The Bond That Ties Us
by moontear

Summary

Two weeks after TLJ, Rey finds herself on an old Rebel base, trying to protect herself with the Force--but Kylo Ren finds a way to break through.

Notes

I do not own Star Wars, nor am I making any money off this fanfiction.

I hope this piece is enjoyed. It's going to be multi-chapter! I haven't written in the Star Wars fandom before, but I had to scratch the itch after that movie! Hopefully it'll help some of you guys. :)
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I hope this piece is enjoyed. It's going to be multi-chapter! I haven't written in the Star Wars fandom before, but I had to scratch the itch after that movie! Hopefully it'll help some of you guys.
Rey had thought that with the death of Snoke, her connection to Ben—no, his name is Kylo—would be broken. But after their escape, at that moment when the Falcon was rising into the air, she’d felt it.

The string between them, snapping into place.

She was strong enough now to build walls within herself, to protect herself from his mind. He
wanted to kill her. The first thing he'd done when he'd regained consciousness was fire an attack on the Resistance, never mind that she was with them. That had really told her all she needed to know, and it had broken her heart.

She seemed to be doing a very good job of hiding it, though, because no one had really noticed. Then again, maybe everyone was too focused on their own grief. This was fine. Rey preferred that not everyone knew she was a complete and total wreck.

In the adrenaline of the events with Snoke, with Ben—damn it, no, Ren—and with the ensuing battle on Crait, she hadn't had time to ponder his offer, the offer she'd spurned. She'd been fired up, angry, scared—never sad. Even with Luke's passing, she hadn't been very emotional, namely because she had felt his peace.

But in the middle of the night… when there was only the darkness and herself… her anger would falter, and tears would touch her eyes.

Snoke may have created the Force bond, may have guided the connection, but that didn't take away from the result. The fact of the matter was, Rey had felt Ben's heart—no, Kylo—no, Ren—… ah, sod it. She had felt his heart, and it wasn't something she could forget, even though she had tried. Blocking him was easy enough to do, but that just protected her from him. It didn't ease the pain that came from memories… their memories.

Creatures hooted, screeched, and howled in the jungle. Rey sat atop a boulder she had claimed for herself, legs crossed as she gazed off into the green. It was the first day in two weeks that it hadn't rained.

She lifted a strip of jerky and nibbled on it while she thought. With just a small pulse of the Force, she could get a sense of lifeforms in the area. If she wanted a more definitive signature, she'd have to concentrate. Unfortunately, keeping Ben out meant staying off the grid. She hadn't yet figured out how to take her imprint from the equation. She wasn't even sure if it was possible.

She referred to it as an "imprint," but it was a term she'd coined to try and figure out their connection. So far as she could tell, using the Force in large quantities pinged her onto the Force radar… meaning, because they were bound, Ben would be able to reach her. Before, it hadn't been as much of a concern. They couldn't control when it happened, and the link was weak. With it growing stronger and stronger, Rey wasn't taking any chances unless she had to.

"Hey, Rey."
Rey looked up at Finn's voice just in time for him to plop down beside her. He pulled up a knee to his chest and hooked an arm around it.

"You're like a ghost. Ever since we arrived on this backwater planet, you've been MIA."

"That's not true," she protested. "I've been around."

"When?"

"At meals!"

"Yeah, that stopped a week ago."

Rey narrowed her eyes.

Finn grinned. "Seriously, though, why the lone wolf act?"

Rey didn't answer immediately, staring off into the jungle. They were on the outskirts and technically safe from the dangers within. Rey was more prepared and better armed than the others, however, so she didn't mind sitting so close.

They had arrived on Solaris after Crait, and they hadn't budged since. They planned to rebuild the Resistance, but it was on hold. Solaris was another old Rebellion base, this one smaller, and it was far away from the "Supreme Leader."

Rey wrinkled her nose.

Most of the weapons didn't work from both disuse and the wet environment of the planet. So much rain made for muggy weather, enough to toy with the weapon settings and create warping. A mudslide had taken out half the compound at some point in the past. That left systems down on the electronics, but their team was currently working on it. Most of the wiring was damaged beyond repair, and they couldn't exactly get replacement parts. The Falcon wasn't an option because of
fuel, so they were only going to use it when it was absolutely necessary.

On the plus side, the food reserves were plentiful and still edible, if mostly tasteless.

Finn was watching her expectantly.

"Restless, I guess," she said with a small, slightly strained smile. She hadn't been getting much sleep, but she didn't want to snap at her friend. It wasn't his fault she was a little grumpy.

Finn was quiet for all of thirty seconds. "What's on your mind? You can always talk to me, you know."

Her smile more real this time, she put her arm around his shoulders. "I know. So… how are you and Rose?" She went back to her piece of jerky, popping the last bit into her mouth.

Finn actually blushed. "O-Oh, y-you k-know…"

Rey's lips split into a grin. "No," she ribbed. "You know, I really don't think I do."

"Hey—!"

…Rey…

Her head snapped up and around, and her hand clapped over Finn's mouth. He must have sensed that something was seriously wrong, because he didn't put up a struggle and went still.

"Who are you trying to protect?"

Ice went down Rey's spine and caused all the hairs on her body to lift. This was impossible. Her shields were up!
But… she couldn't see him. Could he see her…?

"I know you're there. I can feel you."

Her fingers dug into Finn's cheek, and he winced in pain. He gave her a wildly confused look.

"I've gotten this far, Rey—don't you realize you can't hide from me forever?"

Everything inside of her wanted to buck up—wanted to yell at him, to unleash her anger, the anger she couldn't let go of. The anger that survived past the grief.

"Answer me!"

Finn began struggling, probably because he couldn't see what she could. Rey used the Force to immobilize him, and in that moment, Ben appeared.

A slow smile was creeping across his mouth, and he was making no effort to hide the fury in his dark eyes.

Rey let Finn go and rose to her feet. She could see Ben clear as day in front of her, but as usual, not his surroundings. She made a gesture for Finn to stay quiet, and she was glad he obeyed without question despite his wide, alarmed eyes.

"I have nothing to say to you," she spat. It reminded her of the first time they had used the Force Bond, both equally cautious and angry at the other. The only difference was that he wanted to kill her—wait… he had before, too. Well, still. It was much sincerer this time.

"Even if I called a truce?"

It took all the willpower she possessed to keep a blank expression, the wheels in her mind spinning rapidly. He couldn't possibly mean that. He'd sent his gods-damned army after her. Well… after the Resistance and her, but who was keeping track of that? The intent was the same. He wanted her dead.
At her side, Finn spoke in a low voice, the type of tone one might use when talking to someone a little gone in the head. "Rey… who are you talking to?"

Rey barely heard him. "You don't want a truce."

She was forcing herself not to really look at him, the way she wanted to, the way she had before. Thick, wavy black hair, pale skin, eyes filled with all sorts of sorrow and anger and…

She decided to fixate on his chin. It was the only safe place.

"If I didn't, would I be here?"

"Yes," she said. Her anger was sparking, catching flame, spreading through her like liquid fire. He brought out the worst and the best in her. "You want me dead. You made that quite clear."

Finn looked from her to the air in front of her and back again. He did this a few times before his voice changed to something resembling enlightenment. "Is this some kind of Force thing right now? Are you communicating with Kylo Ren?" His eyes widened again as he heard his own words. "Rey! Don't! You—"

"I was angry."

"Clearly. You chased me down to Crait."

"I chased the Resistance down. I told you before… all of this needs to go away, to be left in the past. The only way forward is to destroy the things holding us back."

"I was with the Resistance, as you very well saw!" she half-snarled, ignoring the rest of his statement. If she focused on it, she'd remember looking at the hand held out to her, the hand she'd rejected.

"I was angry," he said again. "You hurt me."
Rey couldn't even begin to formulate an answer to that.

But then one took shape.

"You're a child," she said. "Whenever something doesn't go your way, you throw a complete tantrum and wail at the world like we're the ones torturing you! It's like you never grasped the concept of self-control!"

His eyes darkened, his temper flaring just as predicted. He opened his mouth, surely to launch some sort of heated response. But then, to Rey's surprise, he pressed his lips together, curling his fingers into fists at his sides. What was he trying to do, prove her wrong? It'd take a lot more than that.

"You're not the only one who has suffered, Ben. You had caring, loving parents—much more than I ever got. One of them is still alive, too! You could—"

"YOU KNOW NOTHING!"

Rey leaned back despite herself, his shout ringing in her ears.

And then he was gone.

Vanished back into whatever dark hole he'd crawled out of.

She turned to find Finn staring at her.

"What?"

His mouth gaped open. "What the heck just happened? Why are you talking to him? I thought you guys—"
"I'm not talking to him. He just got through my defenses." She frowned to herself, staring into the jungle again.

"Rey?"

"Yes?"

"Remember how you used your Force magic to keep me still?" He waited until she was looking at him. "Not cool, man."

She nodded. "You're right, I'm sorry. I just… panicked. It won't happen again, I promise."

He nodded in turn, and then frowned. "So you and Kylo Ren…?"

"Like I said—he got through my defenses. Let's go inside, it's getting dark."

Finn went on ahead, and she hesitated for a moment, turning to the place where Ben had stood.

A truce?

Was it a trap… or did he mean it?
Thanks so much for all the positive responses! It's been inspiring me to write more, so here's the next chapter!

Rey was dreaming.

It wasn't uncommon. Ever since she'd been a child, she'd been plagued with dreams, mostly nightmares, about her parents and the way they'd abandoned her. She could admit that now. It hurt, but she could. Sometimes interesting things would surface, although she barely recalled them when she woke.

Tonight was different.

Much different.

Ben was gazing down at her, his hair framing his face, his broad shoulders bare. She swallowed, her heart locked in her throat. The instinct to protect herself, to attack him, was gone in this place. There was only her—her and the person tethered to the line connecting them.

Her mouth opened, and his fingertip landed against it. He tilted his head, moving his hand to cup her jaw, his thumb roving over her chin, up along the seam of her lips. It settled on her cheek, stroking softly. His hand was warm, soft with few calluses, probably from the gloves he wore all the time.

She closed her eyes, her pulse a staccato at her throat. "Ben—"

His lips grazed over hers, and she forgot how to breathe.

She'd never been kissed. Jakku hadn't exactly been a breeding ground for gentlemen, and she'd been so unhappy with her existence that she hadn't wanted anything like that, anyway. Just her parents—just a sign in her life that things would get better.
"I love you." As the words left her, she opened her eyes again, slowly. She had expected him to be surprised, in this safe place where she could speak freely. Instead, something she couldn't describe filled his eyes as he kissed her again, much more firmly than the last.

On the third kiss, she kissed him back, a hand traveling into his hair of its own volition. Her fingers tangled in silky black strands. His teeth caught her lower lip, her jaw, her ear. She shivered, a small sound leaving her throat, a heat she was unfamiliar with warming her from the inside out.

It was then that she put a hand on his chest, pushing gently.

"Too much?" His eyes roved over her face, taking in every thought that crossed it.

She shook her head, her throat too tight for her to speak clearly.

The smallest of smiles, as if he was finally surprised, touched the corner of his mouth. It was so rare to see that she raised her hand to rest her fingertips against it. He caught her hand in his own, lowering it between them as he tilted his head and kissed her again.

His lips were full, as warm as his hand, and incredibly soft. When his tongue grazed her own lips, she parted them hesitantly, not entirely sure what to expect. Fire leapt into her belly as he brushed their tongues together, and for a time, she was lost.

She broke away, needing to breathe, and his relentless mouth moved over her chin, to her throat. Her breath left her again as he suckled a patch of skin into his mouth, and he drew a moan from her when he set his teeth against it. Her hands came up to clutch his shoulders as his mouth moved lower, lower…

"REY!"

A loud banging persisted against her door, and she jerked awake, oddly flushed. She touched her hand to her neck as she sat up in bed.

R'iaa's shorts!
"Rey! Come on! It's important! We're gathering!"

"O-Okay!" she called back, her voice not quite ready to be used yet. Finn went quiet, so she assumed he'd left already.

She took a moment to bury her face in her hands and fight the urge to scream. How was this possible?! He'd gone after her, after the ones she loved, and had almost succeeded in killing all of them! And here she was, having a—a… dream… about him, waking up flustered and—

She crossed her arms over her breasts, mostly because they felt… tender, and it just wasn't fair. She'd done the best she could to keep him out of her mind.

Perhaps that was why he'd appeared in her dreams? Because she thought about him so often? And… and one couldn't control what they dreamed about, and sometimes they didn't mean anything at all. She was getting worked up over nothing. It was fine. A stray dream, nothing more.

Mollified, she pushed her covers back and slipped off her bed. It didn't take long to throw on her boots and grab her weapons.

It wasn't until she was setting her hair to straights and glancing into the mirror on the steel wall that she saw it.

There, on her throat.

A bruise.

"You okay?" Finn asked as Rey came into the meeting room. This was where most of the systems communications were. It was also where the mudslide had broken through, so half the room looked out onto the cliff that rested high above the jungle.
"Fine," she said shortly, not really looking at him. She rubbed her arms to get the goosebumps to go away. Mutinous, they refused to budge. "Just—a bad dream. I'll be fine."

"Want some breakfast?"

She shook her head. She couldn't eat right now. Not with her stomach tied up in knots and her fingers trembling.

How had that happened?

How was that even possible?

She'd touched his hand on Ahch-To, when they were using the Force bond. She'd felt the warmth of his fingertips, and his hand... it had seemed so solid. But part of her had thought that maybe it was just in her imagination, because that was how real the connection seemed. Was she wrong? She had to be. The mark on her neck said enough.

It hadn't been a dream, then. It had been real.

She waited for the bile to rise in her throat, but all she could think about was his mouth on hers.

"I love you."

Oh...

Oh, gods...

Her eyes closed, and she placed her hands against her stomach. Now she wanted to throw up.

He'd gotten too close, much too close. She had been so vulnerable. He could have done anything to her he wanted.
Rey paused, her thoughts graying into static.

He could have done anything he wanted.

He'd kissed her.

Why?

Was it a game? Was it real?

Somehow, she was going to have to find a way to keep him out. Not sleeping wasn't an option—at least, not a good one. She’d get too tired eventually, and she needed to be alert, now more than ever.

"Rey…? Hello…?" A hand waved in front of her face.

She lifted her head. Finn dropped his hand.

"We've got a new mission."

"Mission?" She looked to the others in the room, namely General Organa and Poe.

Leia's face was pinched with worry. "There's another base on this planet."

"That's great!" Rey's face lit up. "Is it like this one? Do you think it's in better condition? Enough for us to get off this planet?"

The princess raised a hand. "Slow down," she said with a chuckle. "I know you're excited, but there's… some danger involved."

"Danger?" Rey's face went blank. Then understanding dawned. "The jungle. Right."
This was it. This was the moment she had been waiting for—something to do, some way to be *useful*.

"Well, I can go. I can handle myself in there." With the Force, Rey had gained confidence in dealing with intense situations. Not enough to cloud her judgement, but to be effective.

"We're going, too," Poe said, nodding his head in Finn's direction. "I've got to get out of here, I'm going crazy."

"All right. Anyone else?" Rey questioned.

The others in the room wouldn't quite look at her. They were the remaining survivors of the Resistance, most of them engineers, and of course they couldn't risk Leia.

Rey nodded, growing more determined. "Excellent. When do we leave?"

Poe stepped forward, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Now."
This chapter is longer than the others! :) The story gets more in depth here. I hope everyone enjoys!

Rey uses her lightsaber here. It's not described how until later, but she reassembled it a bit with what she could find. She's a scavenger. The rest is in the story!

The jungle was hot and unforgiving.

Having been raised on a desert planet, Rey was very fond of seeing green environments, or even vast amounts of water. For the last two weeks while she roosted on her boulder, staring at the jungle far below, it had been enticing, calling to her to come and inspect its many natural wonders. She'd almost done it a time or two, and now she was glad she hadn't.

Poe had warned her going in. "There's a number of dangers out there, Rey, and we have to be focused at all times. There are creatures out there bigger than us, meaner than us, and they're not afraid to have us for an afternoon snack."

Finn had whirled at this. "Whoa, wait, what do you mean, an afternoon snack?" Then he took a step back and cleared his throat. "I mean… cool. Yeah. We got this. No problem."

BB-8 whistled and beeped.

The former stormtrooper glared at him. "Oh, really? That's what you come back with?"

More whistles.

"Fine! Fine," Finn said, crossing his arms and spreading his feet apart.

"He said that you don't seem very sure," Poe elucidated.
"I know what he said!" Finn harrumphed.

A long whistle and a beep.

Poe shook his head with a chuckle. "All right, all right… back to the matter at hand. Finn, you're going to take the lead, I'll head up the back, and Rey stays between us."

Protestations arose at once.

"So you get the back and I get the scary front?!"

"I am not staying in the middle!"

The X-wing pilot crossed his arms and waited.

"Why can't Rey go first?!"

"Yeah! I've got a—"

"She can do that… that… that magic Force stuff! You know…” Finn imitated a lightsaber slashing through the air with sound effects. "And take out our enemies in a second!"

"That's not how the Force works, Finn!"

"You know, I'm getting sick and tired of people telling me that—"

"Enough!" Poe half-shouted. He turned to Rey. "Rey, do you think you can handle taking point?"

She nodded.
He pivoted to Finn. "Finn, can you stay in the middle?"

Finn sniffed and touched the blaster at his hip. "I got this."

"All right. Move out."

It was two hours later that Rey was soaked in sweat and wishing she had never agreed to do this. The heat was smothering, trapped as it was under the tall trees. The humidity caused things to grow frightfully large, so that they were walking beneath flowers rather than above them. Critters darted to and fro, nonthreatening, at least for now, and the ground underfoot was spongy with moss.

Finn smacked his arm as an insect buzzed. "These things are the size of Krayt dragon pearls!"

BB-8 chirped as he strolled beside the group, his head swiveling everywhere.

Rey couldn't answer her companion. She was too busy searching their surroundings with the Force, with as low input as possible. She may not be able to really use it, but at least she could tell if they were in imminent danger or not.

"How far away is this thing, do you think?" Finn asked behind her.

"Quite a ways," Poe replied. "We won't get there 'til the end of the day, if we're being optimistic."

"Fantastic," Finn whispered. "Fanchoobiestastic."

"Choobies… what?" Rey asked over her shoulder, tuning in at the unfamiliar turn of phrase.

"Means balls," Poe supplied helpfully.
"Oh."

Well, then.

"I think our friend is a little worried about being here after dark."

"I am not a little worried!" Finn fired back. "I am… a lot worried!"

BB-8 chose this moment to let out a stream of whistles that emphasized a strong choice of words.

"Yeah, well, you're a droid. No one's going to eat you."

BB-8 drew back in offense. His whistles got louder.

"BB-8 doesn't like to think of himself as a droid," Poe laughed.

"STOP!" Rey threw an arm out behind her, crouching. The group immediately fell silent. She looked around, but that wasn't enough, so she closed her eyes and connected to the energy that was the Force.

Something was coming… fast…

The ground trembled.

"MOVE!" Rey yelled, and she lunged out of the way just in time. A scaled creature that towered over them burst into their clearing. It was on its hind legs, and it had tiny arms tucked against itself, but its head was gigantic, and the blackened teeth in its mouth suggested it wouldn't have a problem tearing them apart. The crown of vicious horns atop its head added to that conclusion.

BB-8 took off, and the others followed suit, barely keeping him in sight. The droid was the one who knew where they were going. If they got lost now…
The thing roared so loudly, Rey felt it down to her bone marrow. The ground shook harder as it pounded after them.

There was no choice. They were going to have to split up.

Rey gestured to Finn, who took off to the left, and Poe followed suit, dodging to the right. That left Rey, which she preferred, as she was the only one with a weapon that could down this thing. The problem was, she couldn't get a good look at it with all this running.

The other problem was that she was going to have to use the Force to escape this thing or deal with it or both. She didn't want to leave herself open to Ben, but her hands were tied. She couldn't let everyone die.

Pulling the Force through her, she leapt up, arching backward, over the creature's snarling mouth, and landed behind it, a hand and a knee to the ground. She looked up at it as it reared around, but by then she had her lightsaber in hand and was barreling forward. She twirled it before taking off one of its arms.

The thing roared louder than ever in its pain, and that only made it more intent on killing her. Letting the Force guide her movements, as she had done a handful of times before, she made a few dodges, barely escaping the teeth bearing down on her. She backflipped again when it swung its massive tail in her direction.

Everything faded away.

Everything except this creature and herself.

Adrenaline pumping through her, the pounding of her heart, the ache in her lungs from lack of air...

It paced forward, and she let it get close—close enough to shove her lightsaber up through the bottom of its head and out the top.

She panted heavily as it fell to the ground, wobbling a little from the force of its landing. Her saber
was still lit, so she powdered it down with a hiss of plasma.

"A Jedi would have found a way to save its life."

Her shoulders drew straight, and what breath she'd gained back left her lungs. She looked across the carcass of the creature at Ben, who stood on its other side.

"It was going to kill us," she argued. She didn't have time for these mind games. She had to find her friends. There were other dangers still lurking in this jungle.

She climbed over the thing, because there really wasn't a way around it. It was blocking the path entirely, and on either side were trees. It meant that she was going to have to walk through Ben.

She received an unpleasant surprise when she bounced off him.

Before she could fall and trip over the creature, his fingers snatched her wrist.

"It doesn't matter," he said. She tugged for her wrist back, but he only gripped it tighter, tight enough to be painful, her bones grinding together. "Jedi have always been strict in their rules. It's their creed. Save what life you can."

"I don't care. Let go of me!"

"You should care. You're a Jedi, aren't you?"

She didn't answer, grunting as she attempted to get free of him. He held onto her effortlessly, but she didn't try to go for her lightsaber. Like this, she could sense it wouldn't have made a difference. She didn't know how, but she knew.

Finally, she gave up, panting a little, and then glared up at him. "And you're a Sith. What do you care that I killed that thing?"

He caught her other wrist and then whirled her around in a sudden motion, jerking her against him.
Still holding her wrists, he lowered them, wrapping his arms around her as he rested his chin on her shoulder. "Why won't you give in, Rey?"

His voice washed over her ear, and she shivered.

"Think of how good we could be together…"

"If you're trying to seduce me, it's not going to work!"

"Isn't it?"

Shouts rang out, ones of relief, and Rey staggered a little as she was suddenly released. She turned around, finding Ben gone and her friends in his place. They were panting, as well, except for BB-8, who rolled up to her and made a few questioning beeps.

"I'm all right, BB-8," she reassured him.

Finn stepped forward to look at the body of the creature. "Whoa… what did I say earlier?" He made his mock lightsaber motions.

Poe put a hand on her shoulder, as was his habit. "You sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine. Not a scratch on me." When he didn't look convinced, she changed the subject. "I'm glad we found each other again. How off course are we?"

BB-8 chittered.

"Not too badly," Poe mused. "All right, team, let's get going." He paused. "And thank you, Rey. You saved our lives."

"Don't mention it," she said with a smile.
But as she stepped back into the position of point, she couldn't shake that feeling.

The feeling of Ben's arms wrapped so snugly around her.

The feeling of his lips grazing her ear as he spoke.

And his question, so soft, just a murmur.

"Why won't you give in, Rey?"

She tried to remind herself of all the reasons she had to hate Ben. It was quite the list.

"Think of how good we could be together..."

She shook her head hard. They couldn't be good together. Ben had the patience and the emotional capacity of a toddler. When things didn't go his way, he reacted in extreme measures. It would be the same this time, too. Once he realized she really, truly, was not going to give into him, she was going to have to fight to save her life.

And that prospect was enough to chill any ardor he'd stirred.

Still...

"Isn't it?"

The two words lingered in her mind, playing over and over.

If he thought she was easy, he was dead wrong.

But how had he done it? How had he been able to touch her like that? Was it all in her head? Was it happening inside of their minds, through the Force bond? Had it really grown that strong?
He shouldn't have been able to see what she was doing. She had a feeling he hadn't. He must have been able to rifle through her thoughts. It gave him the advantage, and she didn't like it at all.

There was only one thing to do…

It was time to turn the tables.

Not using the Force the rest of the trip was not an option anymore. They had only been two hours in when that thing had attacked them. Whatever her issues with Ben, she had to protect her companions first. It was as simple as that.

That didn't mean she had to like it.

But it did mean her shields against Ben were lowered, so it wasn't much of a surprise when he appeared again around the midpoint of the day.

"Decided to let me in?"

She gave him a look. You and I both know that's not true.

She wasn't expecting his answering smirk. "As much as you think I'm doing this on purpose, I'm not. It's connecting us like before—before you blocked me out."

So it's just getting stronger, then?

"Yes. I can read your thoughts easier now. They're like a book… so open, so transparent."

Stop, or I'll read your thoughts, too.
"You can try." The way he worded it suggested that he was more than prepared to keep her out this time.

Annoyed, she decided to ignore him. Replying to him, letting him ruffle her feathers, was only going to give him what he wanted.

BB-8 beeped somewhere behind her, and she heard Poe's low laugh. It was the type of sound that made her look over to him.

Ben's face darkened. "You are mine."

She almost came to a halt at that, but she wanted to keep up appearances, so she kept walking. It wouldn't do to let them know that she was talking to Ben. She didn't want to deal with their looks of concern. She was barely tolerating what was happening on her own.

*I don't belong to anyone, let alone you.*

Now she had to stop. He was in front of her, and she nearly crashed into him.

"Do you really believe that?" His eyes bore into her, demanding the truth. "Answer me!"

She shook her hair back. *Move, please.*

Ben's expression grew murderous. He took an imposing step forward, but she held her ground, chin jerked up in defiance. His hand closed firmly over her throat. She let him because he wasn't yet choking her. If he thought he was going to bully her, he was mistaken yet again.

"Admit it!" he hissed.

*Show some restraint, and maybe I will.*
His fingers tightened, and she found herself on her tiptoes as he lifted her. His face was close to hers, and his jealousy was ugly. His lips were pressed together, his eyes promising a world of hell.

"You love me."

Do I?

"You told me you did," he growled.

I lied to you. I wanted to hurt you again.

Rey found herself flying through the air and landing on her back hard enough to wind her. She stared up at the canopy of the jungle, distantly aware of Poe and Finn running to her side, kneeling over her.

"Rey! Are you all right?! Here, slowly, slowly—" Poe cautioned, putting an arm under her shoulders and lifting.

Finn touched her throat. His eyes widened. "Fingermarks. What happened?"

Not answering either of them, Rey looked down the path, to where she'd been standing with Ben. He was, of course, gone. It was just as well. She was sick of looking at him, too.

"So you're really not going to tell us what happened?" Finn asked.

Rey was quiet, concentrating on the task at hand, which involved swinging her lightsaber through the overgrowth they'd encountered.

"Rey…"
"Look—" She closed her eyes, opened them. "It's not something I can talk about. It's something I have to deal with on my own. There's no one who can help me."

"There has to be someone," Finn argued.

"There isn't."

"So you're really telling me that you can't think of a single thing we could help with?"

Rey paused in the slaughtering of flora and turned to him. "I have a connection with Kylo Ren through the Force. It was put there by Snoke. I thought when he died, our connection would have died with it, but it didn't. It's still here, and it won't leave me alone. Kylo taunts me every opportunity he has, and all I can do is try to keep him out… which I was doing fairly well until today, when I had to use the Force."

"How is that connected?" Poe asked.

"It means that the only way I can mostly keep him out is by not using the Force."

"There's no way to break the connection?" Finn's brows furrowed together.

"If there is, I've yet to hear about it. Luke's gone, so I don't have his help anymore. He was the only other Jedi I knew. Now it's down to Kylo and myself…" She hesitated and then sighed. "The connection isn't something we can control, either. It's completely random. Suddenly, both of us will be able to see the other and talk. One of us can shut it off from there, but it's hard. It's usually easier to let it go away on its own."

All three humans were silent.

"That's, uh… that's..." Finn was at a loss for words.

"Difficult," Poe supplied.
"Yes." She bit her lip for a moment. "He won't hurt me."

Finn started to point to the marks on her throat, so she interrupted him. "Let me rephrase: he won't kill me. He wants something from me."

Poe slowly crossed his arms. "And what does he want?"

"It doesn't matter." Rey shook her head, igniting her lightsaber. "Come on. We've wasted enough time already."

BB-8 rolled up to her side and made a low chirp of dismay.

Stretching before them, against the horizon, were wetlands. Black, still water rippled in places where creatures were breathing, and a red moss hung in tangles from tree branches. Hooting was more prominent than it had been, adding a spooky feel, while birds half the size of BB-8 cawed and watched them from beady eyes.

"Anything could be in there," Poe said, coming to stand beside her. Finn was looking all around and above them. "Quicksand—though that's not too bad, you'd only go in up to your waist. But the mud would be worse."

"Predators, too," Rey remarked.

"Exactly. And we can't see the bottom, so..." He sighed and rubbed a hand over the back of his head. "I would ask you to use the Force again, but after what you said about Kylo Ren—"

"It's all right, Poe. Our safety is more important." She took a step toward the edge of the swamp, held out a hand, and closed her eyes.

_Skeletons at the bottom of the swamp—birds, nesting in the knobbed roots of the trees—fish, doing_
Rey's eyes snapped open. She let loose a steadying breath and lowered her arm.

Finn and Poe were watching her somewhat apprehensively.

"It's safe," she said. "There are predators, but they won't bother us." She cleared her throat and then smiled down at BB-8. "The real question is, how are we going to get him across the swamp?"

BB-8 rolled forward and disappeared into the depths of the murky water. Moments later, two lights emerged, flashing. She supposed they were guiding the way.

"All right, then," she said.

"Droids can survive in space. That usually means they're waterproof, too," Poe said, a bit amused.

Rey nodded. "This is probably going to be disgusting."

"Probably?" Finn replied. "No, it will be."

"I'll take lead," Rey said. Wrinkling her nose, she slowly waded into the water. It came up to her thighs, was cold, and smelled. On the other hand, it could have been much worse.

"Just be careful where you step," Poe called after her. "There's roots, and then the mud—"
"Got it, thanks." Each step, she sent her foot out to determine if there was anything in the way. It was a slow process, but she really didn't want to trip or get a foot stuck.

Finn complained most of the way. Rey didn't mind, because his remarks were comical. She couldn't help laughing a few times, much to his annoyance. He was being such a baby.

Poe fared better, although he had a harder time. Since he was bringing up the rear, he had to focus on the path behind them, as well as navigating the swamp before him.

As for BB-8, he was chirping cheerfully in the distance.

After nearly an hour, they made it to the other side. BB-8's white and bright orange paint was muddy, and everyone's boots were filled with muck. Rey was just glad to be standing on solid land again. The only downside was that she had to keep walking in this attire, in the muggy heat of the jungle.

"It's going to be night soon," Poe said, casting a wary eye to the canopy. "BB-8, how much longer until we reach the base?"

Whistling.

"About another hour. We might as well keep going. Better than being stuck out here all night."

The droid rolled off without waiting for them to follow.

"All right, let's move out!"

By the time they reached the base, they'd been in the dark for half an hour. It was distressing, to say the least.
"Well, at least we avoided the night predators."

Finn turned to Poe. "How do you know this stuff?"

The pilot looked confused. "I wasn't born in space."

Finn opened his mouth to reply, and then shrugged agreeably. "Yeah, all right."

"Where's the entrance?" Rey queried to their droid. She followed him as he rolled around the building. There weren't too many obstacles, just a fallen tree or two. It was hard to see with the trees blocking the moonlight, however.

After a short walk, they came to the front of the base. Everything looked intact, so far as they could tell. BB-8 went straight to the door and stuck an arm into a socket. After a moment, the door gave a great rumble and then began to grate away, exposing the inside.

Poe dug in his pocket and pulled free a small flashlight. He shined it into the building, and they waited with bated breath.

Nothing stirred.

"Good," Poe murmured. "Let's check it out." Keeping the flashlight at eye level, he went inside. Rey and Finn glanced at one another before following.

After another hour, they had gotten the scope of the place and had lights running, thanks to a backup generator that had survived. There was food and running water, but more importantly, the communications systems were in much better condition than their counterparts at the other base.

"This is great!" Rey couldn't believe their luck. They could finally get off this planet.

"Not so fast," Poe cautioned, rubbing a thumbnail up against his ear, his other hand on his hip. "We have no idea if these can actually transmit anything, and they're probably encrypted. We'll need General Organa to take a look at it." He gestured. "The good thing is, BB-8 found a tunnel that leads back to the other base."
"A tunnel?" Rey sat down on a chair that had seen better days. Dust puffed out from under her.

"Do you think it's dangerous?" Finn crossed his arms.

Poe hesitated. Then he shook his head. "I think it's possible. Anything could be down there."

"Well, it's the only feasible way we could get the others over here," Rey asserted. "If we clear out the tunnel on the way over, we can lead them back here and get off this planet. Though I'd have to fly the *Falcon* this way, so I suppose I could just take them on it, too…"

"Either way, the tunnel would be better on us than risking the jungle again."

Finn nodded. "I think it's time to eat. I'm starving." The only thing they'd had on the way here was water.

"I'm just going to shower and head to bed." Rey pushed herself to her feet. "Wake me in the morning?"

Poe hummed, but most of his attention was focused on the systems as BB-8 took a look at them.

With Finn off to get food, and Poe occupied, Rey slipped into the compound to find a shower.

There was a communal bathroom about halfway into the building. Rey pried the door open and took a careful glance around before hitting the lights. They flickered, acquiescing a moment later. It was dusty in here, too, and a little rusty in places. When she turned on a knob, she jumped out of the way as it gushed out brown water. She didn't have to wait long before it ran clear.

Pleased, she stripped down and got under the water. It was cold, but that was all right. After the trek through the jungle, dealing with the reptilian creature, braving a swamp, and fending off Ben's advances, hot water was a luxury she could afford to miss out on.

She scrubbed down. She didn't have any soap, so she had to make do. Feeling the water sluice
through her hair was the nicest thing, the cold making her groan slightly in relief as she pushed it off her face and tilted her head back.

That was when she felt it.

The line, snapping taut.

She whirled around, shrieking and covering her chest with her arms, her back slamming into the wall. She sputtered as water ran into her eyes and stepped out of the flow.

"Get out!"

Ben at least had the grace to look at the ceiling. "It's just now happened. You know it takes a few minutes before we can disconnect."

This was true, though she didn't have to like it.

"It's never been this bad before," she spat out.

"It's growing stronger," he said. "Just like we discussed before."

"Just—just turn around!"

He did so slowly. She edged to the side and started throwing her clothes back on. She'd take them back off when he left. She wasn't going to stand here naked with him in the room.

"You're in a base again, but not like the other… and you were wandering through… a jungle, it seemed. Where are you?"

"I'm not going to tell you that." She was shivering a little.
"I'll find you eventually."

"Just go!"

Ben turned around. "Is that what you really want?"

"Do you need to ask that?"

He tilted his head, his eyes boring through her in that soul-searching way he had. "Does it surprise you that I do?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because why would I want you here?" She covered her chest again, even though she was clothed now. He had a way of making her feel way too vulnerable.

He took a step forward. She took one back.

"You don't miss it?"

"Miss what?" she snapped.

"Getting to know one another."

"I know you," she replied. "I know you, and now I don't want to know you." She said it mostly to provoke him, so that he'd get angry enough and leave, like usual.

A faint smile hovered on his mouth again.
A second later, and he was gone.

She wasn't sure why, but that terrified her more than anything.
Chapter Notes

Shorter chapter, but Rey has to puzzle through some stuff. Thanks for the continued support, you guys are awesome! :)

*Some of them want to use you,*

*Some of them want to get used by you,*

*Some of them want to abuse you,*

*Some of them want to be abused*

-Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This), (cover) Emily Browning

*turmoil*

*darkness*

*uncertainty*

*lost*

*alone*

*abandoned*

*misunderstood*

"STOP!"
Rey opened her eyes. She was sitting cross-legged on her bed, and facing her was Ben, who was absolutely seething. His eyes were wide, his nostrils flared, his lips thinned where they pressed together. He was shirtless, and it was taking Rey more willpower than she would have liked to ignore it.

"Why?" she asked.

"You know why!"

"Do I?" She couldn't help herself: she smiled.

"Stay out of my head!"

The smile dropped. "Sure! So long as you stay out of mine!"

A stalemate occurred in which they glared at one another. It went on for several minutes, their gazes locked in an intense battle of wills. The anger in the room was almost palpable. Both were too stubborn to back down.

Something strange began to happen. Rey's heartrate picked up, and her stomach knotted with a flutter. Her breath grew unsteady as her skin seemed to tighten all over. Heat spread through her, leaving her entire body to tingle.

Ben's pupils dilated. His tongue touched his lips briefly. His fingers flexed and then curled into balls, as though he was holding himself back. His lashes lowered, making Rey's heart skip a pace. She was suddenly incredibly aware of the fact that he was shirtless, and that she couldn't ignore it any longer.

He rose onto his knees, slowly but steadily, treating her as if she were a skittish animal. She watched as he leaned forward, and she didn't stop him as he placed an arm on either side of her, forcing her to lower back onto the bed.

"Ben—"
"You want me."

She flushed and turned her head, gazing out into the dark room. She wanted to answer him, had rebuttals lined up on her tongue. They refused to leave her mouth, stranding her in a sea of sensations she didn't entirely understand. She was somewhat helpless beneath him, and he seemed to know it.

A dark chuckle echoed through the room, soft against her ear. Her hands came up to his chest—braced. To push him away…? To pull him closer…? How was his skin so warm? She had always thought of him as cold, unreachable, and that that would somehow transmute into his body.

He closed his eyes. One of his hands lifted to cover hers. He held it to his chest for a moment before his lips grazed her palm, the inside of her wrist…

A smile of wonder spread over his mouth. "Your pulse is racing."

It was the sight of that smile that left her unable to pull away, although she did flush harder with embarrassment.

A large, slender hand descended, landing on the center of her breastbone. He spread his fingers out, his expression growing intent. She tried to stay as still as possible, not knowing what he was about. After a moment, that same smile returned.

"Your heart is, too."

She swallowed.

He looked at her. "You're hiding your thoughts from me."

Again Rey turned her face away, but he caught it and gently nudged it back.

"Why?" he asked.
"Why do you hide yours from me?" she countered.

He went silent. Then he let her go and sat back, clearly pensive.

