’s helmet and playing at
being a pilot, or crying quietly in the corner, wiping tears from her face as he watches her, distantly curious, and she feels a dull throb of empathy, unable to tell whether it’s from his end or hers.

She withdraws as though she’s been burnt.

He did dream of her! He felt it, too, then.

He always did.

*Oh, my gods.* Her heart is beating swiftly, and she can’t stop the smile that chases over her face, the soaring sense of *joyfulness* before she’s brought back to earth with a thud at the sobering realisation that they’re about to go to *war*. In separate ships, on separate sides.

Her smile fades before her eyes in the reflective surface of the viewport. She keeps her hands pressed to the glass.

*Please.*

If the universe was kind, he’d appear to her now, his fingertips touching hers on the other side of the glass as they’d done the first time she’d visited the mirror-cave. When she’d asked to see her parents and that figure had strode forwards, layered with shadow, becoming the tall, lithe outline of a man, fingers pressing against hers, and her breath had hitched at the fleeting glimpse of his sad brown eyes-

But the universe isn’t kind. It’s unfeeling and cold as Rey leans her forehead against the glass and closes her eyes, trying not to let a tear escape. The Force bond won’t open all the way, not when she wants it to the most. She can’t reach him. Why?

*Where are you?*

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**Chapter End Notes**

Hey mates!

I am TERRIBLY behind on replying to comments, but I promise you all, when this story is finished I'm going to systematically go through and thank everyone for all the lovely things you've been saying :) We're almost at the end! Hopefully I can do these characters justice with a satisfying ending. I never expected this fic to be anywhere near as long as it's ended up being, so I'm kind of in shock! I love you all and I'm happy you've been enjoying this journey! xox
Chapter Forty-Four

Ben sits at the dashboard, staring ruminatively out at the star-strewn heavens with his chin on his hand. He’d recently brought the cargo shuttle out of hyperspace, as they’re nearing the edge of the Outer Rim, passing the border into the badlands.

Wild Space. Uncharted and unsullied by the trifles of humanity, for the most part. Where none but the most intrepid explorers had gone before – his father among them. Han Solo wasn’t an explorer, exactly; he’d mostly ventured into Wild Space in various bids to avoid whatever law enforcement or trafficking gangs had him on their hit list. But it counts.

And why is he thinking about Han Solo again? Insomnia would be the answer to that. Ben hasn’t slept in a good thirty-six hours, plagued by the strange and lurid nightmare he’d had when he’d rested last. The black hole, that unknowable uncertainty, is haunting him again, along with the ghost of his father. He hadn’t thought about their trip to the Maw in at least a decade, he’d thought he’d buried it alongside all the other childhood memories he’d once held close and treasured. Now they’re digging their way to the surface, through the graveyards in his mind, and he’s far from happy about it.

He needs to focus on something else. So he doesn’t psych himself out before they reach Mortis and complete the mission he’s had time to elucidate in detail over the past day or so. That is, if the Knights cooperate.

That’s another pressing issue. The fact that they are more insubordinate than he’d expected. He’d never really been one to have delusions of grandeur, but he had imagined at least that he’d be able to control a couple of rogueDark-siders, even after Snoke’s death. But so far, it seems they were more afraid of what Snoke could do through him than they were of Kylo Ren himself, and they flagrantly disobey him now. He wonders if it’s even worth getting the other Knights back from Hux, if they’re going to be this troublesome.

He’d quarrelled with them earlier, a cyclic argument that had no resolution, about the involvement of the Resistance in his plans. Malik was particularly opposed to it, stating that owing the rebels any favours was practically a fate worse than death. Ben had snapped and said that if that was the way he felt, he should feel free to walk right out of the airlock.

He can just see Rey’s face now. Threatening and intimidation tactics are not the way to keep friends and influence people. But what else would she suggest? Not everyone can be all sweetness and light, enchanting bluebirds to nest in their hair and bewitching knights to fall at their feet.

He wants to talk to her. Badly. It’s been too long since the Force bond allowed them to see each other; it’s a painful flashback to the month of silence, of being shut out. He doesn’t do well when he’s alone with his thoughts.

And he can’t contact her over the comm, because the Knights will hear. This ship is far too cramped for his liking; the walls are paper-thin and there’s no privacy whatsoever. No opportunity for stress
relieving activities, unless you counted sparring, and he’s not inclined to try that again after Malik nearly took his head off with that machete. Adding another item to the pile of reasons why he doesn’t sleep anymore.

He finds himself pining for the days when things were simple – before her, before Snoke even, although that’s tracing back a fair way, down to childhood. Back when all he had to worry about was what new toy his mother would bring him back from the stores in downtown Coruscant, or how many vegetables he’d be cajoled into eating at dinner before he could have dessert. Back before the voices started appearing in his head, along with dreams of a girl, twirling at the edges of his consciousness, outlined in white like an angel. Back then, she’d balanced out the dark influence Snoke had had over his mind, a welcome alternative to the shadows that lurked round every corner in his brain.

As he’d grown older, the figure had become more pronounced and decidedly less angelic; a girl with a dirt-smeared, sort of pretty face, laughing loudly at the furthest reaches of his dreams, playing with ragdolls and kicking dust in his face. She only appeared sometimes, when his master decided to give him a reprieve, and once he’d pledged himself to Snoke entirely, the dreams had all but disappeared. Until the awakening.

Then, he’d been tossing and turning in his quarters, when his fitful slumber was disturbed by a vision of a girl, that same dirt-faced girl, wielding his grandfather’s blue lightsaber and circling him like a lioness, while he lay winded in a bed of snow. He’d woken up gasping; as though the dream of her alone had been enough to take his breath away.

Imagine his surprise when that vision had actually come to pass, with the girl of his dreams clutching his heirloom lightsaber in the forests of Starkiller, baring her teeth and striking at him. She was so beautiful and so vicious, so full of rage. It was the first in a string of many visions that have since come true.

His jaw tightens and he thumps his fist down on the dashboard. Why is he being plagued by these memories now? The closer their ship flies to Mortis, the more these past recollections are appearing to him, like phantoms stealing through the back of his mind, shapeless and preternatural. Could it be the influence of the Mortis monolith? After all, the planet was thought to be a node of the Force, according to the old legends. If he and Rey had always been Force-bound, as he suspects, it’s only natural that the closer he got to the nexus, the more he’d think about that thread of connection, the bond that ties them.

He longs for that now-familiar ripple at the back of his brain, that sudden pulse in the Force that makes her materialize. What causes it? He wishes he could fully understand, so he could make use of it. But the Force is cruel, lately; only showing him momentary glimpses of her thoughts and feelings. It’s every inch as bad as when she was intentionally blocking him out, because this time, the Force is doing it, not her. Why?

Protecting her from him, perhaps?

Or him from her?

Sparing them in case this all goes disastrously wrong?

He’ll soon find out, he thinks grimly, because the computers are signalling their departure - they’re slipping past the border of the Outer Rim now, off the edge of the star-charts and into the unknown. There can only be hours before their cargo shuttle stumbles upon the First Order’s fleet, so one way or another, his fate is sealed.
All he can do is hope for the best as he flies them closer to glory, or to ruin.

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Later, Ben rubs his eyes as he keys in the sequence that cloaks the cargo ship. The dashboard radar is beginning to show signs of life – in the furthest convexity of the screen, a cluster of blue arrows is hovering. The First Order’s fleet. The two biggest arrows, presumably indicating the Star-Eater and the Finalizer, bring up the back of the pack. A much better position than the front – it will be easier to sneak up and take them by surprise. He feels a flash of optimism as he traces a finger over the screen, strategizing.

’Sorcha,’ he murmurs, and the knight strides up behind him, masked now, and he sees her head tilt as she studies the computer readouts.

‘How much longer, my lord?’ she husks, voice distorted by the layers of metal.

He drums his fingers on the edge of the dashboard, considering. ‘Roughly thirty minutes. I’ve cloaked the vessel in advance, so it shouldn’t be altogether difficult to breach their hangar, with the distraction of the Chandrilan fleet.’ He scans over the radar quickly, where a gathering of smaller arrows is beginning to advance, as Rey promised. His lips twitch in an almost-smile. This is happening.

Sorcha doesn’t share his elation, but he senses her grim resignation as she nods, studying the readouts, and it’s something, at least. She’s accepted the fact that they’ll need the Resistance’s help if they’re to defeat the Order. And if Sorcha accepts the plan, Malik will fall into line behind her, as a lower-ranked member of the knights of Ren.

That’s the best-case scenario.

The knight retreats back into the shadows as Ben steers the ship onwards, in a trajectory that will bring them in line with the rear of the First Order’s fleet. It feels like driving blind - in this starless region of space, there’s no light to guide him forward.

He jumps comically when the cargo shuttle’s proximity alarm starts to wail, and the comm on the dashboard comes to life with a crackle.

A clipped voice filters through the radio.

‘Identification, please.’

Ben swears, yanking the transceiver off the hook and smashing the button to connect. ‘You first.’

The voice comes back twice as forceful. ‘Zeta-class cargo shuttles belong to the First Order. Declare yourselves if you do not wish to be shot out of orbit.’

For fuck’s sake. But the person on the other end of the line doesn’t sound like a drone of the Order. The lines are less rehearsed, and the voice has the slightest trace of a Chandrilan drawl. Take the gamble?

‘Ben Solo, son of Leia Organa, in co-operation with the galactic alliance. That good enough for you?’ he barks, holding the receiver too close to his mouth so that the words come out distorted, an odd reminder of his helmet’s old voice scrambler.

‘Thank you,’ the voice returns with a bite of sarcasm. ‘This is Captain Roscoe of the Chandrilan starfleet. General Leia Organa has instructed me to follow your directives in the imminent assault on
He can’t hold back a snicker at that, and he moves the receiver away so he isn’t tempted to hit the button and voice his thoughts. The things he could suggest the captain of the Chandrilan fleet do with himself... hmn. But he doesn’t need to add any more names to his list of nemeses. So he bites hard on his cheek and presses the button to communicate. ‘The newer classes of Star Destroyers have weaker shield coverage along their flanks. It’s most concentrated at the bow and the stern. Get into flight formation and hit the starboard side as hard as you can. I’ll use the distraction to fly in under the radar.’

‘And what will we do once you’re aboard, sir?’ Gods, he can hear the disdain in the captain’s voice. How he must hate being forced to defer to a war criminal, a blood traitor. Ben grins into the receiver. ‘Careful, Captain... Roscoe, was it?’ he asks casually, swivelling in the pilot’s chair. ‘You’re giving your position away.’ He pauses for a moment, listening to the quickened breathing on the other end of the line. His smile widens. ‘You want to destroy the First Order, don’t you, Captain? You have my permission. Don’t hold back - hit the Finalizer with everything you have – the more damage, the better. And tell General Organa to prime her bombing fleet for the smaller ships when she arrives.’

‘I’ll send your regards,’ the captain snaps, and the line goes dead.

Ben laughs, turning his attention to the sonar screen, to the blips of the Chandrilan fleet that have, as promised, begun to advance on the First Order. They aren’t hidden, but the Order’s flagship seems hesitant to fire, perhaps wanting to engage them in negotiations first. It’s not what he would have done – yet more proof that Hux pales in comparison to him as a leader in every way. It’s doubtful his balls ever dropped.

Ben sits straight-backed in the chair and shifts the controls, following the Chandrilan fleet at a safe distance. The ships are difficult to see in the darkness, only visible when the strange lines of indigo light glint off the reflective surface of their wings. Out here, as the shuttle glides closer to Mortis space, light bends and refracts off an unseen prism, and that strange, wordless threnody starts to play at the back of his mind again, a glimmer of pearlescent light brushing against his consciousness, and he startles-

Rey?

It’s gone before he can even think to hold onto it, and the screen in front of him lights up with brilliant orange as the first Chandrilan ships open fire on the Finalizer. He can see more clearly now, see the fleet splitting in half and veering off in separate directions, rapid-firing explosive shells at the much larger starship, and his heart starts to thud with dual anticipation and fear. Behind him, Sorcha hisses with shock as the Finalizer fires a burst of green lasers at one of the head ships, and it explodes in a plume of flames, an inferno that is quickly sucked into the vacuum of space and extinguished, but not before spraying sparks off the gelatinous dark matter that lurks unseen in the void.

Suddenly, everything is illuminated, and Ben lurches forward in his seat as the largest Chandrilan ship fires in retaliation and a hole is ripped in the side of the Finalizer, fire licking at its edges.

This is it! He floors the thrusters, sending the cargo shuttle into an ungainly tailspin as they zoom towards the opening, through the wreckage of the Chandrilan ship, pieces of blown-apart debris clunking against the hull like an errant meteor shower.

Deep space lights up around them in flares of orange as the fleet continues firing, as Ben angles the cargo shuttle to slip through the flame-ringed opening and into the belly of the Finalizer. This is where the fun begins, and he congratulates himself on having the foresight to choose this ship,
because it comes equipped with two wing-mounted laser cannons, actual heavy artillery weapons.

He finds the gearstick that controls the weapons and checks the crosshairs – a lesser pilot would find it hard to fly and shoot at the same time, but he learned on his father’s knee and multitasking is all too easy – and fires a blistering pulse of red lasers towards a group of Stormtroopers that are running towards the shuttle. He guns the engines and the ship soars above the squadron, and he doesn’t know how the hell he’s going to keep flying the shuttle through the bowels of the ship, but he’ll do it for as long as he can. Behind him, Sorcha is yelling for Malik to man the hull-cannons, and he can tell by the answering hail of fire that the knight has obeyed her instructions.

What deck are they on? It’s spacious enough for them to fly through at a considerable height, but it’s not the hangar. So it’s either the fueling bay or the vehicle storage section. Lucky them. Ben sprays the metal floor with a round of strafing beams and it cracks underfoot, sending an oncoming battalion straight through the floor. Up ahead, he spies the racks of TIE fighters and realises this is definitely the fueling bay, which means they’re close to the crew quarters. He pulls the ship up smartly, setting up its landing sequence and lowering it swiftly to the half-molten metal floor. He summons his lightsaber and lowers the ramp, and in front of him he sees Sorcha unsheathe her twin scimitars. Before they leave, he rips the mobile comm-link from the radio, ostensibly in case Captain Roscoe needs more directions later on.

‘My lord, which way?’ Sorcha shouts as they exit the shuttle, and Ben ignites his lightsaber, swatting away a laser slug from an approaching Stormtrooper squadron.

‘To the bridge,’ Ben says calmly, deflecting another round of blaster fire back at the oncoming Stormtroopers. Several fall and lie still, while Malik descends on the four that remain, slashing his machete in wide, heavy-handed swings, separating plastoid limbs from bodies. It’s a sickening sight, and Ben closes his eyes for a moment, listening to the Force, feeling out the signatures of the remaining Knights.

There. On the command bridge. Of all places, it had to be the fucking command bridge.

Oh, well. A showstopping entrance it is.

He motions to the two Knights and they board one of the waiting elevators.

Sorcha keeps her scimitars crossed in front of her chest, staring straight ahead as they ascend towards the bridge. Malik wipes a glistening smear of blood off his machete-blade; while Ben is silent, calculating.

The mobile comm-link pings in his hand and he quickly clicks a button to silence it - Captain Roscoe can wait.

The diamond-shaped doors of the elevator slide open, and the trio come face-to-face with yet another battalion of Stormtroopers, these ones equipped with riot electro-staffs. Beyond them, Ben can see the enormous screens of the command bridge, lit up with a conflagration of orange and red as the space outside burns and shimmers with hellfire.

Against the backdrop of the screens, three figures stand, impassive and shrouded in black. Traea. Jael. Zahra.

With a curl of his fingers and a jolt of the Force, Ben summons the lead trooper’s staff into his hand and attacks with both weapons, the Knights following him into the fray with the grating scream of metal against metal. He hears the hiss of a pin being drawn and covers his eyes as Sorcha lobs a grenade into the air, and it explodes in a searing flare of grease-white light, blinding the
Stormtroopers and allowing the Knights to cut them down systematically, easily.

Ben squints down at the pile of plastoid bodies strewn over the floor, at the hot blood spilt in droplets like rubies on the metal floor. He should feel sorry. He only feels euphoria.

He turns to the knights of Ren, who have assembled behind him, Sorcha and Traea at the front as the highest-ranking members.

‘You know what we need to do,’ he states, and Sorcha bows her head in acquiescence. But Traea cocks his sideways, and Ben can tell that behind his black steel helmet, he wears a quizzical expression.

‘Why have you returned to the Finalizer, Lord Ren? We thought you were exiled.’

Ben frowns. They don’t have time to discuss the complex politics of the Supreme Leadership right now. He tells Traea as much, but instead of deferring to him, another knight pipes up from behind. Jael.

‘But you killed the Supreme Leader, my lord. With the help of the Jedi girl.’

Ben’s heart stutters in his chest. What the fuck is going on? ‘You’re crossing a line, Jael,’ he snarls, but Traea and Jael step forward, breaking rank to circle him slowly.

They remind Ben of sharks, waiting to scent blood before they enter the feeding frenzy, rip the flesh from his bones. And suddenly it clicks into place.

‘The propaganda videos,’ he murmurs, his heart almost ceasing to beat. ‘You’ve seen them.’

Zahra, the sixth knight, scoffs under her mask. ‘Of course we’ve seen them. Who hasn’t?’ She starts to circle him, too, her electro-pike pointed at his face. ‘Every member of the First Order, right down to the initiates on Arkanis, has borne witness to your treason.’

‘What treason?’ Sorcha asks, addressing Jael.

‘Allow me to answer that,’ another voice rings out over the bridge, and this one reignites the fire in Ben’s blood, sets his chest to burning as he realises who it belongs to.

Armitage Hux strides out of the elevator and onto the bridge, dressed in bright carmine robes, his red hair combed and primped into an impressive pompadour. He’s holding a cane topped with a blood-red gemstone, an uncut ruby, and he looks every inch a phoenix rising from the ashes as he struts up the walkway towards Ben and the Knights.

Ben lunges towards him, but is stopped by the collective power of five Force holds, five sets of outstretched hands keeping him in place.

This is betrayal at its finest, its most gut-wrenching.

He should have seen it coming.

‘Tell us the truth,’ Sorcha implores, and she presses the blade of one of her scimitars to Ben’s throat, drawing a bead of blood.

‘Your precious leader has been consorting with the rebellion for quite some time,’ Hux says smugly, coming to a halt next to the group of Knights. ‘And he seems to have a fondness for a certain Jedi in their midst. The little Resistance slut who murdered the Supreme Leader. My security cameras
captured the lovebirds together in Ren’s quarters a number of times. Obviously, once I knew this, I knew he couldn’t be trusted.’ He taps his lips in thoughtfulness. ‘I wonder if you might feel the same way?’

Jael and Zahra nod as Sorcha’s mask turns in Ben’s direction. ‘Is this true?’

‘You traitorous scum,’ Traea spits, his voice rattling behind his helmet. ‘You spared her life when you could have killed her, wiped out the Jedi order once and for all, fulfilled the oath we all swore to uphold. Why?’

He opens his mouth to speak, but Hux steals the spotlight, ‘Not only did your master fail to kill the rebel whore – my spies reported sightings of him on various occasions on the planet Naboo, on quite the romantic getaway with the girl. What was her name? R-‘

‘Don’t.’ Ben says quietly, his soft tone belying the absolute fury beneath, ‘you dare ever speak of her.’ He’s shaking all over, trying to fight back against the Force that binds him, but he can’t – if it was one or two, then maybe, but five against one... ‘Don’t you ever say her name. I’ll-‘

‘You’ll what? Kill me?’ Hux smirks self-assuredly, purposefully casting his eyes over the knights that are still holding Ben in place with the Force. ‘You’ll have to get through them, first. And after all your pitiful attempts to rescue them, are you really going to kill them all in cold blood?’ He tuts. ‘That’s cruel, even for you, Ren.’

And he waits. Waits for Ben to make the move that he expects, for him to throw off the Force hold and turn on his Knights, to cut them down mercilessly for their lack of loyalty. Because it’s obvious now – Hux had turned the hearts of the three remaining Knights long before Ben could get to them, tell his side of the story. He knows how it looks to them – a complete betrayal of the values he’d claimed to have. Leaving them to face an uncertain fate while he cavorted with the last Jedi, the girl he was supposed to hate, to destroy, to crush her light before it could inspire the galaxy.

He’s supposed to kill the Knights now. And if he were Kylo Ren, duplicitous and cruel, he would. But he can’t. He came here to save them. He’s not that person anymore.

Oh, what a foolish thing it is, to try to rescue someone that doesn’t want to be saved.

At last, he understands.

His shoulders slump.

Hux smiles.

He clicks his fingers and another squadron of Stormtroopers march out onto the bridge. ‘Cuff him, and take him to the brig to await evacuation to the Star-Eater. There, he will be summarily executed. Preferably with his mother watching, so do try and capture her alive, won’t you?’ He smirks as Ben stares at him. ‘Oh, yes, we did see General Organa flitting around in her regal little starship. You may inform your rebel slut that if any Resistance ships move to impede the Star-Eater once we’re on-course again, I’ll give the order to blast your mother to kingdom come.’ He smiles widely. ‘And yes, Ren, I know the princess is your mother. Your companions here sold you out quite spectacularly, in exchange for immunity within the First Order.’