She didn't move, mostly because she wasn't sure if she could. Her heart was refusing to slow down even the tiniest bit, and her limbs continued to tingle all over.

"What if I asked you not to?"

Rey's gaze shot up to his. Stunned, she contemplated the question. He was asking for something, not demanding? She didn't get the feeling that it was some sort of trap, either.

But was it…?

"What if I asked you not to?"

Silence reigned once more.

"How do you expect me to trust you, when you can't trust me?" Rey propped herself up on her elbows to see him better.

"It's not that I don't trust you," he replied. "I just don't trust you not to meddle with my thoughts."

"Have you considered that may go both ways?"

"Why would I meddle with your thoughts?"

"Why would I meddle with yours?"

"To try to change me. To try to redeem me." He leaned forward, just a little. "There's nothing to redeem. There's nothing to change. The sooner you accept that, the better."
She shook her head with a small, exhausted laugh. "I've been trying to *avoid* you. Why would I care about your redemption? You've made yourself the 'Supreme Leader'—and here she didn't bother to hide her distaste—and you're bent on ruling the galaxy. I want nothing to do with you."

"That's not true." Ben's voice took on that lick of anger that signaled he was about to lose his temper. "We both know it's not."

"Ben, why does it matter if I'm at your side or not?!" she burst out and sat up entirely.

"Because you belong there. Because you are mine."

"I don't belong to anyone! No one owns me! Not anymore." She looked down with a shake of her head. "And until you can understand that—" She cut off with a sharp gasp.

*Darkness, wrapping around her, soft, like a lover, caressing thoughts and feelings she'd been barely aware of.*

*The joy of letting go, of relishing in victory. The freedom of doing what she wanted, with nothing to stop her.*

*The high of controlling her own destiny—of never letting anyone hold her back. No guilt. No sadness.*

*lust—desire—heat—want—need—*

It was as if another person was possessing her body as she jumped into his lap, tangled her fingers in his hair, and brought her lips crashing down on his.

A low growl rumbled in his throat that made her throb all over. His hands slid down her back and over her hips, jerking her closer, directly against him. She rose up on her knees, and his head tilted back so the kiss would remain unbroken, his hands now sliding around to cup the backs of her thighs.
This time it was she who inquisitively darted her tongue against his mouth. He parted his lips without hesitation, enticing her by touching his tongue to hers. Flames erupted beneath her flesh, goading her on, enough to sink her teeth into his lips. She didn't do it gently, asserting an edge of pain.

He growled louder, rising and tumbling her beneath him. Her thighs were hooked over his hips, and she wound her arms around his shoulders and pulled his mouth back to hers. He braced himself on the mattress with one hand as the other wandered over her ribs, rising higher, higher…

She gripped his wrist and pushed it down her body, only thinking about how good she felt, and how she was aching, and how he could help her. His hand cupped over her, his thumb rubbing her clit through her undergarments.

A moan exploded from her. She trembled, finding his neck and biting into it. His fingers hooked under fabric and pushed it aside so that a fingertip could dip inside of her.

"Ben—"

"REY! ARE YOU AWAKE?!"

Her eyes fluttered open.

Awareness slowly made itself known.

She was flat on her back, and the moth-eaten blankets were tangled around her legs. What was new, and a bit distressing, was her hand between her thighs, and her fingers… Blushing deeply, she pulled them free and sat up before lifting them for inspection. She'd never touched herself there—she'd never wanted to. But Ben came along, and she…

"Rey?!!"

What had happened…? He'd been in her dream… She'd decided to delve into his mind, to remind him what that felt like. Ben had been furious… they'd discussed it, like reasonable adults, shockingly. And then… he'd… what? What had he done? Her memory of it was blurry. Something
She gasped. About darkness!

Had he manipulated her by showing the darkness inside of him? And what did it say, that she got swept into it without hesitation? It called to mind that day on Ahch-To, her first lesson with Luke, and the angry, exasperated words he had for her.

"...you went straight to the dark...!"

The darkness didn't scare her.

"Rey...?! Bang, bang.

But Ben did.

"REY!"

"R'iia's shorts, I'm awake!" she yelled to the door.

"Come on, then, we're having a meeting! Poe wants to discuss getting back to the other base."

"I'll be right there!" she called, her voice still raspy with sleep. She listened to Finn's footsteps fade before she fell onto her back, arms spread around her, and sighed.

If he could show her his darkness, and let it pull her in... Then didn't it go to say that she could flip the tables? Do the same thing to him?

She lay there for a long while, searching her feelings. She supposed the real question was: did she want to? And even if she did... could he be saved?
She remembered speaking with Leia two weeks past, as the general grieved over the death of her brother. Her family was falling apart all around her, yet Luke's words remained with her.

"No one's ever really gone."

Rey put her forearm against her forehead, her heart heavy. Ben was determined to start over, to get rid of everyone and everything. How in seven hells was she supposed to be able to save him, especially when he didn't want to be saved?

"Let the past die. Kill it if you have to. That's the only way to become who you are meant to be."

The words whispered at the back of her mind.

"You're nothing... but not to me."

When Rey sat up, the movements were laced with anger. Just as she had the day before, she tugged on her boots and grabbed her lightsaber. She had no choice with her hair but to pull it back into a knot after combing her fingers through it.

"You're not alone."

Rey yelled and slammed her fist into a mirror that had seen better days. The crunch of the glass was satisfying, even if it stung like ripper-raptor fangs. She hated this. She hated remembering. It was easier not to, to pretend that nothing had ever passed between them, that she didn't know what it felt like to be close to his heart.

She didn't know what to do.

She closed her eyes as they stung with tears and tried to gather her breath. She had no one now. No one who could understand. Luke had sacrificed himself to save them all, and the person she'd turned to before was gone, swallowed up by his own venomous cesspool of emotions. Maybe he had never been there at all. Maybe it had all just been an elaborate ruse on Snoke's part.

Warm brown eyes, a hand extending to her, a hand of kinship.
Rey gritted her teeth. She hated him so much…!

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale…

Her eyes opened slowly.

But she didn't hate him enough.

She looked into the ruined mirror and then down at her bloody knuckles. She winced as she picked a few pieces of glass out. Served her right, losing her temper like that.

_Tick marks on the wall, counting down every day, every day that she was stuck on Jakku, that she waited for her parents to come and rescue her…_

"No, no! You're still—holding on! Let go! You want to know the truth about your parents? You've always known. You've just hidden it away. You know the truth. Say it. Say it."

Rey wiped her hands over her cheeks and sniffled.

"They were filthy junk traders who sold you off for drinking money. They're dead, in a pauper's grave, in a Jakku desert. You have no place in this story. You come from nothing. You're nothing."

She had thought she was over this. Why was it surfacing now? Because she'd fought so hard to put it from her mind, to focus on the path ahead of her?

"But not to me."

No!

This wasn't fair. She'd written him off. She'd known it was too late for him. And now she was deciding otherwise? But it just made sense. He was controlling the First Order. Someone was
going to have to bring him down, and the only person who could do that was her. She was the only one strong enough to face off with him and survive.

That was the thing. The thought of killing him… it broke her.

Her back to the wall, she slid down it, her face screwed up to keep the tears back. She put her arms around her knees and buried her face in them.

"...but not to me..."
"All right, so here's the plan. I've got the systems up and running. You and Finn are gonna take BB-8 back to the base through the tunnel. BB-8 will signal to me, and we'll be able to go from there." Poe looked from one to the other. "Everybody on the same page?"

Finn raised his hand from his seat at the meeting table.

Poe's eyebrows arched in question.

"So we are going to chance the creepy tunnel?"

"Unless you have any better ideas?" Poe replied.

Rey knew she was supposed to be paying attention to the meeting. It was really important and involved possibly endangering their lives again. Poe and Finn (and even BB-8) were counting on her.

She chewed her lip, staring off into space. Her mind was racing, and nothing she did could slow it down. What she had dubbed "The Kylo Ren Problem" was encompassing all her thoughts with a determination that was more than a little frightening. It was a shame Ben couldn't be here for this. Knowing she was fixated on him would put him in a good mood for days, so long as he didn't understand the context.

"Rey?"

She was still so indecisive…
"Rey?"

There were so many options on the path to Ben's redemption, and several that were closed already because they hadn't worked the first time.

"Rey!"

She blinked—looked to the side. Poe was kneeling next to her chair. He had his hand on her shoulder and concern was in his eyes. Brown eyes, lighter than Ben's, and filled with more empathy than their enemy could ever express. She stared into them for a moment and felt her pulse scramble.

"Are you okay?" he asked, not breaking eye contact.

Rey nodded mutely.

Poe's brows furrowed as he frowned. He placed one arm on his knee and the other up on the table. "You don't seem like yourself."

*darkness, sliding down her spine*

She looked up. Ben stood across from her, on the other side of the table. She could feel the anger rolling off him in waves, but for some reason, he wasn't saying or doing anything. On closer inspection, he really wasn't even looking *at* her, but through her.

Rey rose from her chair, walking around Poe and to the other side of the table. Ben's gaze didn't follow her. What was going on?

"Why are you being quiet?" she asked as she circled around him. "Is this some kind of game?"

"Is she talking to Kylo Ren?" Finn whispered loudly. Poe gestured for him to quiet as he stared intently in Rey's direction.
She heard—... voices... words... They sounded warped, as if they were coming in through a bad connection. She concentrated, head tilting to the side, her eyes narrowing. If she focused just enough...

"...Leaving us unnecessarily open to attack!"

"Who is going to attack us?" Ben replied. He pivoted, and Rey went with him, fascinated. "The Resistance is all but destroyed. They don't have the manpower to even attempt—"

"Do not be so naïve! Until they are crushed entirely, they will be free to—"

Ben's hand raised in the air, and he curled his fingers, like he was squeezing something. There was a gurgle and a whimper.

"Who is that, Ben?" Rey asked in as strong a voice as she could muster.

He didn't answer her, his fingers still Force choking whoever he was pissed at. Rey pushed her thoughts into his and met the equivalent of a brick wall. It seemed he had learned something from last night. But that wasn't enough to keep her out.

She focused on what she wanted, which was breaking through his guard. It was even more difficult than the first time they had met. It was like a wall of darkness swirling around him. After a moment, she realized he was using that—darkness—to keep her away. He considered her a Jedi, someone too afraid to tread where darkness dwelled.

He had never been more wrong.

She took that darkness inside of her. It was cold, so cold, and it embraced her like Ben's arms. Her immediate instinct was to burn it away with light. She suppressed it and kept going, her fingers mentally outstretched. She was so close she could taste it.

"No one understands you... Your parents threw you away because you frighten them..."
Whose voice was that? Snoke's?

"Skywalker will never be able to handle your power... You are stronger than him... He will fear you..."

Ben's face twitched, and his eyes focused on hers. Fury burned strong within their depths.

"I can show you greatness..."

The darkness around her seized, tightened. She was trapped, submersed in this tiny realm, and there was no choice but to keep going forward.

"I can let you use your full powers..."

Stay out! screamed through her, so sharp it was as if she had actually been cut. The words echoed over and over again.

And then she could see through his eyes, deeper than she had ever meant to go.

A red-haired man, collapsed on a shiny black floor that looked to be the bridge of a spaceship. Rey didn't recognize him, had no idea who he was. His cheeks were splotched with patches of red, probably from being choked. He stared up at Ben with a mixture of hate and fear.

"Yes, Supreme Leader..."

Hux, Ben's thoughts whispered.

Rey digested that right before she was unceremoniously thrown from his mind. The force of it was enough to knock her physically off her feet. She stared up at him from her new home on the ground.

"Rey!" Poe was at her side, dropping to his knees and offering her a hand to hoist her up. She
ignored him, focused on Ben's livid face. Her breath was coming fast, adrenaline pumping through her. He still said nothing, and she knew it was because he was in front of his army. He couldn't afford to look like even more of a psychotic, murdering bastard than he already was.

*You are mine,* shot through her mind. *If Commander Dameron so much as puts a finger on you, I will—*

*I am not yours!* she steamed.

Usually, he was the one to pop out. This time, she did.

"What happened?" Poe asked. Finn was already kneeling on her other side.

"I saw Hux." Rey pushed herself to her feet without assistance. "That was when he kicked me out."

"Rey…" Finn gestured to beneath her nose.

She touched it, and her fingers came away sticky with blood.

"What did you do, exactly?" Poe rose, and Finn scrambled to follow suit. BB-8 gave a low whistle.

She scrubbed at her nose furiously. "I got into his head. I saw through his eyes."

This statement was met with silence.

"I don't think I'll be able to do it again," she went on before they could get any ideas.

"What were they discussing?" Poe queried.

"I'm not sure. Hux was worried about being open to attack, and B—Kylo Ren said that the Resistance isn't a concern right now."
"Boy, does he have another thing coming."

"That's the gist of what Hux said."

"Rey, I know I asked a short while ago, but are you sure you're all right?" Poe crossed his arms and leaned back against the table.

"Of course. Why?"

Finn and Poe exchanged another look.

"Guys."

They looked away.

"Guys—what?"

Finn coughed something under his breath.

Annoyance flared. "Really?"

BB-8 rolled forward and let loose a series of chirps.

Rey touched her injured hand, which had been wrapped in some gauze from a med kit. "I told you, it was an accident."

More chirping and a couple of beeps.

She pointed to the side. "I didn't put those marks on my neck, Kylo did!"
Beep beep bewoop.

Rey touched her nose. "That was from trying to read his thoughts."

Vweeee, voomoom.

"Of course, I'm being careful!"

BB-8's head fell back in skepticism.

"All right, if we're all done here?" she said hotly. "I believe we were discussing a tunnel."

Poe eyed her for a moment, and then nodded. "There could be anything down there. This base hasn't been used in years—obviously—and it's possible any number of dangers found their way into the bunker."

Rey's eyebrows lifted. "A bunker?"

"Yeah. Meant to withstand an orbital surface bombing. It's pretty deep in the ground."

Finn twitched nervously. "So, uh... any kinda idea what's down there, or...?"

"None at all."

"Oh, great... great," he muttered.

"The weapons here checked out, so I can give you a blaster. Will that make you feel any better, Finn?" There was just a hint of amusement to Poe's tone. When Rey smothered a laugh, he gave her a wink.
Finn sulked. "Maybe a little…"

"We'll be okay," Rey reassured him. "But we should really get going."

"You ready, BB-8?" Poe asked.

Excited beeps.

"All right, then. We'll get the blasters, and then we'll go to the hatch."

It was a hatch outside that was overgrown with vines and flowers—or it had been. The vegetation was piled off to the side, and the rusty hatch was open.

"You did all this already?" Rey questioned.

Poe grinned. "I don't really sleep all that much, and I didn't want any delays on your trip. The quicker we can get the General and the others here, the better."

"Right." Rey tried not to feel nervous herself as she looked at the top of a rusty ladder, which descended into pure darkness and was extremely sketchy.

Finn didn't bother hiding his emotions. "This is gonna suck."

"Suck choobies?" Rey asked, trying to make light of the situation. She hated seeing her friend so worried.

Poe chuckled. "You guys should get going, then."
"I'll go first," Rey volunteered, mostly because Finn looked a bit green.

"I don't like small, dark spaces." He couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from the yawning hole. "I really don't."

"Buck up, kid." Poe patted his back. "You've got a Jedi and the best droid in the business."

"T-That's true," Finn whispered. He didn't budge an inch.

Poe pulled Rey off to the side, out of immediate earshot. He reached into his jacket and produced something small and white. "See this?"

She nodded.

He jerked his head in Finn's direction. "If he gets woozy or feels faint, or even if he passes out, wave this under his nose. It'll bring him back around."

She took it, and they both watched Finn.

Poe put his hands on his hips. "He feels claustrophobic at a tunnel, which makes no sense because he's surrounded by space frequently and has no fear of how close he is to dying at any moment, should something go wrong."

"Sometimes some things don't make any sense, no matter how hard we try." She shrugged. "At least, that's what I've learned."

He eyed her contemplatively, and she tried not to feel self-conscious. "What?"

"I knew from the moment I saw you that you were strong."

She snorted. "It was the floating rocks. They have that effect."
He laughed and drew his fingers through his curls. "When you killed that thing in the jungle, you weren't using floating rocks—which, by the way, is still really impressive—you were fighting for your survival."

"Anyone would." She was confused. He was just as strong as she! He didn't have the Force, but he was an ace pilot and knew his way around a blaster.

"What I'm saying, Rey..." He sighed. "No matter how tough things get... know you're not alone. Know that you have friends, friends who are gonna be here for you no matter what." He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed... slowly. "Okay?"

She was saved from having to answer when Finn called out to them. "Hey, are we doing this or what?"

"We were waiting on you!" Rey laughed. She hesitated for a moment and then looked up into Poe's eyes. They were as open as they always were. He had nothing to hide. "Thank you." She leaned up impulsively and kissed his cheek. Then she went to the hatch opening, stepped onto the ladder, swallowed apprehensively, and began the descent.

"So..." Finn said from above her, the light from the flashlights strapped to his chest bouncing around. "You and Poe, huh?"

Rey nearly missed a step, and a shower of rust shifted free. "It's not like that," she said firmly.

"Uh huh."

She wanted to reply with a heated defense, but she knew that would only work against her. She wasn't interested in love right now. It only created all sorts of problems, problems she didn't have time to deal with or sort through. But she couldn't explain this to Finn—he wouldn't understand.

"Kylo Ren, too." He sounded bitter, and this drew her up short. She kept moving so he didn't accidentally step on her head.
"I hate Kylo Ren."

"Uh huh."

Rey rolled her eyes, glad he couldn't see it.

She decided to change the topic. She had no idea why he was acting like this. "I think we're about halfway down." At least, she hoped so. This ladder was not exactly steady. It wobbled strongly with every step. "This is so slow going."

Vrrrrrrrrppppp…

They both paused at the robotic noise and looked around. BB-8 chirped at them as he slid down a tether he had latched to the hatch opening.

"We are not slowpokes!" Rey protested.

"Yeah, look at you, you've got it easy!" Finn chimed in.

Beeping.

Rey rolled her eyes for the second time in two minutes. Sometimes BB-8 was so impossible. Cute, but not afraid to gloat.

Their steps continued to thunk through the narrow tunnel. Finn dislodged more rust, and Rey shrieked as a bit of it met her eyes.

He froze on the step above her. "Rey! Are you okay?"

"Fine," she sputtered. "Give me a minute."
That was when they heard the snoring.

Rey looked up as Finn looked down, and it was clear they were both frightened.

Even BB-8 went quiet. He continued to descend, however.

"What is that?" Finn mouthed in the glare from Rey's flashlights.

"No idea!" she mouthed back wildly.

Another snore rocked through the tunnel. They kept going down, as they didn't have much of a choice. By the time they reached the bottom, they were plastered against the ladder from the force of the snoring. Rey's heart was pounding. Whatever this was, they could not wake it.

Her feet thumped to the bottom of the tunnel as lightly as she could manage. She stepped aside and gestured for Finn to follow suit. Both held their breath as BB-8 finished with his tether and his heavy bulk hit the ground. It wasn't too bad, and they listened, their ears straining.

More snoring.

What could possibly be so big…? They cautiously moved forward, dimming their flashlights to the lowest setting. BB-8 was unusually quiet and trailed after them rather than pushing ahead.

They encountered the creature twenty feet in.

With every exhale on a snore, they staggered back a bit from the force of it. It was easy to see why: calling it enormous would be an understatement. Its paw that was outstretched was easily four feet wide. The creature was blocking some branch off the tunnel, curled up on its side.

With the little light, Rey determined it was… feline. Its coat was a deep gold, and it was covered in acid green stripes. Two horns curled up under its ears, wicked looking and longer than Rey's arm. Its mouth was partly open, showing equally long fangs.
The rest of the tunnel continued unoccupied, with stairs that were going lower and lower, presumably to the bunker portion. Rey didn't know what the feline was blocking, but she didn't care. Nothing they needed was down that way.

*Why did they have to build this place so big?* she thought.

She pointed to Finn and then down the tunnel. He nodded to show he understood. Together they tiptoed around the creature, Finn's hand ready to draw his blaster, Rey's hovering over her lightsaber. It stirred, and both froze, but it didn't seem to be waking. They relaxed just a smidgen and crept forward.

Its paw twitched.

*Just a little more...!* she thought desperately.

It shuddered.

*So close...!*

An eye opened, green with a slit pupil.

They froze again, as if that would make any bit of difference. And of course, it didn't. The thing pushed itself onto its paws, suddenly very alert.

Some protective mode must have possessed Finn because he pushed her behind him and lifted his blaster.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Rey hissed.

The thing rose—and rose—and rose—
"Uh, Rey…"

Not knowing what else to do, she brought forth her lightsaber. For a moment, it blazed a brilliant, familiar blue.

And then it flickered and died.

"Rey… Rey, please tell me your lightsaber didn't just die…"

She frantically hit the switch, but the laser wasn't working.

"Rey, PLEASE TELL ME YOUR LIGHTSABER DIDN'T JUST DIE!"

"It didn't die," she said.

And then she ran.

Finn followed suit, and BB-8 whizzed after them.

Oh, gods, oh, gods, oh, gods, what the hell had happened to her lightsaber?! She had known the crystal looked cracked when she'd done a shoddy repair, but it had been working fine so far… and now, when she really needed it, it was crapping out on her.

It just figured! Because when was the last time something went the way she expected it to?!

"Uh, Rey—"

"Unless you're going to tell me that it changed its mind and decided that we wouldn't make an amazing after-nap meal, I'm going to need you to let me concentrate!"

The sound of their footsteps slamming against pavement.
"Uh, Rey—"

"WHAT?!" she screamed, half-delirious with fear.

"WE'VE GOT COMPANY!" he bellowed back.

She couldn't look behind her. She couldn't. She just couldn't. "What do you mean?!"

"It's got babies! And by babies, I mean, like, five!"

R'iia's shorts…!

Of course, of course, her link to Ben snapped into existence right at that very moment.

"Rey…" he began cautiously.

"I REALLY CAN'T TALK RIGHT NOW!" she cried hysterically.

"REY, THEY'RE RIGHT BEHIND US!" Finn shouted.

"NOT HELPING, FINN!"

Rey had never run so hard, or so fast, in her life. The only reason she was even able to continue like this was pure adrenaline. Her life was on the line, more surely than it had ever been, at least in the sense of an immediate threat. And if they didn't find a way to evade these things…

"What's happening?" Ben asked sharply, from far away. He clearly wasn't running after her.

"REY!" Finn shrieked.
Rey attempted to ignite her lightsaber. It made a go at lighting up but ultimately gave up.

Excellent.

Excellent!

Wait… There! An opening in the wall.

She seized Finn by the arm and threw him inside with her. Their momentum tripped them up for a moment. They regained traction shortly after and shot off in this new direction. Rey could hear the feline behind her, hissing viciously, too big to shove itself into the smaller tunnel. That didn't prevent her kittens from continuing the chase.

Finn was already wheezing behind her. She understood—she had a knot under her ribs that was quickly growing more and more painful. They wouldn't be able to keep up like this much longer.

"Choobies!" she shouted.

"Rey!" Ben demanded.

"There—up there!" Finn cried. "A ladder—can we make it?!"

"We're going to try!" she replied.

As promised, a ladder awaited them at the end of a large room that spaced off into smaller rooms. This must have been part of the bunker. The ladder looked like it led to a small ledge and then through another door. If they could just make it there, they could get their bearings, and…

"CHOOBIES!"

"What?!"
"BB-8!"

There was a great twittering, and then BB-8 barreled past them, faster than they'd ever seen. It looked like he was throwing up a tether, looping it over the top of the ladder, and quickly pulling himself up. Hope surged in Rey's chest. If BB-8 could make it, then surely, they could?

Rey hit the ladder first. She flung herself up it, moving as fast as humanly possible. She threw herself over the ledge and rolled through the doorway. Finn followed a moment later, grabbing the inside of the new tunnel and placing a hand over his ribs. He slumped, panting.

"Are we safe…?" Rey whispered over the racing of her heartbeat.

Finn winced as he straightened, but he looked over the edge. Rey could hear yowls and spitting. Finn withdrew and came to sit next to her.

"I think so… but we better move, they look determined."

BB-8 beeped agreeably.

"I'm just glad we're alive," she moaned around the bubble of pain in her chest. She got up and stumbled forward. She ached all over, mostly from lack of oxygen, but she couldn't rest. Not yet. Not until they were really safe.

"REY!" Ben grabbed her by the arms and shook her. "What is happening? What is wrong? Tell me!"

She shoved him off her. "I can't do this right now! Okay? Not right now!"

Finn groaned as he got to his feet. "Tell Kylo to buzz off."

Ben looked murderous. "You're in danger. Let me help you."
Rey limped to the exit of the tunnel. She peered around the corner, finding another ladder. "Okay. We climb up that one, and then BB-8 can figure out how to get us out of here."

"Rey," Ben pleaded, and that was what made her finally turn around.

She'd never seen him look so worried.

"I promise I will tell you later," she said before she could think better about it. "There's nothing you can do right now."

"There must be something," he insisted.

"You can go," she said, and now that the adrenaline was wearing off, exhausted tears touched her eyes. "Please."

She expected a blowout, but he vanished. That, or she had shut off the link. She didn't know which. She was too tired to care.

Once they were over the new ladder and in another tunnel, they consulted BB-8. He chirped and went to work.

"This is odd." Rey plopped down and rested her arms on her knees. "Why would a Rebel bunker base be so… labyrinth-like?"

"They coulda built over it," Finn mused.

"I guess we can ask Poe if we see him again."

"When," Finn corrected.

"When," Rey smiled.
BB-8 whistled.

"There's an exit nearby?" Rey asked in surprise. "That's… lucky."

More whistles, and a few beeps.

"Right." She sighed and scratched a thumbnail over her eyebrow. "Of course, it is."

It was an exit, just not the one they wanted.

"How far away is that?" she inquired.

Whooo, beepitbeepbeep.

"Two miles off course. That's not too bad…"

"So long as we don't encounter anything else," Finn replied.

"It's all right. We've got blasters for the smaller things." She stood again and held out a hand to him. He grabbed her forearm and pushed himself to his feet. "Better get going, if we're going to make it before dark."

"Now you sound like Poe."

"Maybe," she agreed. "But the man's right. We don't want to get caught in the jungle once the sun goes down… without my lightsaber."

It was an ominous turn of events, and not one she appreciated.

"Well, let's be off."
Finn nodded, and they followed BB-8 through the maze.

---

How they managed to make it back to the General without encountering anything else, Rey had no idea. She was, however, eternally grateful… as well as covered in dust and rust. That trip through the rest of the bunker had been long and the detour in the jungle longer.

Leia hugged her when she arrived. "Rey," she said warmly. Then she took one look at Finn and walked over to him, cupping his cheeks. "I'm glad you two got back safely. Where's Commander Dameron?"

"Decided to promote him again?" Finn joked.

She shrugged and waved a hand. "I didn't ever really demote him. His ego just gets the better of him at times."

"He's at the other base," Rey said. "That's why we're here. The systems work there!"

There were murmurs of disbelief and then whoops of joy.

The general touched her chest and closed her eyes in relief. After a moment to compose herself, she turned to their small fleet.

"We'll communicate with Commander Dameron, and then we'll plot our next course of action. In the meantime, I want everyone to pack up their things and get ready to leave." She turned to BB-8. "Are you ready?"

A few chirps.

"I'm just—I'll be back," Rey muttered, dismissing herself and heading to her room. She looked around at everything, caught her scent from how long she'd been staying here. The covers were
made, meaning someone had come in here after she'd left.

She straightened and looked to her right. Ben stood there, expression stormy, brooding. Concern had his jaw taut, had pulled his mouth into a deepening frown. She came close to him, stopping just before she would be touching him with her body.

"You were in danger," he said.

"I was," she agreed.

"I could have helped you."

"That's not your place."

"It is my place."

"It's not!" she snapped. "I—I can't do this again. You're doing it—you're... you're showing concern, you're insisting we're a team. But I know where that path leads, and I won't do it again."

"You can't stop me from caring about you." He lifted his hand to her cheek.

She slapped it away. "You're right. I can't. But I also know that I can't handle... you. You're unpredictable. You're cruel one moment, kind the next. I'm not your toy, Ben. I have feelings of my own."

He watched her silently.

"You do understand that, don't you?"

"That you're human? Yes." He searched her eyes. "So am I. Let me in."
"No," she said, and she didn't like how tight her throat was growing, or the heat behind her eyes. "I can't."

"You can," he insisted. He cupped her face and tilted it up to see him. "Look at me. Look into my eyes."

She closed her own. It took a moment before she could speak without her voice cracking. "Stop, Ben."

"Rey—"

"I'm no one, remember?" When she opened her eyes again, they were dry, and her voice was steady and firm. "I don't belong in this story."

"You don't," he insisted. "You belong here, with me."

"You're not here, Ben! You're across the galaxy!"

"You could be here. You could be here now." It was like the time in Snoke's chamber all over again. There was a fervent, desperate spark to his eyes, a certainty in his voice. So she wasn't surprised when he held out his hand to her. "Rey. Do this."

"No, Ben."

His desperation threaded to frustration, riding the line of anger. "No—no. You don't understand. You're doing it again. Why do you keep doing this? Be with me. Be with me." He raised his hand higher.

She took a step back, and then another. She knew her gaze was as sad as it had been two weeks ago.

"Rey—don't."
"Can we be together without destroying the past, Ben?"

"The past is what is holding us back!"

"The past is what is grounding me in the future," she whispered.

"Why do you think that?" Somehow, he hadn't completely lost his temper yet. His eyes were determined, as if he thought he was close to convincing her, and she had only to see. "Tell me. Why do you think that?"

"If we let go of our past, we forget what's shaped us to be who we are now. My parents may have been paupers buried in a Jakku desert who didn't give a damn about me, it's true. But I am the person I am today because of the pain I went through. There's a difference between forgetting the past and letting go of the past."

He stared at her.

"In your eyes, your parents abandoned you. Luke tried to kill you in your sleep. Snoke was the only one who you could turn to. But Snoke brought us together. Don't you see?"

He didn't answer her.

"Without our pasts, we never would have met. We never would have understood each other." She stepped back to him, close enough to take his hand, but she didn't. "We never would have connected. We wouldn't be standing where we are today."

His eyes lowered. And she hoped, for just a moment—

Then his face hardened. "You're mistaken. We are where we are today because we made this future for ourselves. And we can continue to do so, but to do that, for this to work, we must destroy everything that ever held us back. We'll be free, then."

His hand cupped over the back of her neck, and he pulled her into a kiss, one that was rough with the frustration he was feeling. She put her hands on his chest and pushed.
"Free for what?" she cried, exasperated.

"Free to be together. To fix everything—to bring order back to the galaxy."

He was crazy.

He was stark, raving mad.

She had thought it in Snoke's chambers, and she thought it now.

But she knew what she had to do.

She knew what people were unknowingly depending on her to do.

He held his hand out to her for a third time…

"I'll—I'll try," she whispered.

And she took his hand in her own.
Chapter Notes

You guys are so freaking awesome!!!! I am overwhelmed by the support. I appreciate every hit, every kudos, every bookmark, every comment! :)

Oh, it'll take a little time,
Might take a little crime,
To come undone now,
We'll try to stay blind,
To the hope and fear outside,
Hey, child, stay wilder than the wind
And blow me into cry

-Come Undone, (cover) Carina Round, Aidan Hawken

"We have enough fuel to get to Naboo," Poe tapped a screen. "It's close by. We're both on the edge of the Outer Rim. We can make one hyper jump…" He tsked. "It's gonna be tight."

"Would it be better to try and contact someone out there?" Rey asked.

General Organa shook her head. "As of right now, no. We're too few, and if the First Order finds us, it's all over."

Rey's stomach contracted with anxiety. The First Order. Kylo Ren. Ben. The man she'd taken the hand of several days ago. Their enemy.

"Naboo's a member of the Intergalactic Senate," Finn pointed out. "It's New Republic, but there could be bounty hunters there."

"There could be bounty hunters anywhere," Poe asserted. "That's the world we live in."
Rey walked up to the screen, her arms wrapped tightly around herself. It was projected onto the middle of the room, above the meeting table. A star grid swirled, systems and their planets sweeping by. One planet was flashing, indicating that it was Naboo, or so she deduced. It was definitely the closest.

...Rey...

The touch of Ben's thoughts caressed over hers. Quickly, panicked, she threw up her shields. Had he seen? Had he read her mind and figured out where they were headed?

She turned around and nearly slammed into Ben. He really needed to quit doing that.

"Your mother is here!" she ground out under her breath. It was the only thing she could think of to make him back off.

His eyes moved—landed directly on his mother. Rey swung around to see Leia, before pivoting back to Ben. Could he really see her?

*Force bond,* whispered through her mind. *Mother and son.*

Ben curled his lip and vanished.

Rey staggered against the table and braced herself. It was difficult to remain upright. The burden she had taken on was heavy and fraught with easy paths to disaster. She distantly heard Leia dismiss everyone to prepare to leave Solaris.

A gentle hand touched her shoulder. "Commander Dameron filled me in a little about what's going on. You're talking to Ben…?"

Rey didn't want to do this.

*I have to. Ben is leaving me with little choice.*
"Once we get to Naboo, I have to leave."

The general was quiet a moment. She gestured for Rey to sit down and then followed suit. "Why?"

"To protect you." Rey couldn't bring herself to lift her head. "To protect everyone. There's something I must do… and it will be dangerous for my friends."

"Are you going with Ben…?" Leia whispered, in that heartbreaking voice a mother had when she knew she had lost her child.

It was hard to speak around the hot lump in her throat. "I can't say."

"So you are."

Rey pressed her lips together, unable to confirm or deny.

The princess reached over and grasped tightly onto her hand. "You think he's still in there? My son?" Pain filled her eyes. Ben was the only family she had left.

Her throat so tight she could barely get words out, Rey nodded. "He's… capable of love. That's been true from the beginning, and it hasn't changed."

"But the darkness is swallowing it."

Rey started to nod—shook her head. She kept her eyes focused on the blinking, promising light of Naboo.

Leia's brows lightly furrowed in confusion. "Rey?"

"It has, but it hasn't. He wants me by his side. And I… I've got to do what's best for everyone."
"He frightens you."

Rey turned to the general. "His light is still there, and I plan on bringing it back. But to do that, I have to make it seem like I'm switching sides."

Alarm pinched Leia's features. "The dark side."

"Maybe. If that's what it takes."

"And if you don't come back?"

"I will."

"What if you don't?"

"I will," Rey said more firmly, gripping onto the hands of Ben's mother. "I will bring him back, no matter what."

Leia lowered her eyes. "You must be terrified."

Allowing herself a nod, Rey squeezed Leia's hands. "I am."

General Organa looked up again. Her eyes were blazing fiercely. "You're strong. You're strong with the Force, and you're the only one who can reach Ben. I believe in you."

Rey smiled sadly. "Don't believe in me. Believe in Ben."
Keeping her end of the bond locked down was so much more difficult now that her connection with Ben was growing. Rey did her best, although she couldn't pretend she didn't have a migraine. The sensation of needles digging into and behind her eye was plaguing her. There was a high possibility it was Ben trying to smash her walls down.

Sheer force of will kept them up. Until she was safely away from the Resistance and her friends, she couldn't afford to let him in. She had no doubt that he would strike all of them down with impunity.

A porg waddled over the control board of the Falcon. Chewie fussed at it, but it didn't seem overly concerned. Rey was just glad they had been able to feed the porgs on Solaris and had mostly kept them from exploring the jungle.

Poe leaned over her shoulder. "Hit that button—"

"It's fine, Poe!" she snapped. This was the other source of her frustration: an antsy Commander Dameron. Having not been in an X-wing for two weeks and a handful of days, he was eager to get in the pilot seat again. The only problem was that neither of the pilots of the Falcon wanted to give up their seat.

"If you're coming out of hyperdrive—"

Chewie grabbed him by the shoulder and shoved, sending the man tumbling. After that, it was blessedly quiet for a time—but, like clockwork, after ten minutes, Poe was back.

"You'll have to angle—"

Rey shoved up out of the pilot's seat. She couldn't take his nagging anymore. "Just sit down, Poe!"

 Entirely unabashed, Poe hastened to take the vacated seat and started toggling the controls. Chewie called after her to come back and to not leave him with Dameron. She gave him a wave.

"He's a better pilot than me."
Chewie's response said he begged to differ. Since that was obviously untrue, it gave Rey the impression that the wookie didn't care for Poe too much. Rey didn't think that meant a great deal—Chewie didn't care for most anyone.

The wookie rose from the co-pilot's seat and left the cockpit with a last annoyed look and rumble thrown at Poe. Rey stared after him and then sank into the co-pilot's seat. She didn't feel comfortable leaving the Falcon to anyone but herself or Chewbacca.

Poe barely fluttered an eyelash in her direction. Once he had the controls to his preferred specifications, he leaned back in his seat. "We'll be there soon."

"Have you ever been to Naboo?" She collected the porg and pulled the fluffy creature onto her lap. She cupped her hands around its middle, and it settled in contentedly.

"A few times." Poe sighed as he got more comfortable. "You know, I saw a list of all the dangerous creatures in a database on Solaris. You, me, and Finn are lucky to be alive."

BB-8 twittered.

He chuckled at his droid. "Nothing could take you out, buddy."

"I felt them when we were in the jungle," Rey said. "But I didn't want anyone to panic, and they were staying away."

"Except for that thing in the tunnels."

"Or the thing in the jungle."

They caught one another's eye and smothered a laugh before it got too loud. It wasn't even funny, really—not to anyone except for them. They were the ones who had had to deal with that hell out there.

A thought crossed Rey's mind, that she hadn't ever really... laughed like this with someone before.
"I looked up both," Poe was saying. "The reptilian thing was called… I forget, something with a 't'." He waved a hand. "The giant cat was a waulerin. Apparently, they can get up to fifteen feet high."

"Fifteen feet high? It was terrifying enough! I'm still not entirely sure how Finn and I escaped. I thought for sure we were going to die."

"But you didn't."

They watched the glitter of stars and the planet slowing coming into view. Even from this far off, it was a bright, incredible blue. Rey leaned forward in her seat to see it better.

Poe caught hold of her hand. She froze, heart rate jumping from nothing to wanting to implode in less than a second. She swallowed and frantically tried to think of some sort of response. This was Poe—Poe Dameron. Handsome Poe, comical Poe, strong and daring Poe.

Maybe it was just a platonic gesture?

"Rey, look at me."

Maybe not.

She wetted her lips and then did what he wanted, turning a bit in her seat. The commander's eyes were intent upon her own. She had only ever seen one other person look at her that way, and if he caught Poe doing so, he would undoubtedly murder him.

Poe squeezed onto her fingers. She couldn't bring herself to pull away, not yet.

"When we get to Naboo… Can we talk?"

Rey didn't move.
"Okay…" Poe cleared his throat and brought his other hand forward, both now cupping the one he already held in his grip. "I haven't… really done this in a while. Not with—I mean…" He shook his head with a weak laugh at himself and didn't meet her eyes. She didn't think she had ever seen him this way.

"Poe—"

Suddenly he was looking fiercely at her again. "I like you."

She didn't answer him. She didn't know how.

"I wanted to make my intentions clear."

Yes, he certainly had.

"I… why? I'm… I'm no one, I'm nothing."

He narrowed his eyes. "Who told you that?"

She looked away.

"Kylo Ren?" He tilted forward, trying to get her to glance at him again. "Rey, that's the furthest thing from the truth. You know that, don't you?"

She didn't.

He sighed again, this one a little louder and expelled with greater force. "I can't believe I'm about to do this," he muttered. A second later, he was out of the pilot seat and crouching in front of her, still holding onto her hand. His free hand reached up and cupped her face, turning it toward him. "It's important to me that you know that's not true."

"How do you know?" she challenged with no real heat. "You've only known me for three weeks."
"And that's long enough," he said. "No one is no one. Everyone is someone."

She shook her head. "What does it matter if you like me? You're Poe Dameron. Look at you. You've probably never had any trouble getting a girl. So why me?"

He chucked her on her chin. The look in his eyes was so tender, she wanted to cry. "Leia told me what you're planning on doing. Don't do it, Rey. We can find another way."

Rey leaned out of his grip.

Of course.

So this was what that was.

Poe must have understood what it meant when her expression closed. "Rey, that's not—"

"Poe, I like you," she said firmly. "You're my friend, and I value that more than anything. I don't want that to be ruined. I can't…" She trailed off weakly. "I can't do this right now. Or—or ever."

"Or ever?" he echoed.

"I can't leave the path I'm on. It's too important. And I won't drag you into it. It wouldn't be fair."

He raised a hand. "Hold on. Slow down."

"I can't slow down!"

"Yes, you can, Rey, you—"
She pushed herself out of her chair, and the porg went flying back to the control panel. "I need to go check on Chewie. He has a lot of pride, and he's picky about who pilots this ship."

Poe rose with her. "What are you running from?"

"Nothing."

He gripped her elbow and spun her about. She had about two seconds to digest that he was standing much too close when his mouth came down on hers.

*That,* she thought. *I'm running from that.*

Rey pulled away.

"What are you doing?" Poe cried after her in exasperation.

"I can't think when people keep—keep… kissing me!" she yelled on her way out of the cockpit.

R’iia’s shorts, this had never happened to her before, and she was entirely sure she didn’t like it.

Naboo was the most beautiful planet she had ever been on. Even coming into the atmosphere after gaining clearance, she stared in an enraptured fashion out the window. Powerful waterfalls gushing over cliffs, rolling hills of wildflowers, water glimmering in the sunlight from lakes and oceans.

Now they were in the city of Theed, in the Royal House of Naboo, where Rey got to experience the luster of a palace. They wouldn’t be in to see the Queen until tomorrow, but Leia was royalty herself, and they were staying in a guest wing.

The windows in the rooms rose from the floor all the way to the high ceilings. When one looked outside, they could see a view of the waterfalls Rey had admired from above. She was left alone in
a room big enough to house an entire family, but there was only one bed, large and covered in an elaborate cover and fluffy pillows, a four-poster with a canopy.

She longed more than anything to throw herself on top of it. On the other hand, there was an outfit that had been laid out for her, and the equally luxurious bathroom was calling her name. She could finally wear boots that didn't carry remnants of goo from a swamp.

The prospect was amazing.

Rey left the window and walked to the bed to examine the outfit. Confusion crossed her as she held it up.

It didn't have trousers…

Was this a dress?

Good gods, the amount of skirts under this thing! It was cut so low on the top, with some not quite gaudy jewelry bits…

How in seven hells did one battle in one of these?

*That's the point, Rey. They're meant for ladies.*

And she was the furthest thing from a lady.

Well, she didn't have anything else to wear, and her current outfit had to be cleaned at some point, so she took it with her into the bathroom.

An hour later, she remained in the cooling bath water, head tilted back against the edge of the tub. She was so tired… the water had been so hot, sinking into her bones, working away the tension…

...Rey…
She shot up in the tub, sealing away her thoughts. Her heart pounded. That had been close. She half-expected Ben to appear, anyway, but her shields must have been holding.

Shaken, she climbed out of the tub and used a very soft towel to dry off with. She dressed on auto, pulling the garment on over her head and letting it settle before she twitched the fabric so that it would lie right. Once everything felt in place, she looked up to the mirror to see the result and gasped just a little.

The gown was a pale lavender, the neckline dropping low but beaded in pearls, pulled tight at her waist. From there it flared out in a spray of tulle. Her back was completely bare, and she didn't altogether like the sensation of cool air against it.

She went back to her room and the vanity near the window. Delicate combs and brushes topped its surface, along with ribbons, headbands, and pins. She sat and looked at her hair, which she had left dry, before pulling it out of the bun piled atop her head. She wasn't sure what to do. She knew how to knot her hair into a few pieces along the back of her head, and she could pull it back off her face like she'd mostly been wearing for weeks, but…

A very old memory surfaced, so faded she could barely recall it. Her mother, running her fingers through Rey's hair, pulling it into a braid.

Rey's trembling fingers touched a comb.

Dinner was an affair she would probably never forget.

The table was very long, stretching across the formal dining room, seating a few dozen guests. Golden cutlery, dishes, and goblets lined the table and seat settings. Candles rested here and there, and with the low light, they gave a peaceful ambiance.

Rey stayed back a little as people filed into the room, all dressed even more richly than she was. They were conversing amongst themselves, and she got the sense they worked together. She wasn't sure where she was wanted…
General Organa caught her eye and gestured.

Feeling less intimidated, Rey crossed the room, skirts swishing around her legs, the slippers on her feet light and airy. She didn't like how confining gowns were, but for tonight, it wasn't so terrible.

Leia touched her hair briefly. "You braided it. It's lovely."

"Thanks," Rey said a little nervously. "You look very nice, too." She hadn't ever seen the princess in a dress before.

"I think we can both agree trousers are better," Leia chuckled.

"Definitely more practical," Rey returned.

The general pointed down the table to Poe, who was with Rose, Finn, and the rest of the group, BB-8 absent. "Do you see Commander Dameron? He has no idea what to do with a tie."

Heart speeding a little, Rey followed the direction of her finger. Sure enough, Poe was tugging at the tie at his neck and the stiff collar. Rose elbowed him and presumably told him to stop fidgeting.

"Maybe it's not nice of me to say, but seeing them out of their element is really entertaining."

Now Rey laughed. Inwardly, her confusion was mounting. Why was she here, with the princess, and the others were at the end of the table? Included, but separate.

"You look beautiful."

That low, deep voice brought Rey's head around. Ben was across the table.

*Thanks,* she thought at him. How had he managed to get in past her defenses?
"You're avoiding me."

*I'm not.*

"You are."

*I'm getting my affairs in order.*

"You're protecting them."

*I can't do this now.*

"You took my hand. You said you'd try."

*And I will.*

"This isn't trying. This is running away. This is hiding from me."

"The Queen is about to enter," Leia said. "They change monarchy based on elections."

"Elections?"

"Yes. They're chosen from the Naboo Senate. They're usually young."

"Why?"

"The Naboo feel that a young leader gives the air of innocent wisdom."
Rey used all her energy to pull the Force through her. Ben was forced away, and her migraine was back in full swing. She gripped onto the back of her seat and swallowed a groan of pain.

She really hoped he hadn't heard Leia, because if he had, he now knew where they were.

"Rey?" The general's voice was filled with concern.

"I'm fine," she muttered.

Before Leia could question her further, everyone's attention was drawn to the door. A hush fell over the room, and people bowed. Rey did so, as well, albeit a little late.

The Queen was almost ethereal in her beauty, and now Rey understood what the princess had meant about an air of innocent wisdom. She appeared to float across the floor to them. Her face was covered in white paint, and a streak of red sat on the middle of her lower lip, with two red dots on her cheeks. Her headdress looked heavy, silver to match her silver gown, and was threaded through with black.

Once she had reached the table, the first sign of emotion touched her face as she smiled at Leia. Then she looked up and down the table before nodding and allowing her seat to be pulled out. She sat, and everyone took their cue to sit with her.

"It's been too long, Princess Leia," the Queen said demurely.

"I agree. We've been very busy with the Resistance."

Their voices faded into murmurs.

All Rey could think about was how much her head hurt, and how much she was praying that Ben didn't know where she was, not yet. She wasn't ready.

But would she ever be?
Rey collapsed onto her bed and groaned as she sunk into the featherdown mattress. She kicked off her slippers, pulled a pillow to her, and buried her face in it.

That had essentially been the longest night of her life.

Course after course of food. Towering dishes of desserts. Some sort of fizzy, alcoholic drink that everyone kept toasting with. Toasting to what, Rey didn't know. Her migraine was worsening with every passing moment. She was far more certain now that Ben was trying to push the connection to happen.

Her lashes drooped heavily. So much of that beverage had been pushed on her…

Poe had watched her, once, briefly, from his end of the table. She had watched in return, but he was the first to look away. She knew she'd hurt him…

Why had Leia had her at her side…?

She was so tired…

So tired… a little drunk…

Too tired to think…

A warm arm curled around her waist. She mumbled sleepily as kisses were pressed into her hair. Knees tucked up under hers, and a bicep slid under her cheek to cradle it.

"Can I hold you like this?"

She nodded, her eyes closing.
"Rey…?"

She hummed.

"Did you lie to me?"

She shook her head.

"I won't wait forever."

"Forever for what…?" she murmured drowsily.

"You took my hand. You're mine."

"I know…"

"Do you?"

"Yes…"

"Rey?"

"Mmm…?"

Ben's lips grazed her ear. "Take this…"

safety, security, possession

The feelings sank through her, slowly but surely, as though tied to small stones.
Something passed through her heart. It made it quicken.

She felt her cheeks flush, her skin tightening with heat.

Rey was on her back. She wasn't sure how she got there. Ben was above her, his hair falling around his face, his eyes bright, almost feverish. She licked her lips, her mouth growing dry. Her thighs were spread, her skirts rucked up around her hips.

He kissed the inside of her thigh, his eyes closing.

Her fingers threaded through his hair without question. He drew his lips down tender flesh, over the crease of her hip, and mouthed her through her panties. She groaned in want and tightened her grip on him, hips arching up for more.

"Are you mine?"

"Yesss..." she sighed.
possession…

She could feel it seesawing through her, over and over, slow and soft, until it wound up her thoughts, until it had sunk as far as it could go, deep inside of her. Before she knew it, she was trapped—and she didn't care.

She was hungry, insatiable.

She needed him.

He yanked her panties down to her knees. He held her gaze for a moment as he lowered his mouth to the center of her. His tongue licked a hot line between her folds, up to her clit, where he gave an experimental suckle. She bucked, biting into her wrist to stifle a cry.

Ben grabbed it and ripped it from her mouth. "No. I want to hear you."

Rey gazed down at him helplessly, hopefully.

His tongue dipped inside of her. She moaned wantonly, settling her thighs around his head. He gripped them as his mouth explored her. His tongue was everywhere at once, but when it flicked around her clit and she arched off the bed, he attacked it ruthlessly, relentlessly. He didn't stop until heat flooded her, and her first orgasm was wrung from her, so powerful that was she was still seeing stars.

Ben kissed his way back up her body. He settled between her legs and nuzzled his mouth against hers. She could taste herself, but she found she didn't mind.

"You're going to tell me where you are," he murmured.

"I'm going to tell you where I am," she echoed.

"You're going to forget this and wake up thinking you didn't dream."
"I'm going to…"

Everything went black.
Knock, knock.

Knock, knock, knock.

Rey's eyes cracked open.

Oh, blast, bad idea, bad idea, bad idea.

She pulled a pillow over her head. Her head, which was pounding much worse than it had been last night. The needles sensation had transformed admirably into a tactical axe, and it was relentless in its pursuit to take out her eye.

"Choobies," she groaned.

Her bedroom door opened, and a sweet, respectful voice called out. "Miss? I've brought you some clothes."

Clothes?

"Pants?"

"I... what?"
"Pants," Rey repeated with emphasis.

"No, ma'am... it's... it's a dress, ma'am."

Blast.

"Okay." No matter how many times she cleared her throat, her voice stayed raspy. She sounded like some sort of kraken. It was terribly unflattering.

"I'll just put them right here," the maid said politely. "Princess Organa asked you to join her for breakfast. Will you be going?"

Rey nudged her pillow off her face. "Breakfast?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Food! It sounded both amazing, and... not amazing at the same time. How was it possible to be sick to your stomach and still hungry?

She lifted her aching head hopefully. "I'll be there," she said, her voice cracking in several places.

"Yes, ma'am."

Urgh... Another dress.

Rey wrinkled her nose. She was going to have to specifically ask for something more practical, wasn't she?
This one was a very pale red, not quite pink. After a refreshing bath, she changed into it and went to the mirror. The neckline was higher than the other, a band of gold closing around her neck. Fabric billowed out to her ankles. Her back was bare again, down to the base of her spine. Golden sandals completed the ensemble, strappy ones that climbed up her legs.

Rey chewed on her lip. She smoothed her hands down her front. While the cloth was light, it still managed to cling to her and accentuate curves she didn't know she had.

She didn't feel like herself when she saw her reflection.

She turned to see herself from her profile, blushing when she glimpsed the barest hint of the side of her breast. Was this really what ladies liked to wear…?

Rey pulled her freshly washed and dried hair off her face. She wove a braid sideways along the top of her head. It took several tries—she hadn't done these braided styles in years. Her hair was too short to do a full crown, so she tied the rest of it into a nice bun.

A sigh left her as she examined the result. This was so frustrating. She'd never been someone who worried about what she looked like. Scavenging in a desert had that effect.

"You look beautiful."

Rey flushed and headed to breakfast, Ben's words heavy in her heart.

She was halfway to the dining room when she ran into Poe.

She slowed to a stop as he pushed away from the wall he was lounging against and offered her his arm. His usual roguish attire was dimmed somewhat. She wasn't the only one who had had a wardrobe change.

A dark gray shirt with a black coat over it, supple leather. It didn't button or zip, the lapels open
and long. Form-fitting black pants tucked into equally black boots with buckles. The only source of color was beneath his lapel and collar, a shade of white.

When she didn't take his arm, he tilted his head. "I came to escort you to breakfast."

"I know how to get there."

"To the royal pavilion?"

That… she did not.

"I won't bite, Rey."

He was right—she was being silly. She took his elbow and off they went.

Maybe talking would make it less awkward. "You clean up well."

Poe grinned. "Better than that tie I was forced to wear last night."

"Where do you think they get these clothes?"

The commander shrugged. "No idea." Several steps later, he segued, "You look beautiful, by the way. And you did last night, too."

A blush ran across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. She wasn't sure how to handle the compliments she'd been receiving. "Poe…"

He took her hand and tugged her down a lesser-used corridor. "I need to talk to you."

She wasn't sure—no, she was certain this wasn't a great idea. "I don't think we should."
He moved in, and she found the wall at her back, cool against her skin. She had no choice but to tilt her head up. He placed a hand to the side of her head, lowering his own head to her. This close she could see a freckle in his eye, and a darker band of brown around the pupil. It wasn't something she had wanted to know, but now wouldn't be able to forget.

"Poe," she whispered. "I can't do this. Please don't... please don't do this." How many times had she said that this month? It was depressing. The men in her life kept pushing and pushing, and eventually she was going to break, was going to crumble to pieces.

His thumb ran over her chin. "Give me one good reason why not." A smile quirked the corner of his mouth, like he was certain she wouldn't be able to think of anything.

"I can't... get involved, Poe. It's not that I don't want to—"

That smile grew a lot more confident, maybe even somewhat cocky. "You don't want to not get involved?" He waggled an eyebrow to make her laugh, and it worked, a giggle slipping free from her.

It faded as he kissed her.

possession

Her hands found his chest and shoved.

The pilot stumbled back, his eyes wide in surprise and hurt. As he was recovering, Rey stared down at her hands. They had just betrayed her somehow. There'd been an odd moment of... of wrongness, like she was doing something she wasn't supposed to. That was absurd. Poe kissing her didn't bring her to the point of near violence.

"If you don't want to kiss me, you can say so. I'm a big boy. I can take it."

"Poe, no, it's not that—"
"Then what is it?"

Her mouth worked, no sound coming free. How in seven hells was she supposed to explain what had happened when she didn't understand herself? Anything she could think of just sounded… crazy.

"I don't know!" she blurted.

"How do you not—?" He placed a hand on his hip and closed his eyes. It was several moments before he spoke again. "You're right." He looked at her, and he was a different person, closed off, a world away. "We shouldn't do this."

He walked off, leaving her standing there, surprised and hurt herself.

It bothered her. It bothered her that Poe was upset with her, far more than she could have ever imagined. It was mostly because he was her friend, and she'd never had friends until Finn, and she cherished each of them as if they were her family… because they were her family.

She was not proud of herself for her behavior. Poe had done nothing to deserve it. Yes, she hadn't particularly wanted to be kissed… but it wasn't because she didn't like him or didn't feel anything. It was because things were growing too confusing.

The pavilion overlooked one of the wildflower fields. Rey sat in a chair near the balcony and watched the wind slide through the flowers with abandon, tugging them every which way. The first time she had ever seen flowers, she hadn't known what they were. Now that she did, she appreciated them at every opportunity. Jakku was a wasteland she no longer wanted to return to.

There was nothing for her there.

She looked at the waterfalls, and she wanted to throw herself into them, to be dragged to the bottom of the lake, to… something. She didn't know. Escape? It was all she had prayed for her entire life—escaping, once she was reunited with her parents. She had thought that once she left Jakku, she would never feel that desperate again, that she would have the entire galaxy to explore.
Now she knew how wrong she was.

She'd wanted to be proud of her actions. She'd wanted to find her place. She'd wanted someone to show her the way. Luke had tried. Now he was gone.

Behind her, her friends sat at a table with Leia and the queen, while members of the palace staff catered to the company and made sure things ran smoothly. One of them offered Rey a glass with orange liquid in it, and she declined. She'd wanted so badly to eat, but now she couldn't stomach the thought of it, and it wasn't just the hangover.

Was she a terrible person? Was she leading Poe on? If she was, she had no intention to.

Her thoughts trailed away as something unfurled inside of her. It was warm and promising, and it wanted her attention. Her eyes flitted to the field. Something was out there… something close, yet far.

Rey rose from her seat.

"Rey, I'm sorry." The apology from Poe was abrupt, and it took her a moment to focus on him. It was hard. That feeling… It needed her. "I'm acting like an ass."

"What?" She looked at him, for a moment distracted from the call. "No! No, you aren't. I behaved horribly. I'm really sorry. Really, I am." She took his hands. "You're my friend, and I value that so much. More than you can know."

He squeezed her hands and released them. "I'm…" Poe leaned a hip against the balcony and let his own gaze wander to the flowers. "I'm not used to, ah… being turned down."

"Really, Poe, it's all right."

*possession*

"I'll back off," he promised.
She wanted to tell him not to—knew how foolish that would be.

**safety**

It was like being drunk again. Foreign feelings roamed through her as if they owned her, and she thought that maybe they did.

**security**

"I've… I've got to go." She staggered away, past the princess, past her friends, past the queen, past the staff. She heard a few questioning shouts behind her but kept going. There was something out there in the wildflowers. It was pulling her, calling her. If she didn't inspect it, she would go mad.

Rey picked up the skirts of her dress and all but ran off the pavilion.

The call was leading her away, away from the palace. She knew to be wary, but she couldn't stop herself. It had hooked itself behind her navel and was tugging her along. She made her way back outside, moving instinctively. There was a long bridge connecting to the fields, and she strode over it without once looking back.

Weeds, grass, and wildflowers rustled against her legs.

She turned. She'd been walking for so long. The palace was in the distance, the pavilion facing a different direction. The sun was hot on her back, and perspiration coated her skin in places. She swallowed, her mouth dry. Her feet ached, trapped in sandals as they were. Not exactly proper shoes for a journey.

The waterfalls roared at her back. Flowers tickled her palm, and she idly ran her hand through them. The tug was gone, and she wasn't entirely sure what to do next. Why was she here? If she went back, would it be for nothing?
Rey closed her eyes and concentrated.

_The sunlight touching flowers, creating growth, giving way to death and growth again—the water, pure and powerful, pulling its weight—the wind, soft against her skin—fuzzy creatures playing in the grass, hiding, hiding..._

It was so peaceful here.

She was about to sit down to enjoy her surroundings when she heard him:

"You followed my orders perfectly."

She spun, and she had only a moment to look up into Ben's face and know that this was real, that he wasn't just there through the bond.

"I told you I can take whatever I want."

His hand waved, and like that time on Takodana, she fell into a deep sleep. The last thing she remembered was the feeling of his arms catching her and holding her close.

Rey woke up with her fist swinging and had the satisfaction of feeling it collide with flesh.

She pushed herself upright and found Ben tenderly touching his cheek. Blood was a mark on the corner of his mouth. To his credit, he hadn't made a sound when she punched him.

"What in hells did you do?!" Rey yelled. "Where are we?!"

He stepped toward the bed—she started crawling backward, kicking off the sheets around her legs.
She stumbled over the other side of the bed, and from there she backed up until she was against a wall. She was shaking—she was terrified. The last time he had physically been in the same room with her had been in Snoke's chambers.

They hadn't parted well.

"How did you find me?" She couldn't stop the tremor in her voice.

"You told me." His hand dropped from his face.

"That's a lie!" she spat.

"Is it?"

She flinched when he waved his hand again… but she didn't fall asleep. No, instead she…

The events from the night before, the events he'd stolen from her, came rushing back. There were so many sensations and thoughts and feelings at the same time that Rey was immobilized. Having memories rammed back into her, forcing her to process them at the speed of the delivery was, for a moment, threatening to drive her insane.

Everything clicked properly into place.

"I'm going to kill you," she whispered. Her hand instinctively went for her lightsaber, which was no longer there. All she had was this pretty dress. Fine. She would find another way. Like with her bare hands.

She lunged at him across the bed, and they fell in a tangle to the floor.

He caught one fist, then the other. She pushed, straining, but he was too strong. She plucked at the Force, only to be met with a Force shield on his end. No matter how hard she shoved at it, it wouldn't relent. The nearest object was a lamp, and she went to smash it over his head. He blocked it with his arm and waved his other hand. She flew up and back, slamming into the wall above the bed.
Rey pushed with the Force, honing it in one direction. A vase behind him crashed into the back of his head. He grunted, stumbling, and she slid down from the wall. She ran at him, and he caught her at her midriff and threw her over his shoulder, arm tight over her legs. She got a foot free and kicked his stomach as hard as she could. He dropped her, and as she fell, she threw out her hand.

His lightsaber pulled itself from his belt and flew across the room. Crimson sparks hit the air as she tried to ignite it on the way. Before it got there, she found herself pinned to the ground, her fists on either side of her head as she glared up at him. She struggled as hard as she could against his grip. Without weapons and only a basic understanding of channeling the Force, she was a spider caught in his web.

Ben rose to one knee, a hand on his stomach. He winced as he straightened into an upright position. "Stop."

"I will never forgive you!" she snarled. "Never!"

How could she? He was a monster! She'd always known it, but now it was worse. He'd violated her.

His face changed from mildly annoyed to raging anger, the sort that made people run from him whenever he was in a snit. "You lied to me!" he bellowed.

"I didn't lie to you! I was getting my affairs in order, just like I said! You couldn't be patient!"

"You told me you would try! You took my hand, and you told me you would try! Then you vanished—for three days!" The very walls trembled from his wrath, not powerful enough to be alarming just yet but concerning all the same. "You are intent on keeping me out. That's a betrayal. I won't allow it."

"I'm not keeping you out, I'm protecting my friends!" How hard was this for him to understand?!

"It's all the same in the end, scavenger," he said coldly, a stark contrast to the might of his temper.

Scavenger? They were back to that?
"DON'T MAKE ME HATE YOU!"

He yelled and strode forward, igniting his lightsaber in a flare of scarlet. "DON'T MAKE ME THE ENEMY!" He was holding onto his weapon hard enough that she could hear the metal of its pommel creak.

"YOU ARE THE ENEMY!"

Ben gestured. His lightsaber hummed as he held her off the ground, her toes not quite able to touch it. He was shaking all over. She jutted her chin out in defiance. Without a lightsaber, she didn't want to provoke him any further. She'd have to wait until his guards were down to steal his.

Breathing heavily, he closed his eyes and disarmed the lightsaber. When he spoke, his voice was a near croak from how forcefully he'd yelled. "Don't do this."

"You brought it on yourself!" Tears touched her eyes. "You manipulated me when I was vulnerable!"

All the rage he'd been trying to rein in was unleashed. "YOU LIED TO ME!" The entire room shook harder, and what sounded like baubles crashed to the floor, ruined. The lamp she'd grabbed was thrown at a wall. Glass rained down.

Both glared at each other, a battle of wills with no one to back down.

"Don't believe in me. Believe in Ben."

Like a splash of cold water, Rey remembered her purpose.

Save Ben.

"Are you sorry?" She couldn't keep her voice steady. She was still in fight mode.
His eyes flashed in disbelief. "I will not—" He halted. Did he understand the olive branch she was offering? She watched the anger drain out of him. "...I'm sorry." He looked at her expectantly.

Rey gave a stiff nod. "So am I." Apologizing to him was a low blow and one that was difficult to swallow. She hadn't done anything wrong.

She was lowered gently to the floor. His hand rose as if he wanted to touch her—dropped.

Rey looked around for the first time, pretending she hadn't noticed. Was this a cottage?

"Where are we?"

His answer completely threw her.

"My home."
Rey touched her fingertips to glass. She was standing at an octagon-shaped window and watching the lives of a cozy little village down the hill below. Fishermen were making nets, women moved through a small market and exchanged goods. There weren't any bounty hunters, or pirates, or even scoundrels. It was a place straight out of a fairy tale.

This was so surreal. Didn't Ben live on one of those First Order battleships, since Starkiller Base had been destroyed? It was difficult to imagine him carrying out a tidy life in a seaside village, no matter how pretty and peaceful it was.

She rested her forehead against the windowpane. White birds called out to one another, circling down at the docks. What looked like a temple sat on another hill, taller than this one, on the horizon. Men with bald heads and blue robes were bowing to one another at the bottom of an impressive flight of stairs. She wondered what religion they followed.

Rey had never understood religion, nor believed in it, until the day Ben had interrogated her. She'd felt it rise from within, awakening. It had turned the tables—it had protected her. The Force was in everything and everyone, whether they knew it or not.

She turned away from the window and examined the room she was in. It appeared to be a living room. The wall to her left was covered by bookshelves, stuffed full of actual texts. She came closer, expecting something along the lines of "Patricide: The Need to Know Guide," or, "How to Slaughter Jedi: The Pocket Companion." Or maybe even, "Need to Figure Out the Right Type of Brooding? Look No Further!" and "How to Tame Your Inner Man-Child."

Where did one even start when exploring the shelves? Her gaze fell naturally to the middle and landed on a title etched in silver. *Sea Flora and Fauna of Naboo.*

Is this where his home was? They hadn't left the planet?
She ran her finger over the spine of the book and pulled it free. The pages were well-worn and coming loose in places. They were covered with diagrams and sketches of exactly what their title promised. The thing that most stood out to her was the fact that plants and flowers that matched their depicted counterparts were pressed between the pages.

She touched her fingertip to a dried flower that might have been a bright orange at some point. A brittle petal broke off and floated away.

Rey slapped the book shut and thrust it back into its spot. She inspected her hand as a fine tremor rocked through it. She clenched her fingers together to make it stop.

She couldn't… understand this. Everything in this room spoke of a softer Ben, and that image did not meet the one in her head. Still, it couldn't be a ploy… All evidence pointed to him having had this place for some time.

A glimmer caught her eye. She knelt and lifted a broken figurine of some creature she didn't recognize. The two pieces tumbled onto her palm.

Rey jerked as the world rapidly dissolved around her. She had only seen this happen once before, with Luke's lightsaber on Takodana, and she now knew what that meant. She waited for the memories to assail her as her pulse quickened in both anticipation and dread.

A room came into shape, bleeding out across the floor and the walls. There was a plush carpet, a low sitting table, and paperwork was strewn across it. Voices echoed, and there were the glimpses of other flickering memories she couldn't make out.

"I just don't know what to do," Leia confessed. She was not seen, only heard. "The boy… he was thrown so hard… He hit that tree, and his spine…"

A small child, around the age of six, sitting by a door, rolling a figurine over and over between his fingers.

*Bulabird.*

He had a mop of wavy black hair, and Rey's heart seized in recognition. Ben! These were Ben's memories!
"Should we send him to Luke?"

"He was just protecting himself! He... He's our child, Han. He's just... strong."

"Leia, we might not have any other choice!"

I can hear you, echoed so strongly around her that it was like a yell. It wasn't young, but older, as if Ben had reflected on it. It bounced off every surface, and she could feel the pain in it, the hopelessness. I can hear you!

Chewie's familiar rumble sounded. She twisted in that direction, the child Ben dissipating in smoke, the room following. The *Falcon* formed beneath her feet. The wookie was holding onto his bowcaster and demonstrating how to use it to a slightly older Ben Solo.

The boy took the weapon with tentative hands and pulled it to his face so he could sight his target. He looked up at Chewie for approval. The wookie ran a hand over Ben's head, tousling his hair. A soft, lonely smile touched the boy's mouth, and he hugged Chewbacca tightly.

"You're my only friend."

The *Falcon* was gone. A grassy knoll stretched out beneath a blanket of stars.

Chewie held Ben on his shoulders, and the boy was pointing out other planets and the systems that contained them.

A table holding a cake ripped through the image, and Ben sat in a chair, his chin resting atop his folded arms.

"They're not coming, are they?"

Chewbacca gave a soft roar.
The cake rose and flew across the room to splatter against a wall. Chocolate cake with chocolate frosting slid down in goops, the mangled words of "...irth... en... 16..." legible for just a moment before it formed a pile on the floor.

Chewie roared again as the room spun away into another, blending into a Ben in his late teens. He was breathing hard, in one of his rages, and every object in the room that wasn't tied down was rising. A younger Leia and Han looked on in a sort of horror they couldn't completely hide.

"YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND! YOU NEVER UNDERSTAND!"

The broken figurine pieces dropped out of her hands, and Ben's living room came back into focus. She staggered, falling, hitting the ground hard. The memories she relived always felt like they were hers. It was difficult to separate them from her own reality.

*I can hear you,* whispered through her thoughts.

*You're my only friend.*

"What are you doing?"

"I..." Rey's throat worked as she swallowed. The shroud of that experience was lingering over her. Words came to her, made her rise from her prone position. "You... You broke a lot of things. Before."

Should she tell him about what had really happened? Was it normal for Force-users to get memories off objects? She had no one to ask. But how would he handle the fact that it was *his* memories she had seen? He was an incredibly private person, holding onto any vestiges of pain.

Her thoughts drifted as she got a good look at what he was wearing.

A black shirt clung to his chest. Over this was a dark gray, soft looking sort of vest that didn't have any closures. It came over his shoulders, the fabric going down to midthigh. It bunched up under itself on either side, forming lapels. It had a hood on it, and the hem was lined with pockets. His trousers were a matching dark gray, and his boots were black, lacing up all the way to the top of his calves.
Even his hair was different, pulled back with a tie.

Heat flooded her cheeks. She couldn't tear her eyes away. If he noticed, he made no comment on it. He came closer and took the figurine pieces from her.

"Don't. Don't snoop."

That hit her ear wrong, and Rey narrowed her eyes. "Don't snoop because you don't want me to find anything, or don't snoop because—?"

"Just don't snoop!" He pocketed the pieces.

She was definitely not going to tell him about the memories.

"I'm trapped in this cottage. Do you honestly expect me not to look around?"

"Fine," he half-growled. "Look, but don't touch."

"So—you don't want me to touch you?" she asked just to irritate him. She hadn't forgiven him yet, and needling him was second nature. They had spent a great deal of time hating one another. The situation hadn't improved too much since then.

Yet…

Being in front of him, in person, in the same room, seeing everything he saw—she'd almost forgotten what it was like. He was here. He was real. Being mad at him didn't take that away.

She was digesting that as Ben put his hands on either side of her face and tilted her head up so he could kiss her.

Oh—
"Different," he murmured.

Eyes slightly wide, vocal chords tied up to uselessness, she nodded.

He rubbed his thumbs over her cheekbones. "But better."

Another dip of her head.

Ben lowered his forehead to hers. Her lashes fluttered shut as he drew near. She needed to do something... but what? What could she really do? She'd taken his hand—she'd promised him she'd try, even if she had no intention of ruling the galaxy. Reacting poorly wasn't very strategic.

"I've never had this," he whispered.

Rey's heart started banging around in her chest like a skittermouse.

"Don't be afraid..." If she hadn't been standing this close to him, she never would have heard the words.

Her hand lifted—hesitated—dropped.

She could do it... if she wanted. Touch him. *Really* touch him.

Ben's large hand covered hers and brought it to his chest. His heart beat firm and steady against her palm, the exact opposite of hers.

"I have one," he said. "A heart."
"Ben—"

"It's difficult to believe, I know."

She didn't know what to say. She wanted to—wanted to say something. She just…

She was still so angry at him.

"I know why you're here, Rey."

Wait—

"You think you can still save me."

How—?

"But I don't want to be saved."

As she went to draw away, his arms closed around her like bands of steel.

"I've thought about it, though," he continued. He pressed her head to his chest as she struggled. How was he so ridiculously strong? "And I've decided that I'll let you try."

Confusion rocked through her all over again. Her struggles ceased. She could hear herself breathing from the way her ear was pressed against him.

Ben swayed in a slight rocking motion, a hand stroking her hair. He took out the tie that was in it and tangled his fingers through it. Tingles shot down her spine, the prickles against her scalp stealing her breath. She hadn't known it was so sensitive.

"What's the catch?" she breathed.
"You have to try the darkness."

The wind coming off the sea whipped her hair all around her face and her dress against her legs. She stood over a tall cliff face and watched the waves crash into the rocks far below. A length of a spine disappeared beneath the white foam, some sea creature that was likely dangerous.

She'd run out here to get air, and Ben hadn't followed her. She was glad. She could barely look at him, let alone think in the same room as him.

Especially when that room was electric…

The wind dried her tears. She hated that she was crying. She didn't want to show him such a weakness. She didn't want to give him anything else about herself, little pieces he was chipping away at.

"You have to try the darkness."

Rey supposed she should have seen this coming. She'd told his mother on Solaris that she would have to skirt the dark side. She just hadn't been prepared for something of this magnitude. She was so far out of her depth. So very, very far. There was a difference between pretending to be on the dark side and actually being on it.

You could kill him, logic reminded her.

Rey thought about the beat of his heart beneath her hand.

She thought about Leia, nearly defeated in her hope of Ben ever returning.

If she couldn't murder him, then she had very little choice. And… she could do this without tipping too far into the darkness. She knew she had enough light in her to keep her on the right path. She
was just psyching herself out. She’d been unprepared. That was all.

Calmer inside, Rey walked away from the cliff. This was still so strange. It was in this place that Ben seemed more… human. It was almost wrong—and at the same time, intriguing.

"Are we still on Naboo?" she asked as she walked through the front door of the cottage. She knew they were, but it never hurt to make certain.

Ben was leaning against the far wall, his arms folded across his chest, his gaze on the window. He looked remarkably… patient.

It was unnerving enough to put her off her game entirely. A raging Kylo Ren was terrifying, but a calm one was deadly.

His dark eyes were completely unreadable. Why? Was he trying to hide himself from her? Too late. She was here. They were bonded through the Force. There wasn't anywhere to run! She knew. She'd tried.

"Yes," he answered. He eyed her for a moment longer. "Are you going to do what I asked?"

Straight to the point. At least some things were still the same.

"I want a reassurance."

Ben lifted an eyebrow. "Such as?"

"That there be a limit."

"If I grant you one, then I expect the same in return."

She couldn't even argue that. Both believed very much in the side they were on. Neither would concede a point in the other's favor.
Rey exhaled slowly. "All right."

Ben's face maintained its impassivity. "I'm listening."

"What, exactly, are you asking of me? What's the… extent? I refuse to harm anyone."

"Yes, you do seem incapable in that regard."

Her hackles rose. Was he goading her? She had to bite back her anger. As if not wanting to harm people was evil!

"That's fine," he continued in his low, deep voice. "I expected as much." He used his shoulder to push off the wall. As he stepped across the room, it was almost like a prowl. It had to be the new clothes. They weren't nearly as constraining. "What I want is for you to… feel."

"Feel," she reiterated.

"Feel the darkness." He circled around her in a measured pace. "I want you to take my darkness as if it were your own."

Rey spun to keep him in her line of sight. She'd already had a taste of what he was talking about.

safety

security

possession

"And you'll do the same in return? You'll take my light?"
"I will. If you still want to give it when the time comes."

Ominous words. Rey knew she should turn back now. It wasn't too late. She could still—

"I will," she said hotly.

He touched the small of her back. Bare fingers stroked a path up her equally bare back. "We'll see."

Rey fought not to shiver. "How long?"

He hummed and gently pulled her hair off her shoulder. His lips brushed her neck, and she was given a lesson; reality was so much different than dreaming. The dreams had felt real… they just hadn't felt this real.

She tried not to let her lashes flutter like they wanted to. "How long, Ben?" she pressed.

"Two weeks."

Two weeks?!

No, she scolded herself. *Think about it in reverse.* Two weeks was a long time to deal with the darkness. But two weeks spent in the light? She could do so much good with that!