Two Stormtroopers approach Ben fearlessly, one carrying a pair of stun-cuffs and the other a restraint collar. The first one cuffs Ben’s wrists as Hux continues his self-important soliloquy. ‘I really ought to promote them, you know. Without them, this scheme would never have worked. Even the knight who died – Cianh, was it? – did so at my behest, as part of the greater plan.’ The
second Stormtrooper fastens the collar around Ben’s neck – an electro-collar, a device rigged to explode and kill its wearer with the click of a remote control.

Hux raises a ginger brow as the device settles against Ben’s collarbones. ‘Careful, Ren. If you so much as twitch in my direction, I’ll have your pretty brains splattered all over the ceiling. Then, once I’ve apprehended your little Jedi whore, I think I’ll make her clean them up. So no sudden movements, if you please.’

Chapter End Notes

I only just finished writing this chapter so the next one will probably be delayed a few days as I figure it out, but I just couldn't wait to share! *Evil Finn from Adventure Time voice* EVERYTHING HAS BEEN BUILDING TO THIS! MUAHAAHAHA.

If you want something to think about over the next few days, have a think about who could have been trying to make contact over the comm-link when they were in the elevator... and whether Ben actually hit the off-button. He's got big thumbs, you see, he isn't great with technology, and that's just a direct quote from Adam Driver there ;)
‘Careful, Ren. If you so much as twitch a muscle in my direction, I’ll have your pretty brains splattered all over the ceiling. Then, once I’ve apprehended your little Jedi whore, I think I’ll make her clean them up. So no sudden movements, if you please,’ the unctuous voice of General Hux drips out of the radio’s speakers.

‘Bloody hell,’ Poe mutters, turning to Leia and Sosha Soruna. ‘Well, that went to shit in a matter of minutes.’

Captain Roscoe had passed on the command shuttle’s frequency after liaising with Kylo Ren, and they’d tried contacting him from the Nubian starship a few minutes ago as their fleet had entered Mortis space, only for Ren to rudely mute them. But the idiot hadn’t realised that when you pressed the mute button on a comm-call, you could still transmit from the un-muted end of the link, and the trio had had a good laugh at his expense until it became apparent, with the addition of Grand Marshal Hux and the mutiny from the knights of Ren, that the plot was rapidly falling down around their ears.

‘What now?’ Poe continues, glancing between the Queen and the former princess. One of them, surely, will have a plan beta – both of them are so much more than they appear to be. Dark-eyed dreamers with tricks up their sleeves.

Soruna looks thoughtful, nibbling on a crimson-painted lip. Leia’s brown eyes are narrowed with malice at Hux’s threats, but Poe knows behind those eyes, the cogs are turning in a brain as razor-sharp as a rancor’s tooth. Leia is never at a loss for what to do. She’d told them to be prepared for war, and prepared they were, with an armada behind them and a seemingly under-protected pair of Star Destroyers ahead of them.

At least, until three Dreadnoughts uncloak in a spectacular display of might right before their eyes, a trinity of enormous, heavily armoured spacecrafts with turbo-lasers pointed directly at their fleet. One of the cannons is aimed dead-on at their little Nubian cruiser, trained so precisely on them that if he had his binoculars and was so inclined, Poe could stare right down the barrel and into the firing mechanism. He groans.

‘I should have expected that.’

Leia purses her lips into a pair of bloodless lines. ‘Get Rey on the line.’

‘Roger that,’ Poe mutters, keying in the frequency for the Naboo cruiser.

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‘Something’s wrong,’ Rey says softly, her hands pressed up against the viewport of the cruiser. All around them, the blackness of space is lit by artillery fire and the blossoming bismuth-yellow of explosions, ripping holes in starships both First Order and Resistance alike.

As yet, General Organa hasn’t given any orders for the alliance fleet to advance and assist the
Chandrilan one, and Rey wonders why. It’s practically a slaughter out there. The fleet had managed to make two openings in the *Finalizer*, but once the dreadnoughts had uncloaked and began their aerial assault, it became a lot less easy. The Chandrilan starfighters are dropping like flies on the battlefield, and yet they’re all just hovering at the sidelines. Why?

The comms-board crackles with an incoming message, and Rey trips over her feet to answer it. Finn gets there before she does, pressing the button to connect as Rey swats at him.

‘Rey, come in, Rey. It’s Poe. Kylo Ren’s been taken into custody. We heard everything over the comm. Hux is ordering us to stand down; if we advance, the dreadnoughts will open fire.’

‘Poe, slow down. What exactly happened?’ Finn says urgently, exchanging a frightened glance with Rey as her heart starts to beat wildly out of rhythm, panic setting in. Ben was captured? *How?* Why hadn’t she felt it? Her lungs start to constrict, and she breathes erratically, trying to force in air.

‘The shit with the knights didn’t go according to plan. He got double-crossed; it was all some kind of elaborate coup that Hux orchestrated. We tried to contact Ren over the comm-system and he muted us, but we heard the whole conversation. He’s been taken to the brig of the *Finalizer*. Hux is going to have him executed once they make it back to the flagship.’

No, no, no!

Rey doubles over; wrapping her arms over her ribcage, trying to hold all the fragmenting pieces of herself together as Finn awkwardly rubs her back. The knights of Ren betrayed Ben Solo. *Why?* He had told her they were loyal to him above all else. Did they think he couldn’t protect them, so they made a new alliance? After everything they’d been through... he left her so he could save them from Hux. And now he’s the one that needs saving. *Kriffing hell!*

She tries to calm her frantic heartbeats, and when breath control fails, she draws on the Force to sedate herself, closing her eyes and trying to imagine that she’s swimming in the Light, in a sea of stars, warmth sinking through her skin and into her lungs, helping her draw breath and focus anew.

*If we’re going to come out of this alive, we have to be the people the galaxy expects us to be now.*

Her words to him on Naboo have never been more truthful. Right now, the galaxy, and Ben, need her to be the last Jedi. Fearless, brave and righteous. Climbing the fairytale tower to liberate the prince, walking into the monster’s lair to rescue the one she loves.

*You can fall apart later. Right now, you need to be brave.*

*Breathe. One foot in front of the other, Rey. Survive.*

*You do it every day.*

She opens her eyes. ‘Then they won’t make it back to the flagship.’

‘Rey. The whole plan hinged on Ren overthrowing Hux and starting the takedown so we could swoop in. The plan failed. Are you sure you want to keep going? The odds are stacked, the Alliance might not back you.’

It’s like she’s injected pure caffeine into her veins; her brain is working overtime to think of an adequate solution, her ears buzzing. How are they going to board the *Finalizer* if they can’t advance the fleet? The First Order would recognise any incoming alliance starships instantly, it would be a suicide run – not just for them, but for the entire Allied fleet.
Finn’s riding her wavelength, and he taps her on the shoulder, pointing out a deployment of Atmospheric Assault Landers, soaring past their viewport, delivering backup troops to the damaged Finalizer.

The answer hits Rey like a ton of bricks. ‘Oh... that could work.’

She looks at Finn questioningly. ‘Are you sure, though?’

Finn tightens his jaw and nods slowly, but she can see the indecision in his eyes. He doesn’t want to help save the man who tried to kill him, which is completely understandable. But he’ll do it. Because it’s what she needs.

Finn makes a brave attempt to insert some humour into the situation. ‘You think I’m letting you run off to him alone again? Think again, sis. I’m sticking to you like glue.’

Rey’s eyes well up, and she feels a rush of love for her closest friend. ‘Thank you.’

Finn rolls his eyes. ‘Don’t thank me yet. This may be the worst idea I’ve ever had.’

‘I don’t like the sound of that...’ Poe says ominously over the radio.

Rey grabs the transceiver and clutches it in a death grip. ‘The Alliance might not back us, Poe, but will you?’ she asks grimly. ‘If it comes down to life or death, will you help us?’

‘Of course I bloody will. Though I’ll have to find some way to get off this damn cruiser without the turbo-laser blowing us to hell and back. Any bright ideas?’

‘We’ve got one.’ Rey affirms, yanking the mobile-comm off the system dashboard and heading for the engine room with Finn in tow. ‘But you’re not going to like it.’

‘There.’ Finn points, as the technician draws a bead on one of the AAL transports. ‘Pull it in.’

‘Are you sure this is going to work?’ Rose prompts, bending over the back of the technician’s chair and watching as their tractor beam activates, intercepting one of the AAL mid-flight and starting to tug it towards the Naboo cruiser’s hangar.

Finn frowns, keeping his arms crossed as he watches the AAL move closer to the cruiser, a tide of bad memories washing over him at the sight of the oblong Stromtrooper transport. Finn, this is definitely the worst idea in the galactic history of bad ideas, maybe ever. And you suggested it.

‘It’s our best shot. The AAL ships are too small to have comm-systems, so they can’t radio for help or alert the command ship to what we’re doing. And if we fly one of those into the Finalizer, it’s not gonna be noticed. They’ll think we’re just another backup Stormtrooper shipment.’

‘Fair enough.’ Rose straightens up as the AAL inches closer to the hangar. ‘We’d better get over to the docking bay before it lands.’

‘And be ready for a firefight,’ Finn adds, hoisting his blaster.

As it turns out, they don’t need to fire a single shot, because Rey works her magic even before the shuttle lands, mind-tricking the seven stormtroopers on-board into dropping their weapons and undressing, down to their black underclothes as Rose and Finn watch in amazement. The troopers then march right up to the ring of rebel soldiers behind them, presenting their wrists for cuffing.
Finn blinks in shock as the Jedi steps towards the landed craft, reaching out her hand and flexing her fingers, Force-pulling the pilot out of his seat and saying something to him that makes his eyes turn glassy before he repeats her words and stumbles off into the custody of the waiting rebel soldiers. His friend is a goddamn wizard, and he’ll never get sick of seeing her use her powers. It’s exhilarating.

He turns his attention to the Stormtrooper armour that’s littered on the floor in front of him. He sighs in resignation. ‘Deep cover prison break it is.’

Rey nods as she straps on the plastoid leg-plates. Chewbacca growls something as he strides up behind them, and Rey translates for him, telling Finn that back in the days of the Empire, Han, Luke and Chewie had performed a similar rescue mission when Princess Leia was imprisoned on the first Death Star.

Finn tuts. ‘Yeah, and we all know how well that went. Han told me about the trash compactor disaster.’

Chewie roars indignantly.

‘Oh, hush. You’re just sore because you have to wear the helmet again,’ Rose teases as she struggles with the heavy breast-plate. Finn knows he should insist she stays behind on the cruiser, after the disastrous last attempt at posing as First Order officers nearly got both him and Rose killed. But the girl’s a total spitfire, on a level with Rey, and he knows if he suggested staying back, she’d kick his ass, so he - wisely - doesn’t try.

‘Damn straight,’ he gripes as he settles the helmet over his face, breathing in the once-familiar scent of acetone and disinfectant, the sterility of life as a Stormtrooper.

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Once they’re all kitted out, Rey leads them onto the transport, plastoid joints clicking horribly as she walks into the cargo space. The armour doesn’t fit her in the slightest, her arms and legs too wiry for the plates. But it’ll do for the day. Her heart is beating a tattoo against her ribs, but apart from her roaring pulse, she’s surprisingly calm.

For some reason, the taunting words from Snoke’s throne room play through her memory.

*Darkness rises and light to meet it... You have the spirit of a true Jedi!*

His words had been intended to disarm her, to break her spirit, to make her doubt her abilities. But they’d only reinforced her belief in herself, as they do now. She doesn’t *need* sacred books or old masters. She never did. *The Force chose me, to match Ben. I’m strong enough to do this. I am the last Jedi.*

Too bad she can't mind-trick herself into being less bloody terrified.

‘Ready, Chewie?’

Chewie roars encouragingly as he settles into the tiny cockpit of the AAL.

Rey grits her teeth. ‘Let’s do this.’

Poe’s voice crackles out of the mobile-comm she still holds in her hand. ‘*Rey – be careful. With Finn, I mean. I know you can both take care of yourselves, but don’t let-’*
'I won’t,' Rey assures him, tugging a Stormtrooper helmet over her head. ‘I promise. We’ll be okay.’

‘You’d better be.’

‘Launching in ten. Over and out.’ She clicks off the comm and the trio all grip the roof racks, holding on for dear life as Chewie guns the engine and they whizz out of the hangar bay, out into the void of space, towards the Finalizer.

Rey grips the overhead rack so hard her knuckles almost split, trying to maintain her conviction as she breathes deeply through the helmet’s filter. I can do this. I know I can do this. I have to. She can’t let fear influence her now, when it’s life-or-death for everyone involved. It had all become so twisted so quickly, and they’d had to adapt their plans at a moment’s notice. That’s the nature of warfare, though – no matter how much you plan, consider every contingency, the enemy can still surprise you.

They’ll just have to surprise them back.

She studies Finn and Rose, in their identical Stormtrooper uniforms, on the other side of the shuttle. She almost wishes she were doing this by herself – at least that way; her life would be the only one at risk. But her friends would never let her go without them. They’re loyal to a fault, and as frustrating as that can be at times; it’s also immensely touching. They’re here for her, her entourage, risking their lives. If they make it out of this in one piece, she’ll do their laundry for a month.

The assault lander jolts unpleasantly as Chewbacca decelerates, and he roars back to her that he’s about to touch down. Rey takes one hand off the roof rack to grip the blaster she took from one of the troopers. It’s heavier than the one Han gave her, and thicker, equipped with more powerful slugs. She’ll use it until she’s forced to use her lightsaber, but hopefully, she won’t have to resort to that.

The metal floor shudders as they drop onto the hangar bay floor, and they scarcely have time for a breather before the ramp lowers and they’re exposed to any and all First Order officers on deck. The trio march out in formation, blasters trained on Chewbacca in an imitation of an arrest.

Nobody pays them a speck of attention. The hangar bay is in disarray, flames flickering against the black metal, broken ships everywhere, klaxon alarms wailing and flashing blue and crimson lights. It looks like the Chandrilan fleet had more of an impact than Rey had originally thought, and to their right, a squadron of TIE fighters are being scrambled to retaliate. They don’t have much time.

‘Which floor is the brig?’ she hisses to Finn, and the former Stormtrooper leads them confidently to the tube-like elevator at the edge of the hangar bay. The glass doors slide open and Finn presses the button for the lower deck, the elevator dropping them down so fast Rey’s stomach practically falls into her armoured shoes.

They stumble giddily out of the elevator and find themselves facing a long, lustrously polished corridor, lit with stripes of halogen lights. Finn shivers a little, but he beckons them onwards, towards the brig.

‘This is way too easy,’ Rose whispers to Rey, and Rey nods absently, keeping her finger poised on the trigger of her blaster. She keeps herself attuned to the Force, too, like a reptile seeking out heat-signatures. This is the most predatory she has ever felt, prowling through unfamiliar corridors, ready to attack the first thing that moves. She knows that the fear and anger she feels is fuelling her power, that she’s drawing on the Dark side’s influence, but frankly, she couldn’t give a damn. The Dark side, the Light, it doesn’t matter a jot compared to their predicament. All that matters is getting Ben the kriff out of here.
The mobile comm-chirps and she lifts it to her ear, then pulls it away with a cry when Poe’s voice issues out of it with an extremely loud, staccato crackling.

“Rey, I've radioed the commander of the Bespin fleet, and they’re willing to risk another bombing run if you can get Ren out of the cells and off the ship. They reckon they’ve got enough ammo to blow both the Star-Destroyers out of orbit, but first we gotta get rid of the Dreadnoughts. Don’t know how we’re gonna do that when they’re aiming right at us, but I’ll come up with somethin’. Over.”

Rey doesn’t have time to reply as the elevator doors slide open behind them. The Stormtroopers that file out have their blasters trained on them, having heard every word of Poe's broadcast.

'Halt or we'll shoot!'

Rey wheels around, throwing her hand up and contracting the Force around it, before sending a shocking pulse of energy towards the Stormtroopers. They veer sideways, stunned, as Finn and Rose's blaster-fire picks them off.

'Keep going!' Finn shouts and they pick up the pace, starting to jog towards the brig. Rey tries to put the deaths that just occurred out of her mind – killing never sat quite right with her, even in self-defence back on Jakku, or now, when propaganda tells her she’s on the right side of the war. Murder is still murder, no matter whose side you’re on.

‘You know these blasters are set to stun, right?’ Finn remarks, picking up on her unease. Rey smiles gratefully under her helmet. Sometimes, he’s more perceptive than Ben is, and he doesn’t even have the advantage of a psychic mind-meld. ‘C’mon!’

They’re approaching the cells, Rey can tell by the shots that start firing from a circular desk, filled with security cameras. There are officers taking advantage of the cover there to shoot at them. Rey feels a throb of fury as a blaster bolt comes perilously close to Finn’s arm.

Another shot rings out and Rey raises her hand, thinking simply, Stop.

The bolt freezes in midair, a javelin of crackling blue energy.

She flicks her wrist and it flies back the way it came, and from the resulting shout, it hits its mark.

That one wasn’t set to stun.

Rey feels sick, but they continue, as she deflects more bolts with pulses of Force energy, as Finn and Rose and Chewie shoot indiscriminately at any moving target, less concerned with existential crises and more with saving their own skins. She should think a little more along those lines.

One of the bolts she repels hits the security dashboard, sending up a cascade of sparks, and the door to the brig slides open. Finn yells in surprise as another couple of troopers march out of the open door, but they take them down in seconds and push through to the cells.

‘Rey, we’ll cover for as long as we can! Get Ren!’ Rose screams as she ducks behind a pillar, avoiding several red laser blasts. Rey sends a final shock of the Force at the advancing troopers before fleeing into the cells, reaching out through the Force bond, trying to find the other half of the whole. He has to be here. He has to be.

He is. Her signature brushes up against his, light fusing with dark, and he’s in her head again, so suddenly and completely it’s as though he’d never been missing.
Rey?

Ben, tell me where you are!

Rey, what the hell are you doing here?

Saving you, you moron!

She punches the button to lift the door of the last cell, and she nearly crumbles to her knees. He’s there, sitting on a bench, his face bloodied and bruised, with some kind of crude shock collar around his neck and stun-cuffs around his wrists, but he’s alive.

Ben looks her up and down in incredulity, and it’s only then she remembers she’s dressed as a Stormtrooper. She rips the helmet off and tosses it aside, her ponytail spilling out and almost flicking her in the eye again.

It’s a testament to the total recklessness of Ben Solo’s nature that even restrained in a cell, mutinied upon by the last people he could call friends, and under the threat of execution, he still manages to laugh at her.

Loudly.

‘You dressed as a fucking Stormtrooper to rescue me?’ He’s as obnoxious as ever, and Rey doesn’t know whether to be heartened by that, or irritated. She settles on irritated.

‘Shut up and let me help you,’ Rey snaps, examining the electro-collar without touching it. It doesn’t appear to have an attachment point, but if it could be put on, it follows that it could be taken off. If she could just float it off, that would be one thing, but Ben Solo’s big head is in the way as per usual. Rey runs her fingers over the space above the collar, trying to test for weak spots.

There. A tiny deactivation gauge, but functional. She flexes one finger and the device unhooks and falls away from Ben’s neck. She waves a hand and the stun-cuffs unlock instantly. Rey can’t hold back a grin at that.

And so the student has become the master.

‘When did you get so omnipotent?’ Ben mutters as he stands up.

‘No time for that now. Here.’ She unholsters her lightsaber and tosses it to him. ‘I assume Hux confiscated yours?’

Ben’s expression darkens. ‘Yes, he did, and he’s going to die for it.’

‘Yeah, yeah, revenge shall be yours and whatever, let’s just get out of here,’ she grabs his hand, half-intending to drag him out of the cell block, but the second her hand touches his skin, the Finalizer is suddenly rocked by a blast so strong it throws both of them back against the wall of the cell. Rey gasps as the collision knocks the breath from her lungs again, and she slides down the wall and into a crouching position, wheezing. Shockwaves ripple through the ship, the walls and floor quaking. She feels the aftershocks in the Force; too, firecracker bursts of light vibrating in the energy field.

‘What the kriff was that?’ As she says it, a strange, faint kind of melody starts to play at the back of her mind, and at first she dismisses it as her ears ringing from the blast. But it continues, a wordless singing, as she stands up, her vision full of white flecks, and stumbles to the door of the cell. ‘Do you hear that?’

‘Yeah.’ Ben moves to her side and scans the block, frowning as he searches for the source of the sound. ‘Let’s go.’
Rey rubs her ribs to ease some of the ache and runs out of the cell, holding the pilfered blaster in front of her, the strange, unearthly singing momentarily silenced as they come upon Finn and Rose and Chewie, who are still taking shelter behind the cell-block pillars, even though nobody’s firing anymore. Ben ignites her lightsaber behind her, and she groans inwardly. Finn stiffens into a board at the sight of his enemy wielding the weapon that put him in a bacta suit, but Chewie rests a paw on his shoulder and he relaxes, very slightly.

‘Ren,’ he says lowly, his voice full of distrust. ‘You’d better thank your lucky stars.’

‘If it isn’t FN-2187,’ Ben begins with a sneer, but Rey stamps on his foot, the added weight of the Stormtrooper armour causing Ben to hiss in pain.

‘His name is Finn,’ she bites out. ‘Now can everyone play nice for five minutes so we can get back to the hangar bay and fly the heck out of here?’

‘I’m not going anywhere until Hux is taken care of,’ Ben snarls, starting to make off for the elevator. Rey throws up a Force-block, stopping him in his tracks. He’s about to snap something sarcastic at her when Chewbacca bellows and raises his bowcaster, firing towards the corridor.

Four black-cloaked figures step out into view, one holding a vibrating electro-pike, one an enormous machete, another a pair of scimitars, and the last is holding Ben’s lightsaber, lit and spitting sparks, the quillons and the main blade burning an inverted cross into Rey's retinas as she stares at it unblinkingly.

Finn gasps, and Rey knows that these are the Knights of Ren. A reckoning is about to take place in the prison block, one that has been building for years. She holds her breath.

‘Traitors,’ Ben says coolly, but his body language reeks of controlled fury as he faces the four. ‘Did you bring Hux with you this time? Too afraid to face me without holding your new master's hand?’

‘It’s you who is the traitor, Kylo Ren,’ one of the Knights, the one holding the electro-pike, replies in a voice so packed with venom that Rey almost reels. ‘And as a matter of fact, no, the Grand Marshal isn't with us.’ The knight weighs the pike in his hands, testing its mettle. ‘He sent us to investigate reports of an exchange of blaster fire on the prison deck. It's fortuitous circumstance that you were the cause.’ He flips the pike over with a casual kind of elegance. ‘Once he finds out that you escaped your cell, of course, he'll want you and your rebel friends to be punished for it. Dearly. But he's a little distracted at the moment, with the new awakening. So I think he won't mind if we kill you on his behalf. A fitting end.’

‘What are you talking about, Traea?’ Ben growls, taking the bait, and Rey can feel the Knight’s answering smile, the glee that rolls off him in waves.

‘You didn’t sense it?’ the Knight returns with mock surprise. ‘You have lost your touch. The monolith has arisen. Hux is focusing his efforts on destroying it. We’re doing him a favour, really, executing you so he doesn’t have to get his hands dirty. He’s such a little shrinking violet, he even made Zahra kill Cianh. Couldn’t stomach the act himself. He’s got no real taste for blood.’

‘And yet you’ll kowtow to him and sit at his feet in exchange for immunity and power within the Order?’ Ben snarls, raising Rey’s golden lightsaber. ‘Pathetic. I should never have come back for you.’ His eyes flicker over the four, suddenly realising something. ‘Where is Sorcha?’

The Knight wielding Ben’s lightsaber snorts behind their mask. ‘She did not share our stance on your betrayal. She was soft on you.’ His voice, distorted by his helmet, wavers a little. ‘She met the same fate as Cianh did.’
Ben is speechless for a long moment, and Rey can tell that this hits him harder than he would ever let on. ‘No honour among thieves indeed, Malik. You truly are a monster.’

‘Takes one to know one,’ the Knight says tonelessly. He raises the lightsaber and points it at Rey, the red tip spitting sparks. ‘Is that the little Jedi scum you abandoned us for?’ He swirls the saber through the air experimentally. ‘Good. She dies first.’

He drops his centre of gravity and charges. Ben meets him in the middle and their sabers clash in a wildfire of red and gold.

The rest of the Knights spread out into attack stances, wielding their weapons as Rose, Chewbacca and Finn open fire on them, blaster bolts and red lasers slugs flying across the room.

Rey points her blaster at the closest knight, the one with the electropike, and pulls the trigger. The masked assailant deflects the bolt with the tip of his pike, then lunges at her, swiping the ball of the pike towards her legs, just missing her left kneecap as she spins out of the way. She fires her blaster again, but the shot goes wide and the knight swings back towards her shoulder, missing her by mere millimetres as Rey bends her back into an unnatural position to miss the vibrating tip of the pike.

The next swing is stopped by a well-placed shot from Finn, a slug of plasma lodging itself in the gap between the Knight’s shoulder and neck armour. He screams, and Rey takes the opportunity to shoot again at another weak spot, between his legs. The Knight goes down clutching himself, and Rey yanks the pike from his grip, throwing it at Finn. He catches it one-handed, dropping the blaster and bum-rushing another Knight, swinging the pike.

Ben and the Knight named Malik duel across the cellblock, sabers clashing, orange sparks bouncing off the metallic walls of the Star Destroyer. Ben outmatches the Knight in strength, but the warrior fights without integrity, using any windows of opportunity to cut and maim, and Rey is terrified as she sees Ben narrowly dodge a violent upswing that could have separated his head from his shoulders if he hadn’t blocked it. She fires towards the Knight, but the shot predictably misses and the knight doesn’t even falter, beating Ben back towards the circular security booth.

Ben’s attention is momentarily stolen by another Knight joining the attack, Zahra hissing as she scythes a pair of cutlasses through the air, their crossed blades coming down in a deadly trajectory meant to take off his saber arm, He unlocks the golden blade from the red and twirls it with horrific precision, cutting off the Knight’s hands at the wrists. She howls, falling back as Malik redoubles his attack, and Rose scores a deadly shot with her blaster, hitting the Knight in the back of the neck. Zahra slumps to the ground, motionless.

Finn, meanwhile, is duking it out with the second-last Knight, the one with the machete. The diamond-edged blade cut the electro-pike in half, but Finn still wields the electrified end in one hand and the jagged end of the staff in the other as he swings at the Knight’s exposed throat, trying to skewer him. He fights like a man possessed, his arms in constant motion as he fights for the upper hand against the larger, more heavily armoured Knight. But the pike is no match for the knight’s blade, and as Rey glances over, the Knight gets in a lucky hit, striking the pike out of Finn’s hand and knocking him to the ground with the butt of his machete, swinging the blade back over his head and down towards Finn’s exposed chest-

‘No!’ Rey screams, throwing up a hand in rage and terror, and the Force explodes outward, the air electrified as a stream of silver lightning pours from her fingertips, hitting the Knight in the plate of armour over his heart. The electricity spreads like a conflagration over his arms and legs, shaking him like a ragdoll as the current fries him, amplified and conducted by the metal of his armour, and if he weren’t wearing it, his skeleton would be lighting up under his skin for her to see. A particularly strong zap sends him flying back into the corridor, and the Force lightning shorts out, Rey’s hand
tingling with numbness as she stares at it with a mix of shock and a nauseated kind of horror.

Malik bellows, and Rey looks up from her hand to realise he’s charging at her, swinging Ben’s red saber. He throws out an arm and feints left, taking her by surprise as she tries to match his movement, and his free arm flies up, striking her across the face with a vicious backhand. The force of the blow lifts her off her feet, and Rey sprawls onto the metal floor, gasping as the Knight raises Ben’s saber to cut her down-

And a golden blade pierces his chest from behind.

Rey gasps as the knight topples to the floor at her feet, leaving Ben Solo standing over her with her lightsaber held aloft, blood streaked across his face, murder in his eyes.

Ben summons his saber from the felled Knight’s grip and switches off Rey’s golden one, holding the hilt of it out to her wordlessly.

Rey takes it and gets to her feet as time seems to freeze around them, becoming a series of separate frames, billions of tiny facets as she stares at Ben’s face, pale and drawn, stained with the blood of the people he tried to save, and she sees what killing the Knights has cost him.

This is the second time he’s given up everything he had to save her life.

No more.

_Thank you._ It’s said without words, but her thoughts hold twice as much truth anyway. She holds out her free hand to him, palm open and inviting. _My hero._

His dark eyes flicker to her outstretched hand and back up to her face, and he reaches out to take her hand, his much larger one enveloping hers.

The _Finalizer_ shakes underfoot as their skins touch; wracked by tremors that nearly make them all fall flat on their faces, and Rey suddenly realises what it is – the tremors, the source of the alien singing, the strength of the _Force_...

‘Mortis!’ she shouts, and Finn looks over at her, frowning in puzzlement.

‘Bless you?’ he says slowly, and Rey flaps a hand at him impatiently. She didn’t _sneeze._

‘Mortis! It’s reacting to _us_! It appeared because of us. Stars, we have to get to a _ship_!’ Rey yells feverishly, grabbing Ben’s arm and starting to drag him towards the elevator. Unsurprisingly, he digs in his heels, shaking his head, sweaty curls falling over his face.

‘Hux is here somewhere,’ he grinds out. ‘I’ve got to-’

‘No!’ Rey interrupts him with a shout. ‘You have your damn lightsaber, you don’t need him! Didn’t you hear what the Knight said? If we don’t stop Hux he’s going to blow up the Mortis monolith and probably the planet itself!’

‘Yes,’ Ben says, faux-patiently, ‘that’s why we’re going to go to whatever deck he’s on and kill him.’

Rey grabs ahold of his sleeve, widening her eyes as she stares at him, trying to make him see _sense._ ‘Killing him won’t stop the army from destroying Mortis if he’s already given the order,’ she argues. ‘Every second we stand here fighting they get closer to blowing it up. But if you’ll just _listen_ to me for once-’
Ben yanks his arm out of her grasp and strides off toward the elevator again, proving undisputedly that, no; he will not listen to her for once.

‘You idiotic, pigheaded, inconsiderate ass!’ Rey shouts, stalking off after him. ‘We are getting the kriff out of here whether you like it or not, Ben Solo-’

Finn, Rose and Chewbacca are left looking after the retreating pair in abject shock, their raised voices carrying back to them as they argue their way to the elevator.

‘What the hell does she see in him?’ Finn wonders aloud.

Rose shrugs, her shoulder-plates clanking. ‘Animal magnetism?’

Chewbacca roars in agreement.

Chapter End Notes

I'm pumping these chapters out now because we're nearly at the end! This one was so much fun to write, yet also so H A R D. Battle sequences are hard! Schemes are hard! Everything is hard!

But I had so much fun writing the rescue, seriously. I'd been headcanoning for ages that Rey would dress as a Stormtrooper to save Ben, like Luke did for Leia, I just didn't know how it could be pulled off. Original Trilogy hark-backs are LIFE.
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Forty-Six

The Force has gone haywire, Ben thinks in a dark haze of panic, as the rag-tag bunch of rebels and traitors run for the elevator. There’s no logical explanation for it, for the quantum paradox they’re currently caught up in, except to assume that the pendulum has swung wildly out of balance with the apparent appearance of the Mortis monolith, pulling the cosmic energies apart.

He hadn’t even been able to sense Sorcha’s death at the hands of his Knights; hadn’t felt Rey’s presence aboard the Star Destroyer until she’d gotten close enough to reach out to him, break through whatever barrier has been blocking their bond from functioning in the past few days.

What in the sincerest fuck is going on? This isn’t the Force he knows; it’s shaky, inconsistent, surging with power and then ebbing without warning, like the waxing and waning of moon phases, rather than a consistent energy. And that infernal, otherworldly singing that’s been plaguing him for days is back – only now, Rey can hear it, too. He wishes he knew why.

He doesn’t understand anything anymore. Every single thing he thought he knew has been twisted and warped, like reflections in carnival mirrors, until they no longer resemble the truth. His Knights, who he’d thought had been loyal to him above everyone else, their pact sealed with blood, had sold him out to his worst enemy. They’d freely given the details of his heritage, even advised Hux on the Mortis monolith and how to reach it. Hux had told him as much when he’d had him escorted down to the brig – and that was before he’d sucker-punched him in the face, resulting in his currently very obvious black eye. Ben had let him have it, that moment to revel in his triumph; silently adding it to the tally of all of the injustices the little ginger worm had done to him. Each one would be repaid a thousandfold when he finally gets to wrap his fingers around the general’s throat. No Force-choking this time. He wants to feel him die, to rejoice in it, up close and extremely personal. He was going to savour it like the finest delicacy, and it had been the only thing on his mind as he’d sat in the tiny cell in the brig, plotting revenge.

Until Rey had stormed the cellblock, an avenging angel in the guise of a rogue trooper, opening the door to his cage. She’d ripped off her helmet, revealing her pink-stained cheeks, dark ponytail falling over one bright hazel eye, her armour-plated chest heaving with the exertion of battle – and even though he’s known this strange, celestial girl for a month now, seen her at her most naked and vulnerable, every secret stripped bare; it had felt like he was seeing her, really seeing her, for the first time.

Rey of Jakku. Rey the Jedi Knight. The ruthless lioness and the warpainted warrior. The determined scavenger and the compassionate heroine. His true north, his guiding light. He’d almost gotten down his knees then and there, to pledge himself to her like a zealot at the feet of a goddess.

And then the Knights had fucked it up by appearing out of nowhere, threatening Rey and forcing his hand. They hadn’t been content with just betrayal. They’d tried to murder him. Even knowing that he’d risked everything to come back for them, to save them. Whatever light and goodness that was in them had clearly been expunged long ago, either by Snoke or by him – they’re probably equally guilty on that front.
Their blood is all over his face, his hands, staining his skin like indelible ink, never to be washed off. None of them managed to land a single blow on him, but they might as well have, because he’s bleeding out anyway, black blood filling his lungs. He can feel their losses in the Force, the empty spaces where their crimson-edged signatures used to be.

Yes, his wounds are an internal sort, a ripping of heartstrings when he’d been forced to choose between them and Rey. When Malik had threatened her life, he’d known it was over. That they were out of choices.

It should have been a hard decision. But it wasn’t. Like choosing to subtly turn the heirloom lightsaber on his old master, it was the easiest choice in the world. If it came down to his life or theirs, maybe he would have surrendered to the blade.

But not her.

He’d kill thousands to keep her alive. He would shatter stars, burn whole galaxies to ash and dust, defy every deity in existence to make sure her light kept shining, if only for one more night.

But that didn’t make the guilt and grief disappear. They were his friends once, in a warped way. And he’d had to cut them down exactly as they’d done to the padawans at the Jedi Temple. History repeats itself. He wants to throw up.

He’s never felt like more of an irredeemable failure. A monster.

But Rey had called him a hero.

His thumb slides off the ignition switch of his lightsaber as they step into the elevator, Rey’s friends squeezing in behind them. As the doors close, trapping them in this claustrophobic box, a loud hiss and crackle suddenly emits from an unseen spot, making him twitch with surprise.

Rey lifts her hand, revealing a mobile comm-link, clicking a button on it as another unfortunately familiar voice fills the elevator.

Rey – abort mission! I repeat, abort the mission, get off the ship any way you can. Something seriously crazy just happened.

‘Poe, yes, I’m here, and we don’t need to abort – we found Ben. We’re leaving now, I think – what happened?’

A massive fucking rhombus just appeared out of nowhere and all the dreadnoughts have opened fire on it! It might be some kind of futuristic tech, I don’t know, maybe we breached another colony’s airspace – but the First Order is distracted. That means the heat is off us, temporarily – so Rey, you’ve got to get off the ship. The Bespin fleet is primed to start bombing the Finalizer, and the Alliance is scrambling to take out the Dreadnought’s cannons while they’re occupied. Get off the ship as fast as you can!

So it wasn’t a trick. The Mortis monolith has materialized. Whatever race controls it has no sense of self-preservation at all, emerging while surrounded by Star Destroyers and Dreadnoughts. Why has it appeared now? Is Rey right, and it’s because of them? Was that part of Hux’s master plan, too? Surely not.

He’s dragged out of that line of thinking by Chewbacca, bellowing something in Shyriiwook. Rey replies to him in a soft, calm voice, but he knows beneath the veneer she’s as scared as he is. As they all are.
He casts a quick glance at the group of rebels stuffed into the elevator. FN-2187, Chewbacca, and a black-haired girl he doesn’t know – all here, presumably, to support Rey in her hare-brained rescue mission, that apparently involved them all dressing as Stormtroopers and sneaking on-board the Finalizer. The fact that FN-2187 of all people would agree to that plan makes a bubble of mirth burst in his throat, and suddenly it’s all too hilarious – the rebels dressed as imperials, the Mortis monolith, Grand Marshal Hux’s ludicrous new outfit, the Knights’ betrayal, it’s a total comedy of errors, and before he can make a move to contain himself, he starts laughing uncontrollably in the cramped elevator.

Once he’s started, he can’t stop. Rey narrows her eyes at him as he doubles over, sliding down the metal wall and thumping onto the floor of the elevator, gasping as he tries to draw breath in between fits of maniacal laughter.

‘What the hell-’ FN-2187 says hotly, but the black-haired girl shushes him fiercely as Rey squats down next to him, tentatively reaching out to touch his shoulder, and oh shit, he’s laughing so hard he can’t breathe, so hysterical that he’s about to cry, and none of this is the slightest bit funny as he tips his head back so he’s staring past them all, eyes too-bright and stinging with tears, his gaze fixed on the roof of the elevator as they rise towards the hangar bay.

‘This is a bad dream,’ he says aloud, and he vaguely feels Rey’s hand slide down his arm to reach his hand, her fingers threading through his. The bond between them glows as she tries to take away some of the pain, the howling rift of contradicting emotions, and a brief sense of tranquillity washes over him as he clutches her hand like a lifeline, the web of the Force quivering and sighing as their skins brush.

‘Ben,’ she says, and god, he can’t help but look at her when she says his name, it’s a Pavlovian response, and her eyes are as spellbinding as her voice when she says, ‘Please listen to me. We have to get out of here. The Resistance fleet is going to try to blow up the ship; it’s too dangerous for us to stay on-board. Hux can wait.’

‘He can’t,’ he argues, but his heart’s not in it anymore. Who, other than him, gives a flying fuck whether he gets his petty revenge on Hux today, or days from now? Killing him now won’t end this war, there’s still an entire army to contend with. There’s nothing left to be said or done. They were enemies; they hated eachother; they both made eachother suffer, and paid for that suffering in equally terrible ways. Snoke is gone and the Knights of Ren are dead. They’re even; it’s over, at least until tomorrow.

All that matters at this moment is Rey. And that means they have to escape.

She looks deeply into his eyes, as though reading his every thought, and if they’re being honest, she probably is. ‘Do you trust me?’ she asks softly, and he can see his bloodstained reflection in her hazel irises. He gulps. It’s disgusting how smitten he is with her.

And maybe this is how he gets to be the hero. Not just by fighting for her, spilling blood in her name, killing their enemies to keep her safe. But knowing when to call it quits and run for cover, to make sure they live to see another sunrise. To trust her.

It’s all for her.

He nods once, a show of surrender.

She breathes out. ‘Good. Then come with us.’

She stands up, her hand still entwined with his, and he gets to his feet as the elevator doors slide
open, like curtains in a theatre production, drawn back to signal the beginning of the final act.

They’re just missing the applause as they exit the elevator into a total clusterfuck. Wailing sirens, the flaming debris of bombed-out TIE fighters, the command room ablaze, and at least twenty Stormtroopers running across the hangar deck. At the sound of the elevator arriving, half of them spin around, bringing up their blasters.

FN-2187 crams his helmet back over his head. ‘Crap.’

There’s no more time for indecision. If they die here, it’s just one more thing for him to regret. He reignites his lightsaber as the first row of troopers open fire on them, effortlessly deflecting their blasts with a three-sixty degree spin of his blade. Beside him, Rey ignites her golden saber, and they charge forwards, Chewbacca’s bowcaster firing intermittently overhead, bolts slamming into the crowd of white-clad soldiers, the explosive-tipped projectiles flinging bodies into the air.

A riot trooper swings his electrostaff at Rey, trying to take her out at the knees. Ben cuts him down before he can complete his strike, and Rey yanks the staff from the trooper’s grip, pushing forward into the fracas. FN-2187 yells out, alerting them to a pair of troopers firing from above, in the ruins of the command booth, and his companion shoots them down in two well-aimed bursts from her blaster gun.

A Stormtrooper tries to strike him from behind and he whirls round, throwing out an elbow and knocking the trooper’s helmet straight off, following through with the scythe of his lightsaber as he turns to face an oncoming trio of what look like flametroopers. His saber can’t stop a flamethrower – thinking quickly, Ben reaches out to the Force, grasping at every available strand, however unstable it is, to contract around him before releasing it in a crushing explosion of energy, a blow so strong that the troopers are knocked back, the barrels of their weapons crumpling from the force of the impact. Naphtha spills out of the broken flamethrowers, hitting the metal floor and igniting where it meets the still-burning wreckage of the TIE-fighters.

‘We need to get to a ship!’ Rey hollers, her saber a spinning wheel of golden light as she deflects the Stormtroopers’ blaster fire back at them. The Finalizer rocks sickeningly with another barrage of explosions, as if to illustrate Rey’s point.

‘We’re a little busy at the moment!’ FN-2187 shouts back as he fires at a pair of advancing officers. ‘**Krif** this!’ Rey shouts, and to Ben’s surprise, she turns and starts to run for the nearest bay of still-functional TIE fighters, obviously intending to commandeer one, which isn’t a bad plan. ‘Come on!’

His eyes swivel, looking for another escape route, and suddenly – a flash of recognition – *Rey, wait!*

She turns back around, fending off a fresh volley of blaster fire, and follows his gaze to his TIE Silencer, tethered to the wall at the far end of the hangar. Hux must’ve had it moved to the Finalizer for storage – just like the Knights of Ren, he thinks with a bite of irony - when he usurped his throne, removing any trace of him from the Star-Eater flagship. He’d curse every relative he has if he knew the favour he’s done them.

Rey starts to run back in the direction of the Silencer, and Ben starts after her, when he spies a Stormtrooper taking aim at FN-2187’s back, which is unguarded as the former soldier fires towards a pair of rocket troopers beating a hasty retreat.