Hope sparked.

"Starting when?"

His lips brushed along the shell of her ear. His arms slid around her waist and pulled her back against him.
"Now," he whispered.
Sorry for the delay! I was out of town Sunday/yesterday. I hope everyone had a really good holiday! :)

We could fight a war for peace
(Ooh woo, I'm a rebel just for kicks, now)

Give in to that easy living

Goodbye to my hopes and dreams

Stop flipping for my enemies

We could wait until the walls come down
(Ooh woo, I'm a rebel just for kicks now)

-Feel It Still, Portugal. The Man

Sand.

...Rey...

Sand everywhere.

...Rey...

All she could see, swirling around her in a storm.

...Rey...
All she could feel, grains pelting and stinging against her exposed skin.

...Rey...

All she could taste, unable to keep it from entering her mouth.

...Rey...

"STOP IT, I CAN'T THINK!" she shouted, but it was drowned out by the howling and screeching of the wind.

Where was she? Jakku?

The only home she had ever known?

She had no sense of direction. She was up to her shins in sand, and her boots were making it chafe against the skin of her ankles.

Wait—boots?

Rey glanced down. Her dress from Naboo was gone. In its place was the outfit she had been wearing when she'd first escaped Jakku with Finn, before she ran into the legendary Han Solo. Before… before he died…

Indecipherable whispering hissed behind her. She twisted, stumbling in the sand as it shifted beneath her feet.

Nothing was there.

"Rey, you're too overcome by anger!"
There—to her right!

She fell back in surprise. "Luke? How—how is this possible?!"

"It's not," he replied. She could barely make him out through the haze of sand. His Jedi robes were being whipped around him, and his face was as grim as it had ever been. "I'm just a manifestation."

"Of what?" she cried in disbelief.

"Of you." The voice that came from behind her was a child's.

Already knowing what she would find, Rey turned in that direction and looked down. Her younger self peered up at her, squinting at her through the storm. It was the self she had tried so hard to leave behind—the self that still clung to the frail hope that her parents were alive, that they would return for her.

"What do you mean, 'of me'?” Rey didn't like this. Luke had been unnerving enough, but this…

...Rey...

"Ignore him."

Rey closed her eyes. Warmth brimmed beneath her eyelids, and she didn't want to face the new voice. She wasn't sure if she could.

"Rey, think of all the good you've done," the slow, gravelly voice said. "Think of all the light you've brought to the Force."

This wasn't fair.

This just wasn't fair.
"When is life ever fair?"

"Please," she half-whimpered. "Please… I—I can't…"

"Look at me, Rey. Face your fears. Face your regrets."

She ran forward, and she didn't look back.

...Rey...

_They're dead!_ she reminded herself. _They're nothing more than phantoms!_ 

Luke had sacrificed himself to buy the Resistance time to escape his nephew, to escape the First Order. Her childhood had died a long time ago. And Han…

"You're still so full of rage!" Luke's voice echoed.

"You have to let it go!" the child cried. "Let go!"

"Stop!" she sobbed. She was quickly tiring. _Walking_ though sand was an ordeal, never mind running.

"We've all made mistakes, kid," Han added. "It's what we learn from them that counts."

Rey covered her ears with her hands. She couldn't get away from them, no matter how hard she tried. She couldn't see where she was going—she was just running round and round, with no destination, with no idea how to leave this place.

"You trusted him once," the little girl pushed. "He betrayed that trust. He _murdered_ his father. He killed thousands more!"
"The darkness isn't a solution," Luke pressed. "Once it takes hold of you, it won't let go!"

"You said he could still be saved! You said none of us were ever really gone!"

"There are other ways, Rey."

"Like what?!"

"That's a path you have to discover for yourself."

"I don't have time for this!" she yelled at all of them. "I'm doing this the only way I know how!"

"It's a mistake—"

But she didn't want to hear the rest, and she pushed deeper into the storm.

Rey wasn't entirely certain how long she'd spent in this storm. The only thing she really was certain of was the fact that she couldn't keep going for much longer. She was too drained.

How had she gotten here?

Memories flared, kindled.

Oh... Ben had asked her to open her mind to him. She had, with some hesitance. He'd informed her he was going to show her some of his darkness... and now this. This—madness. Where had she gone? Where had he taken her?

A manifestation, they'd said. Of herself.
Was she… inside of herself…?

The earth shifted beneath her feet with a rumble. She cried out as she was knocked down, and she held on while the ground pushed upward and forward. It was almost like… it was almost like a wave, like the ones she'd been eyeing earlier in the village. This one was made of sand, though, and it was barreling forward at a speed that was distressing.

"Stop!" she cried out, as if that would make a difference.

When had it ever made a difference?

The sand beneath her bucked

She screamed as she fell twenty feet, braced herself, and slammed into the sand below hard enough to make her teeth snap together. Her body rolled against her will, over and over, and then suddenly the air was still.

Rey opened her arms a crack and peered out.

The ground had ceased its vibrating.

She rose, aching, and saw it there—a sphere of light, floating at mid-height. Its glow made Rey's heart rate relax, and she reached out. Her fingertips connected with it, and then it was as if time froze. Granules of sand hovered around her in a dome, poised perfectly in place as the storm continued to rage without.

Rey looked back to the sphere and held it between her palms. Its light was a warm, steady pulse, and all the apprehension, the fear she was feeling, melted away. It was almost heady in its relief. Her burdens were gone.

…Rey…
A call of her name, this one different from the others, coming from her left. It was a mirror—a mirror like the one on Ahch-To. The mirror that had showed her how alone she was after its trickery. Why was this one here?

She caught sight of her reflection.

Rey saw herself… only it wasn't. Sensuality dripped off the caricature, though she was identical in every other way. She was wearing the same clothes, the same hairstyle, but her posture… It was confident, almost smug. In her palm she held a sphere, as well, except this one was pure darkness. It looked like shadows swirling rapidly around one another.

"You can only have one," her doppelganger said. "You have to choose."

"No," Rey replied. "That's not true. I can have both."

"No Force-user can have both."

"Why not?"

"The pull to one or the other is too great."

Rey held up her light. "I have this. And I can have yours, too."

"I am you," the other Rey smirked. "Why haven't you figured that out yet?"

"I won't play these games," Rey replied. "I know you're the darkness inside of me. You want to confuse me and to control me. I won't let you."

She placed her palm against the glass, and her reflection mirrored her move. Light and dark, facing one another, neither willing to give in. It was Kylo and herself all over again.

"I can have both," Rey said again. "And I will."
The mirror rippled. She pushed her hand through, and fingers snagged around her wrist. As she was yanked forward, she had a flash of fear and doubt. What if she was wrong? What if this was a mistake, and she'd fallen into the darkness' trap?

Rey cleared the mirror, but there was nothing on the other side, only darkness and falling into nothingness. It gripped at her, shadows that were so cold, so lonely, pulling at her clothes, her hair, her skin. Some ventured toward the orb of light, and Rey held it closer. She wouldn't let it go, not for anything. This was a part of herself; it was essential to who she was.

The shadows covered her, cocooning her, and spiraled her away into the void of darkness.

An ember crackled as a log crashed, and ashes danced.

It was the first thing Rey was aware of as she opened her eyes. It was from the fireplace she'd been lying in front of. Shadows danced over the ceiling, reminding her of the ones she'd just persevered through. A slight shift of her gaze led hers to Ben's, who was sitting next to her.

She couldn't read his face at all, and his thoughts were well guarded.

Silence prevailed for possibly a full five minutes. Rey didn't mind. The relaxation that had taken hold of her when she'd grabbed her light had yet to fade. It would go eventually, so she would enjoy it while she could.

More embers popped.

Ben set his jaw.

Rey waited.

"That is impossible."
"Mmm… I don't think so, no." Rey sat up and shrugged her shoulders. They were a little cramped from having been in a prone position for so long.

"You can't have both. You will eventually give in to one or the other."

"But I want both, and I have both. I can teach you how, if you want?"

He got to his feet and stormed out of the living room. Rey looked after him and then curled her arms around her legs, staring into the fire.

Half an hour later, Rey grabbed a pillow from the bed and smacked Ben's face with it.

The glare he gave her was the type that probably made his soldiers flee for cover.

She smacked him again. "It's late. Where am I sleeping? This is the only room with actual furniture."

He shifted over to make room.

Rey snorted.

Ben set his jaw again and lifted an eyebrow in question.

"You're sulking. I don't want to get into bed with you."

The next moment, he had his hand around her arm in that bruising grip and was yanking her onto the mattress. She stumbled into place beside him. She really wanted to get back up and just go sleep on the floor in the next room, but she was also bone-deep exhausted. Ben had that effect on
"Are you going to put the fire out?"

Her companion waved a hand.

"Show off," she muttered.

"I can teach you," he said.

"With the darkness? Because that angle has worked so well for you."

He propped himself up on an elbow and rolled onto his side to glare at her better. "You're in a good mood."

She shrugged. "Could be better." She studied her nails, trying to ignore the intentness of that glare. It reminded her of the interrogation chamber. She'd accused him of being a creature in a mask that stalked her, and he'd removed said mask to come stand beside her and stare holes into the side of her head.

It was awkward then, and it was awkward now.

"Do you feel defeated?" she ventured.

Something in the next room shattered.

Rey nodded agreeably. Right, then.

"Well, I'm going to bed," she informed him, starting to get beneath the blankets. If he was in a pissy mood, it was hardly her fault. She'd upheld her end of the bargain. She'd let him give her his darkness. She couldn't help the final product.
"You shouldn't have been able to do that," he muttered when she'd gotten comfortable and her back was facing him.

She sighed and opened her eyes. "But I did, Ben."

"The meditative state you were in… I've never seen anything like it."

"I said I could show you," Rey reminded him.

"Can you still feel this?"

darkness curling through her, promising her future glories, of what it meant to truly have power with the Force

"Yes."

"This?"

the sweet, tantalizing secret to every need she'd never known she had, every want needing fulfillment, the rush of blood in her veins, the heat pooling through her, low in her belly, the—

"That, too," she said breathlessly.

her heart pounding faster, her stomach clenching with sweet—

"Or you could just kiss me," she said.

There was a hesitation behind her.

"I have," he ventured at last. "It was never returned, if you recall."
"Maybe now is different."

He made a noise of dissent.

"You're focusing on the light, Ben," she said. "But I've got darkness, too." She rolled over onto her back and searched for his face in the little moonlight pouring through the window. "I always have."

"I wanted to break you with it. I wanted to watch your hopes for me fall while you were taken in."

"Don't you want me willingly?"

His eyes met hers.

"I know you do."

"You—"

She grabbed for his hand and placed it against her heart. "It's not a trap. You can read my thoughts."

"That means nothing, as you know," he said, and she knew he was referring to Snoke.

"So you won't do this until you're certain I've got your darkness inside of me? Are you really so afraid of me?"

He scoffed. "I'm not afraid."

"Then do it," she pressed. "Kiss me."
"I don't take orders from you."

Rey sighed and tossed him onto his back as she twisted into a position over him. "Then take my darkness," she said.

She pressed her forehead to his and focused on everything inside of her, rubbing her darkness and her light up against his mental defenses.

"There's light, too," he hissed.

"Some," she agreed. "But what are you worried about? I thought you would never return to the light unless I can convince you."

"It's not your turn yet!"

"Then DO IT!" she half-yelled. "Stop sulking and do it! Don't—"

The hint of darkness he'd given her minutes earlier was nothing compared to the deluge he introduced her to now. It had none of the subtleties he'd been seducing her with for weeks. His anger had snapped, his pride had reared up, and now he was going to take her down with him.

Rey wasn't worried. She knew how to find her light. And if she could find her light, then that meant she could find Ben's, too.

If she remembered. Everything was growing fuzzy, like nothing really mattered anymore, just the heat always threatening to build between them. She felt where she could withdraw—where her light would protect her. But this was all right. It was passion he was giving her, raw, unrestrained passion.

Ben wrapped his hand over the back of her neck and pushed up with his body. He kissed her, and she groaned very, very quietly.

"You're going to do as I say," he murmured.
"No, I'm not," she said.

Surprise contracted his features. It was in perhaps that moment that he realized he wasn't powerful enough to overcome her when her shields were down—which meant he was equally unprepared for when she forced her mixture of light and dark inside of him, drowning him as he had done her.

She cupped his face as his eyes grow unfocused.

"Ben," she whispered.

His lashes fluttered.

"You're going to do as I say."

"I'm going to do as you say."

She paused, wetting her lips. The surge of power that went through her was heady. She tamped it down. This was the only chance she would ever have to do this, so she had to get it right on the first try, or all was lost. It was a delicate, sticky web, and it had to be a subtle change. Anything else wouldn't work; he was too strong.

Already, he was fighting against the mind control.

"You're going to believe in me."

"I'm… going… to believe… in you," he panted. Perspiration beaded his brow.

"You're going to give in to your feelings for me."

"I'm… going…" His eyes closed as he struggled. "…to give in… to my feelings for you…"
"You're going to forget this."

"I'm... going... to—forget... this...!"

His face went slack.

She allowed herself to breathe.

It was only a little, and on the surface, it didn't seem like it would amount to much. But it would. Ben trusted no one, and he certainly wouldn't ever confess his actual feelings for her. He felt that would bring him too low, give her too much control.

Something like this would stick, deep in the recesses of his mind.

Ben's lashes fluttered again, awareness returning to his eyes. He looked around groggily. "Did I fall asleep? What are you...?" He sat up suddenly, dislodging her off his lap, and his back smacked into the wall. Suspicion hung around him like a cloud of death. "What did you do?"

"Nothing," she said innocently. "I was worried." She gave him a sad look that was only half-manufactured. "I'm vulnerable around you. Why can't you be the same around me?"

His eyes darted around, looking for enemies hiding in the shadows.

"...I haven't... trusted anyone in a long time." He looked at her. "I fell asleep?" he asked again.

"Yeah. You were going to show me your darkness... remember?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut. "...No," he confessed, and her heart fluttered. It was working! "The last thing I remember is our agreement." He pinched harder. "I have a headache."
"Maybe you're getting sick?"

"I don't—get—sick," he snapped.

"Let's just go back to sleep, then."

He seized her wrist. "What did you do?"

Rey met his eyes calmly and let him claim her wrist. "If you can't learn to trust me, this is never going to work."

"Work?"

"You and me," she elaborated. "Working together?"

Ben released her. "…What happened, then?"

"We made the agreement, but you said you had a headache and needed to lie down for a while. I promised I wouldn't go anywhere."

"And I believed you?"

She pretended to be annoyed. "I'm still here, aren't I?"

He slid down from the wall, still holding the bridge of his nose. "Fine…"

His headache wasn't a great sign. It meant his will was already trying to override the orders she'd given him.

Which meant she had to nestle them deeper.
Rey pulled the blankets up and over the both of them and curled up on his chest, snuggling an arm over his waist. He tensed—slowly relaxed, a hand coming up to cup her forearm.

"We can try again tomorrow," she said.

"If you don't want me to be suspicious of you, it is not working."

Rey rested her chin on his chest to see him. "We made an agreement. I never go back on my word." She waited a heartbeat. "Are you going to be this paranoid the entire time?"

Ben grumped and closed his eyes again. His hand covered the side of her head and pushed it back over his chest. He didn't say anything else.

She lay awake a long time after that, planning her next move. Ben had always been the one to pull the strings, to manipulate. Now she had the upper hand.

He had said he didn't want to be saved. Now he wouldn't have a choice.

Rey smiled.

Tomorrow was a brand new day.
And I Found Love Where It Wasn't Supposed to Be

Chapter Notes

Short chapter! The next few may be, as well. Have a lot of stuff going on with work, and little personal time until the weekend, but I don’t want to let you guys down! I also don’t want to get burnt out, lol. You guys are so awesome, I can’t say it enough!

And I’ll use you as a makeshift gauge,

Of how much to give and how much to take,

I’ll use you as a warning sign,

That if you talk enough sense, then you’ll lose your mind

-I Found, Amber Run

Rey and Ben sat on the bed with their backs against the wall. Neither one of them said anything as they watched dust motes swirling cheerfully in a beam of sunlight. It was possibly the quietest they had ever been in one another's presence.

Rey knew that on her end, she'd never before awoken to a man in her bed. Well, technically it was his bed, though that didn't matter for this example. She'd been so warm tucked against his chest, their legs tangled together as she listened to him breathe. He didn't snore, so that was nice. No, he just… he'd looked so peaceful, with no cares in the world.

Ben pulled a leg to his chest and wrapped his arm around his knee. "We should get food. I haven't been here in a fairly long time, so there isn't anything in the cottage. There's a market down the hill. We can go there."

She twiddled her thumbs for a moment. Ben tensed beside her, ever impatient, anticipating gods knew what. "How do you have this home?" It was a question that had been weighing on her mind.

He thunked his head back against the wall and sighed. Loudly. "Do we need to discuss this now?"

He was such a child!
"We've got all the time in the world, don't we?" she retorted with a bite of heat.

"I am the Supreme Leader—"

"Of the First Order, yes." Sarcasm hung heavy on every word that she managed to get out through clenched teeth. "I am perfectly aware."

Honestly.

"Then you should know I'm unable to stay here for much longer."

Rey frowned. "Was that your plan? Seduce me with darkness, and then whisk me away to the First Order?"

His silence was extremely telling and more than a little aggravating.

She shifted so that she was facing him. "You really don't know me at all, do you?"

Ben turned his head without lifting it from the wall. Iciness exuded from his next words. "You told me you would try."

If he made that statement one more time, she wasn't sure she'd be able to resist walloping him over the head with the nearest heavy object. Was that all the man thought about, this perceived slight? If she had a credit for every time he…

"Yes," she huffed. "But not on some battleship, surrounded by people who would sooner murder me than—"

He leaned in until their faces were scant inches apart. Her breath caught at the close proximity, and he didn't waste a moment in sliding a hand over her ribs.
"No one will ever lay a finger on you," he said so fiercely that her heart skipped a bit.

Blast. Then he had to go and say that.

She kissed him, curling her fingers in that clingy shirt. He tensed once more, just for a moment, and she wondered if he would push her away. But then his lips softened against hers, and his hand came to rest at the small of her back. His mouth parted beneath hers, and she took great pleasure in learning it again.

A soft moan escaped her. His arms snaked around her waist and pulled her even closer, and she slipped her arms over his shoulders. His body was hard and taut from training, and it was a line of heat against her own.

This wasn't a dream where he could slip in and catch her unawares. This was real… very real.

"You learn fast," Ben murmured. His hands ran up the length of her back, all the more sensual because it was still exposed to the elements. "Rey… Become my apprentice. Let me teach you what I know."

"The last time you made that offer, I put that scar on your face." She touched it now, tracing a fingertip over the length of it.

"You're powerful." His eyes were a shade darker, turned almost black. "It's why I want you by my side."

Rey soothed a small curl off his cheek. "Not because you love me?"

Now he couldn't look at her. "I don't know what love is anymore."

"That's not true."

He fell onto his back, his hands closing over her hips and staying there. "How would you know?"
"Because I know you."

It was his turn to scoff. "You only know what I allow you to see."

Rey inclined her head to the side. "But that's exactly what you allowed me to see."

"I did not—"

"You did. Why else would you be so determined?"

"Because you—"

"Is it so terrible to love me? There's nothing in the darkness that's against it." Why was he being so stubborn about this? Was he so desperate to have the upper hand that he would sacrifice everything, even his own emotions?

"No, but it is a weakness." He spat the word like he'd tasted something foul.

"Or a strength. You've seen what we can do without love. Imagine what we could do with it."

Ben gave a dismissive roll of his eyes. She could tell it wasn't heartfelt. He knew she was making sense. He just didn't want to admit it.

"Loving me isn't about saving you. There are dark sides to love, too. Passion… possession… obsession…"

He sat up at this, anger leaping straight across his face. "I do not obsess."

It took work to remain impassive. She borrowed a page from his book on the topic, keeping her face as still as possible. When Ben wasn't in a snit, his calm façade was unnerving. She only hoped she could return the favor.
"I never said you did," she replied.

"It was implied," he snapped.

"Was it?"

A heartbeat passed.

All the anger fell away from Ben's expression, and Rey knew to be on her guard. That was never a good sign. Rey always got the impression of a pole-snake waiting for her to make a mistake so that he could strike at her like she was a skitter-mouse. Small and vulnerable, never a threat.

"And if I were to 'admit' I love you?"

"Then we would be together." Despite the sensors in her body demanding caution, she had no problem conceding this. Not after last night. Not now that she knew without a doubt that she could save him.

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She'd never really seen him be so tender before, and she wasn't sure what to make of it. "Why are you so confident? What are you planning?"

"Nothing," she whispered.

"You're a poor liar, scavenger. But I'll bite." His hand slid over her ear to cup the back of her head. He pulled her forward into a kiss that never seemed to end, each one blending into another. "Admit that you love me, and I'll play your game."

Rey's mouth ran dry. She had to swallow several times before she could speak. All she could think about was the dream they'd shared, where she had said it the first time, oblivious to the fact that it
was real.

"I love you," she half-whispered.

Something flickered behind his eyes. Shock? "You mean it."

Rey dropped her gaze. It felt like her very insides were trembling, but at least her nerves weren't showing outwardly. "Yes."

Ben's lips caught hers with near bruising force. "I won't let you take it back."

"I'm not asking you to—" She trailed off with a sharp gasp as his lips met her exposed throat. Darkness tumbled into her. It wasn't cold, but hot, burning her up as it seesawed through her. She barely recognized the noise that escaped her throat. It belonged to that reflection she'd seen in the mirror.

But it wasn't really darkness, was it? It was everything he was feeling, channeling into her. It contrasted with the soft, slow kisses he was treating her neck with.

"I love you," he murmured.

Rey shivered. She hadn't known having the words returned would matter to her so much. She'd never spoken them to anyone—she'd never heard them said to her. It was a thrill in and of itself, leaving her lightheaded and grinning a little stupidly.

"And what was your plan from there?" His teeth worried her skin.

"Um," she breathed. "To let you use the dark side on me."

His head lifted. "You know I'll be able to discover what I want if I do."

"I know."
Rey wasn’t concerned. If he probed too deep, her inner light would be too much for him with how he was now. And by the time he could handle it, it wouldn't matter anymore.

His instincts were telling him not to trust her. She could see it in his eyes. She could also see the seed she'd planted the night before, working furiously at making him doubt himself.

"We will," he said at length. "But… I want it to be—" He struggled with the right words and settled on, "Special."

She nodded. "Okay…"

He kissed her and then rose to his knees, his arms secured around her as he stepped off the bed. He didn't even fumble. It was making her feel incredibly light.

"We'll go to the village," he said.

"For food?"

"And clothes."

She blinked at him.

"I assume you don't want to remain in that dress?"

"Oh!" She laughed, and the sound startled her. It really wasn't something she did often. "I don't."

Ben nodded and set her on her feet. "Do you want to wash up?"

A bath sounded phenomenal. "Will you come with me?"
He gave her a sharp glance.

Despite herself, red seeped into her cheeks. "Unless you don't want to?"

"I do." He hummed in thought. "We'll… come back to the bath." He reached out and grabbed his vest from the chair he'd tossed it over. His clothing was wrinkled from sleeping in it, not that he seemed to mind.

Rey unwove the braid out of her hair as he sat on the edge of the bed to pull on his boots. She tugged it all back into a simple ponytail and glanced over her dress. It was also a little wrinkled, but not in any ground-breaking way. The sandals, she tied on quickly.

"These people have no idea you're Kylo Ren?"

He grunted.

"Or Ben Solo?"

He tightened his laces.

Okay…

"So what do they know you as?"

Ben ran his fingers through his hair as he stood up. "You ask a lot of questions."

"And I've got loads more."

"…I'll answer some of them during the bath." He looked like he wanted to say more, and his eyes lingered over her. Was he thinking ahead to the bath…? "Let's go."
He took off for the door. She caught up with him and grabbed at his hand. She wasn't sure what he'd do, and she didn't care. For just that moment, she wanted to be close to him.

He was still looking straight ahead when he laced their fingers together and guided them outside.
The sea breeze carried the scent of salt with it. It was really enjoyable, and Rey couldn't keep from smiling. Not a single person in the village was sparing them a second glance. Ben was right—no one here had any idea who he was.

Questions burned at the back of her throat. She held onto them, remembering his promise.

...Rey...

The voice was different from the others that had called her name. A tendril of the Force touched her mind, and she knew instinctively who was trying to reach her.

*General Organa!*

As Ben perused loaves of bread at a vendor, Rey gazed upward. It was cloudy today, so the sunlight didn't burn at her eyes.

*Rey!*
Rey felt the general's relief.

*If you can hear me, you must not be too far.*

Rey cast a nervous glance in Ben's direction. He was preoccupied bargaining with a stall owner. He wasn't going to use the Force to his advantage, she could see already.

*I'm not sure how long this will hold. I'm not good at this—not like my brother was. Are you in danger?*

No, Rey answered her. *I'm fine.*

*Are you with my son?*

Yes, Rey replied. *But please, General Organa… don't look for me. Not yet.*

The line was so quiet that Rey began to wonder if it had been interrupted or ceased altogether.

*I won't if you keep me informed.*

Deal, Rey said, relieved. *I have to go. I'm sorry I made you worry. I didn't know I could reach you like this.*

The touch withdrew, and Rey felt strangely bereft. It was a connection to the other world—the world she'd come from, before she'd gotten swept up in saving Ben.

"What did my mother want?"

Rey jolted. She'd completely forgotten where she was and who she was with.

"Don't do that!" she scolded.
Ben narrowed his eyes. "I didn't do anything. My mother's grasp on the Force is unstable and incomplete. She was projecting enough for anyone to hear."

"Then you don't need to ask," Rey replied testily.

Anger colored Ben's cheeks and made his eyes brighten. He took a step closer to her—paused and visibly got a handle on his temper.

"I was showing you respect by not listening. If you want me to trust you, it must go both ways."

"She was making sure I'm all right!" Rey didn't entirely believe that he hadn't been listening.

Ben didn't say anything. He held up a bracelet that was composed of a dark brown leather strip. It was twisted and strung with turquoise glass beads. It was simple and beautiful both.

"When did you get that?"

"While you were making nice with my mother." He took her hand and hooked the strip around her wrist. It was a nicely snug fit. "Do you like it?"

Temptation to make a smart retort rose on her tongue, ever ready when it came to Ben Solo. But she looked at his uncertain face and her new gift, and she realized he'd likely never given one before. Just has she had never received one.

"Yeah…" Rey spun the bracelet over her wrist a few times to quell her nerves. "Thank you."

He nodded. "What would you like to eat?"

She looked up from the shiny beads. "I've lived off rations my entire life. I'm not picky."

Just like it had with Han, pity crossed his face, making him look exactly like his father. He covered
it up the same way, too, hastily turning back to the task at hand. Rey hated it. She was proud, and garnering another's sympathy made her feel weak.

"What do you like?" she asked so she could stop feeling this way.

"You learn not to have too many favorites when you're onboard a military vessel."

"Food doesn't hold up so well in space, I take it?"

"No." He sighed and glanced around. The market was beginning to get busy, people crowding in around them. She looked with him and spotted a jewelry stall not far off. "Well… do you want to decide together?"

"We—we can…"

This was awkward for both of them. Playing nice was not their forte, but they had to learn somehow.

They spent the next hour scoping out food, and a vast majority of it was interrupted with Rey's intermittent giggles and laughter. Some of the seafood they tried was unbearable, and Rey lived to see the look of pained disgust on Ben's face. Every time she dissolved into more laughter, he would shove a piece of the same sample into her mouth so they could commiserate together.

"Did you just snort?"

Rey could only gasp out a "no" through her giggles.

"I think you did."

She'd never seen this side of him before. She enjoyed the careful way he selected their groceries, like everything in life was a mission, and he had to consider all angles before he came to a decision.

"Hard bread?" he asked.
"I think you have to soak it in something. Soup?"

"Soup seems complicated."

"And really warm."

"You're right. What about this?"

"It's got seeds."

Ben took a look at her disgusted expression and burst into a laugh of his own. It was coarse from disuse, but Rey still found the sound lovely. "No seeds, then."

"This one!" Rey pointed to one that was reasonably seasoned.

They tarried on this way, acquiring a basket and then carrying their purchased goods around. Ben lifted a round green fruit and then tossed it in her direction. She caught it with both hands.

"What is it?"

"A snack to tide you over."

"I'm not—"

"Your stomach woke me with how loudly it was growling this morning."

Rey flushed. She was used to going hungry. "It did not!"

"Don't worry. It was adorable." While she was still processing that, that he even knew that word, he
turned away and continued walking. Because his hair was pulled back again, she could see that the tips of his ears were red.

Part of her wanted to tease him. It would be so easy. But something told her that now wasn't the time. She grabbed his hand once more, casually holding onto it. She took a bite out of her snack and started munching. It was crispy and a little sour, yet delicious.

Rey snuck a glance into their basket. Bread, meat, cheese, some sort of grainy sauce in a glass bottle, and an assortment of fruits indigenous to Naboo. It was enough to make her stomach rumble loudly.

Ben opened his mouth.

"Don't," Rey warned, embarrassed.

He squeezed her fingers. "Come on. I promised you clothes."

Rey looked in the mirror at what she was wearing.

A long-sleeved, beige top with a scoop neck and a black zipper that started at her left hip and zipped all the way up to her right shoulder. A matching pair of trousers that tucked into a pair of supple leather boots covered in buckles. Efficient, yet elegant.

She tapped the tip of one boot against the ground. They fit all right, they just needed to be worn in. She tugged on the bottom of her shirt. Where the zipper began, it was longer on that side in a slant. The problem was how clingy it was. Would it restrict her movements?

Feeling silly in the tiny dressing room, she stretched around a few good times, pretending she still had her lightsaber and then her quarterstaff.

Hmmm…
"What are you doing in there?"

"Nothing!" she called hastily.

She bent and gathered her dress and sandals and pushed open the door. Ben waited nearby, his feet slightly spread apart, the basket of their goods dangling at his side.

"How do you feel?"

"Better."

He glanced to the counter where an older lady sat. "She wants the dress. Wouldn't take my credits."

"Fine with me," Rey sighed. She had no attachment to the thing.

Ben caught her wrist before she could get very far. A sinking sensation claimed her. Not now… Not when they'd been doing so well.

"Ben…" she whispered.

"We have an agreement. Do it."

She closed her eyes, her heart heavy. She didn't want to do this. It felt like a betrayal. Had he been planning this all along?

But he was right. She had to honor her end of the agreement.

She shoved the dress against his chest with a dirty look and went to the frail old lady.
"I'd really like that dress, dear," she said. "I haven't seen fabric that fine in ages. It must be from the palace. There's so many things I could do with it, I don't even know where to begin."

Rey took a deep breath. She'd never done this to an innocent before. No, only to people who were a threat to her life in some form or fashion.

"You're going to give me the clothes for free," Rey murmured with the slightest twitch of her fingers.

Rey stormed out onto the street, so furious she could barely see. Everything was covered in a deep haze of red.

An arm snagged suddenly around her waist, and the next moment, Ben's chest pressed into her back. She struggled immediately. The last thing she wanted was his touch.

His mouth dropped to her ear, as if he were oblivious to her wriggling, kicking body.

"If you ever use mind tricks on me again…"

She stilled, her heart gripped by icy fingers.

He kissed the side of her neck where skin was exposed. "I'll kill you."

"You did it to me!"

"And you tried to kill me, didn't you?" He let go of her.

It stung a lot. She had tried, and he'd easily overpowered her. If she'd had any sort of weapon besides her hands… Force to Force, they were still mostly matched. She remembered how they'd initially destroyed her lightsaber, the latest real casualty in a battle of wills.
"Let's return. You promised me a bath."

Rey stared after him. She could still feel his lips sliding over her skin.

He'd threatened to kill her. She waited for that to sink in, to feel shock, more betrayal, anger, maybe fear…

The problem was that she understood it. The moment he'd returned her memories, she'd launched herself at him.

Concern flickered through her. His memories had returned on their own… when? How long had he been holding onto them? Why had he chosen only now to react, to show his displeasure?

Up ahead, Ben turned around. His gaze very distinctly read, "Are you coming or what?"

Rey felt hunted. The instinct to turn around and get herself out of this situation…

"I love you, too."

Did he?

Yes, she reminded herself. She couldn't let fear control her—couldn't afford it. If he was stronger than her, then it meant she had to keep pushing. She couldn't gain or maintain the upper hand by fleeing at the first sign of danger.

She caught up with him and took the basket. "Do you want to eat first?"

Rey rested her forehead against the bathroom door and exhaled very slowly. There was a splash of water from within, and her stomach clenched with a fresh bundle of nerves.
Ben was in there waiting for her. Presumably naked.

_Naked._

_Choobies._

_You can do this Rey. It was your idea_, she reminded herself.

She opened the door and walked in, the tiles of the floor cool against her bare feet. She very carefully didn't look at Ben as she crossed to the tub and climbed into the steaming water inside of it. She fought the urge to cover her chest. He'd already seen everything, after all.

"This was your idea—"

"Yeah, I know!" she snipped.

A chuckle left her companion. He rested his arms against the sides of the tub. Sunlight filtered in through the window beside them. It overlooked the sea, not that they could see it over the cliff. At least, not without standing up.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Because sometimes you're all words. You don't follow through."

"This is following through," she pointed out to save herself some inkling of dignity. Yes, she was naked. And all right, she was noticeably ready to bolt at the first sign of unwelcome movement. But she _was_ following through.

Ben touched one of her ankles. She jerked it away.

"You're absolutely ridiculous," he chortled. It was nice that he was laughing more, but not when it
"You're ridiculous!" she huffed, sending a wave of water his way. He slowly and deliberately wiped the water off his face. "Very mature."

She snorted and tucked herself up against her side of the tub. It was easiest to do by hugging her legs to her chest. It allowed her some semblance of modesty. "You're one to talk about maturity." She would have elaborated but felt it safest not to.

Annoyance made his eyes narrow, just like she'd wanted. Victory was shallow but not hollow.

"Was this what you wanted from this? Bickering?"

Rey dropped her chin to her knees. "So why here? Naboo, I mean."

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, which was down again and wet from the splash. She wanted to touch it, too, and had to resist the urge.

But… why? Why resist?

Water tumbled around as she slid forward. His eyebrows rose, but he made room for her. She half-floated above his hips, her knees touching the bottom of the tub on either side of them.

His large hands ran up the length of her back and over her shoulder blades. She tried not to think about how exposed and vulnerable she was.

"Well?" she asked.

His fingertips skated over the outline of her spine. "My grandmother was born here," he murmured.
"Your grandmother?"

"Yes. She was made queen for a time, under the name of Amidala."

"Under the name?" Rey wasn't sure if she had heard him right.

"The name she assumed as queen. Her real name was Padmé." Ben reached for a sponge on the windowsill and doused it with water. She watched as he lathered soap onto it and dragged it down her back.

Rey swallowed. Concentrating had just become ten times more difficult. Was that his endgame? If so, it was working.

"That's all I really know." His voice grew bitter. "My mother didn't share much of her parentage with me. I did not even know the truth about my grandfather until she'd already sent me to Skywalker."

"Were you born here?"

"No."

The sponge was thoroughly soaping up her back. Rey got the impression that he would rather focus on that than look at her while they discussed this. Rey didn't mind. It made it easier to forget the fact that she was naked, that he was naked, that they were sitting together, both very much naked…

"Where were you born, then?"

"Chandrila."

"I've never heard of it."

Ben glanced at her with another raised eyebrow as he carefully moved the sponge to her front. "Have you heard of many planets?"
"I'm only… I'm only making conversation."

He rubbed the sponge over her belly button. "You're not very good at it."

"You're not either," she retorted hotly.

He paused, wetting his lips as he thought. He guided the sponge up to her ribs, working the lather into her skin. "I… I haven't had to use a filter on what I say in a long time. I'm sorry."

An apology freely given?

"It's all right… I'm not very socially adept myself. I spent most of my life alone."

"Scavenging?"

The clouds scudding past were much easier to look at. "I made my home in an old Imperial walker. No one bothered me there; it was far off in the desert, away from the Niima Outpost. But…” Rey pressed her teeth into her lower lip. "I had these tick marks on a wall. One for every day I'd been there since my parents abandoned me."

She laughed softly. "I learned to deal with the loneliness. I couldn't trust anyone—I had to keep to myself. After so many years, it wasn't as unbearable."

Ben's fingers touched her cheek and gingerly turned her head around.

Rey knocked his hand away. "Don't. I didn't tell you for pity."

"It's not pity," he replied a little gruffly. "It's… relief."

"Relief?"
"You're not alone."

"You told me that once… And then you…" She trailed off. It wasn't worth explaining. He didn't think he'd done anything wrong.

He kissed her, the sponge falling out of his fingers as he put his arms around her and tugged her against him. She dug her hands into his shoulders, her brows pulling tight together. Resisting him didn't last long. A moment later, and she was kissing him back, her lips parting easily beneath his.

It was so much better now that she knew what she was doing.

"I'm going to give you my darkness." His teeth bit at her mouth. "Now."

Trepidation made her pause. "All—all right—"

It hit her hard, no finesse to it this time. She gasped at the sheer heat filtering through her, clinging onto every particle of her being. She didn't fight it and heard herself moan, knew she was fisting her hands in his hair.

"Do you understand? How much I want you?"

She did. She could feel his need as if it were her own. It was different this time, not completely overwhelming, not now that she held both darkness and light inside of her. It was pleasant, and it stoked her own wants.

"Then do something about it," she whispered.

"I won't stop." It was both a promise and a threat.

She swallowed. It was so hard to think properly. But she knew what she wanted, who she wanted.

"Don't," she breathed.
Trying to Survive Inside Your Arms

No, it's too much, burn my sun
Up in flames we go, you fire breather
Ash and dust on my door

-Fire Breather, Laurel

It took a great deal of bravery to reach down and wrap her fingers around Ben's cock. Rey had never kissed anyone before he came along, never mind actually touching someone... there. But as she felt the heat of him, so warm and so, so soft, her hesitation melted away.

A quiet groan left him. The sound of it made her feel alive, powerful. She squeezed him experimentally, and he broke from the kiss to clench his eyes shut and grip onto the sides of the tub. She got the impression that it had been a long time for him to be touched in this manner. That
was good. At least they were in this together.