His pulse quickens, beating in his temples as the trooper’s finger tenses on the trigger.

FN-2187 wheels around just as the Stormtrooper fires, the laser beam crackling as it carves a path
through the air-

And it freezes in mid-air, a hair’s breadth away from FN-2187’s chest.

Ben looks away from the beam to realise his hand is outstretched, fingers balled into a fist to contain the energy of the blast. *Oh.*

FN – Finn – seems to be making the same discovery, looking across from the beam to Ben’s hand, then up at his face. Ben can’t see the former trooper’s expression because he’s wearing a helmet, and they’re both grateful for that. It saves them any embarrassing insights.

He reroutes the beam and sends it back at the last remaining soldiers as Finn fires back at the offending trooper. Before he pivots back around to cover the black-haired girl and Chewie as they make for another TIE, he nods imperceptibly in Ben’s direction. It’s all the thanks he’s going to get, and Ben nods ever-so-slightly back before taking off at a sprint for the TIE Silencer that Rey’s starting to climb into.

He swings himself up onto the platform and unclips the tether that’s hooked onto the Silencer’s docking mechanism. They’ve only got minutes, three at most, before the hangar is overrun with more Stormtroopers, and they need to act fast. Rey has kindly assumed position in the back section, leaving him to slot into the pilot’s seat and start frantically pressing all the buttons that will allow them to launch.

‘Are Finn and the others okay?’ she pants over his shoulder, and he gives an affirmative grunt as he works to get them airborne. With a hiss of kept breath he slams down the last key of the ignition sequence, and the Silencer whirs to life, hovering for a millisecond before rocketing forwards, propelling them through the hangar at an alarming speed. Ben banks hard to the left as he fights to line the vessel up with the hole the Chandrilan fleet made in the Finalizer’s hull – it’s protected by the ship’s shields now, keeping the entire hangar from being sucked out into space, so they’re going to have to lightspeed it if they want to get out.

He positions the Silencer so its pincer-like protrusions are aligned with the patched-up hole and checks the flight computer. They’re primed.

He pushes the button and the screen dissolves into star-lines, shooting them out through the bubble shield and into space, revolving like a mechanical asteroid as Rey shouts and clings onto the back of the pilot’s chair.

‘Look out!’ she yells as several lines of laser fire streak past their ship. He realises with a jolt that they’re in an enemy craft, surrounded by a horde of X-wings – they could be friendly-fired on at any second. Does it ever get easy?

‘Use your own comm-link!’ he roars as Rey grapples with the Silencer’s comm-system. He hears her mentally berate herself for forgetting the mobile comm as she picks it up and switches it on.

‘Poe, come in, Poe, this is Rey, Ben and I are flying the TIE Silencer – tell the fleet to stop firing!’

‘Rey?’ A voice decidedly more feminine than Dameron’s emits tinnily from the comm.

Ben shuts his eyes with a groan. *Motherfuck-*

‘Rey, it’s Leia. What’s going on? Are you both okay?’

‘Yes, we’re fine, or we will be once there’s a ceasefire – where’s Poe?’
‘He’s joined the dogfight, of course, couldn’t keep him away once the cannons were off us. I’m giving the fleet your numbers so they’ll recognise you – I’m beyond relieved you made it out. Ben-’
his mother’s voice falters over the comm, and Ben scowls as he drives the Silencer forward, firing on a pair of unsuspecting TIE fighters as they leave the hangar bay. They become fireballs, spiralling through space in slow-motion. He counts to ten, watching them spin, trailing streamers of fire.

‘Yes, General?’ he growls, because he abhors awkward pauses.

‘You did the right thing.’

He tries to stay impassive, but his treacherous emotions respond to her words, it’s all too noticeable in the quickening of his heartbeat and the sudden stinging in his eyes.

‘It was nothing,’ he says dismissively, but it doesn’t ring true, even to him.

‘I’m sure.’ He detects a note of sass. Several notes.

She wants to say more, he can tell, but Rey quickly distracts both of them with a cry. ‘Oh, my days – look!’

He spins the ship and – holy shit.

Suspended in the darkness of space, supported by nothing but dark matter, is a gargantuan, rust-red monolith. It’s formed out of some kind of metal, or at least a substance that has a metallic lustre, but none of the malleability, and it glints as the light of turbo-lasers refracts off it, the First Order’s cannon-fire bouncing off its surface like electrons repelled from a magnet.

Rey gasps, gripping his arm. He yelps in protest.

‘It’s opening!’

She’s right – the monolith appears to be separating along a seam in the middle, splitting open slowly, like a parting mouth, revealing a bright, incandescent white light, achingly familiar-

The overhead cabin lights flicker and the computer beeps erratically, the engine of the Silencer stuttering as Mortis’s electrical fields communicate with it. What the...

Ben twists around in the pilot’s chair to check the lights and finds himself face-to-face with Rey, her eyes round and frightened. Her face is close enough to his that he feels her breath caress his lips as she whispers, riot-eyed, ‘It’s calling us. Do you hear it?’

He listens, and the same unearthly singing fills his head, as if it was waiting to be invited in, the wordless choir harmonizing with their breathing as they stare into eachother’s eyes, brown meeting hazel, equally confused, one trying to read the answer in the other.

The sudden appearance of a hologram over the dashboard ruins the moment.

‘So it’s true.’ Hux sounds like he’s chewing on a mouthful of gravel, his words are so grating. ‘My officers informed me they saw Kylo Ren and his co-conspirator absconding in his old TIE Silencer. I thought to myself, ‘Too easy. He’s bluffing somehow.’ But it looks like you really are that stupid, Ren.’ The hologram sniffs, hands clasped behind its back. ‘Did you forget that I’ve, in colloquial terms, got your six? As with any TIE vehicle registered with the First Order, the command bridge has the code to communicate with your TIE, and the power to override all your systems and set your engine to self-destruct.’
Ben blinks incredulously. ‘You’re the one who’s bluffing. The First Order doesn’t have that kind of tech.’ If they had, FN-2187 and Dameron would have been blitzed before they could crash-land on Jakku. It doesn’t make sense.

Hux’s transparent face contorts horribly in a smirk. ‘It does now. I’ve made a few necessary changes since taking over, cleaning up the messes you left behind and whatnot. The self-destruct mechanism reduces rates of officer defection, and has proven remarkably useful.’ He raises his eyebrows, feigning a polite disinterest. ‘I believe I have the ace in the hole. Ren, I’ll give you thirty seconds to fly yourself and your slut back into the Finalizer and surrender. Or I’m pressing the button.’

Get spaced, fuckface is what he wants to reply, but he bites his tongue before he can condemn them both with the insult. If it were just him in this ship, he’d let loose, but Rey... he can’t let her pay for his mistakes.

‘Hux, don’t pretend you don’t want me out of your hair as much as I want to be,’ he murmurs as he spins the Silencer towards the Alliance fleet, laser beams flying like comets around them as TIEs and X-wings battle back and forth across the canvas of space. In the corner of his eye, he can see the Nubian starship, the one that contains his mother; he can see her aura, swirling lapis lazuli, full of anxiousness as she listens in on the conversation over the comm-link, still switched-on and transmitting in Rey’s hand. He tries for black humour, for her sake. 'The fun's over. I even let you give me a black eye. That's more than any man in the galaxy can boast. It's done. Just let us go,'

"Oh, I'm not even halfway done with you, Ren." Hux makes a hand motion at an unseen someone behind him. ‘Shall we raise the stakes?’ He smiles again, grimly. ‘I believe I warned you of the consequences should the Alliance fleet continue to advance.’

Ben realises in one heart-stopping second what he means to do, and the smile slides off his face. ‘Hux, don’t –‘

He feels, rather than sees, the moment one of the Dreadnought’s turrets swivels backward and fires at the silver starship. A mag-pulse, not a laser blast, explosive and deadly.

‘Please,’ he whispers, but it’s entirely too late. He reaches out desperately for his mother’s signature, trying to warn her, to shield her, to do something, in the frozen moments before the pulse hits the Nubian starship’s screen and it implodes, glass splintering into millions of teardrop shards, the contents of the ship suctioned out into the icy abyss of space.

For a few futile seconds he stares dumbly at the fast-spinning shipwreck, believing that it’ll be okay, she’ll be fine – she’s pulled through before, after all, but, no, then, a horrific pain claws at his chest as his mother is ripped from him, a connection cut away string by intangible string, and he knows it cannot be.

Rey screams wordlessly behind him as they both feel his mother’s signature slip from the Force, that long-burning star slowly burning itself out, a supernova collapsing into a black hole, leaving utter emptiness behind.

‘You–’

Words fail him. There is no insult he could scream at the man, the man who has robbed him of almost everything that matters, that could do this miasma of emotions justice. Hatred. Black, corrosive rage. Despair. Grief.

The throne.
The Order.

The Knights.

Mother.

Her loss splits him straight down to the marrowbone, an unrecoverable blow, and a small, strangled noise escapes him, either a sob or a moan. Hearing it only enhances Hux’s smile.

‘Time’s almost up,’ he gloats, a scheming foe to a fault. ‘Get back to the ship, Ren, and don’t be a coward. You’re only making matters worse for—’

His hologram flickers, and the grand marshal frowns, half-turning to the blank space behind him and quietly asking, ‘Did you authorise that?’

An unheard reply and he turns back to Ben and Rey, who are stunned into stillness in the TIE as the lights overhead flicker, the dashboard controls turning on and off as though under the influence of a poltergeist, and suddenly their craft is gripped by a random gravitational force, and their ship starts to move, drifting backwards towards something-

‘What’s happening?’ Rey cries, twisting to look out the viewport, at the same time as Hux spits, ‘Time’s up. My officers have hit the override switch.’

Ben’s heart leaps into his throat, expecting the worst, but... nothing happens. The engine doesn’t blow up and send them careening into a wreck of molten metal and biting flame. The ship is still steadily being retracted, the lights switching off completely now, all computers going green-screened, Hux’s hologram buffering and glitching,

‘What in the world...’ Hux breathes, staring at something beyond what the hologram can display.

Rey yells again and Ben turns to look out of the side viewport.

Silvery, shimmering projections in the shape of giant hands are splaying around their ship, and they’re extending out from the opening seam of the Mortis monolith.

‘Ben, they’re pulling us in!’ Rey shouts. ‘Jump to lightspeed!’

But he can’t. Everything is switched off, overridden not by Hux’s cronies but by the divine influence of Mortis itself. The singing in his head becomes an endless scream, a discordant cacophony of noise as the incorporeal hands wrap completely around the ship, whiting out their screen, and they’re being pulled irreversibly towards the yawning gap between the monolith’s hemispheres, into the core.

The last thing he glimpses before everything turns upside-down is the jagged edge of the monolith as they pass through the divide, and the two sides re-seal with a boom that shakes the atmosphere, the hands around their craft dissipating into nothing but smoke, and the Silencer begins to free-fall.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my gosh I'm SO SO SORRY.
I honestly contemplated leaving Leia alive at the end of this story because I love her (and Carrie) so much. But I knew that from what's rumoured about the canon of IX, she's either going to be written out completely or die-offscreen, and I wanted to follow
that lore with this story. Believe me, it was a very hard decision - Leia is one of my
favourites to write, because she's so sassy yet vulnerable, soft yet tough as nails. May
she rest in starlight.

On a slightly happier note, not that there's much to rejoice about in this chapter...
MORTIS. ARC. Repeat after me. MORTIS. ARC. These guys are not gonna be happy
they just got sucked out of a major kickass battle and into a planet with weird relativity
issues! Rey didn't even get to play with the Silencer's guns... or Kylo's :P
Chapter Forty-Seven

‘We’re going to crash!’ Rey screams as the Silencer starts to spin out, piercing Mortis’s atmosphere as they corkscrew down through layers of cloud, gravity beginning to take hold as they speed towards terminal velocity, dragging them down into a devastating, high-speed collision course. ‘Move over!’

Staggering from side-to-side as G-forces grip the TIE, the walls of the cabin shuddering and bending inwards, Rey shoves Ben aside, crouches over the controls and tries to restart the engine. It sputters, turns over and dies.

‘That won’t work,’ Ben gasps as she curses and bashes the button for the hyperdrive. His skin is taking on a greenish hue from altitude sickness, oxygen concentration lowering as the air pressure in the cabin falls. ‘The entire operating system’s been shut down.’

‘No,’ Rey hisses between her clenched teeth, wrenching the steering mechanism this way and that, trying to correct the ship out of its death spiral. ‘There’s got to be something – do you have an ejector seat?’

‘It’s only designed for one,’ he groans, bending over and clutching his stomach as the G-forces grip him, his vision tunnelling as he begins to slide towards unconsciousness.

‘Don’t you black out on me, Ben Solo!’ Rey yells, digging her fingernails into his arm and shaking him as she fights with the controls - damn it, there has to be something in this metal death-trap that operates independently.

The viewport revolves sickeningly fast, a child’s spinning top, and outside the windows, the cloudbank melts away to reveal an expanse of green, rushing eagerly up to greet them. They have to bail, now!

‘Brace!’

Ben pulls her atop him into the pilot’s seat and secures her with his arms as Rey pulls the manual release lever, shutting her eyes and sending up a prayer. With a mechanical roar, the top of the Silencer opens out to the sky and they’re wrenched from the spacecraft, a parachute of black material unfurling out like a pirate’s flag.

Rey cries out as the sudden rush of turbulence nearly pulls her out of Ben’s grip, and she clings onto his arms for dear life as the wind buffets them, the parachute catching a current just as the abandoned TIE Silencer crashes into the earth beneath them with an ear-splitting screech of tearing metal, the ion engines combusting in a flare of brilliance that sears the backs of her eyelids.

‘Holy-‘

She doesn’t finish the sentence as the parachute concaves under their combined weight, sending the pair of them bulleting down for the last few metres, hitting the ground with a spine-jarring thud. The
back of her skull connects with something hard and stars scatter in front of her eyes.

The last thing Rey remembers seeing is a pink-and-gold-smeared skyline - the dripping colours of a sunset - and the shapes of mountains. But they're floating in the sky.

She’s telling herself it’s just an optical illusion when everything fades to grey.

--

When Rey wakes, she’s still seeing stars, and it takes a moment of squinting before she realises that she’s looking at actual stars. She’s lying flat on her back against a stone surface, with what seems like the entire universe spread above her, scintillating piles of stars amassed around two twin moons, milk-white and clear as polished freshwater pearls. Everything is too bright; in such sharp clarity that she rubs her eyes, sure that she’s dreaming. But the backdrop doesn’t change, except for the faintest echo of a voice, calling to her from somewhere across the stars...

She starts to remember.

Rey sits upright, her battered body groaning in protest. ‘Ben?’

She scans her surroundings quickly; noting the strange structures – stone, metal, glass – but there’s nothing resembling Ben Solo.

Where am I?

She takes a deep breath in and her ribs complain more. She unbuckles the remaining plates of Stormtrooper armour and lets them fall to the ground, poking and prodding at herself, assessing the sore spots for any lasting damage. Nothing’s broken, thank the stars. Just heavily bruised – her back and ribs ache the most, so there’s probably an abstract collage of bruises already forming there.

How did I get here?

Someone must have moved her while she was unconscious, she realises, as a thrill of fear shivers its way up her spine. She vaguely remembers passing out under a very different sky – a sunset, not stars – and she’d been lying on grass, not stone. And there were mountains... floating in the sky as if they weighed less than nothing.

And Ben had been with her, the emergency parachute covering both of their bodies like a funeral shroud.

So where is he? They’d crash-landed together – she’s pretty sure she was knocked out when the back of her head connected with his, and gods, his skull must be made of pure lead – so why isn’t he here with her?

Did whoever carried her here take him elsewhere? Or did he wake up first and leave without her? Her heart thuds at the thought. It’s not like she wouldn’t deserve it if he did. A memory of the aftermath of their tussle on the Supremacy steals through her mind, a harsh recollection of her kneeling beside his comatose form, looking upon his resting face with a peculiar kind of tenderness. She’d reached out and brushed a curl away from his cheek, and he’d stirred, startling her. She’d run for Snoke’s escape craft, not daring to look over her shoulder as she initiated the eject sequence. If she’d looked back, if he’d regained consciousness, if he’d said her name - she might have been tempted to stay.

Oh, gods.

Leia. And Soruna, too. Two women she’d thought were invincible, iron-boned, gone in the seconds between a cannon’s fire and a starship’s collapse, the space between two heartbeats. She felt it; their energies leaving the Force, and her eyes had burned with unshed tears. If only time could be made to work in reverse.

Rey tries to stand up abruptly, woozily, and her surrounding spin sickeningly around her. The blow to the back of her head has left her slightly concussed, confused as she sits back down and knuckles her forehead, trying to make the world stop revolving for a moment, so she can get her bearings. She breathes deeply, in and out and in again, until the nausea lifts.

She looks more carefully at her surroundings, trying to find a point of reference among the strange, carved stone sculptures and swirled symbols, cut out of clear glass and lit from below, glowing with an eerie, electric-blue light. She’s sitting in the middle of an arena, sunk deeply in a well of rock, with the slab of a dais towering above her. She sits at the centrepoint of an enormous, engraved circle, with twin petals budding from a golden disc at the centre, swirling outwards into negative half-moons, one white, one black, both spattered with smaller golden dotwork. The design is eerily familiar, reminiscent of the mosaic at the bottom of the pool in the first Jedi Temple. She’d seen it only days before. The Prime Jedi. One half bright, one half dark. The balance of the Force.

The Force...

She rests her hands against the stone of the amphitheatre and tilts her face up to the heavens, mapping the spaces between the stars as she reaches out to the Force, watching it take shape in the masses of constellations above, a series of infinite threads, stretching into a fragile eternity. She discovers, as she had when floating in deep space, that the universe has a heartbeat – or perhaps that’s the Force itself – so strong on this planet that she hears its pulse, welcomes it into her as her heart synchronizes with the beat, and a newfound energy buoys her spirit.

So this is Mortis.

As if on cue, there’s that faint whisper again. Someone is talking to her.

It’s not Ben.

Slowly, in increments that change with every blink of her eyes, a figure starts to take shape in front of her, edged with blue and translucent as the film of a soap bubble. It lengthens and smooths out, assuming the shape of a tall, lithe man – thinner than he’d been in life – with the makings of a scruffy beard and salt-and-pepper hair. He’s wearing the traditional brown robes of a Jedi Master, and he’s smiling from sky-blue eyes as he regards her.

Her own eyes fill with tears.

‘Luke.’

The Force ghost clears his throat, gruffly. Hello, Rey. Long time, no see.

She dashes the tears away with her palm before they have a chance to spill over. ‘And whose fault is that?’ she tries to jest, but the words come out more like an accusation. The Force ghost raises his eyebrows at her tone, and she feels immediately chastened. ‘Sorry. I just... could have used some help making sense of the Jedi Texts is all.’

Luke hums thoughtfully, his eyes twinkling a little. Ah, yes, the books you lifted from my library. You couldn’t parse them? He sighs then, a drawn-out, long-suffering exhalation. Honest truth - I couldn’t
either. He turns and looks pointedly around the courtyard, his outline fluorescing a little, like the oily rainbows you see when a bubble catches the light the right way. Though it seems you didn’t need me, or any dusty old books, my sticky-fingered friend. You found your way here all on your own.

Rey scowls, resenting the implication. ‘No, I didn’t, actually. We were dragged away from the battle with the First Order, sucked through the monolith’s opening by some supernatural force, crash-landed; I got knocked out, and woke up in this courtyard. I assume I have you to thank for that last part, too.’ She stands up, shaking off the last of the nausea, crossing her arms over her chest. ‘I don’t mean to be rude, Master Skywalker, and it’s nice to see you and everything, but I don’t have time to talk. My friends are still in danger, and I need to find Ben and get us back off this planet.’

Luke spreads his arms out in answer, indicating to the odd, zoomorphic statues at the sides of the amphitheatre. You don’t need to worry about their safety yet, Rey. I’m sure you’ve already discovered that time works differently on Mortis than it does in the rest of the galaxy. His ghostly image crosses the stone courtyard, moving towards one of the statues. Rey’s eyes follow him, looking closer at the shape the statue is carved into – a griffin, flecked with white gold, rearing back on its hind legs. Luke reaches out to it, tracing a blue-tinged finger over its carven beak. Here, days seem to stretch on and on without end. It probably seems to you that you have been stuck here for hours. But out there, he gestures towards the sky overhead, the multitude of stars, time has a different rhythm. For the Resistance, it has been only seconds since your ship was sucked through the monolith. He glides back towards her, smiling gently. We have all the time in the world to talk, young Jedi.

Rey holds onto her elbows, shaking a little. In truth, she had forgotten about the relativity difference between Mortis and the wider universe. That particular fact is the only thing stopping her from having a complete meltdown on the spot, in front of her old master. She’d been ripped away from her friends before they’d had a chance to reunite outside the Finalizer – the last she’d seen, Rose and Chewie had been running to commandeer another TIE while Finn covered them, but Ben had jumped the Silencer out of the bombed-out Star Destroyer before she’d had time to see whether their friends had made it out.

But if time really works differently here, days slipping by while only seconds pass in space, then maybe, somewhere outside this realm, Finn and Rose and Chewie are still firing up their TIE’s ignition sequence. Or they’re just beginning to fly into outer space, to join the dogfight. Maybe, just maybe, they’ll stay safe for as long as Rey is here. If Master Luke is right, they really do have all the time in the world.

Luke stops in front of her, still smiling serenely. As I was saying, my help was entirely unnecessary. You followed the path of the Jedi, regardless of my input, or the riddles in those books. You found your place in the galaxy, Rey, and you did it all by yourself.

Rey laughs uncertainly, not sure whether he’s being sincere. ‘You seem to know an awful lot about me, for someone who’s dead.’

Luke laughs too then, a proper laugh that crinkles the edges of his faded eyes. Turns out being a ghost comes with a certain amount of spare time on your hands. Part of the package, I guess. I used my spare time to study the intricacies of the Force. His face becomes grave again. Rey, do you know why you’re here? Why the monolith unsealed itself for you?

She bites her lip. ‘Not really. My bet’s on it having something to do with Ben and me, though.’

Luke tilts his head to one side. And why might that be?

Rey gnaws on the lining of her cheek in mild frustration. ‘I don’t know, maybe because everything
else does?’ she says crossly. ‘The mirror cave. The visions. The dark and light sides. The Force. My powers. You said it yourself, back on Ach-To. “I’ve seen this raw strength only once before, in Ben Solo,”’ she quotes in a poor imitation of her mentor’s baritone. ‘Everything always leads back to him.’

Luke smiles at her ire. Yes, it does. It’s funny you mention Ach-To – time moves differently here, as I said before. The time at the Jedi Temple with you feels like aeons ago. His eyes blur with the effort of remembering. I was too stubborn back then, Rey; wilfully blind to what was in front of me. Much as I’d been when I had Ben under my care at the last temple. I didn’t see you for everything you are, even when you stood before me, demanding that I look closer. I see you now.

His eyes focus again, twin blue orbs fixated on her. I’m not dead, Rey – not in the true sense of the word. I am simply at one with the Force, part of the greater web. And being a part of the Force lends me a certain insight into its workings. Workings that, of late, seem to revolve around you. He smiles dryly. The Mortis monolith opened for you because it recognised itself in you. The planet is a conduit of the living Force, and it cries out to be balanced. You, likewise, are one half of a whole, the piece that completes the puzzle. I’m sure you’ve realised by now that my nephew is the other half. But it’s more than that.

You were created to balance each other, Luke continues, his brow furrowing as his gaze intensifies. When Ben was younger, when I could still convince him to confide in me or Leia or Han, he used to speak of a girl, silhouetted in white, who sometimes appeared in his dreams. But there are ten years between you; you could not have been born yet when these visions were happening. Conversely, you told me at the temple that you had been dreaming of my island for years – years before it was even conceivable for you to know such a place existed. Your scope of the universe was limited to the harsh, hot days and sunburnt dunes of the desert. But through Ben’s memories, you dreamed of an island in the heart of the ocean...

Rey listens to all of this, and her cheeks are wet, her eyelashes damp with tears. She’s not making any effort to stop them from falling now; unable to move as Luke explains everything she’s needed to hear for so long. Where she fits in this cosmic chessboard. Her belonging.

And yet somehow, in a bone-deep, incomprehensible way, she already knew.

The bond between you transcends time and space – you could even say that it is stitched together by the continuum itself. It existed long before you were even born. It is a product of the cosmic Force, the divine will of the universe. That force awakened when your minds touched, when you discovered your power through Ben’s memories. You are the symbol of light and hope for the galaxy, but not because you’re a Jedi. You are far more than that. You are an instrument of the cosmic Force itself.

Rey’s eyebrows knit together in confusion. ‘What do you mean by the cosmic Force?’

A spark catches in Luke’s eye, a hint of the old sense of humour. My master, or indeed my master’s master, could have given you a better explanation. But I will do my best. Do you remember my first lesson to you on Ach-To, and what I explained to you about the ways of the Force?

A sad smile flits across Rey’s face then, remembering his words. The Force is not a power you have. It’s not about lifting rocks. She’d gone on to do exactly that, lifting a rockslide to free the Resistance from the salt mines of Crait. Sweet irony. It’s the energy between all things – a tension, a balance. It binds the universe together.

Luke smiles encouragingly at her, as though he’s reading her every thought. When you reached out with your feelings that day, you connected with the living Force. The sentient component, the life energy that exists in and is generated by all living creatures. But beyond the living force, there is the
cosmic component – the will of the universe, the alchemical energy that binds the stars. When a being dies, its energy transfers into the cosmic force, and it becomes one with it, as I have. The cosmic Force in turn uses that energy to rejuvenate the living Force, creating new life. Think of it as a wheel, endlessly spinning. Death and destruction, birth and creation. It’s a cycle. One that you and Ben are at the heart of. The universe planned for you, much as it did for my father, I know that now. But instead of creating a Chosen One, leaving the burden of balancing both dark and light up to one person... this time, the universe has created two. A sun, to outshine the moon. A dawn, to filter out the dusk. The embodiment of light, to balance the embodiment of darkness. Children of the universe.

Rey shakes her head again, frantically now, tears leaving silver trails on her cheeks. ‘I don’t understand. I – I can’t be all that. I have darkness in me, too.’ She looks at him pleadingly. ‘You know me - you saw it in me - and you were afraid. How can I be the embodiment of light when I feel what I shouldn’t? I thought that anger, that hate, that love was all part of the dark side. How can I be the light when I –’

She cuts herself off with a gasp.

Luke stares at her, hard. When you’re what?

‘When I’m in love with him,’ she whispers, and she crumbles to her knees on the cold stone floor. ‘I love him, even if he’s dark. Maybe because he is. I don’t know. It’s all so messed up. But it’s not the light.’

Except it is, Luke says simply, and his eyes have gentled now, his teal outline becoming fuzzy. Because he’s your equal in the dark, and he’s a part of you. You carry a piece of him with you, everywhere you go. Light will always have a small amount of darkness, and darkness will always have a small amount of light, if they can learn to coexist. Like the sun and the moon, one is always falling for the other, fading away to let the stars between them shine. He smiles, and his timeworn face is entirely open, honest. Rey, let me tell you something. The place where I exist now, like so many Jedi before me, is a temporal space outside the constraints of time - beyond the labels of past, present and future. I have seen every possible future the galaxy, and you, can have. I’ve seen for myself what it looks like if you do achieve balance - and I can tell you it’s more beautiful than anything you could possibly imagine.

Rey thinks of the vision she’d had the first time they’d reached for each other, with earnest hands and lonely hearts – the serenity, the belonging, the energy they’d recognised in each other.

She remembers the cave, the tiny handprint through the looking glass, the surprise of the child. A glimpse at their shared future, tantalizing, terrifying.

As she kneels on the engraved stone, the evening sky overhead wheels and shifts, a kaleidoscope of colour, and the gold dots on the symbol begin to shine, becoming a reflection of the stars above as Rey looks up at her mentor on bended knee, beseeching.

‘Show me what you saw. Please.’

No, Rey. I can’t break the laws of time. I can’t show you the future. You have to choose it, and shape it, it for yourself.

‘Then why?’ she asks urgently, her face creasing with anguish. ‘Why would Mortis bring us here if nothing’s going to change? If we don’t get to learn how to balance the Force? We’ve tried – it just keeps tearing us apart, over and over.’ She wipes angrily at the tears that are forming in her eyes again. ‘We want different things.’
Luke smiles indulgently, his blue-outlined edges turning silver, blurring and distorting as his ghost shimmers like star-sap before her eyes. Amazing. Everything you just said was wrong.

Chapter End Notes

HOW ABOUT THOSE NOVELISATION LEAKS, HUH??

For those that don't know, there was a segment on one of the Star Wars subreddits that gave away some spoilers for The Last Jedi's novelisation. One of them, the one that I've deemed most important to the plot line of this story, is that when Luke reconnects with the Force on Ach-To, he discovers that Rey is "an instrument of the will of the cosmic Force." I've changed some of the details surrounding that discovery, and what it means, in this fic, but the sentiment remains the same. You can find the leaks I'm talking about here: https://www.reddit.com/r/StarWarsLeaks/comments/7zz0ta/tlj_novel_tidbits_part_2/

The Cosmic Force is a different thing than the living Force, or the unifying Force, for that matter. You can read about it here: http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Cosmic_Force/Legends

Also, for anyone interested in Mortis, I've found this INCREDIBLE trilogy of YouTube videos the other day that perfectly sum up the Mortis Arc and how it could relate to Reylo. I'm pretty convinced now that Mortis will play a part in IX. You can find the videos here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLeZ8dL5j6A

Basically, THE UNIVERSE ITSELF PLANNED FOR HER AND BEN I CAN'T DEAL WITH THIS ANGUISH.

Anyway, sorry for the time in-between updates - there's only a couple of chapters left and I've been mulling them over extensively, if there's one thing I want to get right it's the story's ending. Gotta make it meaningful. Hope you guys enjoy this chapter!
Chapter Forty-Eight

Ben is awake. And he is bleeding.

Thick, dark blood oozes from his nose and mouth, and when he rolls over, gets to his knees and spits onto the ground, that too is awash with sticky red.

He wipes his mouth, wincing at the sting of his bottom lip. It must have split open, or he’d bitten through it when he’d hit the ground with Rey, the emergency parachute failing them as they’d plummeted to earth, the back of her skull cracking against his face with enough force to splinter bone. He thinks the blow might have broken his nose; it’s haemorrhaging blood like a burst artery. He uses his sleeve to try to staunch the flow, blood soaking through the fabric in seconds, mingling with the blood that’s already caked on his hands and arms.

He pinches the bridge of his nose, gingerly, trying to feel whether it’s indeed broken, but the bones are still aligned. Just bruised, then. Like everything else.

He is a bruise, throbbing and blood-blackened, an ugly blemish on the skin of this strange planet. A reminder of violence. A wound in the Force.

Child of darkness. Come closer. Come to me.

That voice. The one that had brought him out of unconsciousness, issuing from somewhere unseen in this hellscape. Still on his knees, Ben turns his head from left to right, assessing his surroundings, what he can see through the whirling crumbs of ash, in the fingers of flame that twist up the sides of the chamber like hungry things.

‘Rey?’ he coughs, particles of ash swirling in the air in front of him. No answer. He can’t feel her presence, either.

Where the fuck is she? Did she leave him behind?

No. Impossible. She wouldn’t.

Would she?

Where am I?
He looks down. He’s kneeling on a shelf of igneous rock, bubbled and warped with heat in places,smoothed over with melted obsidian in others. As he presses his bloodied hands to the rock,ostensibly to push himself to his feet, a pattern takes shape, fissures in the rock filling with gold lightat his touch.

It’s a symbol, glowing yellow, with a cluster of bubbles, grown together in the centre, exploding outward into a starburst with multiple points of light, sharp enough to draw blood. Facets.


He twists, searching for the owner of the voice, looking up and seeing the veins of magma carved into the walls, and above that, the opening of a well, inlaid with more orange tracery. This place is reminiscent of Mustafar, but without the towering steel structures. Instead, it speaks of primordial magic, predating Mustafar and all other man-made constructs. Sparks fly as the lava flows up the sides of the well in thick streams, defying gravity, and it’s this that makes him realise he’s looking up from the bottom.

But how in hell did he get down here?

He doesn’t remember waking up, doesn’t remember walking to this place. So unless he tripped and fell in, magically missing the pools of lava; or climbed all the way down this well in some kind of fugue state – possible, but unlikely – someone must have brought him here. But who?

He rises to his full height, brushing cinders from his shoulders. That voice. It’s familiar, yet not. It’s saying things he hasn’t heard said in years, not since he was a child, when the first voices first started to sidle into his mind, only at certain times of night, when he’d lie awake until the early hours, disobeying his mother’s repeated orders to go to sleep.

His mother.

It takes all his strength to stay standing. Horror rips through him like scalpels, a ruthless vivisection as the sudden remembrance takes his breath away, cuts him to the bone.

*Mother. Leia. Gone.* Shot out into the freezing blankness of space to die, to die slowly, from a combination of oxygen loss and solar radiation. Even now, when it can only be sympathy pain, he feels it, the radiation eating at his skin, polluting his lungs, deprived of air, freezing, refusing to expand-

No. No! I never had a chance to-

No, he realises. *She* never did. He never gave her that chance, rebuffed her attempts to make amends at every turn. And now it’s too late. Out of chances. His mother, who only moments before had been so animated, so full of dreams and hopes and acerbic words, is now – nothing.

Ben thinks of a pair of sabaac dice, their solid weight melting into nothingness in his gloved hand,disappearing along with his last connection to the Light. Alone in the galaxy. An orphan.

The tears come, hot and relentless and hurting his eyes along with the wafts of acrid smoke filling this hell of his own creation. This is pain beyond all meaning, a splitting of the soul. He will never be the same.

He failed to save the Seven Light. He murdered his family. Rey is gone. He’s alone, and it is *all* his fault.

If he were anything resembling honourable, he would die now. There’s no coming back from this.
He’s destroyed too many things, hurt too many people. All that’s left is to dismantle himself, unmake the boy who has been moulded so wrongly, turned into something twisted, stunted, cruel – shaped by his own hands and by those of others stronger than him.

*I am a monster.*

Ben gasps for breath, tears streaming down his cheeks, trying to separate himself from the phantom pain, the sublimation of her life energy, matter transformed into starlight...

He can’t breathe.

He’s slipping into a blind panic, and Ben reaches out, fumbling for the Force to tether himself, to release some of this awful energy so he doesn’t completely implode, layers compressing into stardust and collapsing into a singularity, becoming a black hole that no light can outlast.

The Force is unbalanced here. Darkness reigns, the bright points he’d normally see in the web reduced to mere pinpricks in this lightless pit. Once, that would have been a source of comfort – the more darkness existed in the Force, the easier it was to drown himself in it, to douse his inner light, to forget he was ever anyone else than Kylo Ren, son of darkness and darkness only. The Dark had a melody, a *hush-hush* kind of lullaby that would soothe him to sleep.

Now it is silent. And it only frightens him. A starless, limitless existence. No light. No conflict. Only power. Something he’d once craved, but now abhors.

A voice ebbs from the depths of the lava pit, breaking the silence. That same voice he’d heard before, but where before it enticed, now it mocks, the air in front of him shimmering with heat and malice.

*You deserve to die for what you’ve done.*

*Coward. Fool.*

His tears are flowing openly, salt stinging the cut on his lip as he shakes his head wildly, hair flopping into his eyes. No, he’s not a coward, he killed-

*You killed your own father to cement your place in the dark. Instead, it made you weak, sentimental. Your soft heart was always your greatest defect.* The rasping, distorted voice issues from the pools of magma, and Ben cries out as a black figure rises from the pit, revolving in place before stalking towards him, cloaked in shadow, reeking of corruption and death. He can’t make out the figure’s face, it’s more of a silhouette, but the voice is vaguely familiar.

‘What dark side sorcery is this?’ he hisses, drawing his lightsaber.

The shadow extends a hand before he can ignite it, and invisible fingers close around his windpipe. Ben drops the saber hilt and collapses onto his knees, clawing at his throat, the breath wrung from his lungs.

*You were too weak to lead the Knights of Ren. They lie dead because of you.*

Ben chokes, unable to draw breath, his lips turning blue, as the unknowable figure throttles him from a distance, hand splayed and fingers pinched together, crushing. Ben thinks of drowning, of sinking in a black, glassy lake, dark spots opening in his vision, *blacking out*-

If he drowns, it will be the end of him.
Save me.

The fingers inch back apart, and he gasps and coughs, bracing his hands against the rock face, fighting his mind as it begs to slip back into unconsciousness. This being is strong, too strong, consumed with Dark. What are you? he wants to scream at it, but the words refuse to come.

You hoped the dark would make you whole. Shape your jagged edges into something smooth, something beautiful. A weapon. But you have always been broken. Damaged beyond all hope of fixing. The voice becomes truly spiteful, spitting its venom at him as it speaks from an unseen mouth, its two-dimensional cutout striding forward, its cape hewn of smoke and shadow, swirling over the rock. Even the girl sees it. You were never worth saving. Piteous darklight creature. Tainted by evil. You can never be anything more than a monster.

His fingernails scrape against the rock as the figure directs a pulse of Dark energy at him, the Force around him churning, unstable as Ben clenches his teeth, forcing himself to speak, to resist this shadow that’s giving voice to all his fears – ‘Shut up.’

The shadow laughs, a high-pitched, breathless laugh he knows all too well. And before he can put a name to it, to this demonic entity, its outline morphs, shrinking to fit the shape of someone he knows even better.

He’s right, you know.

Rey.

You’re pathetic, her voice sneers, and her disgust for him is like shards of glass, splintering and burying themselves under his skin. How could you ever think I would want you? That I would see you as anything more than something to be reviled, to be pitied? You think you’re Vader’s legacy? You’re nothing.

He closes his eyes, breathing raggedly, the shards cutting deeper, slicing his resolve to ribbons as he remembers the hatred in her eyes, the way she’d looked at him in the forest, like he was less than human. You’re a monster!

She loathed him all along.

The shadow flutters, folding and unfolding like an origami shape before him, embers catching fire around it, switching effortlessly between forms as a thousand voices fill the pit, ringing in his head, a deafening refrain.

Child in a mask.

Disappointment.

You’re sick!

You have compassion for her.

You’re afraid.

You’re a monster!

Your emotions have made you weak.

You don’t have to do this.
He fists his hands in his hair, tearing out a fistful of black strands. *Make it stop!*

*I hate you!*

*Murderous snake!*  
*You’re a stranger.*  
*Psychopath!*

*Just like your father.*

*The Resistance will not be intimidated by you!*

*When he gets what he wants, he’ll crush you.*

*How could you?*

**Ben!**  

‘Shut up!’ he screams. ‘Shut up, shut up, shut up!’

His lightsaber hilt is still on the floor. He could pick it up, ignite it, hack at this shade until it disappears, but it would be futile. There’s nothing here to destroy.

*Just you.*

Ben is panting, half-sobbing, as the voices slowly peel back, leaving just that one. The initial one.

It’s his voice.

It was always his voice.

*It’s what you deserve.*

Slowly, sweetly, its black metal coat gleaming in the lava-light, the saber hilt begins to turn before his eyes.

*You’ve wanted this for so long.*

The saber spins, just as it had done when he’d double-crossed Snoke. And it’s as if he’s both inside and outside himself, watching from above as the emitter end comes to rest, facing him.

*Justice for what you’ve done.*

Wide-eyed, he wraps his fingers around the saber, taking it off the ground. You should never point a lightsaber at something you don’t want to kill; Ben knows that better than anyone. It was one of the first lessons in responsibly handling such a weapon. But it isn’t turned on.

All it would take is the press of a switch.

He blinks, dazed, and memories burn like lens flares across the backs of his eyelids.

*For the family who tried to help you.*

Leia, running into his bedroom to calm him, those times that he’d scream so loud the pictures on the apartment walls would shake, the duality of the Force inside him too big for his body, ripping his
skin apart, throwing her arms around him, *shhh, shhh, sweetheart, it’s okay*, while his father would ignore his meltdowns and dream of *marauding through the galaxy again, free of him...*

*For the friends you turned your back on.*

The padawans at the Jedi Temple. Sorcha with her rat-tail braid, swatting at a white-robed Traea with the end of a duelling stick, Ben, having been coaxed from his hut, watching them joust and letting out a rare laugh; the nights by the campfire, the air full of woodsmoke and glitterbugs and the fleeting moments of happiness they got to live as children before *his darkness forced them to choose a side...*

*For the girl who deserves more than your darkness.*

Rey. Her tear-silvered cheeks when she’d faced him in the ice forest, then again in their shared moments through the bond. *He* put that hurt expression on her face, the agony in her eyes. It wasn’t easy for her to choose him, he knew that. Whatever feelings she harboured for him were like the light itself, *just a glimpse in the darkness, never meant to last.*

*She will be free of you. They will all be free of you. And you will be free of this torment. Isn’t that what you wanted?*

*Yes. Yes, he’d wanted it. In the years before he became Kylo Ren, when he’d tell himself his family were afraid of him, that’s why they never visited; that he was a freak, an outcast, possibly insane - and then the voice would whisper in his ear, or he’d catch sight of himself in the mirror, and he’d know it was true. And after, on restless nights aboard a Star Destroyer, exhausted from fighting the the pull to the Light, bones bruised and skin blistered from Snoke’s punishments, he’d even gotten as far as planning a date. After killing his father, certainly he’d been tempted; he would have done anything to forget that. Opening the airlock and stepping out into the abyss; going into battle defenceless, using only his fists; swallowing poison or pills. *Suicide.* And when Rey had bested him on Starkiller Base, the saber that should have been his carving a burning slash up his face and neck, landing him on his back in the snow, he’d almost begged her to finish him off. But those were just thoughts, fluid and fleeting, passing in a fistful of heartbeats, wishing himself out of existence for a moment that never lasted. Underneath it all...*

‘No,’ he whispers, shaking his head, quivering uncontrollably as tears flow freely over his cheeks. ‘I didn’t want this. I didn’t want to kill...’