Another wave of his darkness crashed into her. It made her tremble from the force of it. She willingly pulled it inside herself, breathing through it, tossing her head back as her throat worked in a long swallow.

It was difficult to describe, even to herself. The rush of power threatened to drag her into an undertow. Both of their emotions were heightened, only fueling the tide. It was heady and disarming, and she knew she should protect herself.

She just couldn't. It felt too good.

Ben's mouth closed over her nipple. A jerk tore through her, and she had to move her hand so she didn't accidentally hurt him. He grabbed it before it could retreat entirely and guided it back to his cock. She couldn't stay still, the pressure on her nipple intense and almost uncomfortable, but not quite.

*possession*

The pulse of that particular feeling was more than familiar. She didn't want it—but why…? She gave a mental shake of her head. Because she didn't want to be claimed. She'd told him so, time and time again.

*possession*

Resisting him was quickly becoming a losing battle. Ben pressed kisses to her throat and put his hand back over hers. He moved it slowly, taking the time to show her how to properly handle him. He was wide and long, and as her fingers tunneled around him, she wondered if he could possibly fit inside of her.

*possession*

"Ben—"
"You promised."

She had. She'd promised she would take it, take his darkness.

It rolled over her once more. She shuddered and licked her lips. She had to do this, had to give in and let go. He knew it, she knew it. All that had to be done was for—

**possession**

A dam burst inside of her.

Rey went rigid, unable to do more than process everything coiling through her. It drowned out her hesitations, her fears, her worries. His claim on her stamped itself on her thoughts, her heart, her soul.

And the power… surging inside of her, eager to be used…

She could do anything, anything at all. The only person who could stand against her was beneath her, and he had no desire to. He was the one who wanted to come together, to use… *this*.

Her body became hyperaware. She could feel the heat from the water, each droplet on her skin, how hard her nipples were, how plump and aching it was between her legs. Her pulse, the pounding of her heart. The smoothness of his skin.

She stood, water pouring off her, and gripped the back of his head. She secured a leg over his shoulder and rocked the core of herself against his mouth. His tongue dipped between the folds of her cunt, and he let out something like a territorial growl. He yanked her even closer, nearly knocking her off her feet.

Rey hadn't known how much she was denying herself by denying him. She couldn't think beyond the shadows entangling her, or the suction of his mouth on her clit. He experimented at his leisure, trying to figure out what sent her through the roof.

He pressed his tongue up inside the hood of her cunt and a moan exploded from her. He kept at it,
his mouth burrowing even closer to it. She started writhing, her fingers pulling at his hair. She
didn't know if she wanted this assault or if she wanted to push him away. It was too much. Or at
least she thought so, until he attacked her clit again with gusto.

It pushed her straight over the edge, and she—

Wait—what was that? There was liquid coming out of her. She pushed his head away and was
surprised when he adamantly refused to budge. His mouth closed back over her, and he continued
to work her clit.

But—?

Two fingers shoved inside of her with no preparation. Her legs were shaking, barely able to hold
her up. Oh, gods. He needed to stop! She was about to do that—that thing again. She clenched his
hair in warning, yet just as before, he stayed close, his free hand gripping the back of her thigh.

Her folds were so slick, and she could feel that wetness between her legs. Orgasm burst forth, and
like before, it carried liquid heat. He didn't falter, burying his mouth more firmly against her as his
fingers pushed up to the knuckles in her cunt.

She—she couldn't—it was just too much—

He slid a third finger in, stretching her even wider, and when she whimpered, a forth. She was
beyond tight. It should have been painful, but she was so caught up in his darkness that it didn't
matter.

Another fierce suckle at her clit and she fell apart. This time she didn't care when she came in his
mouth, she just rode his face harder. He didn't cease and desist until she could barely hold herself
upright, her thighs trembling.

Ben kissed her core and pulled his fingers free. Her lashes fluttered, and she looked down at him,
so relaxed and wanton that she almost couldn't stand it. She groaned when she saw her wetness on
his face and neck.

"I didn't mean to—"
"You taste amazing."

"So it wasn't—?"

"No."

"Are you sure you—?"

He licked his lips clean. "Yes." The intensity in his gaze told her not to ask again. "Do you like it? Do you feel my darkness?"

Rey nodded, unable to speak.

"Do you feel how powerful it is?"

She dipped her head in answer.

"Do you want more?"

More? There was more? How was that possible? This was already so magnificent.

He chuckled darkly at her expression.

The promise of more of that raw, potent power was too much to resist. She'd felt it coursing through her own veins as if it were her life's blood. But it wasn't the power itself—it was Ben, tethered to the end of it.

"I have you," he whispered. "Fall."
She wanted to resist—and maybe later, she would.

"Fall."

His darkness descended. It wasn’t a slam this time. No, it was much more sensual than that. It wound through her until the rest of her insecurities melted away, leaving only her desires, his desires. When he rose and cupped her face, every hair on her body stood on end, his touch was so charged.

Ben’s arousal pressed urgently against her stomach.

"How do you feel?" he murmured.

"Free," she sighed, closing her eyes.

"Do you love me?" His fingertips danced over the length of her shoulders.

"Yes."

"Do you want me?"

"Yes."

"Will you show me just how much?"

She dropped to her knees in answer, the water sluicing over the lower half of her body. His hand tangled in her hair as he pulled her mouth close to his erection.

A hunger came over her without warning, a hunger to taste him as he had tasted her. She took him eagerly into her mouth, going forward until he bumped the back of her throat. She choked a little, her fingers digging into the outline of his hipbones.
"Don't stop there," he said, pushing deeper. Her throat convulsed in the process, and she couldn't breathe. A hint of panic ignited.

"Rey—focus on me."

She rolled her eyes up to see him. Her throat burned around him, but she had the sensation of being full.

"Use the Force—relax your throat."

She could do that, she could.

Rey closed her eyes and fell into a meditative stance she'd learned from Luke. Slowly the tension unknotted from her body, and the muscles in her throat eased. It allowed him to sink all the way in until he'd fully seated himself.

"Gods," he groaned. "Do you know how rare this is? No, of course you don't. Stay still—I don't want to hurt you."

His hips rolled in a tentative rock. The tip of his cock pushed into her throat again. Heat rippled through her, and pride, pride that she could take all of him. She didn't have a lot of experience, but she could gather enough that what he'd said was true.

It went on like this for several moments. He was as careful as he could be, and she lightly suckled on him as the underside of him slid over her tongue. She didn't mind it—liked it even. But…

On his next thrust, she met him, gripping onto his hips and ramming her face forward. This drew a strangled gasp from him, and he jerked harder on the next grind. She didn't know why this was so erotic to her. She'd always thought such a thing might be demeaning. She was glad to know she was wrong.

A wave of darkness choked her. Her heart trumpeted up another notch, and it was giving her ideas. As she let him take her mouth in an almost brutal line of thrusting, she focused on the Force. For once, it didn't take much concentration. She pulled it through him like a string and plucked it. It reverberated through the both of them, a frisson of energy under their skin.
Ben's eyes flew open.

He withdrew abruptly from her mouth, panting slightly. His eyes landed on her reddened, bruised lips, and he groaned with clear want.

"Why are you stopping?" she rasped, her throat a little rough from the abuse it had taken.

"Because I don't want to finish yet." He picked her up into his arms and stepped out of the bath. The air was cold in places on her skin.

"Where are we going?"

She had her answer a moment later when he tossed her onto the bed. She looked up at him with primal eyes, her body supple and compliant. She was dizzy from his darkness, and she honestly wasn't sure if she ever wanted it to leave.

She recalled the reflection of darkness within herself. She understood it now, the allure, the appeal, the addictiveness. The darkness took all of the feelings that weighed on her and tucked them away.

Ben growled. His hands ran down her body, and she arched into them with a needy sigh.

"Don't you see how we could be great together?"

She reached up, grabbing his hips and yanking him down on top of her. She bit her lip as the velvet heat of him rubbed between the folds of her cunt. There was no need to resist the urge to rock up, so she didn't. Ben's breath hissed from between his teeth.

"Don't you see the things we could do?"

Her hands rubbed appreciatively down his chest. She'd been wanting to do that since the first time she'd ever seen him shirtless. It was even better than she'd imagined.
Ben flipped her onto her stomach. His hands grabbed her hips and yanked her up. In the next moment, he had a hand on the small of her back to steady himself, and then he was slamming into her.

Rey screamed. From pleasure or pain or both, she didn't know. Her cunt stretched to accommodate him as he knocked against her cervix. His fingers gripped her with bruising force, and she could hear his ragged breathing behind her. Any pretense of being gentle had died when they'd started sharing his darkness.

The flash of pain didn't last long. He didn't wait for her to recover and started ramming into her cunt the same way he'd taken her mouth. She pushed up into him, her fingers grabbing fistfuls of the blanket. The wet slap of their bodies resounded through the room, and it only served to stoke her arousal higher.

"Tell me," Ben panted.

"Make me," she groaned.

He hooked his arm around her waist and yanked her back against him. A hand wrapped around her neck and squeezed. It wasn't enough to cut off her air supply, but it added a thrilling element of danger. He wasn't subjecting her to anything she didn't want. This closely linked, he could feel anything she was feeling.

His teeth bit into her shoulder. She knew there would be a bruise there later.

"Tell me," he repeated.

"Make me," she insisted. A bead of perspiration slid to the small of her back.

His hand planted itself between her shoulder blades and pushed her down onto her stomach. The force behind his pounding rocked the bed, made it shake. She licked her lips, arching into every single thrust. She was steadily losing the ability to think clearly.

"I want you to want this willingly," he ground out.
"Then—give—me—more—"

His cock suddenly withdrew, and she cried out at the loss. She didn't have to wait long. A moment later, she was on her back and he was sliding back inside of her. She sighed in relief, and he dropped his forehead to hers. One of his hands found hers, and he laced their fingers.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

It was a seamless transition. One moment she was floating through the splendor of their arousal. The next, she was—

Rey put her arms around his neck and groaned as she kissed him. She wanted to feel like this forever, be with him like this forever. No more words were exchanged as he began driving into her over and over again. Both could feel the other's heartbeat, hear the other's thoughts.

And when Ben's darkness touched upon her light, he didn't flinch.

"Take it," she urged him.

"I don't—"

"I'm taking yours." This deep, the agreement they made didn't matter any longer. "All of it. I still—feel like myself."

"It will be different," he protested.

"It doesn't have to be." She cupped his face with her hands. "If it makes both of us better… isn't that—?"

"You're trying to trick me."
She pressed the heels of her palms against her eyes. One step forward, ten back. The only way this would ever work would be with trust. But neither of them trusted the other, not even this deep.

Ben took her hands away from her face. "You think this will make us stronger?"

"I think it's the only way for both of us to get what we want."

"We—"

Rey shook her head. "We have to stop trying to change each other. We should evolve together."

"And if I do this… you'll be at my side?" His breath quickened.

"I will."

Ben returned to hammering into her. She gave a cry, her nails raking down his chest and leaving red welts. She could feel her light inside of him. She threaded more through to help, keeping an even pace.

But then he grabbed the rest of it and dove in. Concern flared within her. He'd been on the dark side for years—this could seriously hurt him.

Except it didn't. Was it because it had found the light that still resided inside of him?

She watched his face as he continued to thrust. It looked like he was having an inward battle, right up to the point that his eyes snapped open and tears streaked his cheeks.

Ben leaned into her. She held him to her as his tears made a wet patch on her neck. She could appreciate him, and he could appreciate her. What was more important was the sensation of their connection. The tie had always come and gone at its leisure—now it was firm, strong, stretched between them like a missing puzzle piece.
Rey knew it was because they had finally unlocked their true potential.

"I'm going to come," he gasped into her neck.

"Do it," she encouraged. She continued stroking his back. The heat had abated to something less urgent, but still potent. No one could ever feel the way they did in that moment.

Ben spilled inside of her, his seed hot in her core. Like this, neither of them could think about being safe. All that mattered was being together, comforting the other.

"I love you," she murmured.

He kissed his favorite spot on her neck. "I love you, too."

And she knew that no matter what happened, no matter the hardships, they would be okay.
Am I Broken, What's the Chance I Will Survive?

Chapter Notes

I want to take the time to really thank everyone who has supported me this far in the story, and especially in the last chapter. I value each and every one of you. You guys are so awesome. I really look forward to waking up every day to see your guys' responses. It's one of the reasons I pump this story out so fast—'cause I know it's appreciated!

I LOVE YOU GUUUUYYSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS!

Cut me open, and tell me what's inside,

Diagnose me, 'cause I can't keep wondering why

And, no, it's not a phase, 'cause it happens all the time,

Start over, check again, now tell me what you find

-Avalanche, Bring Me the Horizon

It was the booming that woke her.

Rey sat straight up in bed, her heart racing. When she looked to the window, she could see it—the rain sliding down it, the utter deluge outside. A wicked streak of light flashed over the blackness of the sky, and that boom followed in its wake. Was this what she had heard mentioned but never seen? Thunder? Lightning?

Even on Solaris, it hadn't... stormed like this.

Thinking she should lie back down so she didn't disturb Ben, she pulled her covers up and settled into the bed and her pillows.

"Rey…?"
Her name, uttered in the weakest of whispers. A fresh wave of fear gripped her as she rolled over to look at the man beside her. Panic rocketed through her, amped up the fear. He was so… so pasty, almost, with beads of sweat clinging to his face. She had never seen him like this. Was he ill?

"Ben…?" She started to reach for him—stopped. He was a proud person. What if he didn't want…?

"W… What have I done…?" His brown eyes were so, so wide, and she didn't know what he was talking about at first. Then he licked his lips and added in a cracked voice, "My father…"

Oh, gods.

Rey gripped his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

He squeezed his eyes shut. A long moment passed. He shook his head.

Through their connection, she could feel it with a casual reach. All the horrible deeds he had performed were catching up with him. Was it the light—*her* light? Had it done this to him? She'd wanted him to come back to the light side of the Force, she just hadn't known it…

The next crack of thunder was so loud it shook the entire cottage. There was a crashing noise—the waves against the cliff face? It was a subtle roar in the background.

"There's an unbalance in the Force," he whispered hoarsely.

"It's just a storm."

"This is a temperate planet. A storm like this is exceedingly rare. I find it hard to believe it merely coincided with our joining." A cough wracked him after this, as if it had taken too much effort to speak in complete sentences.

Rey tried not to feel afraid. It wouldn't do either of them any good. "…So what do we do?"
Ben's TIE silencer was not meant for more than one pilot. How in seven hells had he gotten her across Naboo in this thing while she'd been in a Force slumber?

Rain plastered her hair to her face, and her clothes were uncomfortably wet and weighing her down. The walk here had been long and arduous, made worse from the mud they'd had to trek through. He'd decided to hide his ship in a field nearby the village, with a camouflage over it to hide it from the world at large.

She watched as Ben climbed into his ship, and she knew then the only way she was getting in there to the palace was by sitting on his lap. Such a mental image might have brought her joy today, but they had more pressing circumstances at hand.

Then he gestured behind him. Curious, she pushed up into the ship and spotted what couldn't be seen from outside—a smaller chair behind the pilot's.

"Oh, you want me to sit there?"

He looked at her dubiously.

"I'm only—you don't look like you can fly, Ben."

"These controls…” He paused to wipe his arm over his forehead. "They were made to my specifications. I'm not sure you could handle them."

"You're sick—"

"Rey, get in."

"I just don't know how—"

"Rey, get in!"
"Fine, but if we crash, it's your fault," she grumbled.

Rey stuck her head inside the *Millennium Falcon*. "Chewie?" she called. Hearing his answer, she followed where it had come from. He was in the cockpit, fiddling with some wires. She'd known she'd find him here, instead of in the palace with all of the stuffy Naboo. He didn't like big deal affairs.

When he saw her, he dropped what he was holding and came to her to put his hand on her shoulder. He roared quietly. She smiled and put her hand over his. Then his eyes caught sight of the tall, hooded figure behind her.

She had a second to process the rage that filled Chewie's eyes, and then the wookie was pushing her aside and going straight for her companion.

Chewbacca wrapped a hand around Ben's throat and lifted him, pressing him into a wall. He roared so loudly it made Rey's ears ring, and she clutched at his arm, trying to tug him off. To his credit, Ben stayed where he was without a struggle or a sign of the Force. He wasn't choking. Yet.

"Chewie, don't! He knows what he's done! He—"

The wookie growled a retort.

"I'm *not* blinded! Look at him! *Look at him!*

Her friend swung his attention back around to Ben, who was trembling, not from fear, but from the things he kept playing over in his mind. He was barely there, trusting Rey to take over speaking, travel plans, and anything else that would require his thoughts. It was as if his body was expelling the darkness like a toxin, and all he could do was hold on until the fever passed.

The wookie released Ben with a questioning noise. Ben slumped against the wall, then slid down it until he hit the floor.
"We have to leave."

**BOOM!**

Rey jumped; she couldn't help herself. She didn't think she liked thunder very much. "We've upset the balance of the Force. We have to get far away from here. Someplace where—" She paused as Chewbacca spoke across her. "The Wilds? Where is—?"

"Are you insane?" Ben hissed. "The Uncharted Territories?"

Chewie roared and looked ready to grab his would-be nephew by the throat again.

"Yes, Starkiller Base was there. And the path we had to take, to map out, to even survive—"

"The Resistance reached Starkiller Base," Rey protested. "Surely it wasn't that difficult?"

"Barely, if you recall."

"If by barely, you mean we destroyed it."

Ben's lip curled. "They would have had to follow an exact map to get there. The Wilds are called uncharted for a reason. It is a labyrinth. It is filled with black holes, with—" He cut himself off with a frustrated noise. He turned to the wookie. "Why there?"

Before he could answer, what sounded like an explosion rocked through the hangar and the *Falcon*. Rey lost her footing and gripped onto a seat before she could injure herself. Chewbacca remained standing, although barely.

"Wait, what?" Rey asked once Chewie had answered Ben. "You think there's someplace out there that would be able to absorb the counterbalance?"
The wookie rumbled that it was a theory.

"Risk our lives and—?" Ben began.

"Or risk the lives of everyone else!" Rey cried. "It sounds like the entire planet is about to break apart. I don't want to be responsible for destroying the galaxy because we don't know what we're doing and there's no one here to help us." She gripped onto Chewie's arm. "What's your idea?"

Ben and Rey listened in silence.

Wind pushed rain into the hangar, howling ferociously and making the pilot ships teeter and groan. Rey could see it all through the windshield of the cockpit, and it was unnerving, to say the least.

"Follow the Force," Ben replied blankly.

Chewie snapped a retort at Ben about how Ilum was there, the planet where lightsaber crystals came from. Rey derived from this that it couldn't be too difficult to navigate out there, and that Chewbacca thought Ben was being overly dramatic.

"How do you even know about that?" Ben asked skeptically.

"Because he was around when the Jedi Order was still there," Rey surmised. Chewie nodded at her. She waited for the wookie to speak some more. "You think there's wild Force out there?" Another nod from him, and Rey got back to her feet. "You're probably right. I think we're strong enough that we could follow it. The only problem is getting there…"

Her friend roared heartily.

She blinked in surprise. "You want to come?" And when he looked offended, "I just meant because Ben is here!" The wookie cast his partner's son a dirty look with a growl. "You don't trust me alone with him?"

Ben knocked his head back against the wall. "I don't care. Go make your goodbyes—quickly."
Rey ran as fast as she could into the wing where her friends were housed. The ground trembled beneath her feet but held steady. The chandeliers in the corridors blinked in and out, the electricity compromised from the storm. It was crazy imagining that Ben and herself had caused this because they’d intertwined their hold on the Force so completely.

A maid informed her that the Resistance members were about to be seated for breakfast. Thanking her with a curt nod, Rey headed there next, this time for the dining room. She highly doubted anyone would be on the pavilion in this weather.

She burst into the room, and members of the queen's court looked blearily in her direction. The smell of eggs and bread filled her nose, enticing her to eat. She shook it off and went to the end of the table where her friends were, who were already rising to their feet.

"Rey!" they exclaimed, and crowded around her.

"Guys!"

Poe reached her first, his hands on her shoulders. "Rey." The relief on his face was stark, and she wanted to reassure him—had planned to. The choice was taken away from her as her fingers curled and Poe's feet left the ground, his hands groping at his neck. Confusion and betrayal shone clearly in his eyes.

BB-8 whistled in alarm.

"Ben," she said, uncaring of how mad she probably seemed. "Let go of him."

Rose gasped and went to—what, stop her? Finn grabbed her before she could, yanking her behind him. The dining room was entirely silent except for the choked noises the ace pilot was making.

"You are mine!"

"Ben!"

Her fingers opened, and Poe fell to the floor, stumbling and landing on his ass.

Her friends were watching her in horror. She sighed. That was about right. She was going to have to draw a line with Ben about where controlling the other's body was. Being this closely joined together, thoughts and all, made it possible. That didn't mean it should be used, or worse, abused.

"Rey?"

She whirled to find Leia walking toward her, her hands outstretched. Rey left her friends and went to the general, clasping onto them. R2-D2 followed with C-3PO clanking along, and the former droid's lights lit up.

"I wanted to tell you that we're leaving," Rey said. "Chewbacca's coming with us."

Before Leia could answer, the ground beneath their feet shook so tremendously that screams could be heard echoing throughout the palace. A piece of the ceiling fell and landed square on the dining table, smashing crystal and cutlery and sending those seated scrambling out of their chairs.

"Because of this." Rey hugged the older woman. In her ear, she whispered, "He loves you."

So many expressions crossed Leia's face, and Rey didn't have time to ponder them. She released her and turned once more to her friends. Finn rushed to hug her, and she let him, gripping tightly. His scent washed over her, mostly comprised of that leather jacket.

"I don't know what's going on," he said. "And I want to go with you."

"You can't, Finn—"
"I can!"

"Rose—"

"Rey, you need me there!" He pulled back to grip onto Rey's hands and stare intently into her eyes. The sight of those brown pupils had always been comforting to her. Finn was a warm soul, and she sorely wanted him to go. She'd missed him so much already. "Whatever you're doing, you can't do this alone!"

"I have Ben—"

He snorted.

"And Chewie—"

"REY!"

There was no time. There was no time, and Ben, he wouldn't like it—

* I *don't care*, he said tiredly. *We need to go. Now.*

"You're sure?"

R2-D2 gave a sudden whistle. He bumped forward into the backs of Rey's legs. As she looked down at him, he let out a series of beeps.

"You want to come, too?"

"He says you will need help navigating," C-3PO translated. "I will stay here with the Princess in her time of need."
R2-D2 chirped shrilly and banged into C-3PO's metal legs.

"A coward? How rude!"

"Is it all right if he comes?" Rey asked Leia.

She smiled sadly. "He was always Luke's droid. If he wants to go with you, you should take him. He probably knows more about the Force than any droid should."

The ground rumbled, though not as strongly as it just had, and Finn grabbed her hand.

"What have I told you about taking my hand?" Rey fussed as he dragged her out of the room, their droid in tow.

Typically, Finn ignored her. "Where are we going?" he asked in the silence of the nearest corridor. "Lead the way!"

Getting the *Falcon* up and going was going to be difficult with the wind slicing through the air as it was. Rey buckled herself into the pilot's seat with Chewie at her side, and Ben and Finn fell into the seats behind them. R2-D2 was nowhere to be found, so Rey assumed he was securing himself somewhere. He probably didn't have ropes like BB-8 did.

"Everyone hold on!" she warned.

One treacherous path later, Rey broke the clouds covering the planet and raced toward the stratosphere. From there, it was a hop and a skip to shoot into space. She hadn't the faintest idea of where she was going.

"Jakku?" she repeated back to Chewie.
"It sits on the edge of the Wilds," Ben supplied, his voice cracking in places.

Finn looked back and forth between Ben and Rey. "What's wrong with this guy?"

"I'll tell you later," Rey promised. "All right, Chewie, did you get us enough fuel?"

He nodded.

"Do you have an idea of where we should go once we get there?"

He shook his head.

"Right, then," she muttered. "I can do this…"

She shoved all thrusters forward, and the stars turned to streamers of white.
I Won't Suffer, Be Broken

Run away, run away, I'll attack,

Run away, run away, go chase yourself,

Run away, run away, now I'll attack,

I'll attack, I'll a, whoa!

-Attack, Thirty Seconds To Mars

"I know we're worried about black holes… but has anyone considered Jakku might be one?"

Rey looked at Finn. He was staring straight ahead at the encroaching planet.

"We're not actually going down there," Rey reassured him. It would be a hot day in the seventh circle of hell before she willingly stepped foot onto Jakku again. Unless they needed her to, of course. "It's just our starting point."

The two friends were alone in the cockpit. Ben was resting in the crew quarters, and Chewbacca and R2 were fiddling with something in the main hold. Maybe. Rey wasn't entirely sure. They could just as easily have been in the forward hold.

"And from there, we're going to the Wilds?"

"Yes."

"Like where Starkiller Base was?"

"The other side."

"Okay… and has anyone ever… I don't know… been to this part of the Uncharted Territory?"
"In general, or…?"

"I mean us." Finn, notably a little tense, gestured between them. His eyes stayed locked on the desert planet ahead. "Has any one of us gone into that part?"

"Um…" Rey wasn't sure how to break this to him. He looked on the verge of freaking out. "No…?"

"So… let me get this straight." Finn rubbed his hands together and then placed them under his chin. "We're all going into the Uncharted Territory…"

"Yes."

"And none of us have ever been there?"

"No."

Finn kept silent a whole ten seconds before whirling to her. "Are you crazy?!

"No."

"I mean, whose idea was this?"

"Chewie's."

He drew back. "…Really?"

"Yes."
"So… So… we're supposed to just go in there and…?"

"Ben is going to pilot."

"You mean the 'Supreme Leader' who is so pasty right now that he could be a stormtrooper?!!"

"He's the best we've got," Rey said defensively.

"Poe is the best we've got! Let's go back and get him!"

"Shhh!" Ben was asleep, so he couldn't hear anything that was happening, but she didn't want to risk it. Poe was dangerous territory.

"Oh, sure! Shhh the one making sense!"

"Ben is a better pilot than Poe." She didn't see the point in calling him Kylo Ren to her friends anymore.

"A better pilot than Poe!?!" Finn's voice rose to almost squeaky disbelief. "You're kidding, right? This is some kind of game? Mess with Finn, watch his head explode?!"

Rey put her hands on his shoulders—patted them—and then left the cockpit.

"Rey!" He followed her into the corridor. He caught her elbow and shepherded her into the nearest wall. She let him guide her out of amusement more than frustration. "What's going on? You haven't told me anything."

"You haven't let me," she reminded him.

Finn grew quiet for a moment.
"Yeah, all right, that's true." He folded his arms. "So tell me now."

Rey put the heel of her palm to her forehead. "I don't even know where to start." When his mouth opened: "And don’t say at the beginning, it's not that easy!"

"You wanna tell me over a game of dejarik?"

Rey's eyebrows rose. "You figured that thing out?"

"Hell no. But it sure looks like fun."

Finn was smiling at her so much that she couldn't help but smile back, her annoyance evaporating. She was really glad he'd come along. Finn was the closest thing to a best friend that she had.

"All right. You're on!"

"My head…” Finn groaned as he rubbed it. "I have so many thoughts…”

"I figured you might." Abandoning her pieces, Rey got up. "I need to check on Ben. We can't hang around Jakku forever." They were sitting targets for pirates. Besides, the Falcon was associated with Han Solo's enemies, and not everyone knew he was dead yet.

Ignoring the pang in her heart, Rey went to the crew quarters. Ben was curled up on one of the three beds, facing the wall. Even from the threshold, she could tell he was trembling. It appeared that whatever was afflicting him was getting worse.

She stepped close to his bed. Finn, who had followed her, hung back. He actually looked concerned.

Rey sat on the edge of the bed and put a hand on her… partner's…? shoulder. She still had no idea
what to refer to him as. "Lover" made her blush, and it didn't really encompass their gimmick.

"Ben…?" she murmured.

His hand rose and gripped onto hers, but his eyes stayed closed.

"Are you sick?"

"It's the darkness…" His voice was raspy.

"The darkness?"

"De…" He shuddered. "Detoxing…"

"Will you be—?"

*I'm connected to you.* It seemed speaking out loud was too hard on him. *I'll be fine.*

"Okay," she whispered. She got up to go.

*Rey…?*

She turned back to him. *Ben?*

*Don't…*

Seconds ticked past.

*Don't…*
What was he trying to say?

Don't go…

Rey sat back down. She smoothed his damp hair off his clammy forehead. She'd never really been in a position to comfort someone before. She hoped she was going about it the right way.

"I'll… go find Chewbacca," Finn said in an unsettled sort of way. "Tell me if you need me."

Rey nodded without looking up. When Finn's shadow vanished from the doorway, she bent and kissed Ben's forehead. Being tender like this… with Ben… He'd been her enemy for so long that this still felt incredibly new.

"Are you… are you sure you're going to be okay…?" Rey couldn't help but feel a little afraid—afraid and responsible. This hadn't happened until he'd taken in her light. What if he only got worse…?

"He's being purged of the darkness."

Rey fell off the bed. "Luke?! How—?!

It was Luke… but it wasn't. She realized she could see right through him, and that he had a faint blue aura around him. Mother of choobies, how in seven hells was this possible?

*Force ghost,* Ben supplied.

Luke came close until he stood over Ben. "He's reliving every terrible deed he committed. This is not something most Sith survive."

"WHAT?!" she exploded, scrambling to her feet. "He could die?!"
"He won't. He's far too stubborn."

"Go… away… Skywalker..." Ben gritted through chattering teeth.

"Not—not that I mind, but why are you here?" Rey couldn't resist the urge to poke her hand through the 'ghost.'

"Hey! Quit that!" Luke snapped indignantly.

"Why? Do you feel it?" This was so strange.

"No," he sulked, folding his arms. "But it's hard to be imposing when someone is sticking their hand through you." At another shudder ripping through Ben, he sobered. "It won't be easy for him. A lot is weighing on his mind."

"Did you… come here… to gloat, old man?"

"Partially."

"Luke!" Rey scolded.

"What? He had an army fire nearly half their ammo at me! But…" Luke sighed. "I came here to help in the any way that I could."

"Don't—need your—help!" Ben pushed into an upright position, or at least he tried to. Rey wouldn't let him, insisting he lie back down. He panted angrily up at his uncle. "Go away!"

Luke made a show of studying his otherworldly nails. "You shouldn't strain yourself, Ben. You're going to need all of your strength."
His nephew collapsed on the bed. He breathed raggedly up at the ceiling, and his fingers clenched into the blanket beneath him. His chest and underarms were damp on his shirt from how badly he was sweating. A half-yell locked behind his teeth, and his eyes flashed amber for just a moment.

Rey hated seeing him like this. She felt so helpless, not knowing what to do.

"Get—out!" Ben roared. He was sitting again, and this time Rey got out of the way. Rage was palpable on him, and being near him was likely very dangerous. Luke may be impervious to harm now, but she wasn't.

"Or what?"

Rey could not believe Luke was provoking him so badly. She was tempted to tell him to leave, but it was so good seeing him again, seeing him as he had been in life…

Ben outstretched an arm, lifting his hand. His fingers curled. He panted, wetting his lips. He had to know it wouldn't have any effect on the ghost. He stared hatefully into his uncle's eyes.

And then Rey saw it—she knew Luke had, too—

The fight left him.

Ben's hand dropped—his head dropped—his shoulders dropped. His gangly arms came to rest on his legs. He coughed a few rough times.

"I'm… sorry…"

Rey knew how much that apology must have cost him. When he'd apologized to her a few days ago, he'd barely been able to get the words out then, and she'd been only half his enemy. He despised Luke from the depths of his being.

"For… for everything…"

"I'm not a spokesperson for the people you murdered." He waited a beat. "Or your father."

Ben's shoulders trembled. He covered his face with a hand. Rey thought maybe he was crying. She wanted to turn away, to give him at least some sense of privacy, but she was transfixed.

"Nothing I say… will ever be good enough." The tears had stopped, and he sounded drained. "I killed innocents, I tortured them, I—"

"The Sith you are so obsessed in emulating, have I ever told you about his final moments?"

Ben looked up in confusion. "What?"

"My father died saving me from Emperor Palpatine. He died restoring balance to the Force." Luke's lips pressed together, and his eyes were wide and a little forbidding. He turned to Rey. "He'll be all right. Take care of him in a way I never could. Okay?"

"Luke—"

But he was gone.

Ben and Rey rested on their sides, facing one another. Ben's eyes were closed and Rey held his hand between their bodies. He didn't look much better, still sweating and shaking.

"Let me help you," she whispered.

He shook his head. "No."
"Give me some of the burden."

"This—is… something… I have to do on my own…"

Rey bit her lip. "Okay." She kissed his forehead. "I need to go help them. Let me know if you need me?"

**I'll always need you.**

"Well, now you're just making it impossible for me to leave." It was a choked tease. "Do you want me to stay longer?"

He shook his head again.

"Okay," she murmured.

She sat up. He grabbed her arm, and she looked down at him. His eyes remained closed, but his face was pinched with some inner struggle.

"My… My father…"

Rey couldn't help it. She tensed.

Brown eyes pulled tight with pain opened and stared into her own. "I'm sorry I took him from you."

Tears burned at the backs of her eyes. She couldn't tell him it was okay. It wasn't. Han had been the only father figure she'd ever known. It wasn't saying very much, but it was still something. Something was better than nothing.

"I'm sorry that I took him from everyone…"
He'd said she didn't have to stay, but she fell back onto her side and gripped his hand anew.

"All the things—that I've done…" His throat worked. "They keep replaying… in my head…"

"Please let me help you, Ben," she begged.

"You can't. No one can."

She touched her thoughts to his. She half-expected him to withdraw. He didn't, the feel of his mind questioning.

Instantly, she was swamped. It was guilt, all of it. It coated the roof of her mouth, dug at her eyes, yanked her down, down, down… She carried his darkness inside of her, but this was separate from that. This was what had been left behind when the light cleaved through him.

It was so overwhelming, she thought Ben was right. She couldn't help him. And it made her doubt Luke—if this was enough to potentially kill him…

A memory flickered, one of Ben's. One they both shared, from different perspectives. Han, talking to his son on the bridge—

_Not that one!_ she cried desperately.

It echoed all around her, keeping close, the pain that oozed from it coating her.

"Ben, stop it!" she yelled. "You can blame yourself… but not completely! Don't forget all of Snoke's evil, the evil that pushed you here!"

_I can't use him as an excuse!_

"It's not an excuse!" she cried. "He wanted you even before you were sent to Luke! He was seducing you from the time you were a child! Ben, there's only so much that you can blame on
They were my actions.

Rey felt like there were puzzle pieces scattered all around her, and she had no idea how to pick them up. Where would she even start?

"And don't say at the beginning, it's not that easy!"

The beginning…

Where had all this begun?

He was a child, she thought.

The sea of black melted away. A familiar scene unfolded before her. Ben, a small child, playing with a figurine shaped like a bird. He sat on the floor, outside his parents' bedroom, listening to every single word spoken about him.

Back in reality, Ben stilled beside her.

How did you know how to…?

I saw some of your memories, she replied.

When?

At the cottage. Before you told me not to touch anything. Rey pointed to the scene. They're talking about… how you broke someone's spine defending yourself. What happened?

Here, in his mind, Ben was much more articulate, not confined by his currently weak body. My
mother and father were always gone. Around that time, I played with the children of other politicians.

Shame rose through her. It took her a moment to realize it wasn't her own.

I... was bullied. I was quiet, and the other kids didn't understand me. They thought I didn't belong. One day, they decided to attack me, I never knew why. My body responded on its own. That was the first time I'd ever used the Force.

And the strength of it put you on Snoke's radar, she mused. In your other memories, you were so lonely... your parents were always gone?

The political circus. Nothing important with that. And I wasn't alone.

I said lonely, not alone. But... you mean Chewie, don't you?

"You're my only friend." It resounded all around them.

A mixture of annoyance and amusement rose.

Did you see all of my memories?

Only some. It was the first time I'd ever really understood you. I realized you were just as lonely as me.

He was quiet.

You knew my loneliness from the mirror on Ahch-To. You told me I wasn't alone, and I told you the same. But I hadn't seen your loneliness.

Seen me vulnerable, you mean.
Not vulnerable. She thought about it. Okay, you're right. But like I said, I understood some part of you.

Rey ran a mental hand through the guilt. Ben?

Yes?

No matter what you've done... these memories you keep reliving... remember that I fell in love with you in spite of them, and that—and that I'm not going anywhere. You know I'm not.

The pressure of his guilt weighing her down eased just a little.

I've forgiven you. I want to be with you. I love you. So please... please hold onto that...

You didn't tell me you loved me until you thought you could save me. It wasn't argumentative, just a statement of fact on his end.

Ben, come here. Follow me.

The guilt was left at the threshold of her mind, of her side of the link. He seemed to breathe easier.

Here...

Another memory shaped itself. She was strapped to an interrogative chair, and a masked figure was across from her.

"That happens when you're being hunted by a creature in a mask."

Ben removed his helmet. In the silence that ensued, Rey had to look away. Her heart was pounding, but only partially from fear.
The real Ben snorted. *That wasn't love.*

*No, but it was attraction.*

*You didn't know anything about me. It was purely physical.*

*That's not true. Don't you remember…?*

"Don't be afraid. I feel it, too."

*I had an idea of you. You showed up with the First Order and hunted me in the forest. But I felt connected to you, anyway. And even then, I should have been ashamed of myself for it… I wasn't. I was ashamed that I wasn't.*

*You love a monster, Rey.*

*I know. That's exactly what I'm saying. I love a monster… but I love the part of him that's not a monster, too. I saw the best in you… despite what you've done, despite everything that plagues you now.*

Reality melted back into place. Rey cupped Ben's pale cheek in her hand. "I took half your darkness." Hearing her voice aloud after that sounded odd. "Do you want it back? Will that make this easier?"

"No," he whispered. He was looking at her like he'd never seen her before. He licked cracked lips. "We should start our search. I'll pilot."

"Are you—are you sure?"

Ben kissed her. It was deep and heated, and it involved his tongue prying her mouth open as his fingers tangled in her hair. When they broke apart, Rey's breathing was heavier than she would have liked. Ben smoothed a thumb over her lips.
"Yes. You're holding your darkness alongside of mine, and you're still... you. I need to face my problems. I want to be as strong as you. Let's go."