*My father.*

*My mother.*

*Me.*

*But you did,* the voice tells him, and now there is a note of sweetness in his voice, syrupiness as deadly as cyanide. *It’s past time you atoned for your sins, instead of running and hiding behind a mask.*

The nightcrawler’s fingers flex again, and Ben is rendered immobile, as easily and totally as if he’d been dipped in carbonite. Only the hand with the lightsaber continues to move, positioning itself until it its emitter end is placed over the spot his heart should be.

*The choice is yours to make. Die now and save yourself. Or continue to live, like the weak, selfish, contemptible creature you are.*

He shuts his eyes, tears still seeping out from under the closed lids. He *is* selfish. He *is* weak. He
deserves nothing less than contempt, than revulsion, from Rey and everyone else.

*But I don’t want to die.*

Finally, finally, he understands.

Only he can save Ben Solo.

The lightsaber clatters onto the rock shelf, unlit.

*You fool!* the shade hisses, insubstantial form coalescing with anger. *You will burn.*

It rushes at him, spirit and shadow, and Ben lifts a hand to repel it, drawing its attention.

His other hand Force-pulls the saber hilt.

It jumps into his hand, eagerly, an old friend.

Ben Solo ignites the lightsaber through the middle of the shadow and slices upward.

The shadow cleaves in two, dissolving into dark matter, molecules separating and flying apart.

Ben holds the crackling saber aloft, in a gesture that could be mistaken for triumph. But his heart has never felt heavier.

He wheels around at the sound of clapping behind him.

*Holy crap. That... was wizard.*

A semi-transparent, dark-robed figure is standing in front of him, the antithesis of a shadow, its edges outlined with sky-blue. Ben blinks once, twice, as the figure shakes out its sleeves and laughs at him, entirely careless.

*Strange way to say hello, but hey, I’ll take it,* he grins, indicating towards Ben’s saber, still lit and pointing in the Force ghost’s direction. For that’s what this entity is, a Force ghost, a *real* Force ghost, standing in front of him and bantering with him as if they were long-lost friends. Ben desperately searches for its Force signature, scared it’s another dark-side apparition about to turn on him. But the energy coming off this spectre is anything but evil.

*Damn,* the ghost continues, raising his eyebrows. *You know, they told me we looked alike, but I have to say, I don’t see it. Might have something to do with the blood –* he gestures to his face, artlessly handsome – *it’s kind of all over you.*

Ben stares at him, the image of this person solidifying itself in his mind, connecting the mental jigsaw pieces of *lookalike* and *Jedi robes* and *charisma* –

*Oh.*

‘Anakin,’ he breathes, watery eyes opening wide to take in this impossible sight. His thumb slips off the lightsaber’s switch. *‘Grandfather.’*

The ghost of his ancestor grins at him. *I’m not even gonna ask how you found your way down here. If you’re anything like me, this place would have called to you the second you landed. But Ben-* his face drops, becoming serious – *you can’t stay here too long. This well will chew you up and spit you out. It’s the place on Mortis where the dark side is most concentrated.*
‘Oh?’ Ben challenges, dredging up the barest hint of obstinacy, to cover up the pure surprise that’s running through him like a live wire, threatening to shock him into speechlessness in front of this person he’s longed to talk to for forever. ‘Then what are you doing down here?’

Anakin spreads his arms grandly, smiling for all the world – or rather, just the two of them in this firepit – to see. You might say I have a certain affinity for dark things. I spent half my life being one. His smile fades. All jokes aside, though - I remember what it was like when I was here, back when I was still a lowly apprentice. This place is, to put it bluntly, a shithole. One you should escape as soon as possible.

Ben frowns, trying to process this amongst all the other craziness that’s happened. ‘What was that – that thing?’


The ghost beckons, and Ben obeys, following its spectral form to a series of spiralling steps cut into the side of the well, camouflaged so well against the onyx rock face that they’re almost invisible. He trails the fallen Jedi up the staircase, not daring to look down in case vertigo takes him and sends him toppling into the magma core. Only when they’re at the top, standing at the mouth of the well, the volcanic rock giving way to lush grass, does Ben look back down at the literal fiery hell from which he just emerged. He’s panting; his face still coated with tears and dried blood, and he wipes at the congealed mess as he turns to Anakin’s ghost, looking at him hungrily, memorizing the details of his face, this person he’d only seen in holo-recordings up till now.

Anakin Skywalker’s ghost has a youthful look, possibly even younger in death than Ben is in life. He has a mop of wavy, shoulder-length sand-coloured curls and a roguish slant to his eyebrows. He’s tall, but not as tall as him, and less broad, more wiry. He smirks as Ben gives him the once-over, and somehow, that incenses him.

‘Why didn’t you come sooner?’ he bursts out, and he sounds so ungrateful, so petulant, but he can’t help it, it’s a question that’s been on his lips for what feels like a decade.

The ghost quirks an eyebrow, and Ben can tell he wants to come back with something pithy, but he reins himself in. Barely. Because you didn’t want me.

His mouth drops open. ‘Didn’t – I didn’t-?’ Ben blusters, his face turning red. ‘I tried to talk to you every night!’

No, the ghost says in a tone of exceeding patience, you didn’t. You wanted Darth Vader, not Anakin Skywalker. You wanted the man in the mask. If I’d shown up, you wouldn’t have had a clue who I was. You weren’t ready for the truth.

‘No?’ Ben challenges, his jaw clenching, temper simmering. ‘So what is the truth, then? That Darth Vader was just another former Jedi? That you fell to the dark side through trying to save your wife? That I was trying to emulate someone who was the exact opposite of what I should have been trying to become? Because all of that information would have been helpful about seven fucking years ago!’

But would you have believed it? the ghost bites back at him. If I’d rocked up out of the blue and told you all that, would you have listened? Search your feelings carefully, now. I’ll know if you lie. He taps his forehead, a sardonic smile on his face. Omniscience, you know. It’s a perk.

A muscle in his jaw spasms, and he unclenches his teeth, letting out a trapped breath. ‘No,’ he
admits, grudgingly. ‘I would have thought it was just another trick of the light.’

The ghost bows his head. *Like I said, you weren’t ready then. But now – that’s a different story. You know about me, and who I was before I became the creature in a mask. But you don’t know everything.*

‘Then tell me,’ Ben says urgently. ‘Tell me everything.’

The ghost studies his face for a long moment, then nods. *I was born a slave, on the desert planet Tatooine. I had a mother, Shmi, who I adored, but no father. I found out when I was still a youngling that I was born not of man and woman, but of the Force, and that a hefty burden had been placed on my shoulders. I was the Chosen One, conceived as the result of a prophecy, destined to bring balance to the galaxy through being the perfect mix of light and darkness. He smiles forlornly. And then I fell in love.*

‘Padme,’ Ben murmurs, and the ghost’s eyes glisten, either with tears or with memory, he doesn’t look close enough to know.

*She was so far out of my league, she might as well have existed in a separate universe. Gorgeous, clever and brave, so much braver than I could ever dream of being. Hell, she survived a few assassination attempts without batting an eyelash. I was just a kid when I met her, but damn, I fell hard. And then, of course, by the time I saw her again and was old enough to pursue her, I’d gone and pledged myself to the Jedi Order. My master, Obi-Wan Kenobi, was constantly drilling it into me that attachment, that passion, was forbidden by the Jedi code, but I found ways around it. I was always good at that, at bending the rules. I told myself that what I felt for her was just compassion, that I was encouraged to feel that way. He rolls his eyes. Yeah, it was love. And for reasons I never figured out, she felt the same way about me. After the Geonosis disaster, we got married in secret, and she fell pregnant. We were going to run away together…. his eyes take on a faraway look, his blue edges fading, but then he shakes his head, bringing himself back to reality. It wasn’t to be. I had visions of her dying, screaming, in terrible agony, and I let them take root in my heart. I was desperate to stop her from dying, at any cost. I’d already lost enough. His mouth sets in a harsh line. I’d lost my mother after another one of those visions. I couldn’t lose her, too. I loved her. But that’s the thing about love. He looks up at Ben, his eyes hard as flint. It makes you a target. Something to be manipulated. You’ve got a soft spot that people stronger than you can exploit. I’m sure you’re all too familiar with that. A Sith Lord named Darth Sidious exploited me in such a way. He told me that Padme would die unless I learned a specific brand of power, a power that could save her. Power that I could only get from tapping into the Dark side of the Force, something completely at odds with the Jedi way. But, much like you, I was strong with the Dark side, and I would have done anything to save Padme.*

Anakin stares down the mouth of the well, contemplative as he speaks. *But, like most Force-sent visions, when you try to cheat destiny – you make it so. In the end, the pull to the Dark became too strong, and I was consumed. Addicted to power. I did terrible, terrible things, Ben, things that spun the galaxy off its axis. And the most terrible thing of all – I caused the death of my wife. My love. The mother of my children. And I never forgave myself for that. Until my son walked into my world and told me I could still be redeemed.*

*A smile plays at the corners of his mouth. Is this starting to sound familiar? Good. My story bears many similarities to yours. But I hope you realise, after what you saw in this pit – he gestures disdainfully at the lip of the wellspring – that you will not be the new Vader. You are far better than that. You still have a chance to atone, before it’s too late.*

Ben narrows his eyes, distrustful. ‘How, exactly, do I do that?’
Anakin smiles enigmatically. *You’ve already started. Every choice you make sends you further down that path. You just have to keep making them. Choose balance. Choose redemption.*

Ben glowers at him. Trust a Skywalker to be cryptic to a fault. ‘You realise how unhelpful that is, right?’

The Force ghost rolls his eyes, as if Ben is the one not making sense. *Listen, kid. This planet - it’s a special place, more connected to the Force than anywhere else in the universe. The planet *is* the Force, in a way, and if you can balance it, you can control it. When I came here, I was young, hot-headed, with infinite potential and precious little life experience. And a hell of a lot of guilt. Guilt for failing to save my mother, for keeping my love for Padme a secret, and for not telling my master of the visions I'd been having of a future, steeped in darkness. An ancient Force-wielder, the father of the mythic Ones, brought me to his monastery, tested my strength, and told me something that stuck with me: that balance could be found in the one who faced his guilt.

*You’ve already started to face your guilt, Ben. You proved that in the pit, when you overcame the compulsion to self-destruct. Now, you need to move to the next stage. Just like me, you were made to restore balance to the Force. But this time, you’re not alone.*

At the words, his thoughts circle back to Rey, to the promise they’d made to each other that lonely night on the *Supremacy*. When they’d connected across countless stars, two beings with the weight of worlds on their shoulders, and changed each other’s lives.

*The girl,* Anakin interrupts. *You already know what she is.*

Ben nods, slowly, considering the concepts. Fate. Destiny. The Force. All three are tangled up with Rey, a series of kite strings he couldn’t begin to unravel even if he wanted to. He reaches out to the Force and the bond blossoms at the back of his mind, a soft glow, that reassuring light, and he almost smiles. Fuck whatever the *thing* in the pit tried to make him believe. No matter if they’re on the same damn planet or fifty star systems apart, they’ll never be alone again. She’s his. And he’s hers.

*Then you know that for every shadow, there must be a light to draw it out of hiding. She’s yours. And together, you will bring peace. Go to her. And Ben? A sudden grin flares across his grandfather’s face, and the Force ghost cocks an eyebrow. Try not to screw it up this time. That last attempt at a proposal was cringe-worthy.*
Chapter Forty-Nine

It’s almost time.

Luke tilts his head back, looking up at the evening sky. Rey follows his gaze.

Above them, beyond the web of stars and the glistening darkness, they can see shockwaves rippling out over the layers of the atmosphere, mirage after shimmering mirage, heaving spills of sudden light, caused by the bombardment of the First Order’s Dreadnoughts, turbo-lasers firing against the monolith. Evidently, they’re beginning to breach it.

She looks back at Luke, worriedly. ‘Can they actually break through?’

Not if the will of the Force has anything to contribute.

Rey huffs in annoyance. ‘That’s comforting, thanks.’

Luke smiles at her mysteriously. You exert your own will over the Force, as well, you know. If you don’t want the barrier to fall, then it won’t. If you want the First Order to disappear, then they will. If you want to save your friends, trust in the Force that they’ll be saved. The Force always finds a way. You know that pretty well by now.

His edges are fading, arcing colours playing over his silhouette again. He’s on the verge of disappearing, and Rey panics.

‘No, don’t go! I don’t want-’ she cries, but Luke’s Force ghost is dissolving with the moonbeams.

Just let go. Trust in the Force, and in you.

‘Damn it!’ And he’s gone. It’s all up to her now; he’d made that much clear. Her and Ben.

Where is he? Maybe Luke went to fetch him, she thinks with a little snort. Ben would love that.

So, great. He’s gone, and his guidance with it. It is, apparently, her will against the might of an army. Rey throws her hands up in the air in frustration, chancing a quick glance at the sky again before crossing the stone courtyard.

It seems much bigger and more intimidating without Luke’s company, the gold circles inlaid in the stone seeming like a thousand glowing eyes, following her as she treads over to the left side of the arena, to the statue that Luke had fiddled with before. The half-griffin sculpture, its spread wings impregnated with veins of gold and mother-of-pearl, with an inscription carved in the stone at its feet. Rey squats to read it.

‘Daughter.’

She blinks, confused but intrigued, reaching out to trace the engraving with a fingertip - and then reels back as a sound like a gong being struck echoes out from the sky above, so loud it makes her
eardrums quiver, and Rey claps her hands over her ears, trying to protect them. She cranes her neck to look up, and sees that more light is leaking into the night sky, the sea of stars shot through with a band of incandescent white. The monolith is being forced open with each successive cannon blast. This is bad. She doesn’t have time to waste inspecting statues and solving mysteries.

Where the kriff is Ben?

She closes her eyes, keeping her hands pressed over her ears, cutting off her senses one by one as she tries to centre herself in the Force. It takes a few attempts, with her ears aching and her heartbeat racing like a runaway train, but eventually she lets go and succumbs to the rhythm of it, the fluctuating patterns of light and dark that move across Mortis like a study in chiaroscuro. She delves deeper, following that link between their minds, the bright thread...

The bond sings, his mind answering hers, his Force signature appearing in her awareness, and Rey feels a heady rush of relief.

The relief quickly turns to confusion when she examines his Force signature. Normally oozing with darkness, cut with pinpricks of light, it now coalesces toward something paler, softer – almost grey.

She does a double take, and when she hones in again, the darkness is back, phasing over the grey in a series of lunate eclipses.

What was that? Yet more proof of Mortis’s influence? Rey shakes her head, choosing to turn her attention to herself, examining her own aura in the Force as she waits for Ben to find her, drawn by the same fated string she’d followed to locate him.

That beautiful, siren-like song resonates in her mind as she identifies her signature in the Force, brushing over the tendrils of lustrous white. Mortis is speaking to her, she knows that now, but she doesn’t know the language, can’t decipher the melodies.

As she thinks that, the song changes, the harmony ebbing, becoming the hum of several disparate voices, as old and unsteady as time itself. She strains to listen, taking her hands away from her ears.

Two halves of a whole...

Life... death... that breeds new life...

Light... darkness...

Selfish... selfless...

A balance...

Eventides....

Nearing death....

Nascent life...

Rey gasps as her stomach flutters, a sharp tugging deep inside her, and she frowns, gritting her teeth and refocusing on the Force and what the voices are trying to tell her. But she lost the thread of the conversation, and there’s only silence, a deep, spreading silence that persists until the bond blooms at the back of her mind, a rare flower, and she’s drawn into Ben’s mind, seeing through his eyes for a brief moment as he climbs the steps of a monastery, slate-grey and topped with spires, a glossy blue rhombus floating above the tip of the pinnacle.
Her eyes snap open just as he appears in the courtyard before her, and there’s a weird moment where his vision is superimposed over hers, so that she can see herself and him at once – her kneeling next to the half-griffin statue, him standing at the edge of the arena, caked in – is that blood?

She blinks and her vision’s back to normal as Ben walks towards her, and yes, it’s definitely blood. But she makes herself look past that, past the stains on his face, to his eyes, burning black, but not with rage or misery or even lust.

Like twin phoénixes risen from the ashes of the afterlife, they approach each other, stopping in the centre of the courtyard, toes touching the rim of the golden disc underneath their feet. Rey looks down at it, suddenly shy, and sees Ben’s feet are planted firmly atop the black side of the emblem. Hers are on the white.

The golden dotwork begins to glow again, slightly, just out of the corner of her eye.

‘Where did you go?’ she asks, her gaze flicking back up to his. She studies his face – his lip’s split and bloodied, there’s an enormous, purpling bruise forming under the hollows of his eyes, his hair is mussed and sticking out in about twelve different directions, but he’s alive. He’s alive and he’s here and that’s everything to her in this moment. She wants to twist her fingers in his hair, to smooth it out and pull him close and kiss the blood from his lips. To make him better.

‘If I said hell, would you believe me?’ he inquires, eyes flicking up to hers, and Rey laughs, a little nervous, then realises he isn’t kidding.

‘Wait, seriously?’

‘Something similar, anyway.’ Ben amends, his gaze flitting away to scan the arena, the electric-blue fixtures and curlicued steel. Eventually, he turns his focus back to her, his dark eyes swimming with emotion. ‘I saw my grandfather there.’

Rey’s surprised, but she tries not to show it. She glances at the sky again – still marbled with veins of white – then back to Ben. ‘Did he talk to you?’

Ben inclines his head, dirty hair hanging over his face. Rey senses that’s all the answer she’s going to get out of him – that there are some things he can’t bring himself to speak about yet.

‘I – I saw someone too,’ she offers tentatively, then almost quails when Ben’s eyes snap to hers.

‘Who?’

‘Luke,’ she says softly, crossing her fingers behind her back that he won’t freak out at this crucial hour.

But Ben just smiles ironically. ‘And what falsehoods did he tell you this time?’

Luke’s words run on a loop through her mind.

*He’s a part of you...*

*A chosen two...*

*He used to dream of a girl, silhouetted in white...*

*You dreamed of an island in the heart of the ocean...*

And past those words, her words to him.
I love him. Even if he’s dark. Maybe because he is.

Rey smiles to herself. No falsehoods. Just hidden truths. She knows it’s true, knows it right to her marrow. They are one.

Ben looks at her, his brown eyes dark with that emotion she couldn’t name before. It’s an emotion, she realises with a stunning throb of lucidity, that she’s seen in his eyes a hundred times or more, ever since they went back-to-back against Snoke’s Praetorian guards.

Hope.

That gong strikes again overhead, as if to announce the witching hour, the sky sizzling with light as the monolith is cracked open further. They’re running out of time, Rey knows, and she feels a flutter of panic. Ben looks up at the bleached sky, frowning, and Rey steps closer, capturing his attention.

‘The monolith is cracking apart. We don’t have much time. Ben,’ she looks up at him, seeing the confusion writ plainly over his face, and her heart soars, despite the worry. This is everything she had meant to say before they were parted again, but couldn’t. Now, at what might be the end of everything, her heart demands it. She owes him this much.

‘Once upon a time, you offered me knowledge, but I didn’t want it, not from you.’ She shakes her head ruefully, stepping forward to stand atop the golden disc.

‘Then, you offered me the galaxy, but I never wanted that, either.’ She tilts her head to the side, a smile playing at the corners of her lips. She watches the expressions chase themselves over his face: confusion, hope, fear, yearning, and finally, a brief flash of amusement, picking up on her half-smile.

Rey raises her eyebrows for emphasis. ‘I didn’t want a crown, or a throne, or a kingdom of stars.’

Ben stares at her with incredible intensity. ‘What do you want, then?’ he breathes, and she can see, as brightly as a sun, that the fate of the Force rests upon on her answer.

Rey grins assuredly. ‘You, you moof-milker. I wanted you. And despite the fact that you’re quite possibly the most clueless man in the universe...’ she raises her hand, palm up, an offering, a proposal all on its own.

‘I love you, Ben. And right now, I really need you to help me save the world.’

--

‘Concentrate all fire below the opening,’ Hux raps out, watching avidly as the enormous rhomboid structure begins to part at its seam, flooded with white light as the turbo-lasers wedge it open, inch by inch. He thinks to himself that it’s fortunate the Unknown Regions are incapable of contacting the Core – if more systems adopted this method of shielding their planets, Starkiller Base might have had a harder job of obliterating Hosnian Prime.

Building a second weaponized planet is the next thing on his agenda, actually, underneath disembowelling and decapitating that treasonous piece of pond scum, Ren. How he escaped the brig, Hux has no idea, but he’d sent a team of troopers to inspect the cellblock he’d absconded from, and they’d reported seeing the broken bodies of the Knights of Ren strewn outside the doors. He should have known the traitorous slime would have no problem killing his own men in the end. Ren is defined by a lack of honour.

At least, if he never manages to capture him alive again, he’d been able to deal him that last blow. Shooting the wizened old princess and her queenly consort out of their spacecraft had been a dream
come true. He sighs happily, revelling in the moment, then makes himself focus anew on the rhombus, gaping wider, a flash of green visible to the naked eye.

--

‘Evade!’ Finn roars as he and Chewbacca sit back-to-back in the cramped TIE-fighter, Rose squeezed in next to Finn, barely on the seat but expertly controlling the TIE’s gearstick all the same, while Chewbacca guns down any fighters nearby on sight.

The good thing about flying a TIE fighter is that other TIE pilots expect you to be on their team. Chewbacca takes joy in friendly-firing on them, picking them off cleanly as they soar past the port side of the wrecked Star Destroyer, avoiding heat-seeker missiles from the Star-Eater’s cannons, Rose banking the TIE hard to the right to avoid a cross-stream of laser fire.

‘Tell the cruiser command that we’re coming back in a TIE,’ Rose orders, and Finn scrambles for the comm. But he’s stopped by the sight of a pile of crumpled silver debris outside the screen, as Rose swerves to miss the shorn-off side of a starship wing, covered in chrome.

‘Is that...?’ she whispers, as Finn cries out and Chewbacca moans, all of them realising in unison exactly what that wreckage represents.

*Leia.*

Finn grits his teeth. ‘Chewie, switch the gunner setting to mag-pulse. Make them hurt.’

--

In the cockpit of his X-wing, Poe rips his helmet off, tossing it aside, as his shoulders heave with sobs. Over the comm-link, Connix tries to comfort him, but he switches the broadcast off, resting his head on the dashboard as tears roll unchecked over his cheeks – she was a mother to him, *more* than a mother, she was a mentor and a princess and a comrade. All of that depth and history, gone at the pull of a trigger.

Above him, in his special port, BB-8 beeps quietly, sadly – an elegy for their lost commander. Poe forces himself to straighten his spine, to reposition his hand on the trigger of his cannons. If he goes down too, he does it with a backbone of steel, not bent over, broken and sobbing in his seat. He will be like General Organa, with her unflappable composure even in the darkest of times, when it seemed like the whole universe had conspired to make her life miserable.

That was the first thing Connix had said to him, after all, when she broke the news.

*She named you General.*

--

The sky above is split with fissures of light, sonic booms shivering through the atmosphere, and Ben is completely dumbstruck.

And if he could preserve this moment forever, crystallise it in amber, in its own self-contained infinity, he would – save these precious seconds of Rey telling him she loves him. But instead, the moment is a chrysalis, broken by the unfolding of a butterfly’s wing. An entire *flock* of butterflies take wing in his chest, and he’s suddenly afraid, because this is too good to be true, why would she confess her feelings *now*, it’s got to be some kind of trick, or maybe she’s just another illusion, a fantasy-
He shakes his head wildly, backing away a little, looking at her pleadingly. ‘You don’t mean that. You don’t – you don’t know what you’re choosing.’

Rey counters his every step, moving forward, keeping her hand outstretched. ‘I do. I really, really do. Ben.’ Her stare is hard as diamond, unbreakable even under the weight of mountains. But her expression is soft. ‘I’m choosing you.’

‘Why?’ It comes out like a gasp, like the first breath of air after resurfacing, like an infinity cupped in between two hands.

Like his entire world is about to change.

--

Rey, to her credit, doesn’t mock him for the question, the insecurity. She doesn’t have time for a proper explanation – the cracked sky above is proof of that - but she knows he needs something, that he won’t understand why she’s chosen him, when his whole life has been a succession of not being chosen.

‘You really want me to count the reasons why?’ Her eyes glitter. ‘Fair enough.’

‘One. Because you risked your life to save mine. Twice.’ She takes a step forward.

‘Two. Because you got under my skin with all your angst and your sarcasm and your hot-and-cold, and by the time I realised I could get rid of you, I didn’t want to anymore.’ Another step closer. Ben isn’t backing away. Her chin tilts up, eyes travelling over the jagged, pearly scar that runs from forehead to cheek, then under the collar of his shirt.

‘Three. Because I marked you. And, where I come from, that means you’re either my enemy, or my lover. Either way – it makes you mine.’ Rey lowers her hand to her side, keeping her gaze fixed on him, on those expressive brown eyes, the dawning understanding there. He’s always such an open book.

‘And four. Because our destinies have apparently always been tangled up with eachother’s, since before we were born. Luke told me that we’re the balance, instruments of the cosmic Force, something far greater than anything we can try to control. So we have to let go. Stop trying to control the Force, and let it control us. That’s how we stop the First Order. It’s how we survive.’

She doesn’t hold out her hand again. She trusts him to take it if he wants to.

There’s that metallic boom again, as more cannon-blasts strafe the monolith, cracking it wider, and Rey closes her eyes, streaks of light illuminating the backs of her eyelids as she imagines the sky starting to tear itself apart, stars shattering and falling to earth like comets, like rain.

*Fall with me.*

She doesn’t say it.

She doesn’t need to.

His hand closes around hers.

At the touch of their hands, the Force trembles and sings, the pluck of a harpsichord’s string, producing that unearthly, ecstatic music.
Ben pulls her close, his arms circling her. She wraps hers around him in turn.

Their bond blazes, the raw strength of their connection electrifying their minds. They sink into it, into a space beyond sound, beyond brilliance.

Two children of war embracing at the end of the world.

Underneath their feet, the swirled symbol fills with power, the yin-and-yang halves radiating their respective colours, and the dots, tiny little golden fires, project light around them, a constellation that’s all their own.

His mouth brushes the shell of her ear, and Rey hears him sigh, *I love you, too.*

They fall.

--

Poe pulls out of a mad tailspin, cooling his jets, when he sees it.

‘No way,’ he breathes, pupils as wide and reflective as mirrors, before he holds up a hand, shielding his eyes from the dazzling explosion of light.

The supernova.

--

The officers are in a flurry as Hux stalks back onto the command deck, snapping ‘What is it?’ as they hurriedly relay orders between the dreadnoughts and the Star-Eater.

‘Sir, there’s a developing situation—’

‘Move,’ Hux shoves the offending soldier aside, bustling up to the viewport, before he falls back with a cry, holding a hand up to his eyes, seared by brilliance.

Two stars have crashed together in the void of space, cores combining and collapsing inward into an eruption of light and heat, a spectral flare that’s blinding everybody in the near vicinity unwise enough to leave their eyes uncovered.

‘You pack of buffoons couldn’t have warned me about the supernova directly in my field of vision?’ Hux spits out, keeping his eyes covered as they water horribly.

‘But Sir, it’s not a supernova—’

‘Quiet!’ Hux barks, dabbing at his weeping eyes.

--

‘Holy shit!’ Finn yells as their entire cabin is illuminated with radiant light, the controls, Rose, everything whitening out in the haze of the star collision.

Rose is screaming beside him, her hands fumbling over his to get to the controls, and it takes Finn a few seconds to register what she’s saying.

‘-get away! It’s going to become a-’

--
‘An accelerated black hole,’ Lando says calmly, looking through his elegant pair of silver binoculars from the Bespin fleet’s flagship. ‘Mobilise everyone we have and get them far away from the mass as fast as possible. Why the hell the First Order isn’t running for their lives, I don’t know.’

--

They both feel it, the moment the stars collide, galaxies rewritten by this majestic clash of energies. Rey grips Ben tighter as he shakes uncontrollably, the power of the Force coursing through them like voltage, using his Dark and her Light, manifesting it into this galactic event, the fusion of polar opposites, the resulting, catastrophic explosion.

The Force is like millions of infinite strings, pulling and pushing, tangling stars, entwining hearts. She feels them vibrate and tremble as it enforces its celestial will, droplets sliding along the scale, her head full of singing, and suddenly-

Silence. Replaced with an endless roar, an absence of light, a devastating need to consume.

They’ve done it.

‘Hold on,’ Rey whispers to Ben, and his arms tighten around her, holding onto her like she’s the most precious of gemstones, like she’s everything.

--

Even with his eyes covered, Hux can tell when the cabin of their ship goes dark, the brilliant flare of light extinguished. And in place of it-

He takes his hand away, squinting with tear-filled eyes at the opening chasm, the maw of the abyss, devoid of light, its edges pulsating with dark, gelatinous matter.

The black hole.

‘How-’ he starts, but he’s cut off by the wailing of the Star-Eater’s alarms, activated by the new and unexpected gravitational pull, the walls of the ship beginning to rattle, to bend-

‘It’s sucking us down!’ an officer shrieks, punching buttons to broadcast a distress signal.

Hux stares open-mouthed as the black hole slowly becomes the universe, it’s all he can see as it draws them closer and closer, the refracting bands of dark and light inside it, a rainbow of colours skittering off its edges as it eats, bringing matter into its hungry mouth, a star-eating machine.

He thinks how ironic the name of their flagship is.

It’s the last thought that ever crosses Armitage Hux’s mind.

--

‘We have to get out of range!’ Rose screams as she fights with the TIE fighter’s controls, grappling with gravity to escape the pull of the black hole. Finn can see it behind them, a gaping, angry mass, warping space-time around it into deformed waves, particles streaming into its core.

Chewbacca bellows, and Rose cries as she burns out the ion coils, and this is it. This is the end.

--

Rey keeps her eyes closed, bathing in the light of their triumph, when she feels it. The desperate tug
of three threads, three people who are accidentally becoming tangled, trapped in a fate they weren’t meant to suffer.

Finn. Rose. Chewbacca.

Rey furrows her brow and intervenes, threading the strings through imaginary fingers, bending and shaping, twisting the Force to do her bidding. *Please. I have to save them.*

But it isn’t enough. She hears their voices crying out, desperate and afraid, as the black hole the Force has created begins to draw them past its event horizon, their spacecraft starting to cave in.

And then –

Another set of hands join hers, rearranging strings with deft, elegant fingers.

Together, they weave fate. Together, they rewrite the stars.

--

Chewbacca roars again, in surprise, as a golden bubble forms around their TIE, encasing it, repelling the black hole’s crushing energy. Finn lunges for the controls, pressing the hyperdrive button, and the viewport dissolves into gold-flecked star-lines, before rocketing them back into place, next to the Bespin fleet.

The radio crackles.

‘Pick up, kids. Are you okay in there?’

Rose flicks the switch to communicate, her voice shaky when she replies, ‘We’re okay. I think. Did you see that?’

--

‘Yeah, I saw it.’ Lando grins into the transciever. ‘I saw a goddamn miracle.’

The First Order’s fleet has disappeared into the black hole, their ships engulfed by the crushing darkness, their entire fleet obliterated in mere minutes. Like Icarus, they flew too close to the sun and paid the price. Lando shakes his head, amazed.

But it’s not over yet.

One of his advisors shouts and points, indicating the russet monolith that had until recently been the focus of the First Order’s bombardment, trying to force it open.

It’s opening now.

White light spills out over the chaos of space, cleansing and brightening, the monolith splitting in two, its halves dropping away to reveal a small planet in swirls of aquamarine, with two identical moons nestled at its side, revolving before his eyes.

--

‘It’s opened for us!’ Poe yells at Connix over the comm. ‘Let’s get down there.’

‘Are you sure that’s a good idea?’ the lieutenant’s anxious voice comes back at him.
‘Connix. We literally just won everything. Don’t be a buzzkill now.’ Poe tuts, grinning.

‘Fine. Just don’t make your first official act as General Dameron be leading us all into the mouth of a black hole, that’s all I ask,’ she huffs.

Poe thinks of what Leia would do in his position.

And smiles.

--

‘Rey!’ Finn cries, looking in wonder at the opening monolith, at the cluster of planetary bodies inside it, like pearls cloistered inside an oyster shell.

‘And Kylo Ren,’ Rose adds, elbowing him in the ribs. ‘You think they did this?’

‘Kylo Ren, create a black hole?’ Finn purses his lips, considering, then shrugs. ‘Sure, why not. Seems like something he’d do.’

Rose giggles. ‘They saved us.’

Finn frowns, reminded of that time, only minutes but also, seemingly, a lifetime ago, when Kylo Ren had frozen a blaster bolt that was aimed at him. Saved his life. And now, apparently, decimated the First Order’s fleet, indirectly saving them again.

Damn. He hates owing people, especially when people = Kylo Ren.

‘I’m not going to be friends with him,’ he announces to the cockpit.

Chewbacca growls warningly.

‘I’m not going to be very good friends with him. Okay?’

--

She doesn’t know whether she lets go of him first, or he her, but they’re both falling, through stardust and disordered galaxies, strings fading away as they disengage from the Force, coming back to themselves slowly, in winks of sudden light and bursts of sound.

Rey wakes first, eyelids separating to see the same ocean of stars she saw when she last woke up, flat on her back like this. But now, there are more stars, infinitely more than before, and at the edge of her vision, she can see the whorling pinprick of darkness that is the new black hole.

‘Ben,’ she murmurs, not getting up. ‘Ben, wake up. The monolith’s come apart.’

He stirs beside her, groaning a little as he sits up, hair all over his flushed face, looking as though he’s just stumbled out of a thorough lovemaking session, rather than communing with the cosmic Force. Maybe they’re not so different, Rey thinks with amusement.

They’d connected so deeply, so wholly, that Rey had thought her heart would explode, smashed into pieces like the stars that had been forced together. It’s a wonder they found their way back to themselves – for a moment, it had felt like their minds themselves had merged with the Force, and that if they’d lost themselves, they’d have become one with it, starlit beings like Luke and Anakin, sempiternal and omniscient.

But the Force isn’t finished with them yet. They’d balanced it, sure. But something else would tip the
scales in the distant future, that was certain.

What exactly that something else could be makes Rey smile, as she feels that tiny tug in her belly again. As delicate as the flutter of an eyelash, but there. She’d felt it before, hadn’t she, when she first connected to the Force on Mortis? *Nascent life.*

She reaches out, still lying down, and finds Ben’s hand, twining her fingers with his.

‘The stars are so beautiful from here,’ she marvels, looking up at the glacial, swirling heavens.

But the back of his head’s blocking her view, dark curls outlined against the night sky as he looks up, too.

‘Oi, your massive head’s in the way,’ she complains, sitting up and batting at him with the hand that isn’t holding his.

His eyes flicker to hers, reflecting the constellations, and without a word, he leans in, slanting his mouth over hers in a heated kiss.

‘How about now?’ he asks against her lips, and Rey captures his bottom lip between her teeth, biting down hard in a rebuke.

‘Ow,’ he murmurs, gripping her shoulders and pushing her back onto the ground, following her down and placing a string of open-mouthed kisses along her cheek and jaw.

Ben pulls back, hovering over her, and she sees a flash of some emotion cloud his face before he asks, ‘Did you mean it?’

Rey tilts her head back, looking up at him coquettishly from underneath her lashes. ‘Mean what?’ she asks innocently.

Ben growls. ‘You know what.’

She snickers. ‘What, that I’m in love with you?’

He nods once, curls falling into his eyes, and a hint of pink creeps over his cheekbones, highlighting the smattering of freckles on his face.

She parts her lips, running her tongue over the bottom one, and then smiles. ‘Come here and maybe you’ll find out,’ she invites, eyes darkening.

Ben glowers at her, obviously not satisfied with the non-answer, but he can’t resist the temptation, the attraction to her light. He never could.

He kisses her again, and they are at once brighter and darker than an eclipse, darkness lensing over light, each overshadowing the other as his black hair brushes her face, and her white hands close around the nape of his neck, pulling him down to her. The sun and the moon, falling for each other as they were always meant to.

--

Her lips taste like honey and sunshine, and he could spend forever *just* kissing her, getting drunk off the taste of her, but the increasingly insistent swell of his erection, coupled with the warm wetness he can feel soaking her clothing where he’s pressed against her, would indicate otherwise.

‘Here?’ Rey protests when he tries to slide his hand under the waistband of her pants. ‘But we’re in
the middle of a sacred Force temple!

Ben gives her an impatient look. ‘Rey, a decent quarter of my life has been spent desecrating Force temples.’

She snorts at that. ‘Fair point. And here I thought you’d turned over a new leaf, Ben Solo.’

He pins her down, bringing his mouth very close to hers, smiling a little as Rey struggles against him, frustrated that he won’t close the distance and kiss her. ‘I have,’ he says thoughtfully. ‘But old habits die hard. Sometimes one might just – what was the phrase - fall off the wagon.’

‘Shut up.’ Rey growls, launching herself upright and capturing his mouth in a violent kiss, her freed hands carding through his hair. They kiss for a long time, lost in the brush of their lips, the tingles and the warmth it elicits, and then Rey pulls back, eyes sparkling.

‘I give up. Go ahead. But if any vengeful Force ghosts come and put a curse on us for having sex in their sacred monastery, I’m telling them it was your idea.’

‘So loyal,’ he teases, and he curls his fingers over the band of her trousers and tugs hard, pulling them down to her knees in one movement. Her underwear follows in a glide of cotton, and Ben nudges her thighs apart, lowering his head between her legs, when-

‘Oh, no,’ Rey groans as a horrifyingly familiar whirring starts to break through the haze of the atmosphere overhead. She pushes Ben’s head away, ignoring his protests. ‘Stop. It’s the Alliance.’

‘Are you fucking kidding me?’ He cranes his neck, following her gaze as Rey hoists her pants back up, and he sees the ships that are beginning to blot out the night sky, the familiar X shapes of the Resistance's armada, followed by the less-distinctively shaped ships of the Bespin fleet.

Rey is frantic, her face flushed. ‘Do you think they saw anything?’

Ben just glares up at the fleet, and if looks could kill, their ships would be spiralling out of the sky, unpiloted.

Rey tugs on his arm, worried. ‘Don’t do anything impulsive-’

He keeps his eyes fixed on the sky when he asks casually, ‘How fast do you think we could make a second black hole?’

’Ben!’

Chapter End Notes

This is it, you guys! This is where it all comes together! Hence the massive amount of split POVs in this.
I hope it all made sense! This part of the story has been planned for a long time, ever since I researched, I kid you not 'most awesome display of power ever seen by a Force user' and found the power of "force supernova", in which a Jedi could rip the core out of a star and literally throw it at an enemy ship, which is at once hilarious and frightening to me.
I took some liberties with that power, combined it with the belief that since Rey and Ben don't have a clue exactly what they're doing anyway, they kinda winged it and trusted
the cosmic Force to guide them and use them as its instrument for what it can do in the galaxy. And thus the Force black hole was born! I loved the idea of an ironic ending for Hux, having his ship called the Star-Eater sucked into a chasm that literally eats stars. Death by black hole is probably not a pleasant way to go either, so... seeya, sucker.

I'm also a bit in love with the idea of a black hole as the combination of their dark and light tendencies, as that's pretty much what a black hole is, really. Very aesthetic decision on my part. And then the bubble that saves Finn and the gang - all light-side energy there.

And yes, before anyone mentions it, I know that supernovae generally take a heck of a lot of years to become black holes, but work with me here, this is the Force's doing, I'm sure it can speed up the process of a star becoming a black hole :P

If it didn't make sense, as usual, feel free to hit me up on Tumblr about it:D But I hope you enjoyed!

Just the epilogue left now! I promise there won't be any more mind-bending displays of power or outright threats to our happy (but sexually frustrated) couple.

Additionally, you may notice that the ending of this story has some similarities to a particular chapter of Interstellar Transmissions (one of my favourite Reylo fics, and if you haven't read it, what are you doing, it's basically the plot of TLJ but with way more sex and awesomeness). That was semi-intentional, I LOVED the idea of the Resistance being the cause of coitus-interruptus for our favourite space couple, so I've borrowed some elements of that idea for this fic here <3
Epilogue

Six Years Later

Nightfall comes unexpectedly on Ossus.

The planet falls under the banner of the Auril Sector, a small collection of planets in the Adega System of the Outer Rim, and is distinctive because of its orbital position – the planet orbits two suns and two moons. Because of that, the days are incredibly long, but the sky darkens quickly and nights tend to fall suddenly and totally, the darkness bringing out a host of nocturnal creatures, the planet’s many environments teeming with life.

Rey has to hold Asha’s hand constantly so he doesn’t go running up to the creatures he excitedly points out to her – though she does let him approach the occasional tree-frog. At five years old, they’re his favourite animals; he’s entranced by their chameleon skins and sticky tongues.

Now, he tugs her over to two fluorescing red frogs, bulb-toed feet stuck to the bark of a tree-branch, flicking out their long, electric blue tongues and catching insects. Asha squeezes Rey’s fingers as one of the frogs’ backs lights up with mottled green dots, a response to danger in the environment, as they hear a howl in the distant woods.

Time to go. Rey runs her fingers affectionately through Asha’s mop of thick, black curls until he ducks away, shaking his head like a wet dog, and she takes hold of his hand again, guiding him out of the bambwood and towards their house, built on the outskirts of Knossa, Ossus’s main city and spaceport. Their house borders the forest, and if they hadn’t been sidetracked by the frogs, they’d have been able to watch the sunset over the Eocho Mountains.

It had been a long, hard journey to get here, to this idyllic house in the heart of the mountains, with their child snuggled up next to her on the couch as she reads him a story from a book of fairytales; epic romances of knights in black armour and princesses in ivory towers. Rey smiles a secret smile as she reflects on it all.

--

After they’d been airlifted off Mortis, Rey and Ben had been taken into custody aboard the Naboo cruiser. Ben had been handcuffed without protest – Rey did plenty of that on his behalf – but when they’d taken him away, she’d turned to the viewport, in tears, and seen the two halves of the monolith re-sealing themselves over Mortis, concealing the planet and its moons from her sight.

Then, in the time between a single blink of her eye, it had disappeared entirely. As if it had never existed.

For some reason, that was comforting.

*Trust in the Force, and in you.*
She knew Poe, as the new commander of the Alliance, at least as far as the original rebels were concerned, would want to do things by the book. Arrest, detainment and a fair trial. After all, they didn’t know Ben the way she did. To them, he was still a heartless war criminal, Han Solo’s killer, and Poe’s personal torturer.