It was really the highest compliment he could have ever paid her, coming from him.

"I want to be as strong as you."

She smiled to herself, her steps light as she trailed after him.
"This is the worst sonic shower I've ever been in," Ben stated. "I guess my father never saw fit to update it."

Rey hummed thoughtfully. They'd been in the refresher for nearly half an hour, with her companion having to fight the shower every step of the way. It didn't perform as well as one employed by, say, the First Order.

Ben was trying to prepare himself for dealing with the rest of the group, it seemed. He'd said he wanted to be as strong as her, but he had to look the part. Ben took great pride in his appearance, in how he projected himself.

"He lost the *Falcon* at one point. It sat in the junkyard in the Niima Outpost for years. Maybe it was because of that?"

Ben scoffed. She knew he was on the verge of saying something nasty, but to his credit, he refrained.
He stuck his head out of the shower. "Will you hand me that shirt?"

A teasing smirk came to Rey's mouth, unfamiliar but… fun. She liked wearing it. "If you step out of there first so I can see you."

Heat narrowed Ben's eyes. "Are you flirting with me, scavenger girl?"

She hesitated—softened her smirk into a shy smile. "Maybe a little. Is it working?"

He came out of the sonic shower, shutting it behind him, and grabbed her up around the waist and yanked her close to him. She let out a breath of surprise before curling her hands over the back of his neck. She was still smiling when he kissed her.

"REY?!"

Ben cursed. Rey hung her head and counted to ten. She let out a breath and then raised her voice loud enough for Finn to hear her outside of the refresher.

"Yes?"

"How many times is he going to cockblock us?" Ben murmured.

She elbowed him to keep quiet around a giggle. His arm pulled her back to him, and she felt him smother a smile into her hair.

"Um—oh—you're both—oh. Uh—I'll come back."

"No, what is it?" she called.

"It's cool, just come find me when you're outta there!"
Rey rolled her eyes and looked up at Ben. "Where were we?"

"Getting my shirt. If he interrupts us one more time, I can't promise I won't try to choke him."

"Please don't. Force choking all of my friends isn't a good habit to keep."

He nipped the tip of her nose as he reached around her for the shirt. "Make them less infuriating, then."

"I'll go see what he wants." Rey gave Ben a last kiss and departed for Finn's location.

After calling his name a few times, she found him in the main hold, arms crossed, frowning down at the dejarik table. Chewie and R2 were nowhere in sight. She wondered what they'd been up to.

"Hey," she said a little breathlessly. "What's up?"

"Is this ship going to explode at any moment?" He was as serious as she'd ever seen him.

"I—" She frowned, not following. "What?"

He gestured with one hand rolling at the wrist as he spoke. "We left Naboo because it was a crazy nightmare, and you were afraid you guys were gonna make it go boom." His hands formed what must have been an explosion. "Right?"

"Right," she said slowly.

"So—we're headed to the Wilds to find a safe place to be. Is it okay that we're sitting here in the Falcon? Isn't this a ticking time bomb?"

"Well… from what I was able to gather from Ben before we left, our unbalance just effects nature for the most part. Not objects. And space is a vacuum."
Finn released a clearly relieved breath. "Whoo. Okay. I can work with that." He nodded. "But, um, when are we gonna set off?"

"As soon as Ben gets dressed."

Her friend pulled a face. "I did not want to picture that man naked."

Rey gave a startled laugh. "You did it to yourself. Are you holding something back from me?"

"That's not even funny!" Finn scowled at her. "Not that—that's… a bad thing. But it's Kylo Ren."

"Ben," she corrected him. "He's not going by Kylo Ren anymore. He's not a Knight of Ren."

"What the hell is that, anyway?"

She shrugged. "We haven't gotten around to talking about it yet."

"Doesn't that seem like something you'd—?"

"So where's Chewie?"

"Don't think I don't know you're changing the subject. But he's in the cockpit with R2-D2. The droid's trying to map out a path for us to follow."

"Great. Ben can start piloting immediately, then."

Finn frowned. "You really think it's okay for him to pilot?"

"Well, we know Han was really good at it. And… while I was on Ahch-To, Luke told me once
that he was a great pilot, too. He helped take down the first Death Star." Her brows pulled together. "He was a little drunk… I wonder if it was that weird milk he kept drinking… but I don't think he was making it up. So… it's definitely in his blood. Besides, you were in the First Order. You didn't hear about his piloting?"

"It's possible," he conceded. "There's a lot I don't remember." He gestured to his temple. "Some of it's really fuzzy. Gotta be the brainwashing. Little details like that don't really make it through."

Rey nodded thoughtfully. "Well, I think we'll be all right, Finn, so don't worry about it too much."

"How can I *not* worry? There's a lot of dangerous crap out there."

"Right. So you should look at it like this: Ben's piloting is the least of your problems." Rey grinned.

"That's not funny, either."

"I thought it was." But she sobered and stepped closer to him. "Finn… You know how much you mean to me, right?"

The man grew flustered. "I—I mean… yeah, sure, I guess."

"Well, it's a lot. You were my first friend. And… And I need you to do something for me."


"Try to be friends with Ben?"

"Try to what?" From Finn's expression, Rey gathered this was not what he'd expected her to say.

"He's going to be in my life forever. And so are you. I—I really need both of you to get along."
Finn narrowed his eyes. "I'm not going to be the problem. You do know that, don't you? He's not exactly the guy you want—"

"Finn."

He sighed, a long one, and looked up at the ceiling. It was several moments before he spoke. "You really think he's interested in being one of us? The good guys?"

Rey hesitated. It was something she hadn't discussed with Ben, and she couldn't in good faith say he was. "I… think he's interested in not being a bad guy or a good guy." There, that seemed reasonable and safe.

"So… what… you're telling me he's… gray?"

"Yes. And I think I am, too." How could she not be, at this point?

"What does that mean?" Finn asked in exasperation, like she was speaking something other than galactic basic standard.

"I told you before. With our bond—I mean—we've… sort of shared ourselves." Before she could go into more detail, Ben appeared around the corner, his wavy hair shining under the lights. She smiled at him. "Are you ready?"

Ben glanced between the two of them and then focused his attention on Rey. "Yeah." His eyes lingered over the main hold in places. He was wearing a tight cream shirt with a V-neck that looked like it might have once been Han's, and the black trousers he'd had on Naboo.

*What is it?*

*I haven't seen this thing in years.*

*Are you going to be okay?*
Ben took one last gander at Finn before nodding at the entrance to the corridor that would spit them out in the cockpit. "Where's the droid?"

"Uh—Finn said he was in the cockpit with Chewie." Rey hastened to fall into step with Ben, who was already striding ahead. He did look better, not quite as clammy or pasty. She could tell there was a slight tremor to his hands, and his thoughts were still a chaotic sea, but he was able to be on the move. That was most important. That, and the fact that she could tell he knew he could lean on her if needed.

"Yeah," Finn chimed in, taking Rey's request to heart. He kept pace behind them. "He's mapping out a path."

"I'm still not sure how he'd do that," Ben murmured. "No one has any concise maps of the Wilds. That's why it's so dangerous."

"It doesn't hurt to try," Rey argued. "He's a remarkable droid. He'll probably come up with something, even if it's not much."

Ben arched a brow but didn't say anything and hastened his gait. Rey and Finn swapped a glance, with Rey mouthing, "I don't know," and shrugging, and Finn rolling his eyes up to the ceiling.

This was new territory for her, too. Most of the conversations she'd ever had with Ben hadn't been... like this. Fluid, casual, in the moment. She was so used to him wanting to kill her or own her that she was on shaky, unexplored ground. They'd find a way, though. They already were.

Finn would have to, as well.

They entered the cockpit, and Ben paused for the first time. He exchanged a look with Chewbacca that went on for an awkward length of time and made Rey wonder if there was going to be trouble. But then something remarkable happened: Ben lowered his head, the wookie gave a quiet growl, and they embraced.

"Wow, I never would have seen that coming," Finn whispered.

"Chewie was his only friend growing up," Rey murmured.
The wookie let Ben go and put a hand on his head. Ben was not nearly as small as he had once been, but the smile he gave, while rough around the edges, was real.

Ben took the pilot's seat and Chewie fell back into the co-pilot's. R2-D2 whistled a few times and projected a hologram of a map. Rey and Finn fell into their respective seats behind them, buckling up, both so nervous they kept darting glances at one another. They'd all talked about going into the Wilds… and now it was really going to happen.

"The droid's right," Ben said, pointing to a spot on the map. "There's a supermassive blackhole here. There's another this way…" His fingertip strolled over air and tapped two different spots. "And one over here. They're far enough away from each other that the galaxy won't implode, but they'll be tricky to navigate around…"

"We can't avoid them altogether?" Finn voiced.

Ben didn't look at him, absorbed in the hologram. "We could plow straight through, but that would take us through a set of solar storms. The other route involves gravity wells, caused by objects no one's really been able to identify…" He sighed. "The First Order was able to obtain the imperial's maps from the Jakku Observatory that routed a path—it was the one that led us to Starkiller. But we don't have a way of accessing that."

Rey shifted in her seat. She knew that Ben was not up to the task of going back to the First Order. Not right now. "Do you remember anything from it at all?"

"There were hyperspace jumps you could make." He shook his head. "But that all amounted to going to Starkiller."

"Chewie mentioned the… the Ilum System?"

He caught her eye for a moment. "Where the Jedi lightsaber crystals are?"

"Yes. The Order used to go there… didn't they?"

"That path would be lost, as well. The Jedi Temple in Coruscant was destroyed when Vader joined
the emperor, but the archives were obliterated before he could get his hands on them. At least, that's what I've been told."

Finn was unable to keep quiet a second longer. "So there's nothing we could get to help us?"

"No, FN-2187, there is not."

"Really?" Finn burst out. "Really?"

Before total anarchy could occur, Rey put her hand on Finn's arm and turned to Ben. "Don't call him that. His name is Finn. He's in our group whether you like it or not."

Ben curled his lip but returned to the hologram without further comment on Finn's name. "No matter which route we take, we're going to encounter a host of problems." He tapped the hologram grid once more. Lights began flashing. "We have an idea of where the systems are. I could take us to the Ilum System… if that's where we want to go."

"It's a start," Rey began, but Ben held up his hand suddenly. He leaned closer to the hologram, his eyes intent.

"7G?" he asked.

R2 beeped confirmation.

"That's the same sector Starkiller Base was in."

R2 whistled heartily.

Ben faced the group. "This may not be as difficult as we thought."

Chewie roared, saying that he'd told Ben he was being dramatic from the get-go.
Ben ignored the wookie. He was too enraptured with the map. He spun it around, examining it from all angles. "I can get us to where Starkiller was."

"And the rest is still up in the air?" Rey asked.

"Yes. But half the journey is covered now." Ben took the controls. "Relax, FN, I won't be tossing you into a black hole just yet."

Finn opened his mouth to launch an angry retort, but it was lost when he gripped his seat arms as they shot into hyperspace. Rey sighed inwardly.

This was going to be a long trip.
All righty, here's the next chapter! I just want you guys to know again that your replies to me really get me through the day. :) You guys are just so amazing, and I really appreciate those of you who are still here.

*You've pulled me into your dream.*

Rey hummed and ran her hands down Ben's bare chest. Her fingertips lingered over the line of his pectorals, the ridges of his abdomen, the dip of his belly button. Everything was warm and fuzzy. There were no worries here. She could worship his body at her leisure.

*I'm flattered.*

She ghosted her palms over the sharp wings of his shoulder blades. The muscles of his back rippled beneath her touch. She had never been with anyone before Ben, had never seen a man like this. She'd done her best to keep out of Niima Outpost unless she was working. While she'd witnessed things she'd never been able to erase from her mind, she hadn't encountered a naked individual.

It was almost amusing, in a morbid way, when she thought about it. A man being stabbed to death over a simple luggabeast dispute, a couple having a quick romp against a building, countless drunkards and their inane patterns… but in this, she'd remained mostly innocent.

*Rey, you're making it incredibly difficult to concentrate.*

She wanted him so badly, she fairly ached with it.

*Rey…*

Their first time together had been absolutely, undisputedly phenomenal. She hadn't had much of a
chance to luxuriate in the afterglow. They'd been exhausted from the vigorous, rough… lovemaking, for want of a better word, and they'd fallen asleep soon after. Shortly after that, the planet had started loudly protesting their presence, letting them know they'd overstayed their welcome.

Come to think of it, she really didn't have much time in her life anymore to just… think, to process. She was always on the run. Once BB-8 had shown up, the time for ruminating had been over. If she hadn't gone to help him… how different would her life be? She already knew the answer to that. She'd still be there, waiting for her parents to return for her.

"…they're dead, in a pauper's grave, in a Jakku desert…"

*I didn't tell you those things to hurt you.*

Her fingertips feathered over the lines of his collarbone, the hollow at the base of his throat.

*I wanted you to let go of your past, so we could be together.*

She knew that. It had been the starting point of their separation. He wanted to rule the galaxy with her, and she…

*Rey…*

Her thumb traced his full lower lip, tugged on it. His mouth descended on hers, and she groaned quietly, her thighs slipping over his hips and her arms winding around those broad shoulders. He had such a long, beautiful torso, and such silky, thick hair for her hands to tangle in. His hands were so large that when they rested against her ribcage, his fingertips nearly touched together at her back.

Would she have given into him earlier, if she'd known how good it would feel, to be like this…? He'd haunted her dreams, seducing her slowly, and she hadn't really fought him on it. Oh, she'd told herself she had, of course. Denial was something she'd cultivated since the time she was a child. She was particularly good at it.

*Frustratingly so.*
It was surreal, the way their lives had changed in the last forty-eight hours alone. They’d both been convinced they could save or turn the other. Now they were joined as one, slipping between the lines of good and evil, right and wrong, Jedi and Sith, landing in a muddled gray. She wondered if she should be concerned, because she wasn’t.

It was hard to be concerned over things like that when she had his darkness inside of her.

When she had her own darkness inside of her.

Ben’s lips brushed beneath her ear. His teeth followed a scant second later, hooking over her earlobe. A strangled sigh left her, her body arching into his. She didn’t think she could ever let this go. She’d told Finn that Ben would be in her life forever, but thinking on it now, she really meant it. They were tangled too closely together for anything else.

*Rey—wake up.*

The world was trembling.

He kissed the corner of her eye, the tip of her nose.

*Rey—wake up now.*

The world slanted sideways.

*REY!*

She gasped as she woke, flailing because she was being tossed out of her bed. The lights to the *Falcon* were flickering madly, and she could hear R2’s shrill beeps in the distance mingling with Chewie’s yells. She only had a moment to process that before the *Falcon* turned on its side and she went sliding down the crew quarters and into the corridor.

Rey slammed into the wall of the circuitry bay. She grabbed it, trying to locate something to hold
The Falcon righted itself again, and she took advantage of that moment to sprint as fast as she could to the cockpit. She made it there in time to strap herself down in the seat behind Ben and hold on for dear life.

"What's going on?!" she cried. Finn was absent. Where was he?

"We're being attacked," Ben replied. Despite how calm he sounded, she knew he was full of worry on the inside. She could feel it as if it were her own.

"By what?"

"A group of gunships."

"Pirates?"

"Most likely."

Intuition dawned. "Finn's handling the shooting."

"Yes." He yanked heavily at the controls, and Rey squeezed her eyes shut as they went flying onto their side again. It wasn't the motion that frightened her, but the asteroids they were barreling through. It was very different when she wasn't the one at the controls. Piloting was a rush of adrenaline, and you had to make spot second decisions and didn't process dangers the same way.

Ben cursed.

Chewie gestured to the upper righthand corner of the windshield.

"Yeah, yeah, I see them," Ben grunted, sounding spectacularly like his father in that moment. She doubted he even realized it.

"Where the hell are we?" Rey demanded.
"Outside of the Ilum System. The path here was clear, and then—"

A *boom* shook the *Falcon*.

"FN—" Ben began into the speaker near his mouth.

"MY NAME IS FINN!" she heard through the earpiece.

"There's a ship coming in from the right side—"

"Got it!"

The *Falcon* was propelled forward from the force of the blast behind it. It slammed Rey against her restraints, and she knew there'd be bruises on her chest later.

Asteroids stretched out far into the horizon. Green lasers were shooting through the space all around them. Rey wasn't sure if they would survive this, with how tightly packed the asteroids were and how close the gunships were on their tail.

R2-D2 whirred, lighting up.

"We're in their territory?" Rey repeated. "Well, how far does *that* stretch?"

Two beeps and a whistle.

She closed her eyes again, trying to breathe. "Great, that's just great."

They needed to get out of this star system immediately. The only problem was that there wasn't a place to hyperjump, not with this labyrinth surrounding them.
Another *boom*, and Finn's crow of delight and victory.

In the next moment, Ben began a series of maneuvers that made Rey swear she saw her life flash before her eyes. She couldn't believe what she was seeing, what he was doing. It was beyond mad, beyond reckless, and he was taking them along for the ride. They were a hairsbreadth away from smashing into an asteroid at any given moment. She didn't think even Poe would try this.

*Don't mention that name!*

Rey swallowed a sharp retort to save for later. Honestly, jealousy right *now*?

Ben shot up, using another explosion for the momentum he needed. Rey was flat on her back, holding onto her armrests so hard she could feel each bend in the metal. They tore through space, up and up, somehow moving seamlessly over and between each asteroid. Rey thought he had a command of the Force through piloting she may not ever achieve.

Then the *Falcon* straightened—skimmed the top of an asteroid—and took a steep dive back into the field. It was the opposite from before, Rey's harness keeping her safe while she took a horizontal position in her chair. From this angle, she couldn't see what was happening, and she thought that may have been for the best.

A gunship sounded like it crashed into an asteroid close to them, followed by a pair. The propulsion sent them flying harder, and Rey worried they would careen. They somehow didn't.

These asteroids weren't big enough to really hide behind. Large enough to cause massive, irreversible damage if they hit them, but only barely bigger than the *Falcon*. They'd be spotted in an instant, because they weren't even fast enough to outrun their adversaries.

"FN, I'm about to give you space to take out the leader!" Ben said.

"We're going to have a talk when this is over, about how to say my *name*. I can't—there's three in front of it, they're dodging—"

"Hang on."
Ben wrenched the *Falcon* to a sharp, spiraling left, weaving over and under asteroids. Exactly three explosions rocked through the ship. It seemed they'd crashed, as if Ben had shaken them off like sand fleas.

"Now!"

"You're making it hard to aim! Give me a second!"

"WE DON'T HAVE TIME, FN!" Ben bellowed.

"CALL ME FN ONE MORE TIME!"

"Please stop fighting," Rey whispered under her breath. It was not helping the intensity of what was happening.

"WHOO! GOT HIM!" Finn yelled gleefully.

Rey knew a heartbeat of relief.

"Oh—oh, no," Finn said. "Um… guys… I don't know how to say this, but… about… twenty more of their buddies just showed up… Guess they didn't like our hello…"

Rey felt a swell of anger come from within Ben, threatening to drag her down with it. She managed to refrain, holding onto herself only barely. The last thing they needed was for both of them to be furious. Someone had to have a level head.

"We're going to have to land somewhere," Ben said. "There's enough of an opening ahead that I can get out eventually and make a short hyperjump to a planet."

"What opening?" Rey cried disbelievingly. There was nothing but asteroids, asteroids, asteroids.

Ben didn't answer her. "Hold on," he said.
That was the only warning he gave before they shot straight into the stream of asteroids.

It was the longest half hour of her life. The asteroid field was clearly a belt, and stretched on far longer than they could hope to traverse without hyperspeed. It was both a blessing and a curse when the asteroids grew smaller and spread further apart. On the one hand, it was easier to navigate. On the other, they were a bigger target.

Chewie roared about finding an exit.

"I know!" Ben snapped.

Everyone was extremely tense. Finn was still firing off with the quad laser, Ben was pouring all of his concentration into getting them to safety, Chewie was doing his best to assist… And where was Rey? Sitting in her chair, helpless. There wasn't a damned thing she could do.

Chewbacca pointed.

"There!" Ben echoed. "Punch it, Chewie!"

It was only when they were safely in hyperspace that Chewbacca and Rey looked at Ben. He seemed to know what they were thinking; the tips of his ears were red. He steadfastly kept his gaze on the controls.

"Well, we managed that jump," Rey said to deflect the awkwardness for him. "But where are we now?"

"We're near the—"

The *Falcon* shuddered, its lights flickering. They experienced an uncomfortable dip through space before it righted itself.

"What was that?" Rey whispered. All the hairs on her body were standing on end.
"That..." Ben trailed off for a moment, staring out the windshield. His head turned one way, then the other.

It happened again, and Rey's stomach tightened as she gripped her seat. The *Falcon* dipped lower this time. R2-D2 made a noise that wasn't up to its usual pitch, and his lights dimmed.

"We're caught in a solar storm," Ben said. "I'll push us into another hyperjump—"

This time when the lights went off, it took nearly thirty seconds to come on again.

Chewie roared that jumping wasn't an option anymore.

"What's that planet?" Rey pointed to the one they'd arrived above.

R2 chirped weakly.

"He has no idea," Ben murmured, eyes still alert. He pulled a few handles, and they slid sideways, aiming toward the planet. That was about when they felt it—invisible fingers closing around the ship, pulling it. "And there's the gravity well."

"Put us—put us at minimum capacity," Rey stuttered. She was admittedly afraid of how terribly wrong this could go. "We'll let gravity pull us into the atmosphere, and then we can use the thrusters to kick us further inside. The storm shouldn't be as bad once we're protected with the atmosphere, right?"

"Generally speaking, yes." Ben licked his lips. "But we have no idea of the makeup of this planet. If its atmosphere is too thin..."

"Look at the plant life," she pointed out.

That seemed enough for Ben. He dimmed the output of power and kept his hands on directional controls.
"What are we doing?" Finn's voice came over the headset.

"We are going to land on the planet, FN."

"Thank you, Kylo Ren, Supreme Leader of Kiss My Ass."

Ben's lips quirked. Rey gathered Finn had won a point of respect in his favor. He looked to her over his chair. "Where did you learn so much about solar storms and atmospheres?"

"When we were on Solaris, we were deprived of entertainment. Poe taught Finn and I some basic knowledge of space travel."

His eyes darkened. *If he ever touches you again, I'll kill him.*

*Don't be ridiculous, Ben,* she retorted. *You have nothing to worry about. I only want you.*

*That wasn't the case a week ago, was it?*

*You have complete access to my thoughts and feelings. My memories. Did I ever kiss him back?*

*That doesn't matter. The way he feels about you won't change. Not without… encouragement.*

Rey closed her eyes and leaned back in her seat. Humoring him by getting upset was only going to make it worse.

"Wake me when we get closer."
It was the heavy shaking and yelling that brought her awake this time.

She stared around blearily, trying to process what she was seeing. The *Falcon*'s lights flashing on and off, the spin of bright blue… beneath her? Treetops coming closer, Ben and Chewie shouting, Finn giving something close to a shriek in his own seat.

"What's going on?!" she cried.

"Your plan only halfway worked!" Finn replied. "The solar storm messed with the power too much; after we got out of the atmosphere, it started tanking!"

Trees started to snap against the underside of the *Falcon*. It bounced them around everywhere as Ben tried to control the fall. It looked like even the Force wasn't helping with this.

*Rey, hold on!*

Tall buildings…? Destroyed, or… just abandoned…? Teeming with life…?

The *Falcon* glanced off another tree and spiraled. In the ensuing shaking, Rey's head smacked hard on the back of her seat. The last thing she saw before she blacked out was a metropolis sprawling as far as the eye could see, covered in greenery.
"Poe?"

Rey blinked drowsily. There was sleep crud in her eyes, and she wiped at it and sat up. She was in her chair in the Millennium Falcon, but she was alone. Darkness pressed in on the cockpit, its lights powered off and the sky outside studded with stars.

The ace pilot chucked her on the chin.

She knew that this couldn't be real, that he couldn't really be here. That would be impossible. It wasn't like he was a Jedi, he couldn't just become a Force ghost, or however in hell that worked. Yet he felt as solid as she did when she put her hand on his cheek.

"How are you here…?" she whispered.

He smiled and rose from his crouched position beside her chair. She fumbled with the clasps on her restraints and let him pull her to her feet. Where was everyone else…? What had happened after their crash landing on this planet…?

"Poe?" she said again.

His slender fingers clasped around her wrist and tugged her to follow behind him. She did so unquestioningly, too confused about what was happening. The sounds of a forest reached them as they climbed out of the Falcon. A low hooting emanated from the trees, almost a purr, something she'd never heard before.

Pine needles crunched underneath her feet, and the snap of a twig made her jump a little. They were both standing beneath the boughs of these tall, tall trees. They were so thick around that it would take ten people holding hands in a circle to close the ring. They were silent sentinels, at once comforting and foreboding.

"Rey! Rey, come on! Rey!"
Poe guided her into the depths of an abandoned city. Buildings taller than these trees crumbled in place, windows long gone, stone worn smooth in many places. A lot of them were collapsed into one another, as if their foundations had given out. The most intriguing part was the wildlife that had taken the place of people. It wound over and around this empty empire of stone, branches bursting from every available crevice, grass as tall as her waist waving in a cool breeze.

It was… enchanting, in a horrifying sort of way.

"Rey, I need you to—"

What had happened here? Where had these people gone? Had they died from… from some sort of plague or epidemic? Had they simply abandoned the planet? How long had this place of rest remained undisturbed?

"—need you to—"

She jumped onto a tower that had become a mound of rubble, forced onto its side. She wobbled in places, trying to keep up with Poe, who wasn't waiting for her. They went under a pair of buildings that had formed an archway. Metal plaques were posted here and there. She couldn't read any of them, their inscriptions whittled away by the weather into vague smears.

The deeper into the city they went, the more crowded together the remnants of the city became. She should have been exhausted from such extensive walking, but she felt fine. In fact, it was as if most of this had passed as a blur. It wasn't something she thought about. She was too focused on Poe.

"Rey, seriously! Rey! REY!"

She hesitated, looking up. What was…?

Poe's hand closed around her wrist again, warm and inviting. He was right. They couldn't wait. What he had to show her was urgent, and the sense of that urgency built upon itself the deeper they went.

The city stretched on forever, a blanket of stone and nature. How long was he going to make her walk?
"Rey, come on, come on! It's not working, she can't hear me!"

The buzzing in her head was so incessant. She rubbed at her eyes, and when she opened them again, she had to stop in her tracks. She was stunned speechless. There were almost no words for what she was looking at.

They were in the center of the city. People… hundreds… hundreds of people… gathered on top of one another, climbing over one another, and they were all petrified. Rey crept closer, unable to tear her eyes away. What in seven hells…?

Men, women, even children. Unlike the rest of the city, their faces were perfectly etched with expressions that ranged from furious to desperate to bloodthirsty to maniacal. They were a pile of bodies that stretched incredibly high. One person was at the top of them all, her hand stretched out and raised, like she was so close to grabbing what she wanted.

What they all wanted.

"Rey! Come on, man! Rey! I can't wake either of them!"

"Poe," she whispered. "What…?"

She turned to finally question him, to no avail. He wasn't anywhere in sight. Her eyes scanned frantically over her surroundings. Where had he gone? Why had he left her here? How in seven hells was she going to get back?

"Rey! Please!"

The sound of a lightsaber being ignited sizzled behind her. She froze in place, acute fear taking hold of her. She was weaponless, and she wasn't sure if she could pull on the Force quickly enough to defend herself.

"Rey!"
Not daring to breathe, she whirled slowly on the spot. Her eyes grew wide as they landed on Ben. He was dressed head to toe in black, and his red lightsaber rested near his side.

Rey scrambled back.

"Rey!"

Ben advanced, his features contorted with rage.

"WAKE UP! JUST WAKE UP!"

"You thought you could save me," he whispered murderously. "You thought you could fool me with our bond."

"No!" she choked out. "No, that's not true! Ben!"

"DON'T CALL ME THAT!" he raged. "My name is Kylo Ren!"

What was…? Why was…?

"This again?!" she yelled. "Why can't you trust me? When will you ever learn to trust me?! When will—" She cut off sharply and slowly looked down to her abdomen.

Ben pulled free his lightsaber.

Rey collapsed to her knees, holding onto her stomach. Black crowded around the corners of her vision as she looked up at him in betrayal.

"Ben…"

"REY, WAKE UP, WAKE UP RIGHT NOW!"
The impending darkness dissipated, leaving her staring up at Finn. He was cradling her in his arms, and he was close to tears. She registered it for one moment, and then she was on her feet, summoning the Force, calling Ben's lightsaber to her.

Her adversary was on his feet, and he staggered a little, breathing hard, his eyes full of venom. He reached for his lightsaber at the same time. They were on the First Order flagship all over again, in Snoke's chambers, using all of their strength in their fight for the weapon.

"Guys!" Finn shouted. "Stop it!"

Rey had never concentrated on anything so hard in her life. It was imperative that she get the lightsaber. She had to kill Ben. He was going to murder all of them, and she would not go down without a fight. She was finally going to have to neutralize him once and for all.

And then Finn was in front of her, and she lost her hold on the lightsaber. She shoved him out of the way and leapt for Ben with her bare hands. She'd done it before, she could do it again. Distract him with the fight, gain the upper hand, score the lightsaber, and finish the deed.

He was on his back—she was straddling his chest—she had her hands around his neck—he was grabbing her wrists and pulling them free—

His eyes met hers, and all of the burning bloodthirst drained out of her. She stumbled off him, up and away, crashing into Finn. For a second, he looked as though he was going to continue the fight. But then he blinked hard and shook his head.

When their eyes met again, her lower lip trembling, his brown irises a bottomless pit of remorse, she couldn't stop herself from launching at him again. He let her tackle him and caught her in his arms, fistng his hands in her hair as he dragged her mouth to his.

"Um… okay, then…" Finn said somewhere behind them. "Just go and collapse for no reason, scare me to death, try to tear each other apart, and then this… right, sure."

"What was that?" she breathed into Ben's kiss.
"I don't know," he murmured. "Are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head.

"Guys!" Finn crouched beside them. "Chewie and I are a little stressed out here. Wanna clue us in to what's going on?"

Chewie roared agreement.

Rey reluctantly slipped off Ben and looked around. They were in the crew quarters on the *Falcon*. The backup lights were on, so the environ was very dim. R2-D2 whistled near the door, and Chewie had claimed the bed across from them. The third and remaining bed to her right was rumpled from where she'd been sleeping.

"I… what happened?" Rey asked.

"Well, the two of you were trying to kill each other—" He caught her expression. "Oh, you mean before then? Okay, yeah. You were knocked out, but we brought you around. We were discussing what to do next when both of you collapsed."

Ben and Rey exchanged a glance.

*Did you see the same thing I did?*

**What did you see?**

Figuring it would be faster to show him than explain, she closed her eyes and transferred images of the 'dream' to him. He accepted them and was quiet for a heartbeat.

*Commander Dameron makes a return. Why am I not surprised?* But before she could get irate, *That's what I saw.*
Who guided you, then?

Ben turned his face away. My father.

Rey gripped onto his hand and squeezed. So what do we do?

*Whatever it was, it made a point to immediately target the two Force users.* He shook his head. *It’s powerful, that much is obvious.* He ran his fingers through his hair. *But what does it want?*

*For us to kill each other?* Rey guessed. It was the only thing that stood out to her. It had somehow made them attack one another. *Did I stab you in yours?*

*Yes.*

*Not exactly creative,* she tried to joke.

He spared her an amused quirk of his lips. *So far we know that it can manipulate our thoughts. If FN is be trusted—*

*And he is, why wouldn't he be?*

*—we collapsed suddenly. He wasn't able to wake either of us.*

*Yeah. And our... guides took us into a city. Do you think it's real?*

*Yes. But he didn't look happy about it. I'm still not really sure what we saw...*  

*What do you want to do?* she asked. *Should we go investigate ourselves?* She didn't really like that idea, but what else could they do? Sitting around, waiting for whatever it was to greet them again wasn't a viable option. Besides, she didn't like the idea of being a sitting duck.
I don't think we have much of a choice, he agreed. He turned back to her and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. We're going to have to stand united. If we don't, it'll likely attack us again.

Using mind tricks?

Yes.

Finn threw up his hands. "So what is this? Some kind of psychic communication?"

Ben ignored him. "It's night, so we can't head out now. But we should first thing in the morning."

"Head out where?" Finn questioned.

Rey stood and linked arms with him. "Show me the damage to the Falcon, and I'll explain everything."
Chapter Notes

I've had a couple of people asking me to express some of my thoughts during these chapters. I generally don't, because I like to avoid making people form opinions beforehand, whether they're positive or negative. I also don't really want to spoil anyone as to the contents. Sometimes I may seem like I'm neglecting pieces of information, but I'm not. They just haven't feasibly come up in the story yet. But they will, I promise!

"So you guys think it's... a thing? Like... sentient?"

"Yes," Rey replied. And at Finn's newly panic-stricken face, she laughed and said, "Don't worry, Finn, it's all right."

"How can you say that? How can you laugh? Aren't you, you know, scared?"

Rey lowered her eyes. "Of course, I am. I've been afraid every second since I left Jakku. But you can't give into that fear. You can never give in, because the second you do, you won't be able to pick yourself back up again." She thought for a moment. "At least, that's how I feel. I wouldn't really know, would I?"

Her friend pulled her into a hug, and she didn't resist it. Finn never pitied her, only sympathized. She put her arms around him and rested her chin on his shoulder.

"Rey..." he whispered. "Rey, I love you."

She wasn't sure she'd heard him right, it had been so quiet. But his arms tightened around her, and she knew. Her heart was pounding, not for the reason he wanted. She couldn't believe he—why? Why do this, why now?

Why make it to where she had to hurt him?
Tears rose on her lashes. "You're my best friend, Finn. Please don't do this."

"Do what?"

She blinked.

Finn was across the room, his head tilted with confusion. "Hey, why are you crying?"

"I'm—I'm not." She scrubbed hastily at her eyes with her wrist and sniffled. What in hells was that? Was it like before, some sort of illusion? But why hadn't she collapsed?

Her hands were trembling again. They were doing that a lot lately.

"I, um… I've got to go." Rey staggered blindly out of the main hold. She had to get back to Ben. She had to tell him what had happened. Well, the gist of it.

She'd gone two steps into the corridor when it happened again, this time enough for her to know it was an illusion. It was made quite obvious to her, what with the fact that the Falcon had disappeared, and she was in one of those meadows on Naboo. She was flat on her back, the roar of the waterfalls behind her.

"I told you I can take whatever I want."

Rey pushed herself up onto her elbows. She was alone.

"I wanted to break you with it. I wanted to watch your hopes for me fall while you were taken in."

"And if I do this… you'll be at my side?"

She stood, and she was in Solaris. The sounds of the jungle reached her.
"Rey, I’m sorry. I’m acting like an ass."

Arms snaked around her waist. A scent tickled her nose that told her it wasn’t Ben, even before she registered the touch. She swallowed, her pulse a staccato in her throat as Poe kissed it. Reality and illusion were weaving together. What was real, what was fake…?

"Do you forgive me?" he asked.

"I—for what?"

"I can't stop kissing you… I know how you hate it…"

"I don't hate it," she heard herself say. "It's just—it's complicated." And wasn't everything these days?

"Don't go. Don't try to save that murdering bastard… stay here with us. We need you." Poe kissed his way to her ear. "I need you."

"That's not…" She couldn't breathe. His kisses were stealing the very air from her lungs. His teeth grazed her earlobe, and she groaned. "You don't need me. You're Poe Dameron. You need no one, especially not a girl."

"Now where did you hear that from, mm?" Poe spun her around, putting her arms over his shoulders and then sliding his hands over her waist. The clouds above were growing gloomier, threatening rain.

He lowered his forehead to rest it against hers. His eyes closed. "Once we leave for Naboo, stay by my side."

"I—I can't."

"Why?"
"I..." She didn't know. Why *shouldn't* she stay by his side?

"So do it." His lips brushed over her eyebrow.

This was wrong.

This was really, really wrong.

It wasn't that it was Poe's arms she was in, or that she was on Solaris. She'd been in the jungle for two weeks. They were going to take off for Naboo soon. She knew she'd made a promise to Leia, but... but what was it?

Everything was growing so foggy.

"Stay with me?" he murmured.

She shoved her hands against his chest, breathing hard. As he staggered, the world began sliding away again. She knew she had only a moment.

"STOP PLAYING WITH ME!" she screamed.

What could it possibly want? Why was it tormenting her? Did it enjoy seeing her react to things?

*But I'm curious,* a voice whispered. *Your thoughts, your heart, what makes you tick... So much more interesting than the sad, vengeful boy... it's so strange... there are two of you, yet you're one and the same.*

Rey wasn't given the opportunity to mull those words over. She was back in the corridor on the *Falcon,* and she was surrounded by her companions. She shook her head, falling to her knees, her hands landing on cold steel. She felt sick.

It was taking everything she had not to linger on the illusion of Poe. It didn't mean anything, she hadn't *done* anything, yet if Ben saw it, he would lose his mind. Illusion or no, he wanted the
commander's throat. She imagined he wouldn't react well to the illusion of Finn, either.

"Please say this thing is toying with you, too," she choked to Ben.

**It is, but not the same as you.** His thoughts were distinctly murder-y.

**What do you mean?** She was almost afraid of his answer.

**While it confuses you with illusions, it forces me to watch them.**

Oh, lovely. So he *had* seen everything. The best course of action would be to not bring anymore attention to it.

**Did you hear... what it said? At the end?**

**That it finds your naivety interesting and my vengefulness, as it put it, dull?**

*Well, I wouldn't have said it like that. And anyway, the most important thing is that it spoke to me. It really is sentient. It's more than just an it.*

"Are you two doing that whole talking silently thing again? Because it's getting old," Finn said. He folded his arms.

"And are you forcing your presence on us once more, so we know you're here?" Ben curled his lip. "It's not as funny as you think it is, I assure you."

"That's enough, you two," Rey said tiredly. She got to her feet with Ben's help. "If this is going to work, you're going to have to start getting along."

"I didn't invite him here," Ben growled. He was clearly still upset about the illusions and was taking it out on Finn.
"No, but you said he could come," Rey replied. It was effort not to let her temper get the better of her. "Knock the chip off your shoulder and be kinder to him. He's my best friend."

Finn puffed up beside her, poking his chest out like he was proud. Wisely, he kept his mouth shut.

"Can you guys just… give me a minute alone with Ben?" Without waiting for their response, she grabbed his elbow and dragged him to the crew quarters. She heard Chewbacca rumble behind her, with a beep from R2.

The second she'd wedged the door shut, she put her hands on her hips. "All right. Out with it."

He picked a free space of wall to lounge against, one foot on it, his arms crossing. "Out with what?"

"With this hostility you're harboring."

_You don't want to know my thoughts, Rey._

_I can view them at any time, and I know you didn't forget that so easily._

_You can view them so long as I let you. Don't be so naïve._

_You've called me naïve twice in the last five minutes. Has it occurred to you that maybe you're pitching a fit again and being completely unreasonable?_

His eyes darkened. _You're treading on dangerous ground._

_I half live in your head! Get over yourself! Has it occurred to you that maybe that's what this thing wants, for us to fight? My thoughts, my heart, what makes me tick. And it knew that we're tied together. Rey sighed and threw herself onto a bed. It called you sad and vengeful… and to borrow your own words, dull. It's saying you're one-dimensional._
He glared.

*You know, that there's not much to you outside of being an angry man-child?*

The rage that swelled from him overwhelmed his own thoughts and slipped into her own, more potent than ever before. Her first instinct was to keep being snide, to be angry back. But she knew it wouldn't do any good, and besides, it'd probably just provide 'it' with more entertainment.

*Remember what you said about being a united front? We can't do that when you're ready to burn down the galaxy every time someone breathes the wrong way.*

*Keep trivializing my response to your boy toys, Rey, but turn it around and see how it looks.*

*They're not my—!* She stopped. Breathed. *Fair enough. I would be angry, too.* Actually, now that she thought about it, she'd probably want to claw someone's eyes out. She had never considered herself a jealous person. But the idea of someone else's arms around Ben, of his lips on another's mouth…

Still. *But I would trust you if you told me that it was nothing, that you loved me and no one else. That doesn't mean I wouldn't feel upset,* she reasoned when his thoughts grew frightening again. *But I wouldn't be angry at you, and I wouldn't try to push everyone in the world away.*

*Don't forget where this began. It was my idea to raze the galaxy, to free us of our restraints.*

She rolled her eyes, fed up with it all. *Is that what you still want?*

*What do you think? You said you could read my thoughts. Tell me, then. What do I want?*

*I'm not playing this game with you.* Rey kicked off her boots. *I'm going to bed.*

*Is it your plan to avoid me every time we argue by feigning exhaustion?*
Rey knew he was goading her. That didn't make it any easier to ignore him. _Does it make you feel better, to act like a spoiled brat?_

She'd thought he would blow up at her. It was simpler to handle him that way. He'd storm off in a fury and leave her blessedly alone. That wasn't the Ben who appeared, however. No, it was the one who'd embraced her in the village on Naboo and whispered in her ear that he'd kill her.

"**Rey! I know you can hear me!**"

He pushed away from the wall and stalked toward her. Her heart became a lump in her throat as her eyes followed him, captivated. What was he going to tell her now? Would he threaten her again?

"**REY!**"

His finger curled under her chin and lifted it sharply. She let him, unable to breathe again.

_So that's in, then?_

Ben's brown eyes were closed to her.

_We'll never be able to get along, will we? You'll never trust me, and you'll never change._

_Is that what you want from me? Change?_

_Only compassion. Only understanding._

"**SCAVANGER GIRL!**"

Rey flinched and placed her hand to her head. It was hurting, throbbing. Almost as if…
"Yes—wake up! This is not real!"

She gasped and pulled away from Ben, slapping at his hand. The world spun back into focus, and she was curled up on the ground in the cockpit. Her arms were over her head, and she was rocking back and forth. Tears streaked her cheeks.

Rey—Rey, gods, come here—

Rey jerked away from Ben's arms as they reached for her. "No, stay back!"

You little fool. He sat beside her and pulled her against his chest. His hand rubbed her arm as he rested his chin on her head. She didn't have the strength to try and get away a second time. She was so confused. It's me.

What was real…? What was real…? What was real…? What was real…?

whatwasrealwhatwasrealwhatwasrealwhatwasreal

whatwasrealwhatwasrealwhatwasreal

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whatwasrealwhatwasrealwhatwasreal

whatwasrealwhatwasrealwhatwasreal

Ben kissed her hair. I'm real.

How do I know that?

Because I can do this. He lifted his hand. With the combined power of their connection, R2-D2, who was nearby, rose into the air with no effort at all. It's been feeding me illusions, too. But it can't make us use the Force.
But how—how do I know the illusion isn't just telling me that?

Because it makes too much sense. The illusion is so real to us because it's targeting our thoughts and our feelings. It can manipulate us into experiencing what it designs. But the Force… to be able to recreate something of that magnitude, it's not possible.

But…

If it could use the Force through us, wouldn't it have done it already? Instead it relies on parlor tricks to turn us against one another.

He had a point there.

Rey swallowed the lump in her throat. What did you see?

Things… things I'm not proud of.

She didn't pry. She didn't exactly want to share what she'd seen, either. So that's how we know if it's an illusion or not…? We use the Force…?

It's the only solution I have until I know more about it.

What if it's using the Force to create the illusions? I mean, what else could do that?

It still stands, if you think about it.

She supposed that was true. I know you said we should wait until morning, but… it's obviously not going to leave us alone.

I have an idea. It will only work if we remain stationary. We'll be able to rest tonight and then go out when it's light.
What's the idea?

You might not like it, he warned.

It has to be better than the alternative. Not being able to tell what was real… it was going to slowly drive her insane. It took a lot out of her. One never appreciated their sense of being grounded in reality until it was gone.

Until now, we've only… briefly joined our thoughts, our consciousness.

Yes…

If we do it again, for tonight, it would be difficult to craft illusions from both of us.

Ben, that's not something I mind. Swallowing, she summoned the strength to rise free from his embrace. Now that she dared to look around, she saw Finn at the threshold of the cockpit and Chewie behind him. What must they think of her? Of Ben?

She supposed their thoughts of Ben couldn't be much worse.

Yes, but we've never done it that long before.

We haven't got much of a choice. She glanced over as Finn tentatively crouched in front of them. His eyes darted nervously to Ben before settling on her.

"Rey…? Are you all right?"

"Rey, I love you."

Her throat tightened. It had been an illusion, she reminded herself. It wasn't real.
Ben looked at her sharply.

"I'm fine, Finn." It couldn't be true. Finn loved Rose. She'd seen it so many times while they were on Solaris.

But he'd left her like it was nothing while they were on Naboo…

_No!_ she told herself firmly. This was what that thing wanted. To create conflict among her friends. She wouldn't let it mess with her mind any longer!

Since she knew Finn would want to be included, and understandably so, she pasted on a smile. "Mind telling me the last thing I was doing before I collapsed?"

"We were walking to the main hold. It was right after you said you were going to explain everything."

"I'm sorry, Finn." She held out her hand, and he helped her up. How was it that she constantly wound up on the floor at some point? "There's… something out there. We don't know what it is. But it's… it's making us see things that aren't there. Really powerful things."

"That's weird. Why isn't it messing with Chewie and me?"

"We think it's interested in our connection. Maybe. It's just a guess." She bit her lip. "It's like we said before, tomorrow we're going out first thing to try and find it. Finn…"

"Yeah?"

"You can't come." As expected, he started protesting immediately. "Finn, it's really powerful, whatever it is! I can't lose you!"

"I may not have the Force, but I'm strong, too, Rey!"
"I know that!" Rey pleaded. "But if you get caught in an illusion, you can't use the Force to try and break it."

"And what's that going to matter? It can still do the same thing if I'm here!"

"But you're in the Falcon! We don't know what's out there! What if you were in an illusion, and something hurt you? Something I wouldn't be able to stop if I was fighting off my own illusion?" She knew she was hurting him by telling him she had to leave him behind. It wasn't a feeling she enjoyed. "Staying here doesn't mean you're weak, Finn. It just means this isn't your strength. Besides, you can help Chewie repair the Falcon."

Finn set his jaw. Without another word, he left the cockpit.

Rey sighed and closed her eyes, her hands on her hips and her head down. *He's probably going to follow us tomorrow, anyway.*

Most likely.

"Chewie, we're going to bed," she announced to the wookie. "If... if something happens to you or Finn, please wake me."

He roared his consent.

Once she was alone in the crew quarters with Ben, she curled up on the center bed with him. It was the only one with a total view of the entryway. He spooned up against her back, his arm around her waist, and he buried his face in her hair. It reminded her of the time after the party on Naboo.

Are you ready?

Rey nodded. His thoughts slipped over hers, and she closed her eyes and opened herself to him.

It was singularly the best thing she had ever experienced, and it continued to be every time they did this. There was a sense of rightness, of coming home. She wondered if it was because their respective light and darkness were inside one another. It took away any insecurities that had
formed while she was dealing with the Illusion Ben.

*Ben?*

*Rey?*

*I love you.*

He kissed behind her ear. *I know.*
This chapter is NSFW and may use language that offends you. Please read at your own discretion.

On a secondary note, as I've received questions about it: Rey is not in love with Finn and never will be.

Rey was so warm. It was the nice sort of warmth, the kind that was soft, welcoming. The kind that made you reluctant to get up, to move in any way. And underneath it all, she could hear Ben's heart beating.

She snuggled closer to him, tangling their legs together more firmly. Her face was buried in his chest, and she moved it to nuzzle into his neck. He made a small noise, his arm tightening around her. His lips brushed a bleary kiss to her hair.
I don't want to wake up.

Ben hummed.

But we have to.

He made a noise of dissent.

She kissed his full lower lip. Ben, we have to get up.

Fear took hold of her, fear and doubt. What if this wasn't real? What if…?

Telling herself to calm down, she focused on their pillow, only enough to make it wiggle. She breathed relief.

Stop messing with the pillow.

Come on!

He made a much grumpier noise.

Changing tactics, she slid her hand up under his shirt, her fingers touching heated skin. He was like a furnace. She loved it.

His abdomen sank under her fingertips. Her thumb brushed along the ridges of it. Her hand inched up higher, until she could place her palm over his heart. Since he still hadn't really moved, she nibbled at his ear.

She pulled back to see he'd cracked an eye open. His thoughts were colored with interest.
Rey grinned. *Now let's go.*

She made to get up, got as far as putting her feet on the ground, before Ben grabbed her and yanked her back to bed. As she wriggled for freedom, he tucked her against him and pushed her hair off her neck to kiss beneath her ear. Then he pushed his hips into her rump, so she could feel the evidence of his arousal.

*We can't, not here! Someone could walk in!*

The pull of the Force rippled through her. Ben was using it to extend their senses, to pick up where life was. The signature of Chewie and Finn glowed brightly in the engineering bay. They were deeply immersed in wires and would undoubtedly be there for a while.

Rey's heartrate accelerated, and Ben gave a low chuckle behind her. The sound of it tightened her stomach, tightened… lower… things…

His teeth caught her ear. *Call it what it is.*

*No!* she squeaked. If one could squeak inside their mind. *All right, so they're there, but… but they could still change their mind and come in here and—*

She was abruptly on her back and out of breath. One: because that was quick. Two: because the sight of Ben above her did a decent job at scrambling all of her thoughts. He grinned, a rare flash of teeth that was startling.

*I don't frown that much, do I?*

*Um…* How could she answer that without offending him?

*Just by thinking that, you could offend. You do realize that?* It wasn't said with malice. He was distracted, his hands getting her trousers open and yanking them down. She squeaked out loud this time, and it was swallowed by a kiss. She let out a groan that was wanton enough to make her blush.
The fresh surge of arousal from him at the sound made that blush deepen.

**You have no idea how much I want you.**

Feeling daring, she cupped between his legs and squeezed where his cock was trapped. *I think I do. I can feel what you—*

His next kiss was devouring, and the taste and feel of his tongue on hers made her start to get his own trousers open. She wanted to really touch him. Maybe their twin desires were feeding into one another, because for a moment, they worked as a single person, mirroring each other. Finishing shoving down trousers and sliding their hands over heated, bare skin.

They both let out one long, ragged moan.

Rey was slick where Ben dragged his fingers between her folds. She hissed out a soft breath and looked up at him through her lashes. He wanted so many things. He wanted to taste her again, to touch her longer, to make this moment last.

But they both knew that if they wanted to do this, it had to be now.

His cock pressed against her entrance. She gripped the base of him and helped guide him inside of her core. As he gently rocked his hips, a stark contrast to the last time they'd done this, she moaned quietly with every inch. Finally, he was seated completely inside of her, nudged up against her cervix.

Ben's lips brushed over her chin, her jaw, her neck. She clutched onto his shirt, her fingers digging into his back. For a moment, they stayed still. He was reveling in how she felt around him, and she was reveling in how good it was to be so spread open. Her fingers slid further up his back to play with the feathery ends of his hair.

**Our thoughts are too joined together like this. I feel like I'm going insane.**

*Me, too.*
He withdrew his mind until it was only a touch. It left Rey feeling bereft, as she'd grown used to having him so close to her. But they couldn't continue to function that way, not with this. It would be too much—had already started to leave that impression. There was a danger in that if their thoughts were tangled too close together for too long, they'd begin to be unable to tell themselves apart.

For sleeping, it was all right, harmless. For protection, a necessity.

Better not to push it.

She couldn't read his intentions without flexing her thoughts, so it came as a surprise to her when he drew out of her slowly… and pushed in just as slowly. Their first time together had been a whirlwind of heat and exhilaration, half brought upon by how rough they'd been. This was different… gentler. She found she liked it just as much.

_You feel so good._

_So do you._

He stayed slow, bracing his elbows on the bed, keeping only a few inches between their bodies. She sighed with want and need and buried her face at his neck. She began to move with him, and he adjusted his rhythm for her to join it.

Some part of her, some distant, distant part, still wondered and thrilled that this was happening. She'd never been sure if she'd wanted it to, this thing that had snared them. She'd known he was too mired in darkness to make this work.

Rey had never expected it to come to this.

And she was never more thankful.

Ben stared into her eyes as they moved together. Her thighs cradled his hips, her hands roved over her chest, underneath his shirt. He watched her like he would lose her if he looked away too quickly. She knew how he felt. These moments were so tender, this bond spun so delicately. They weren't even balanced yet.
But they would be. They would be, and they would figure this out, because they loved one another, and that was all that mattered.

Rey had never considered herself a sappy individual. She'd never known love, and the thought of it made her skeptical. She knew that if she could hear her own thoughts, she would be furious with herself. Not only was she in love, head over heels in love, it was with Kylo Ren. Ben Solo. Anyone would think she was mad. Finn probably spent every second of his time with them questioning her inwardly.

But there was a change in Ben, just as there had been one in her.

Their friends had seen the light emerging in Ben. They hadn't noticed the quiet, rising darkness inside of her.

The darkness that made him hers, and hers alone.

Ben's hips sped up, and she muffled another moan. Like this, there was so much more friction. It sent spikes of pleasure pulsing through her. His fingers found her clit and rubbed it. That was still new enough to make her arch, to make her bite into his shoulder as her eyes rolled back and orgasm took her.

*You're making a mess.*

*I—I'm sorry—*

*Do not be sorry.*

Ben's breathing was ragged. Her cunt had formed a shuddering vise around him, and he was working through it. A growl escaped him. He rose up onto his knees, lifting her hips and pounding into her. Her hands clawed at his chest as she writhed, unable to stay still.

*I feel my darkness in you. I feel your possession.*
She couldn't answer him. The pleasure was dividing her thoughts into two camps: how amazing Ben felt and how much *more* amazing he did as the seconds ticked past.

*Do it.*

She shook her head with a strangled gasp. He'd found a spot inside of her, and every time his cock rubbed over it, lightning jolted.

*Do it!*

*You're mine—you're mine!*  

The breath he drew was shaky. Muscles flexed, and then he was slamming into her as hard as he had their first time.

*Tell me the rest.*

*No—*

His fingers found her clit again, working it over and over. She came again, and still he didn't stop. A sob of pleasure latched in her throat.

*Tell me!*

*You're mine—and—I'll hurt anyone who touches you—I'll do anything to keep you—*

It was what he'd felt toward her these last few weeks, but now it was flipped around. She couldn't even care. It was a wellspring of headiness that was taking over her, the dark blending with the light... tethered in each of them, trying to find a balance.

*Good. Don't you feel it?*
She did. The gods help her, but she did.

They were joined in thoughts and heart. The darkness that wanted her to claim him was an undercurrent that wasn't frightening. It was so far from frightening it *should* have been frightening. It wasn't. It only consumed.

*Come again.*

Rey knew he was barely holding on. She reached down and touched her clit herself. It allowed him to move without restraint. He let go, head bowing, one hand on her hip as he rocked her across the bed with the force of his thrusts. It took only a few rolls of her clit between her fingers before the dam burst again. Her fingers and thighs quickly grew slick.

The clench of her core contracting around him sent him right over the edge.

He pulled free, giving his arousal a few desperate jerks of his wrist. His seed splattered against her lower stomach. His eyes squeezed shut, he worked himself until he was entirely spent. Then he fell beside her so he didn’t crush her. She wondered how they were going to clean up this mess and not have it be noticed.

He grabbed her hand.

*Can we do this? What if this thing is too powerful?*

*We're going to try using the Force while connected.* He was struggling to think past the glow of climax. *We need to see what we're capable of. The nature of this planet hasn't been disrupted, so it should be safe.*

*How strong do you think we are?*

The grin he gave her was feral.
It should be afraid.
Chapter Notes

I appreciate every comment/review tossed my way! I cherish them. I cherish all of you.

Slight NSFW warning. Please read at your own discretion.

Enjoy. :)

And now people talk to me,

I'm slipping out of reach now,

People talk to me,

And all their faces blur,

But I got my fingers laced together,

And I made a little prison,

And I'm locking up everyone that ever laid a finger on me

-Yellow Flicker Beat, Lorde

I'm worried.

About what?

About how powerful we are.

Why would you be worried?

I... I don't know.

And Rey didn't know. A sort of ominous feeling had taken root deep in her belly and wasn't letting go. She wasn't afraid of the dark side, of tipping the balance. She wasn't afraid of Ben going entirely back to the dark side. But... was this all right, to have two Force users connected like this?
She remembered Naboo and the way it was threatening to rip itself apart. That wasn't natural. *This* wasn't natural. And she wouldn't take it back for anything, no. She loved Ben, she loved how they felt together, how they *fit* together.

*Are you afraid we're going to destroy this planet?*

*Maybe.*

Rey heard him make a soft puff of amusement.

*We're not that powerful, scavenger girl. No one is.*

*Okay, but then why was Naboo...?*

*We would not have destroyed Naboo.* He reflected. *It would have settled. Eventually.*

*Taking a lot of lives along for the ride,* she pointed out.

*And here we are, in the Wilds, on a planet strong enough to withstand our unbalance. Once we have found that balance, things will grow more stable.*

*Don't you wonder what we need to make the balance happen?*

*I suspect it involves equalizing our light and darkness.*

Rey thought about that, about the darkness growing within her. Creeping along when she didn't notice it, almost insidiously. It would have been if she minded. She didn't.

They both paused to listen. Escaping while Chewie and Finn were occupied wasn't something Rey was proud of. The alternative, however, was endangering Finn's life more than was necessary.
Chewie wouldn't care so much about staying with the *Falcon*. If they could get away unnoticed, at least for a little while…

Finished with making sure the coast was clear, they ghosted down the boarding ramp and into the sunshine. It was nice. Not muggy like a jungle, humid like the sea, or as dry as a desert. It was temperate, almost a little too cold, but that was just her preference.

Birds twittered morning greetings to one another. Rey closed her eyes and listened. It was peaceful in a way. They knew they had nothing to fear, and for a moment, Rey envied them.

**The first thing we should do is sense the surrounding area.** Ben's eyes were everywhere, assessing potential threats or ambushes. *I'm interested in seeing how far we can expand our range. Are you ready?*

Rey barely had time to give him her consent before she felt the Force stirring inside of her. She focused belatedly, closing her eyes again and channeling all that she could. The result was more intense than anything she'd ever experienced with the Force. Her abilities were twined with his, and their net of detection spread nearly three miles into the forest. They could have gone farther, but at that point, everything was too entangled, too hard to keep track of.

Nothing enormously threatening was close by. There were families of birds teeming in the trees, creatures swinging from the branches, small and friendly. Snakes coiled in the shade, worms and other things digging through the ground.

*They're not afraid. I don't think they've ever encountered anyone.*

They let go of the Force, and the mental sweep faded away. Rey was flushed, and Ben's eyes were bright. They looked at one another, and a moment later he had her up against the side of the *Falcon*, her legs around his waist as he kissed her. The remnants of their power throbbed through them, a high both unfamiliar and welcome.

Rey gripped his hair. He bit at her lips. She had a hand traversing under his shirt, and he grabbed onto her rear and squeezed. They both let out something close to a snarl of need and tore at one another.

They struggled to get their pants down, and as soon as they had enough room to move, Ben gripped his cock and drove inside of her. Rey's teeth sank into his shoulder. His nails dug into her
ass. They were practically rutting. All they cared about was this: being joined, riding the wave of power. Everything else had ceased to exist.

He angled his seed onto the grass. His cock was soaked from her orgasm. Rey licked her lips and tried to remember how to breathe. He was in similar shape, panting and dragging his hair off his face. He let go of her enough to let her slide back to the ground.

_If we do that every time we use our power, it's going to be a problem._ Rey's fingers fumbled getting her trousers back up.

_We'll grow used to it. Eventually._

She laughed. He really liked that word. _What if we're in the middle of something important?_

He got his own trousers into place. _When aren't we?_

Ben was clearly determined not to worry about it. She supposed she shouldn't, either. They had other things to deal with. Like the entity that was trying to illusion them to death.

_Let's go before they realize we're gone._

What looked like needles crunched underfoot as Rey walked. A bird flew overhead and called to its mate. In the shade of the trees, it was even cooler.

They'd been moving for nearly an hour now, pausing occasionally to sense for beings. They didn't put nearly as much power into it as they had the first time. They found that even with minimum effort and no concentration, they could pick up signatures several hundred feet ahead. This worked doubly as a way to ensure they weren't trapped in an illusion.

"What are these things? Do you know?" Rey spoke out loud because as much as she liked the mental link with Ben, she needed to practice talking the normal way now and again. She was a
little concerned that she might grow out of the habit of knowing how to socialize with people who weren't in her head.

"Pine needles."

It was nice to hear his voice.

"Pine needles," she murmured around a smile.

"From pine oaks, like the ones you see here." He waved a hand at the massive tree trunks. "They're rare, but I suppose I'm not surprised. The Wilds are unpredictable. You can find anything here."

Why do you think it hasn't tried to attack us yet?

I suspect it knows we have a plan against it.

They continued in silence, each wary and on guard. They didn't sense anything, no, but they had no idea what this thing was or what, entirely, it was capable of. They also had no real idea of how far away the scene from the very first illusion was. They'd been walking for only about an hour, and they still hadn't reached the outskirts of the city.

It was close, though. She could feel it.

Why are you... pulling out...? Rey didn't know how else to phrase it, and she blushed. She didn't look at him, spreading their awareness again. There was a four-legged creature nearby, about the size of those crystal wolves on Crait. It was bent over a pond, antlers rising majestically from its head.

"Over here," she said. She opened the pack on Ben's back that he was carrying and grabbed their water containers and the iodine.

The creature lifted its head. It stared at them for half a second before prancing off. It had a heavy fur coat on it, the color of dusk, and no tail.
Why am I pulling out? Ben waited as she knelt and filled their bottles.

Y-Yes…

The first time, we were swept up in it… I wasn't thinking.

Oh. Well, that made sense. Neither of them had been thinking about anything other than how they felt for each other.

Do you want me to not…?

No! No, it's okay if you do. It lost some of its intimacy, but Rey didn't want to get pregnant. Being pregnant in the challenges they faced daily would be disastrous.

She applied the iodine drops and rose. It would take about half an hour before it was safe. They could have grabbed hydration from the Falcon, but they didn't know how long they would be stranded on this planet. There was no use in wasting all their resources so quickly.

Why does it feed you illusions of Commander Dameron?

Rey capped the bottles and spun them closed to buy time. She didn't want to fight with him; this really wasn't the time for it. But Ben was stubborn, and she couldn't beg off anymore. He had her cornered.

I don't know.

Don't lie.

Her temper flared. She stamped it down and turned to face him, looking him right in the eye. I feel sorry for him. He likes me in that way. He thinks he can rescue me. She remembered Poe's words to her on the Falcon about how it was important to him that she know she was more than nothing. Whenever he advances on me, I know it can't go anywhere, and I hurt for him. He's my friend.
Ben arched an eyebrow. *He will never stop trying to have you.*

*You don't know that.* Rey angrily pushed the bottles into the backpack.

*Why are you—?*

*I'm defensive because I know that anything I say about it doesn't matter! You don't like him, you don't trust him around me, and you want me to cut him out of my life.*

*Would that be so hard?*

She took a breath and used the Force to help build her patience. *I know you want me to need only you. But I've never had friends before, and now I do. And they could be your friends, too, if you let them.*

Ben rolled his eyes. *You are incredibly naïve at times.*

*No, just hopeful. I know you'll never be friends with Poe… or like him.*

*And you will not let me kill him.*

*No.*

*Beat him within an inch of his life?*

*No.*

*Fight him for your honor?* He set his jaw.
Rey eyed him. That fight would have nothing to do with her honor. But she thought about how she
would feel if this was the other way around, if some woman was pursuing Ben. She wouldn't be
thrilled. Not pushed to murderous feelings, no. Violent, on the other hand…

You can fight him. Without the Force or weapons. And Ben, you know I will know if you use the
Force.

Fine.

Do you feel better?

He made a grumpy noise. Rey took that to mean he did, he just wasn't willing to admit it.

They resumed their trek.

Rey pondered if there was anything else they needed to discuss. She already knew he wouldn't
want to get into the Knights of Ren, or what the First Order was doing without him. So what was
safe…?

"I need… a crystal. I need to be able to build my own lightsaber. We destroyed Luke's, and I wasn't
able to repair it. It died. That's why you saw me scared out of my wits when I was with Finn. There
was a creature there, something feline, about fifteen feet tall, more or less. It chased us down."

"The lightsaber died?" Ben frowned at her.

"Yes. It just stopped working. It ignited, and then it flickered—"

"Consider yourself lucky that crystal did not explode on you."

Alarm tore through Rey, made her pulse skip. "It could have exploded?!" She remembered to keep
her voice down. Why, she wasn't sure. It wasn't as if there was anything around to hurt them, and
the 'thing' knew where they were no matter what.
"Yes."

Rey was stunned. She'd had a brush with death and had been completely unaware.

"Well… either way, I… I need another lightsaber," she said when she'd regained her voice.

"In the past, the Jedi were fond of using crystals from Ilum. When Skywalker trained us, the planet we were on had gems. We harvested them for our lightsabers."

"You don't have to use the crystals?"

"No. They're powerful, but there are other ways, ways just as powerful." Ben touched the lightsaber at his side. Rey wondered if it was purposeful or habit.

"Once we have balance, I want to find one."

Ben nodded. "We will. Do you have a preference for a specific color?"

Her eyes rounded. "You can decide what color?"

"Generally, what you use determines the color."

"That's amazing…"

The forest had grown dense. It was quite the feat, considering how large these trees were. Finding a path grew difficult. Oftentimes, they were wandering over giant roots all gnarled together. The sunlight that had been drifting in was all but shut out, leaving the world beneath the boughs dark and uncertain.
Rey was tired. She wasn't used to walking such long distances, and this was more arduous than the jungle in Solaris, if she didn't count the swamp. And in that moment, she didn't. These roots were hellish to climb. Compounded with the rising incline, her calf muscles were threatening mutiny. She was too stubborn to admit she needed rest, though.

Her companion was handling matters with what appeared to be little to no challenge. Then again, he was much more fit. He was like a sleek feline, in that every time he moved, he was stalking, and his muscles were rippling with him. It was entrancing. Too many times she found her eyes grazing over him appreciatively. He was ahead of her now, so she had a full view. It provided a nice distraction from her screaming legs.

They had just sent out another sweep when Ben took off at a dead run.

Ben?!

He didn't reply. A new type of alarm gripped her. All the aches in her body disappeared as adrenaline surfaced. She sprung into action, hot on his trail.

Ben!

What had he seen? Discovered? What had happened?

She leapt over roots, her legs pumping, propelling her. She never tripped, never stumbled, and could only assume it was blind luck. He was already so far ahead of her, with his long, long legs. He was barely in view, promising to vanish at any moment.

Rey gave up on trying to reach him with thoughts, and she didn't have the breath to shout. Clearly this was too important. She understood that. She just wished she could catch up to him, wished she had some clue as to what was going on.

Her lungs protested, cramping her chest. All she could hear was her blood roaring in her ears. All she could feel was the panic and the fear. It wanted to pull her under at every opportunity. She wouldn't let it. She was used to ignoring it by now.

The trees thinned. The soft ground was springy beneath her feet. Twigs and leaves and pine needles crunched. The long, thick, gnarled roots had disappeared. She was free to fling herself
farther ahead, gaining speed. She wondered if he got to their destination first, if he could still use the Force with her not so close.

She was nearly even with him—he was several yards away, the space between them decreasing—she was closer—she could touch him if she wanted—

"REY! NO! STOP!"

She was so close—so close to understanding what was happening…

Arms grabbed her forcefully. It gave her whiplash, and she kicked her feet out. No! What had her? Was it the entity?!

Rey concentrated on the Force—

Opened her eyes and swallowed a scream—

"It's okay, it's okay, I've got you, shhh…"

The flat land she'd seen a moment ago was now a cliff face, and she was a half a step from toppling over it.

She sank back into Ben, and despite herself, a sob rose in her throat. She managed to swallow it before it could escape her mouth.

She'd nearly walked over a cliff.

She'd nearly died.

Ben stroked her hair, one arm still holding her to him. He was completely out of breath. Had he only just managed to stop her?
It's getting smarter. She squeezed her eyes shut. The illusion it created... it picked something I wouldn't question...

Ben backed them away until they were safely back within the stand of trees. He let go of her, and Rey collapsed to her knees and retched. Nothing came up. Her face was burning from exertion, and her body was shaking from it.

She couldn't stand this. Couldn't stand how this thing was getting into her head.

I've been asleep so long, she heard. I've forgotten how simple humans are. But the two of you are still a puzzle... two people, one person...

What do you want from me?! she yelled inside of her head.

It didn't reply. Of course not.

Rey pushed her hands over her hair and looked up. The cliff was a part of some sort of canyon. Across its chasm were more dilapidated buildings. How much of this planet had been overrun with people?

Do you need to rest for a minute?

She shook her head. She didn't trust her voice.

Summoning some reserve of strength, she managed to amble into an upright position. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides. She gritted her teeth and glared at thin air. There was something boiling up inside of her, something all too eager to be let free.

Rey had never been this angry. When Han had died, she'd wanted to hurt Kylo Ren. Hurt him, but not murder him, even though he'd done so to his own father. They'd fought in the woods after that, with snow flying all around them, lightsabers clashing together. He'd asked her to be his apprentice. She'd given him that scar.

The next they met, it had been through the Force Bond. She'd taken a blaster and shot it without
hesitation, aiming to kill. That was born from fear and grief. And when they'd battled over his lightsaber in Snoke's chambers, it was to save her life. Even after she was on Solaris, and he'd told her he wanted a truce, and she'd wanted to hurt him like he'd hurt her… she'd never… been so… so blindingly furious…

So bloodthirsty.

That thing was going to pay. It wasn't just toying with her emotions now—it was toying with her life. Deliberately, not born out of any sort of anguish or fury. No, it was a coldblooded attempt. She wasn't going to stand for it. She would do everything in her power to destroy it.

Realization crept through her thoughts from Ben's.

**You didn't need darkness offered to you. You needed to be pushed.**

Rey didn't have the energy to be angry at that, not when she was so determined.

*I'm going to kill it.*

His breath left him in a whoosh. He was silent for a moment, deliberating what to say.

*If you kill intentionally like that… you're embracing the dark side.*

*I don't care.*

And she didn't.

Not when it meant protecting herself and those she loved.

On some level, she knew it was his darkness that was guiding these thoughts, these urges along. If she used the dark side, it would make this easier. She would have what she needed to put an end to her tormentor.
And she would relish every moment of it.
To The City

*We need to be careful,* Ben thought. *I believe it was able to pull you into another illusion because you were tired.*

Rey didn't like to think she was so weak. On the other hand, denying it would only exacerbate the problem. She *had* been tired, so tired she was still shaking from the run that had taken place once the illusion started.

*What do you suggest we do?*

*We rest. We combine our thoughts again, and we rest.*

The stone city.

Ben and Rey looked up at the skyline at the birds soaring overhead. They were circling around the top of one of the abandoned towers. Rey wondered if they had made a nest up there.

Her eyes swept over the rest of the city. It was exactly as it had been in the first illusion. It went miles inward. Rey couldn't see any sort of end to it, only tower after tower after tower... What had this place been like when it was thriving? It was sad to see it now.

The journey to the center was going to be long and arduous. They would have to rest more because their path through the trees hadn't been nearly as strenuous as this would be. Rey felt like she was holding them back and knew it was nonsense. Ben would inevitably have had to take a break, too. He projected an image of tirelessness, but he was only human.

And everyone grew weary eventually.
Rey hoped they would make it there before nightfall. They had no idea as to how long days on this planet lasted. Darkness could be an hour away, or twelve. They hadn't gotten a good sense of time here, seeing as how they'd spent most of it trapped in illusions or sleeping.

*What do we do if it grows dark?*

*We find cover.*

*And join our thoughts?*

*Yes.*

*What if this is a trap?*

*We came here on our own. The outcome will be the same whether it's a trap or not.*

She supposed that was true.

Rey stood under the shade of a crumbling building and panted. Sweat was dripping down her forehead and neck. She wiped away the former and took a swig of water from her bottle. Not too much, though. She needed to conserve what she could. She knew that much from growing up in a desert.

At the touch of Ben's mind, she let him in. They needed to rest for a moment and regain their grasp on their surroundings. They'd been going straight for hours, but at this point, everything looked the same. Towers, broken buildings, plant life flourishing, all of it unending. They couldn't even see the forest anymore.

She hoped they would be able to find their way back to the *Falcon* once this was over.
They rested for half an hour and then soldiered onward. It was hell climbing over these buildings, and sometimes the flora would be too thick to cut through easily. Ben had brought out his lightsaber, making a path for them. The sight of it always made Rey quite envious. She missed the feeling of having a lightsaber in her hand, of being able to defend herself.

Of having something capable of attacking the thing trying to murder her. Maybe then she'd have a fair chance.

Ben caught onto her rising bloodthirst. *We are going to use the Force, remember?*

Yes, he was right. She'd gotten tunnel vision.

*The Force will be more potent than anything a lightsaber can do.*

The Force. They'd already had a taste of their combined powers, and they hadn't even pushed them to the limit yet. Once they got there, once they reached this thing, the might of their power would eviscerate it. She had doubted this morning, but she didn't now.

She just…

She…

Rey bit the inside of her lip. Hard. The flash of pain reminded her of herself. Honestly, she was a little terrified of what had risen inside of her. She knew murder wasn't the way, that tit for tat wasn't what was right. She also knew that using the Force copiously could have negative impacts on her sense of self, as well as her body.

*How do you do it? How do you resist?*

*I didn't.*

Well, all right then.
I had no reason to. Now… with our connection, with what's happened… I build my resistance with what I pull from you.

So it still calls to you? The power?

The power calls to everyone. The use of it is what sets Jedi and Sith apart.

That made her feel a little better.

Gravel crunched beneath their boots. They came to a stop before a line of buildings that didn't have an immediate end. A giant tree wound through them, and Rey tilted her head back to see the roots better. She could climb those easily.

You are… having trouble resisting?

He didn't need to ask that. He could see it clearly in her mind. Which meant he was probing for something.

All I want to do is take our power, right now, and go deal with this thing.

Rey placed the sole of her boot against the biggest root. It wasn't slick, but it was also very dry. Getting a foothold might be a problem. She took a few steps back, then several more, and then crouched with one knee on the ground.

She exhaled.

Rey tore across the gravel, arms pumping at her sides, and leapt. Her feet found purchase, and she wrapped her arms around the root. With some shimmying, she was soon an easy twenty feet off the ground.

Has it occurred to you I may not be able to climb like that?
It's not as hard as it looks.

She concentrated and kept climbing. Some fifteen minutes later, she stood at the top of one of those ridiculously tall buildings. She put her hands on her hips and lowered her head as her heart pounded madly. Catching her breath was taking a moment; she was a little too winded.

Two minutes later, Ben landed next to her, frazzled and irate. *That was not pleasant.* He brushed his hands off, clearing away the bark.

Rey didn't answer him. She was too busy staring straight ahead.

Not questioning her, Ben stood beside her. Together, they took in the sight they'd been searching for. Bodies and bodies of petrified people, climbing over one another, fighting for something Rey hadn't been able to figure out yet. And the girl at the top, her hand outstretched, so close to grasping something.

"It's going to take another hour just to get down there," Rey said. They had no climbing equipment, and the side of this building was a straight shot down. They'd have to find another way to go around; probably keep walking over the tops of the buildings and tree roots until they found an easier way down.

There was an eerie quiet in the air. Rey hadn't realized how much wildlife was still rooting around in the buildings until it was gone. The waist high grass and the trees continued to flourish, but there were no birds, no critters…

It was deeply unsettling.

They were getting closer, and so far, the sunlight was holding strong. It had taken two hours instead of one to get there. After an hour and a half of hunting for a way down, they came upon a hole in the roof of one building. It consisted of layers of abandoned floors, and they followed them until it spat them out decently near the ground.

*They wanted something,* Rey said. She reached the first of the statues and went to touch it, but Ben
gripped her hand and yanked it away.