But she trusted in the Force to unfold as it had been fated to do.

After all, she’d seen their future.

In the court proceedings that followed, Finn had shocked everyone by standing up and declaring to a packed courtroom that Kylo Ren had personally saved his life twice, that he hadn’t been entirely responsible for the tragedy of Hosnian Prime or the construction of Starkiller Base, and that, despite the fact that he was an enormous asshole, he didn’t deserve to die, at least not without being taken down a peg or two first. That had sent the courtroom into an uproar, and in the ensuing ruckus, marshals had had to frog-march both Finn and Rose from the room.

Rey had said her piece; too, of course, recounting what seemed to her like tall stories, of black holes and Force gods and heroism. And, to her surprise, Poe had even come forward and vouched for Ben, stating that as the late Leia Organa’s son, they should lessen his sentence in her honour. She’d died believing her son could be redeemed, so sentencing him to death would be an insult to her memory. In the end, it was Poe’s charm that swayed the court, and the sentence had been returned after a day of deliberation.

The man formerly known as Kylo Ren, now only as Ben Solo, would be exiled to the Outer Rim regions of the galaxy. He was forbidden to possess a lightsaber or any other kind of Force-associated weapon. He was permitted to make a home on any of the inhabitable Outer Rim planets, and could travel between the Outer Rim and the Unknown Regions freely, but he was not allowed to come within two lightyears of the Mid-Rim, and not near the Core under threat of immediate arrest and execution. To solidify this, they’d had him implanted with a tracking chip.

However, he had been granted one day of grace. The day of his mother’s funeral.

It had taken place two weeks after the battle of Mortis, on Naboo. The reason for the time delay was not publicly known, but Poe had admitted to Rey over a bottle of Corellian wine that their scouts had spent a whole week scouring the battlefield, trying to recover what they could of the bodies of Leia and Queen Soruna. They’d found pieces of the queen’s robes, but even when they’d strayed far beyond the confines of space one could reasonably expect to find a body, there’d been no sign of Leia. The black hole, the usual suspect, had disappeared, too, without a trace, so there was no possible way to know where she’d gone.

‘I don’t know what I expected,’ Poe had muttered, shaking his head. ‘When the First Order bombed the Raddus, I saw her float back into the cruiser using the Force, saving herself, so... I don’t know. I guess I thought if anyone could survive the vacuum, it’d be her.’ He rubs his forehead, trying to smooth the wrinkles forming there. ‘But there was nothing. Not a trace. Gods, it’s as if she fused with the stars or something.’


--

The path to Leia’s cabin in the lake country had been festooned with bright white streamers, nets of gossamer and cascades of flowers, bouquets of star-mist and nova lilies, as was customary for Naboo. The casket was closed, of course, because there was no body inside. Just the idea of the warrior princess they’d known and adored. She and Ben had walked the path at the end of the
funeral procession, her hand in his, and his head had been bowed, hair fallen over his face to hide the tears that he shouldn’t have had to shed.

Rey had seen Rose and Finn at the memorial, sitting in chairs on the opposite side of the casket, and she had smiled, but she hadn’t approached them. Ben needed her more. He’d squeezed her hand so hard during the ceremony; she’d thought her fingers would snap right off. The eulogy had mentioned him, as she’d known it would. Ben and Han Solo, the twin loves of Leia’s life.

She’d told Ben about her suspicions after the memorial, when they’d both had time to process the enormity of what had happened, what the war had cost them. And they’d sat under the shade of one of the weeping willows and cried together, for a long time, distilling every emotion, a terrible kind of catharsis.

But eventually, they’d had to return to the Theed spaceport, where the Millennium Falcon was waiting for them, just as Rey had left it when they’d last come to Naboo, under such different circumstances. Fuelled up and freshly serviced, they’d flown it off-planet and back to the Outer Rim, co-piloting as naturally as if they’d been a team for their whole lives.

Rey had turned to Ben in the cockpit, the viewport in front of them a dizzying array of stars and fiery magnetars, and had asked, grinning impishly, Where to, Captain Solo?

Ben had smiled back at her, a soft smile, still sad at the edges, but he’d replied, It doesn’t matter. As long as we’re together. And he’d taken her hand again, holding it tight as they steered the ship into the unknown wonders of the galaxy.

After adventuring around the Outer Rim for a few weeks, they’d eventually chosen Ossus as their new home planet – mostly for its dubious history, along with its absence of freezing-cold snow and ice, for Rey’s benefit. She needed to be comfortable, and maintain adequate body temperature, incubating a tiny human and all.

She’d felt that initial flutter, that almost insignificant movement, on Mortis, even though it had been far too early for their child to be anything more than a cluster of cells, an infinitesimal, golden presence. More a nudge from the Force than any real indicator of pregnancy.

She’d always imagined she’d panic, feel fear or dread at the discovery. But she knew, intimately and quietly, that this was meant to be. The next step, in a series of interconnected steps. A choice.

She’d wanted to tell Ben on one of the first nights they’d spent on the Falcon, floating somewhere in deep space, the crew cabin lit by the silver ionized dust of a nursery nebula, birthing new stars. It had seemed appropriate to tell him then, when that was the backdrop.

She’d been tested only days before at the clinic on Coruscant, and had found out exactly how far along she was. Given Ben could read her mind at a moment’s notice, it didn’t seem like keeping it secret would work much longer.

They’d been messing around in the bunk, mock-wrestling, and he’d just gotten the drop on her when he’d slammed the back of his head against the slats of the bunk above them, letting out an impressive string of expletives. Rey had cracked up so hard her face had turned bright red, so hard she nearly wet herself, and the connotations that action had had convinced her to finally spill the beans.

‘I- I have – something important to tell you,’ she’d spluttered in between fits of laughter.

‘Nice of you to save important news until I’m half-unconscious,’ he’d gasped, flopping down beside
her and rubbing his head. ‘I think my brain’s bleeding.’

‘Aww, poor baby,’ Rey cooed sarcastically, reaching over and patting his hair. Ben had growled irritably, rolling over and trapping her underneath him, hands circling her wrists and pinning her arms above her head.

‘Say that again,’ he’d dared, his lips against her throat, mouthing kisses along the column of her neck, the length of her collarbones, her breasts.

‘Baby,’ Rey had said breathlessly, arching her back up against him when he’d started to suck a bruise onto the hollow of her throat.

‘Mmm?’ Ben had murmured, kissing a burning line down her sternum towards her belly button before moving lower, and Rey had lost her train of thought then, resolving to tell him after, after this, this sublimation of desires. It was the first time they’d had a chance to be truly alone, without the courts of Coruscant or Finn and Poe and Rose somewhere in the vicinity.

It had been the most erotic experience she’d had, back then, with his mouth on her sex and her hands twisting into his hair, tugging him closer, unable to control the movement of her hips as she ground herself against his lips and clever tongue, knowing that she had this delicious secret, something he didn’t know yet, this delicate thing that was theirs alone, that they’d made together.

When she drew him back to her, kissing him and tasting herself on his lips, that musky, strange kind of sweetness; when the rest of their clothing was stripped away; and when she’d straddled him and sunk down onto his length, when he was finally, finally inside of her, their bond flourishing in the back of her mind like a nocturnal bloom, hearts changing pace to beat in unison, she knew that they were one, in so many more ways than she’d ever thought possible.

*Force-bound.*

*Soulmates.*

*Dusk and dawn.*

When she’d cried out and collapsed, letting the euphoria of her release run riot through her, when he’d whispered her name, over and over, bringing tears to her eyes, and when he’d stilled underneath her, his hands falling away from her waist as he looked up at her with an unexpectedly tender expression on his face, that was the moment she knew it was time.

‘Ben... I’m pregnant.’

Rey had looked down at him, eyes glossy with tears, no longer trying to hide the truth. She wondered if he could feel it in the Force as she could, that one new light. A tiny lantern. A baby star.

His eyes were enormous, pupils blown, in total system shock. ‘When?’ he breathed.

Rey shifted above him, suddenly shy. ‘Before you left for Pillio.’ She bit her lip. ‘Third time lucky, I guess. Or unlucky, depending on your point of... view,’ she finished, her eyes searching his face, looking for any signs of disappointment, anger, anything negative.

She didn’t find it. Ben flipped her over so she was beneath him again, and as she tried half-heartedly to wriggle out, he cupped her face in his hands, so gently, like she was a tiny, paper-winged sprite, an ephemeral dryad he was trying to capture without crushing.

‘Marry me,’ he’d said, in a low, intense voice that shook them both to the core, connected as they
Rey reached up a hand and waved it in front of his eyes experimentally. ‘Ben, I think you’ve got a concussion. How many fingers am I holding up?’

He’d grabbed her hand, squeezing her fingers before returning it to her side. ‘I’m perfectly stable,’ he’d said coolly, which had drawn a derisive snort from her. ‘I mean it, Rey. Let me do this the right way.’

‘All about propriety now, are you?’ she’d teased, squirming beneath him in a way that made his eyes darken, drawn to the sway of her breasts, and he’d smirked at her as he’d thrust back into her, so suddenly and deeply that it made her choke on a gasp, and he’d said, in a voice touched with laughter, his breath hot against her ear, ‘Hardly, scavenger.’

‘Mom?’ a tiny hand fisted in her shirt, tugging insistently, drags her out of her reverie. ‘Mom, can we go to the Eyrie tomorrow?’

Asha is looking up at her with puppy-dog eyes, and Rey can’t help it: she melts. ‘If you’re good,’ she grins, tickling him under his chin, and he giggles and squirms, ski-jump nose scrunching up adorably, hiding some of the freckles, like star-maps in miniature, scattered over his cheeks.

Rey is constantly in awe of the perfection of this kid, this pint-sized person who’s only five years old, but somehow more wise, kinder and more erudite than half the adults she’d known on Jakku. She doesn’t know any other five-year olds that can read proper books, or spend half their days drawing anatomical pictures of the creatures they encounter on Ossus. Not to mention actually begging her to take them to school, rather than the other way round.

The Eyrie he’s referring to is the Eye of Ashlanae, the ruinous old Jedi temple that had once been the headquarters of the Order on Ossus. When they’d first come to Ossus, the temple had been half-destroyed, a crumbling relic of the Great Sith War, but with a semi-reluctant Ben at her side, along with a team of helpful Ysanna, they’d begun to rebuild it, restoring the temple to some of its former glory. The rooms inside were still mostly intact, along with the catacombs underneath the structure, and it’s a **vergence**, another nexus point of the Force, much like Mortis had been.

Rey has been taking Asha there, to meditate, to teach him the intricacies of the Force. He’d already started to manifest last year, giggling as he floated wooden building blocks around his bedroom, making book pages flip of their own accord. His grasp of the light and dark is strong, incredibly so, for someone so young, and more equal than she or Ben could ever have hoped to accomplish.

When they are gone, he will become the balance, Rey knows that irreversibly. She only has to look at his Force signature if she ever doubts it: it’s a neverending circle, a perfect fusion of light and shadow.

Like those golden moments, when the sun has set, but the sky is not yet dark. The gloaming.

She snaps the storybook shut and turns around, letting Asha clamber onto her back so she can piggyback him to his bedroom. He hooks his arms around her neck, and Rey Pretends like he’s choking her, coughing dramatically as she jogs back to his room, swinging him down onto his bed, pulling the planet-patterned sheets up to his chin, waving a hand to turn on his nightlight.

Her child’s eyes shine in the dim light, a vivid jade-green, framed by an absolute jungle of black lashes. She has no idea *where* that colour came from – both of them must have had some recessive
genes stored away somewhere. Every other aspect of his face, though, is all them. Rey’s nose and eye shape. Ben’s ears and freckles. And that hair. A total nightmare to comb through after shampoo, but so beautiful, black as quill-ink and the softest thing imaginable.

‘Mom,’ Asha murmurs sleepily, eyelids drooping. ‘When’s Dad gonna be back?’

‘Tomorrow morning,’ Rey promises, bending down to plant a kiss on Asha’s forehead. ‘If you’re lucky, maybe he’ll come up to the Eyrie with us. Sweet dreams, Ash.’

--

It’s the earliest hour of the morning, just before the sunrise, and Rey is in the study, tinkering with the wires of her lightsaber, when she feels that warmth at the back of her mind, the welcome glow, and she smiles, getting up and leaving the saber hilt half-deconstructed on her desk.

She checks in on Asha before she leaves – the nightlight illuminates his sleeping face, the duvet bunched around his knees – and she smooths the covers out before tiptoeing back out of his room, then out of the house, making sure to lock the door behind her and check that the Force-concealment field is in place, in case of another confused Gokob crawling through their window to steal food. The little rodents were friendly, but sprayed a stinking chemical when startled that you had no hope of removing for at least three lunar cycles. She’d gagged every time she’d set foot in the kitchen for a month.

Rey shakes her head, clearing her mind and focusing on the thread that draws tight as a violin’s string the further she walks, through a copse of trees, on the path towards the cliff-face.

And perched at the very edge of the plateau – just the kind of careless treatment of his father’s ship she’d expect from him – is the Falcon. Ben leans up against the side of the ramp, arms crossed playfully over his chest, a slight smirk playing over his features, visible in the first glimmers of dawn as the twin suns begin to rise.

‘You took your time,’ is Rey’s opening gambit as she sidles up to him.

He falls into the rhythm of their banter easily. They’ve had six years to practice their art. ‘The thought of you was enough to keep me away an extra few days,’ he says, even as his arms circle around her, pulling her into a bone-crushing hug.

‘I can see that,’ she chokes out, trying to act like she’s not being asphyxiated on the spot. ‘How much you despise me.’

‘Pure and utter loathing,’ he agrees, nuzzling his face into the crook of her neck, inhaling her scent, before he kisses her shoulder and pushes her back, dark eyes roving over her face as if it’s been months since he’d last laid eyes on her, not three days.

But they both know how important three days can be in the grand scheme of things.

‘So what was it this time?’ Rey teases, walking away from him over to the edge of the plateau and sitting down, legs dangling over the rock face. From this vantage point in the Eocho Mountains, she can see the whole valley below, spread like a patchwork quilt; the unspooled threads of rivers and the blanket fuzz of forests, as the suns spill liquid fire over the horizon line, the pearl-gray sky beginning to run like paint colours splashed on a canvas, dripping rivulets of pink and orange.

Ben arranges his long legs over the rock shelf beside her, sighing huffily. ‘Dameron had the bright idea of trying to out-negotiate a pack of war-mongering Hutts on Taris. I speak Huttese. He doesn’t. He practically begged me to stay longer. It took threatening him with personally explaining to
Ash why I broke the pinky-swear for him to release me.’ He rolls his eyes heavenward. ‘I hate that man.’

He doesn’t, though. Out of all the unlikely friendships to spring up, Poe and Ben’s had been the oddest of any. Both Rey and Finn still don’t quite understand it. Finn attributes it to the two couples being in such close proximity - eventually, after six years’ worth of Poe and Finn’s many visits to Ossus, ostensibly to see her and Asha, they were bound to rub off on one another, given that Rey and Finn were already such inseperable friends.

‘It’s our fault, really,’ he’d mused one day, watching Poe walk out the door with Ben, both of them talking animatedly about some type of spacecraft specifics. ‘If we weren’t so close, they wouldn’t have been left with eachother.’

Rey had nudged him in the ribs. ‘Jealous you’re not best buddies, too?’

‘Never,’ Finn had said stoutly – but one night she’d glimpsed him and Ben up late in the sitting room, discussing the detriments of the Stormtrooper program in quiet, sober voices. It wasn’t friendship, more like tolerance, but they had an understanding, and that was something rare.

As for the pinky-swear, it was a bit of a thing, just one among many secret rituals and special handshakes, qualities of Ben and Asha Solo. As much as he loved Rey, as much as he listened with rapt attention when she taught him about the Force or skipped with her through the woods as they hunted for magical creatures, he was his father’s son, through and through. Rey doesn’t know how many times she’d stumbled into Asha’s bedroom, an uninvited guest, to find him and Ben playing with model starships, or colouring together on the floorboards, or sitting against the bedframe and chatting, Asha’s stubby legs splayed out in an imitation of his father’s long-legged sprawl.

Just once, she’d seen Ben sitting cross-legged in the middle of Asha’s room, the little boy standing up and inquisitively touching the faded imprint of the scar on his father’s cheek. ‘Tell me the story again,’ she’d heard him say.

‘Again?’ Ben had laughed. ‘All right. Long-’

‘-ago in a galaxy far, far away,’ Rey had broken in, unable to resist the bait, striding into the room and kneeling down beside them, ‘a nice girl named Rey met a mean boy named Ben and-‘

‘And it was hate at first sight,’ Ben interrupted, flashing her an ironic smile.

‘The boy took the girl away to a palace in the snow and tried to read her mind. Which you never do without permission, remember,’ Rey had added sternly, feigning a frown. Asha nodded solemnly.

‘But the girl was strong with the Force, almost as strong - ow! – equally as strong as Ben was, and she escaped from the castle,’ Ben continued, rubbing his arm where Rey had pinched it. ‘He chased her through the snow, trying to get her to come back, and she brought out her lightsaber-‘

‘And kicked his butt,’ Rey finished, bumping fists with Asha, who giggled.

‘That’s not exactly true,’ Ben muttered under his breath, but Rey made like she was going to pinch him again and he surrendered. ‘The end.’

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Rey snickers now, thinking about that as the sky fills with light, streaks of silver and lilac taking over the colour palette. Ben’s hand is warm in hers, and the earth is warming under them, and all is right with the universe.
It’s not always that way. She doesn’t want to paint a picture of perfection. That isn’t Ben. There are still days when he has old demons in his head, or thunderclouds in his eyes, but on those days, she’s learned to leave him be, let him sit with them awhile, and when he returns, slightly less stormy-eyed, she’ll dance in the rain.

And through it all, he has her and Asha. And Chewie - Asha’s godfather, by mutual agreement - and Poe and Finn and Rose. And on rare, special days, their family of Force ghosts. They will never be alone again, either of them.

It isn’t perfect, but when was it ever? It doesn’t make it any less good.

Rey rests her head against his shoulder as they watch the sunrise, humming a little tune to herself, content.

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Ben looks down at her, nestled against his shoulder, her lashes set aflame in the glow of the morning suns, eyebrows and hair threaded with gold, spilling light and shadow across her face, highlighting the curve of her mouth and the point of her cheekbone.

Her beauty, and the sunrise, makes him remember what he’d said to her, the day he’d finally done what Anakin’s ghost had bid him and proposed to her properly, and this time, managed not to completely fuck it up.

They’d been scoping out Tatooine, a few days before relocating to Ossus, and he’d had one too many sips of sunberry wine, and they were scuffing their way across the dunes. And as the twin suns set over the desert, transforming the sand into rose-gold for a few alchemical moments, he’d turned to her, to Rey of Jakku, the jewel of the desert, the better half of him, and said,

_The best thing that I can ever be is yours._

And then, holding out a hand with a wry smile, _Join me?_

And Rey had grinned, considering his hand for the briefest moment, before placing her smaller one in his, his fingers enveloping hers.

‘You’re on.’

Chapter End Notes

I DID A THING AND MADE IT FLUFFY! SO FLUFFY I GOT TOOTHACHE! OW!
In all seriousness I have to go to the dentist at the end of this fic. That's how sweet it was writing this chapter, I teared up so many damn times, I hope it's the same for you guys!

Now, for some details on ASHA SOLO. I hope you guys love this beautiful (and awesomely unisex) name as much as I do! I wanted a name that had something to do with 'ashes' but also something a bit more spiritual, but also something not super out of the ordinary, as Ben is quite an ordinary name, and Rey is... semi-ordinary I guess? And I stumbled upon the name Asha as I was writing this (original draft had their child's name as Sasha, which, I mean, close enough). But the Sanskrit meaning of Asha is
literally 'wish', or less commonly, 'hope'. I couldn't go past it. Like, come on, guys. Seriously.

i hope in the end I have done these characters justice, Ben and Rey are two of my favourite characters ever to exist in any form of entertainment, and I have all the love for them.

Ossus is a real place in Star Wars and has an incredibly cool history. The old temple, the city, the creatures I mention in this fic - it's true, all of it. ;) Here's a link if you want to check it out. http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Ossus/Legends

This is it! The culmination of three months of writing. It's been an incredible ride, and I want to thank you all so much for being along for the journey, and leaving all your lovely comments and kudos (I'm honestly completely in shock with how much love this fic received, it blows my mind every single day). I'm happy I could do my small part for the fandom and I hope everyone enjoyed this as much as I did. Your comments made me giggle and smile a lot of secret, knowing smiles along the way, so thank you so much <3

As always, you can find me on Tumblr if you want to chat more Reylo-ey stuff. I'm galacti-core over there.

Love forever <3

AAAAAAAAAAND if you're like me and you like to wrap up a happy ending with a (sort of?) happy song, here is the song that first inspired me to write this fic. Brand New is my old favourite band, and before I decided on the name Sealed To Me (which turned out to be super apt because of the Mortis monolith unsealing itself for our heroes, and is also a BN song title) this fic was going to be named The Quiet Things That No One Ever Knows. So here, in celebration of that, have this feelsy, sort of sad and angsty but also happy song. It's very Reylo, I promise.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RD9PuTOVSh4&index=15&list=LLVKuXLxM_mEtse7OdH8Rv4w

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!