*You don't know that it won't spread to you.*

Heart still racing from the sudden grab, Rey nodded. *What do you think they were after?*

*The creature that is toying with us.*

Rey's brows rose at that. *What?*

*It's just a hunch.*

She was still looking at Ben and walking forward as she slammed into an invisible wall. The force of it sent her flying a few feet back, and she grunted in pain as she landed on gravel. What in seven hells…?

*So it's hiding in there!*

*We can probably penetrate it with the Force.*

*And then what?*

*Then we meet it when it comes for us.*

Uneasy, Rey took Ben's hand. He waited for her to be ready this time, and then they both called upon the Force. It came swiftly to them, stealing Rey's breath. She did her best to ignore it. Now was not the time.

*Concentrate.*
They moved as one, their awareness stretching. They took the Force and gathered it, as if in handfuls, building it until it was brimming over. They fused it together and then launched it forward, Rey crying out, Ben standing grimly.

The air rippled.

*Now what*—

Darkness.

Rey could feel it, something headed straight for her. She threw up her arms, squeezed her eyes shut.

Nothing hit her.

After a few tense heartbeats, Rey lowered her arms and opened her eyes. The darkness had vanished. In its place was a sprawling metropolis, the touch of wildlife gone. There was nothing here but shininess, everything metal or plastic and completely devoid of empathy. It was an odd thing to think, and she wasn't sure how she knew that.

Her eyes lifted to the people climbing over one another. They were swarming, they were rushing past her to the center to join the fray. Weapons flashed and went off, lasers bouncing off metal surfaces and taking out more people. The cries of the dying and the vengeful filled the air.

Everyone had completely lost their minds.

*Ben*—

She turned to him, but he wasn't there.

Oh, no. An illusion?
Rey pulled at the Force. It didn't respond to her call.

An illusion.

They'd discussed how to tell if she was in one, but not how to get out of it!

She was being shown the past, though… why?

She hadn't seen anything for the people to be warring over, but that was because she hadn't peered hard enough. Something was up there, glowing a brilliant white. It faded back into non-existence, and the air rippled. The crowd screamed harder. A child was elbowed in the face, crushed a second later by someone's foot. Rey looked away, ill.

What is this?

A voice answered her. This is what happened here. You wanted to know.

"Take me back!" Rey cried.

No. I want you to see them kill one another to get to me.

To… to what, the glowing white ball…? Was it saying that it was—that thing she'd seen so briefly?

"What are you?" Rey asked.

The petrification process had begun. It sprang from the ground and moved steadily upward, claiming all in its path. Faces were frozen in time—the woman at the top, reaching, reaching, fingers stilling as the stone encompassed her.

I am everything and I am nothing. I am energy, but I do not change. I am wanted because of what I can do, the power I represent.
"Don't play around!" she snapped.

*I can feel the desire in you, the desire to kill me. That is new. I have never felt this. I have always been wanted, coveted, never hated.*

"I'm not a doll for you to experiment on emotions with!" Rey looked round and round, but couldn't spot anything significant. If it weren't for the pulses of movement the ball sent off, she would have thought everything was petrified, not only the citizens.

*I wonder if you could kill me.* Strangely, it didn't sound like a taunt or a challenge. *I think that would make me very happy. I am very lonely.*

Lonely?

What?

Rey stepped closer to the center, her eyes now trained back on the ball. "What do you mean?"

*I am only wanted—to be used.*

"I don't—*care* about using you!" Rey shouted. "I have no idea what you are, and I really don't need to! Now take me away from this illusion and bring me back to reality!"

*This is not an illusion. This is a memory.*

Blasted…

"Memory or not, let me go!"

*You really do not want to know what I am?*
"If I can use it kill you!"

*You are not intrigued by my potential?*

"Whatever you are, I don't want it. I have everything I need. All right? So—"

*You do not want pure, unlimited power?*

"No! I have enough power!"

The voice was quiet. Just when Rey lost her patience again, it spoke anew.

*You do not want to use me? Even if you knew what I was…?*

She closed her eyes for strength. "If you want to tell me, then tell me," she gritted out. "But I really don't care either way. If I listen, will you free me?"

*Yes.*

"Fine." She crossed her arms. "Let's get this over with, then."
I've gotten a few grumpy commenters talking about their dissatisfaction with the story. Where it's going, where it's at. I've thought long and hard about this, so I'm going to say this as nicely as I possibly can.

If you don't like what you're reading, please, by all means, no one is holding you hostage here. I will totally understand if you want to give up on me and go somewhere else. I won't hold it against you. Promise.

With that being said, we're about to get off this freakin' planet! Whoo! Enjoy. : )

The world disappeared, and Rey found herself staring at—nothing. It was black, everywhere, so complete that she couldn't even see her hand in front of her. Unnerved, she tensed. Her hand went habitually to her hip. Weeks later and she still reached for her lightsaber.

"What are you doing?" she called.

*To know what I am, you must first be made to understand.*

"What—"

Now the inverse, white light so searing her eyes teared up. She covered her face with her arms again and prayed it would go away soon. It was worse than the darkness, and her arms were doing little to block it out. She found she had to grind the heels of her palms into her eyes to find relief from its brightness.

*In the beginning, there was nothing.*

What was this, some sort of genesis story?

Partial darkness, and Rey could see spots whenever she blinked. She looked down and gasped. Beneath her feet, the light had transformed into a swirling galaxy. It was as though she were
standing on glass, protected from falling, privy to the inner workings of something that no one could ever fully understand: life, death, destruction, creation. The link they made, continuing ever onward in a circle.

An ouroboros.

The galaxy shifted, rapidly withdrawing upon itself until it was nothing. It exploded scant seconds later, matter traveling faster than the speed of light, ricocheting around the empty pocket of space. She saw the galaxy as it was again, and it swirled closer. There was the supermassive black hole at its center. Planets and stars hung in a blanket of inky darkness, as if waiting to be plucked. She did exactly this as one of the former came near, an orangey color.

The planet was transparent in her grasp. She stared into it, and it took form before her. She could have been staring out a window in the Millennium Falcon for how large it was, suspended in space once more. Streamers of color swirled in the backdrop of space, the gases of a nebula playing close at hand.

"What is this?" Rey whispered.

The Wellspring of Life.

Rey blinked, and they were traveling to the planet, into its atmosphere. The surface was barren except for the geysers shooting up out of the crust, sparkling, radiant. As Rey eyed them, lips parting in a bit of awe, she was suddenly disappearing through the crust and into an entirely different world below.

Floating islands, rich with flora.

And—

"The Force," Rey whispered.

Yes.
"You're saying this is… where the Force comes from?"

Yes.

Rey couldn't seem to get air into her lungs. She wasn't even really there, just observing a phantom. But she could feel the energy surrounding her as if it were tangible. It was too much, yet not, all at the same time.

She didn't want it.

You turn away from the idea of such power?

"I don't need that much power. No one does."

The Wellspring of Life fell away into fragmented pieces, and what was left was the planet she'd been stranded on for several days. Its buildings were gone. The giant trees covered most of where the city was, and rivers, and a lake. The treetops grew closer as Rey was lowered to their boughs and then underneath.

On the ground, it was quiet. It was so real that Rey could feel the sponginess of moss against the soles of her boots. Something inside of her urged her to glance up, and when she did, she found a part in the trees. A flash of incredible white light that had her eyes tearing up, and then, somewhere distant, a very loud boom.

"What is this?"

My creation.

"What do you—?"

A priestess, many millennia ago, grew weary of her charge of guarding the Wellspring. She sought to take energy. Even surrounded by the light, there was darkness building in her heart. She rendered a knot in the energy. The moment she succeeded, I was flung from the Wellspring. I did not belong there anymore, and the Force cannot be dispersed.
Rey was trying to follow. "You were a knot in the Force? And the Wellspring booted you out, because you had to go somewhere?"

Correct.

"What happened to the priestess?"

_I do not know. I only know that I have been hunted, used. I grew angry... I was lonely, and humans are despicable, predictable. They all crave power. They want to use this power. For thousands of years, I allowed them to use me. One day, I grew sentient..._

"So you—what, gathered all those people there and then petrified them?"

_I feared what they would make me do. That they would destroy this planet._

"Why didn't you just leave?"

_The day they were petrified was the day I became sentient. After that, I had the planet to myself. There was no need to go anywhere. I grew tired, and I slumbered._

"What happened to the rest of the people on this planet?"

_I am not entirely certain. I believe there was a plague._

"You make illusions... is that what happened in the city? They were reaching for something you were showing them?"

_Their heart's desire._

"That's not—" Rey broke off. She wasn't sure how to word what was weighing on her mind. "How was that right?"
They were using me to murder each other. How was that right?

"And... now you're just... you woke up because we landed on this planet?"

Yes.

"You said you didn't understand us."

I have never seen anything of your like. You are two individuals, yet you share your essence.

"...Like a soul, you mean?"

No. Your essence.

Rey sighed. It didn't seem to understand what she was referring to. She could figure it out later.

"And you were testing us, to see how we 'ticked,' as you called it?"

Yes.

"Right. Well, this has been completely fascinating, but I'm really worried about Ben, and I want to go. In fact, we really want to leave this planet. We only landed here because of a solar storm. We just need to fix our ship, and then we'll be gone. You can read my thoughts—you know I'm telling the truth. Please... let us leave?"

Take me with you?

Rey did a doubletake. That was honestly not what she had been expecting, not even on the far end of her spectrum of thoughts.
"Why would I?" she found herself saying. "You've—" She shook her head. "You've got all this incredible power, power I don't want, and you've made it clear you don't want to be used. Why would you want to come with me?"

_I am lonely._

"I couldn't take you with me. I—I could never trust you! I could never trust that you wouldn't use illusions on my friends and myself!"

_I was only testing you. I left your two friends alone._

Rey's mouth worked silently.

Then she set her jaw. "Ben would try to use you."

She wasn't certain he'd be able to refrain from getting a hold of so much raw power. Of a knot in the Force, concentrated and primal and lethal. The first thing he'd probably do was create that universe he'd been envisioning. Yes, Ben had her light inside of him, but that didn't mean he was immune to things like this.

Power was a Sith's ultimate weakness. And that hadn't changed when they'd forged their bond.

_I know how the two of you can achieve balance._

Rey hesitated.

If you take me with you, I promise I will not harm any you consider friend. And I promise that I will teach you how to learn this balance. You need it most, do you not? The reason this planet is unaffected is because I am here. I can set the balance.

"You...?"

_Do not think I did it for you. I was protecting my home._
"So then why are you so eager to leave?"

*I am so lonely. And... I like you. You do not want to use me. Please?*

"How would I even hide something like you? You're a glowing ball of light—"

The forest faded. Rey was in the center of the city, and there was a creature at her feet. She had never seen its like before, and as it stared up at her, deep in its black eyes was the intelligence of the Force knot.

It was... cute.

"What are you?"

*I have taken the appearance of a creature known as a squirrel monkey. Is this sufficient?*

The monkey leapt, and Rey jumped despite herself. It clutched onto her bicep, and then settled on her shoulder. Its long tail looped over her shoulders. It smelled like—a creature, but not... overwhelmingly so.

*Think of me as a very hygienic monkey.*

Rey didn't want to do it—and then she did. She giggled.

No!

No, she had to focus.

"You tried to kill me," she said.
I woke you before you stepped off the cliff. I allowed your partner to grab you and stop you. Even if he had not, I would not have let you die.

"I don't believe you," she murmured.

*I am ever intrigued by your feelings for him. So intricate... despair, longing, hope, fury, forgiveness, sadness, love—*

"Yes, all right, I get it." She was blushing. It felt... intrusive, almost, to have someone know your thoughts so entirely. Ben did, but that was different. He was now a part of her.

*May I come with you?*

"What if Ben tries to use you?"

"What if I try to what?"

Rey paused. The scenery hadn't changed. She was still in the city center. But she could finally feel Ben's presence again, and when she turned, she saw he was standing directly behind her. His eyes were feverish, and he went to grab her—stopped. His gaze had landed on the monkey on her shoulder.

*What in hell is that?*

*The Force knot?* she replied weakly.

*You were gone. For half an hour. You—you stood there, unresponsive. Nothing I did could reach you. Explain to me what is happening.* He was on the verge of imploding from his temper.

Rey explained everything she could. She fumbled a few times, and the monkey helped her when her thoughts stalled. There was only so much she could describe with words. They were communicating mind to mind, but it wasn't with actual... *words*. It was with pictures, feelings.
Ben crossed his arms. *No*, he said.

"I don't think he's taking no for an answer."

*He? I am a he?*

"Oh… sorry. I suppose you don't have a gender, do you?"

The monkey hopped up and down a few times. He clapped his little hands. *This is fine. Would you name me?*

"Name you?" Ben hissed. It seemed the Force knot was projecting to both of them. "I want to murder you. I don't trust you. I don't buy for one second that you weren't trying to kill Rey, or drive either of us insane."

*Then may I offer a gift?*

"I don't want your—"

Something coated Rey's thoughts, something… light and fluffy. A weight had eased off her shoulders, and she could… breathe. Normally. She hadn't realized she wasn't until just then.

She touched her chest and looked at Ben. He wore the same expression she imagined she was wearing.

It took her a moment to place what was different. She had complete and total access to Ben's thoughts as always, only… the turmoil that had volleyed through her from her light and his darkness had… settled. She felt… different, yet the same.

*Once you achieve true balance, it will feel like this."

"It's just an illusion," Ben snipped.
Only in a sense.

Ben opened his mouth to no doubt start a heated argument against the monkey. Rey stopped him by lifting a hand. Her thoughts weren't pounding, her chest wasn't tight. She didn't feel conflicted, like she was struggling to be one or the other and not let either overwhelm her and win. For the first time in days, she had a clear head.

"His name is Luke. And he's coming with us."

Chewie roared in question.

"This is Luke. He says he knows how to power the ship back up until we can find someplace to repair it."

Finn looked a cross between furious and relieved. His eyes let Rey know he hadn't forgiven her yet for leaving him behind. "Can we trust this thing? What is it?"

"A… friend," Rey replied. How true that was had yet to be seen.

Ben stormed past all of them and disappeared into the corridor.

"He's not on board yet," Rey said. "But he will be. Chewie, help me get the Falcon off the ground?"

He roared and ambled to the cockpit.

Maybe she was mad. She could accept that. She could also accept that she enjoyed having clear thoughts, knowing where she stood in the grand scheme of things. Knowing that she held both their light and darkness inside of her, and she was as settled as she would be once they figured this out.
She was balanced.

She was gray.
Thanks so much for all the kind words I received last chapter. You guys really are the best. Like… you keep me going. A lot of people write about how reading this story makes life/work/whatever easier, but hearing from you guys, it makes life easier for me, too. It really does.

"No, Rey, I just don't understand why you're not putting the Resistance first!" Finn slapped the backs of his fingers against his open palm.

Rey sighed. They'd been at this for an hour already. "The Resistance can wait. This can't."

"How can you say that, though?! We need you!"

"The Resistance is less than twenty people, Finn!" Rey had been trying to keep her voice down, to not yell. She didn't like yelling at her friends. But tempers were flying, and she couldn't rein it in anymore. "It's going to take time to gather more of us!"

"This is just Kylo Ren talking—"

"No, it's not!"

"—or that weird—weird—monkey thing! Whatever it calls itself!"

"Finn, did you miss the part where we almost upended Naboo!"

"Because of that stupid bond thing!" Finn pointed in the direction of Ben. Ben had retired in the crew quarters five minutes into the argument, so he wouldn't rip Finn's head from his shoulders. "He's bewitched you! He's got some kinda crazy mojo over you!"
Now Rey staggered back a step. "That's what you really think? That this is a trap?"

Finn put his hands on his head and closed his eyes. He looked like he was praying for strength. After a long moment of silence, he set his jaw. "Rey... I don't know. Okay? I just don't know. There's too many things happening, things that don't make sense. And I was willing to just go along on the ride—"

"You begged me to take you with us!"

The man's eyes flashed open. "Because I was trying to protect you!"

"Against Ben?" Rey couldn't keep the disbelief from her voice.

Finn stepped close to her, his hands outstretched. Was he close to strangling her?

When he spoke, the words were strained. "Against Kylo Ren. Rey, he's murdered hundreds of thousands of people! Not only that, he tried to kill you!"

The truth of it was, Rey had no defense. She thought she'd been prepared for this, to see the looks of disbelief and distrust on her friends' faces. She'd been wrong. Nothing could have ever prepared her for this.

She put a hand on her hip as the other went to cover her face.

"Rey?"

"I don't know what you want me to say, Finn," Rey choked. She silently cursed herself and pulled it together. She dropped her hand, and her eyes were dry. "Anything I say won't matter, you've already made up your mind. And I understand that, I do. I respect your opinions."

Finn deflated. "That's..."

"That's what?"
"You're just… you're just different, Rey…"

"I am different, Finn. Half of me has been given over to Ben."

"Just like half of him is inside of you." Finn's eyes darkened. "That's why I said—"

"I'm not talking about this anymore," Rey interrupted. Ignoring his hurt look, she gestured at the controls of the cockpit. All the lights were fully functioning on the ship, and the void of space loomed beyond the window. "We're going back to Naboo, and Ben and I are leaving. We have to train."

"For a year!"

"Not necessarily."

"That's what you just said!"

It was what had started this fight.

"I said maybe a year at most."

"I just don't understand why I can't go with you!"

"I don't know, Finn, you just made this entire case about how you need to help rebuild the Resistance."

"So that's just it, then? You're just gonna give up on being a hero?"

"I was never a hero!"
"That's crap, and you know it!"

"Rescuing the lot of you off Crait doesn't make me a—" Rey couldn't do this anymore. Her head was spinning. "We're landing on Naboo in an hour."

"Rey!"

She got out of the cockpit. She couldn't stay in there a second longer.

"Rey!"

She had known no one would accept her bond with Ben. And it was like she'd told Finn, she couldn't even blame them. Ben *had* done all those horrible things. Rey knew he wouldn't do that ever again, it just wasn't something she could convince her friends to understand with words. How did one explain the feeling, the certainty in their heart, after knowing the complexity of Ben's heart?

Rey was connected to Ben; she was the other half of his whole. Rey had Luke patching their thoughts into stability with his illusions until they could train on their own without risk of harming their friends.

She'd spent the majority of her life on Jakku, hunting for parts to get a meager meal every night.

But she had never felt so alone.

When Rey came into the crew quarters, Ben had his back to the wall with his eyes closed, his legs dangling over the side of the bed he was lounging on. Luke was missing. Or rather, his monkey form was missing. On her bed was a different creature, with a fuzzy little face and black paws, a red fur coat, and a banded tail of red and gold.

It lifted onto its back legs and put its paws in the air.
Oh, gods, it was absolutely adorable.

_I am quite cuddly!_

Rey was amused. "You know what cuddly is?"

_I am learning all sorts of words from your minds. Pick me up?_

She hefted Luke into her arms and stroked her fingers through his soft fur as he rested his chin on her shoulder. "So, what is this form, then?"

_A red panda._

She sighed and sat down on her bed. A glance at Ben revealed he hadn't moved.

"Will this really take a year?" she murmured.

_Possibly longer. It depends entirely upon your ability to adapt to one another, to become cohesive. As you are now, your thoughts, your beliefs, are too conflicted. This bond has not been in place long, making what you might call a honeymoon period. Once it wanes, you will realize the two of you continue to hold very separate views on the world._

He'd explained this already, and Rey knew it made sense. So much had already happened since that fateful night with Ben. They'd never had a chance to sit down, to talk about anything other than what was ahead of them. They'd also been responding to each other's darkness and light. Things would settle eventually, and it might not be pretty.

The Resistance… the First Order… Ben's desire to wipe it all away, start clean…

If she was being one hundred percent honest with herself, she couldn't say that he'd changed his mind on it. Maybe he had, maybe he hadn't. Maybe he still didn't know.

Luke had figured that because this would take so long, they would need to drop their friends off on
Naboo and then resume search of a planet to train on. Luke was powerful, sheer Force energy, and even he couldn't entirely contain what would happen once they put their bond up to the task. He was holding him now, while they were both stable. It would unravel very quickly, he'd warned.

It worried her a little. She supposed she had thought they were a little more put together, Ben and herself.

*If you do not merge completely, you will destroy those who you come in contact with, perhaps even each other. It is only a matter of time.*

*How do you know so much about this? You didn't know what we were when we arrived on the planet. You continued to test us.*

*I have the lay of your minds now that I am here. I can see the maze of your bond. I can help you solve the puzzle, but you both must be willing to change for one another. For the better and for the worst.*

"*With the light and dark?*" Rey questioned.

*Not only that, but as I said… your beliefs.*

Rey frowned. She was almost afraid to ask.

*Even with the light, Ben Solo's first instinct in a fight is to destroy the enemy, any source of antagonism. As you might say, attack first, ask questions later. Rey, you are entirely the opposite. So… if you would allow me to continue to speculate… if the two of you were together in such a situation, Ben Solo would go to use the Force first, whereas you would not be ready. Conflict. With your bond, knowing how you will respond together is crucial.*

Rey bit her lip. "Because we would be vulnerable in a fight while we struggled over the Force."

*Or the constant fighting over the Force would ruin your bond instead of enhancing it.*

"And that's only a small issue, isn't it?"
Yes. Now you see.

When he put it like that, they really were a complete walking disaster.

_Fear not, Rey. I believe the two of you will be able to merge in time. The problem is overriding instincts brought upon by birth, and by the different circumstances that have affected you both. You have found similarity in your backgrounds, yet as I said before, each of you respond differently to conflict._

"But—that's because we're two different people," Rey protested.

_As I said, you must change for each other, or else you will never achieve serenity with your Force Bond. The Force does not see two different personalities. The Force knows only how it is used._

Rey looked at Ben, who was suspiciously quiet. "What are you thinking?"

_That I do not trust that creature, and that I will never trust it._

_A prime example of my meaning. Your instincts are honed so very finely. Ben Solo would leave me on the planet, or find a way to disperse me, because he feels I present a threat to him._

Ben bared his teeth as his eyes opened to glare at the red panda. _Because every single thing you've done is untrustworthy._ Impatient, he lifted his eyes to Rey. _Do you really think this is a good idea, scavenger girl?_

_Rey truly detests still being called scavenger girl, Ben Solo. You see this in her thoughts, yet you do it, anyway. This will house a source of conflict._

The two humans spoke at once.

"I'm not—I don't care if he calls me that! And at least _pretend_ like you can't read my mind!"
Ben's words were mostly curses. He looked ready to ring the red panda's neck.

Luke released Rey's shoulder and cuddled up on her lap. *I make sense. Rey knows it. Ben Solo is slower to the truth. His stubborn streak is blinding him.*

Rey put her arms around the panda when Ben shot to his feet. "Ben!" she cried.

He gave them both a vicious look and departed.

She gazed down into the panda's adorable little face. "Are you needling him on purpose?"

*It is quite fun.*

"Yes, well, you're creating problems for me later."

*I apologize.*

The *Falcon* powered down the second it had landed safely. The red panda in Rey's arms trembled and then became a glowing ball of light... and then nothing at all. Rey reached for its presence, encountering nothing. For a moment, alarm filled her. Was it all right?

*Very, very tired... will sleep... wake me when you are ready... I will stay in this ship and hold your Force together...*

Rey worried for a moment, then discarded the feeling. It was the Force. It had probably just wiped itself out carting them around the galaxy. Completely understandable.

They ran into a pleasant surprise—for everyone but Ben—as they came out into the hangar. Rose
ran forward and threw her arms around Finn, whose lingering anger melted away when he hugged her close. He was blushing, but happy.

Next up in the throng of people to greet them was the General. Ben ducked his head at this, making to go back on the *Falcon*. Rey grabbed his arm and tugged him back. His reluctance lasted but a moment—he'd seen his adversary.

Poe Dameron.

"Ben, don't—!"

Everyone parted with yells as Ben strode into the crowd, headed toward one person. Poe had about a moment to realize what was happening, and then he ducked in time for the first punch.
This is a fluffy and smutty chapter for my peeps! I love you guys! You deserve it, hehe.

I don't know what to say,

But I'm going to want you 'til the stars evaporate,

We're only here for just a moment in the light,

One day it shines for us, the next we're in the night,

So say the word, and I'll be running back to find you,

A thousand armies won't stop me, I'll break through,

I'll soar the endless skies for only one sight,

Of your starlight
The sound of blasters rising echoed through the hangar.

Rey acted instinctively, pulling on the Force. Shortly after that, the blasters were dangling above their owners' heads, safely out of reach. She hated the looks of astonishment and betrayal thrown her way, but what else was she supposed to do?! She wasn't going to let anyone attack Ben!

Even while he attempted to pummel Poe Dameron into unconsciousness.

"He's not going to kill him!" Rey cried. And how ridiculous did that sound, in the face of things?

Protests rose at once. Most of them were geared toward pointing out Ben was a bloodthirsty Jedi killer, now Supreme Leader of the First Order, who would not hesitate to mow them down—the ace pilot under his fists in particular. Choobies. How was she supposed to fix this? But that was the problem, wasn't it?

She couldn't.

"I know you don't trust him, but trust me!" she pleaded. She hated the thin note of panic in her voice she was trying to suppress. Sounding like an emotional girl clinging onto Kylo Ren wasn't going to win her any points. Ben had stolen so many people from them. "He's not going to hurt you!"

That went over about as well as expected.

"Commander Dameron—"

"Are you under some sort of spell?!"

Why was it always about a spell?
"This isn't—about you." Rey waved a hand toward the brawling men. "This…" Ah, sod it. "This is about me. They're… working out their differences." She winced. She was really butchering this. There was only one thing to do, and she hated it.

She played the Friend Card and looked at Finn.

Finn looked back at her. No way.

Rey looked harder. Come on, Finn, please.

He sighed and took a step forward, releasing Rose. "It's true… I was with them. He's changed. He's not… Kylo Ren anymore. He's just Ben Solo." More exclamations of distrust. "I know it's hard to believe! I'm still having trouble believing it myself, but…"

The general finally cleared her throat. Everyone whirled to her.

"I trust Rey's judgment. That is my son."

Ben had Poe on the ground, his fist raised. Poe's face was bloody, but Ben hadn't escaped unscathed. Rey's breath caught as she waited for one horrible moment. Would Ben lose control? Would he push it past what they had agreed was okay?

Hearing her thoughts, he turned his head in her direction. He was breathing hard, and she could see his mouth was puffy, blood at the corner. He curled the good side of his lip, like he'd been prone to doing lately, and got to his feet. He shook out his knuckles.

Poe pulled himself into a sitting position. One of his eyes was swollen shut.

Ben brought his eyes to hers. I am not staying here. I will go to the cottage.

But your mother—
**I am going to the cottage!**

**BEN SOLO, YOU WILL SEE YOUR MOTHER!** Rey thundered.

Ben didn't get his chance to escape. No sooner had Rey lobbied the thought at him, the general was walking toward him. The only way he could avoid her would be to shove around her, through the throng of people. Rey felt his mind contemplate it, mapping out the quickest route.

Leia lifted her hands and cupped her son's cheeks.

No one was breathing.

Ben's lower lip trembled. He couldn't meet his mother's eyes.

In that moment, he didn't look like a ruler of an evil faction. He was vulnerable, and he had no place to hide. Members of their audience began to avert their eyes, as if not wanting to witness such a private moment.

"Are you in there?" the princess whispered. "I thought you lost forever."

Her son took a breath. He was planning to object, Rey could feel it. In the end, he didn't. He squeezed his eyes shut as his lashes lined with tears.

Rey took this time to glare at those who lingered. Grumbling, the group dispersed, heading to either the other end of the hangar or disappearing inside the palace. Rey kept their weapons aloft in the air and began to float them gently across the hangar to land near its aerial exit. That way, if one of them reached for their weapon, she would have time to respond, to protect Ben again.

They were as alone as they were going to get.

Chewie came up behind Leia and offered his opinion on the matter. He spoke of how he hadn't wanted to believe it, either, that Ben had changed. But he had because of Rey.
Ben shot him a look, to which the wookie roared.

Rey stayed back, unsure if she was welcome. Ben didn't want to be here. He hated showing emotion like this. He hadn't wanted to run into his mother, he hadn't wanted to deal with the Resistance. Now here he was, surrounded by both. He would likely be angry at Rey, too. Misdirected anger, but anger nonetheless.

_Do you want me to go?_ she asked.

_No. Stay._

"Luke saw him, too," Rey offered. She had to do or say _something_.

Leia turned her head but didn't release her son. Her eyes were soft with wonder and sadness. "You saw Luke?"

"Yes, he was a ghost. He was… he seemed happy." Rey bit her lip. "He even picked on Ben a little."

Now Ben pulled out of his mother's hands. "Enough. I am not that unchanged."

But everyone standing there, including Ben, knew it was a lie.

Rey took this opportunity to come closer. "We didn't come here to stay long. We have to go back to the Uncharted Territories. We… have a problem we have to deal with."

"A problem?" The General looked between them. "The problem that sent you away this last time?"

"Yes. It didn't… well, it only got partially resolved." Rey tugged nervously at her shirt sleeve. "We shouldn't talk about it here. I don't know what to do… I don't want Ben to be attacked."

"I can handle myself," Ben snipped.
"That's exactly the problem!" Rey retorted. "They'll try to attack you, you'll kill them, and then we'll be in even more trouble!"

"I wouldn't kill them." The words were sullen.

"No, you'd just make them wish they were dead," Rey said dryly. She frowned at the General. "Ben has someplace to stay here where he won't be found."

Please, Rey, tell her all of my secrets.

Oh, hush. It's your mother.

"I can stay here and keep you up to date. What did they do with Ben's ship?"

"I had them keep it. It's farther down in the hangar," Leia replied. "It's hiding behind that ship over there." She pointed. Then she hesitated. "Ben… I really want to talk with you. Will you allow me? Will you give me a chance?"

He was already walking toward his ship.

Tell her… tell her I will speak with her later. I can't right now.

Meaning he needed time to prepare for that conversation.

Leia was staring sadly after him, and Rey touched her arm. "It's all right. He said he'll speak to you later. He just needs a little time."

The other woman's lips parted. "How…?" Then realization kindled behind her eyes. "Your bond has grown so strong?"
"Yes." Rey found herself smiling, really smiling, to the point where her cheek muscles ached. She hadn't had any idea how ridiculously happy this apparently made her, to be so connected with the raven-haired man. "We're tied together forever now."

Then she winced. She had not wanted to say that. It made her squirm uncomfortably, her smile fading.

Leia's eyes were glittering. Rey knew instinctively what she was thinking. There were wedding bells tolling in that woman's head.

Blushing furiously, Rey chose a spot on the horizon to glance at. It was easy, because Ben's vessel was slipping silently into the night.

"So where can we talk?" Rey said.

"And then I said she could come tomorrow, probably," Rey chatted as she took off her boots. It was with some effort, and she hopped around. Ben was in... the bedroom, it felt like. That was where the pressure of the bond was coming from, at any rate.

She sighed and kicked the boots beside the door. "Poe's face looked so horrible, Ben, you really did a number on it." She came and stood in the doorway of the bedroom. Her... what could she call him...? Lover seemed too... flowery. "But the good news is that we can repair the *Falcon*, and then Chewie is going to let me take it back out there."

Ben was curled up on the bed. He had an eye cracked open to glare at her with.

She grinned and put her hands on her hips. "Now what kind of greeting is that?"

"It's four in the morning," he groaned. "What are you wearing?"

"Some kind of 'functional' dress." Rey smoothed her hands over it. "Came with these really nice
boots, but my feet hurt now." She lifted a hand merrily. "That's all right. The alcohol has taken care of most of it."

Ben closed his eye and pretended to sleep.

"Hey!" Rey giggled and bounced onto the bed, crawling over to him. She poked him in the shoulder. "I know you're awake! You can't fool me!"

The man groaned again. "You are lucky you are adorable when you're drunk. Go away. You're too loud."

"Oh, my gods, you're actually whining." Rey pushed at his shoulder.

"Woman, you are a menace!"

"A menace that you love!" she countered.

An arm snagged behind her thigh, and then she was on her back. Next moment, her back was to Ben's chest, and his face was buried in her hair.

"I have never loved anyone, Rey," he murmured. "You are certainly a first."

"Oh, stop," she said, in complete defiance to her pounding heart. "You're just telling me that so I'll feel good."

"I never tell anyone anything so that they will feel good," he mumbled tiredly. He was on the verge of falling back asleep.

"That's true," she agreed.

"I love you," he breathed.
Judging by the rising and falling of his chest, he'd slipped into slumber. Rey thought about how she needed to get changed, how this dress was too uncomfortable to sleep in.

She stayed where she was, and she couldn't stop smiling.

"What is that smell? What are you doing in here? Is that… my shirt?"

Rey was biting her lip in concentration, brows furrowed together. She hadn't ever really cooked anything besides the slop from Jakku. But a trip to town an hour ago in that dress had netted her some eggs and some sort of meat. After that, she'd taken a bath, and the only thing she'd found to change in was a shirt of his. It fell down to her thighs, it was so large.

"I'm cooking breakfast," she replied.

"Do you even know how?" Ben sounded highly skeptical.

"Fine, then you don't have to eat it." Rey was pretty sure she was doing this right. The man at the stall had told her to scramble the eggs by beating them together over a heated stove. The meat she could fry on either side until it was a golden brown.

"I like that you're going for a real meal, lassie," he'd said. "Not any of that dehydrated shite. Though with that fancy dress, what's a wee girl like you doing out in this little village?"

Ben slid his hands up under the shirt.

"Ben!" she yelped.

He buried his face in her neck and shoved a finger into her core without any preparation. It made her gasp and lean into him, so he slid in another. He thrusted them slowly, scissoring to stretch her. It wasn't taking long at all for her to grow slick, for his fingers to move without resistance.
"The food is going to burn," Rey moaned.

Ben reached around her to shut off the flames and put the pan to the side. Then he grabbed her hips, spun her around, dropped to his knees, and disappeared under the shirt. A moment later, his mouth was on her cunt, and his tongue was delving between the folds.

She gripped into his hair, pulling tight enough it was likely hurting him, but it only made him suckle at her harder.

*You are going to be the death of me.*

*W... Why...?*

*Wearing my shirt...* His tongue plunged into her entrance. *Cooking me breakfast...*

*Cooking myself breakfast, you mean.*

*The picture of a housewife,* he continued as if she hadn't said anything. *I never thought I would have this. I never knew it was something I wanted.*

Then he stopped talking entirely and just worshipped her body.

She heard him working his trousers open. It didn't surprise her when he yanked her down and shoved her onto his cock. She sank onto it all the way, yelling, and he twisted until her back was on the floor. He started hammering into her after that, and she moaned beneath him, hanging onto his shoulders.

Their lovemaking tended to fall on the rough side, but that was all right. She enjoyed it thoroughly, and it felt good.

Every thrust stretched her wide open, and he pierced deep inside of her. It was lightning over her nerves, pleasure sparking with every bit of the friction. She could feel his share of pleasure through the connection, and it only fueled her own.
Rey crested, crying out his name.

He followed after, panting hers, spilling onto her stomach.

She listened to their heavy breathing in the accompanying silence.

*Well, now I'm hungry.*

She smacked his arm as she laughed, still giddy from the endorphins rushing through her.

*You're an ass.*

*No,* he thought as he nuzzled into her neck. *I'm yours.*
And what, exactly, do you expect me to say to her?

Rey sighed. General Organa was probably about half an hour away from arriving, and Ben was close to having one of his infamous meltdowns. He wasn't holding his lightsaber as he prowled around the living room, but his hands squeezed at air and his thoughts centered around destroying something.

She couldn't tell him to relax. It would have the opposite effect. Ben was much like a girl in that respect.

Her other half slanted a dirty look her way. Do you even bother to hide your thoughts?

No, she replied serenely.

Ben shoved both hands into his hair. I can't do this. You don't understand. You weren't there!

When she sent you to Luke?

He said nothing.

"Ben, she's obviously sorry she did it."

"Now, after the fact, after she's seen what it made me!" Ben shouted. A vase smashed into the wall. The entire cottage rumbled, ready to break away from its foundation.

"You must stop that!" Rey snapped. "You like this cottage. Don't ruin it just because you're afraid to face your mother. Who, by the way, loves you terribly."
Ben bared his teeth. "You don't know her like I know her."

That kindled Rey's temper. "I don't have to! Do you know why? Because you have a mother! I have no one! I'm just a pauper's daughter, remember?!"

Ben had the grace to look ashamed. That was a completely different reaction from what he would have had before they finished their bond.

When I said those things, I didn’t—

"You have a mother," Rey stressed more quietly. She didn't want to dwell anymore on what he'd told her: that she was nothing. "A mother who loves you, who is willing to forgive you and the things you've done. And I must say, there are not many of us willing to do that." She could count them all on one hand, herself included.

…I don't know what to say to her…

Tell her how you feel.

That is not something she wants to hear.

Maybe not, but she pushed you away, not the other way around. I think she's expecting something like that, anyway… Rey hesitated. Do you want me to go when she gets here? She hated to keep asking, but Ben was so volatile. It wasn't something that had changed from their bonding, as it was an integral part of his personality.

No. Stay, he said again.

Rey knew then that she would be the buffer between mother and son. She wasn't sure how she felt about it. It was going to be an intense exchange. Would there be yelling, crying…? Stoic staring at one another? Well, stoic on Ben's part…

Realizing her thoughts were running away from her, she put her hands on her hips. "Do we have any money? I want to go buy some clothes."
Ben's lips at last quirked in a smile. "Not comfortable with what you have on?"

"Not for a visit from your mother, no." Rey tugged down on the hem of the shirt, even though it more than covered the naughty bits. "Besides, she's the general. I should try to look my best as much as possible. Isn't that part of respecting her station?"

He looked away. *I think… my mother isn't visiting in an official capacity…*

It took her a moment to gather his meaning.

Then she blushed.

*You mean, she's visiting like… family?* Which there was nothing wrong with. It was just implied, in that moment, that Rey was a part of the family. As in, a mother visiting her son and her daughter-in-law.

*She will be asking a lot of questions.*

A given, as it were. *Some about us?*

*Many.*

Right… well, Rey had nothing to hide. The only issue she could think of was that Princess Leia was bound to ask Ben questions Rey herself hadn't asked him yet. Rey hadn't wanted to—she wasn't ready to push Ben into that quagmire. Down that path lay several answers of an argumentative, highly confrontational nature.

*Are you ready for her to—?*

*No.*
Will you answer her, anyway?

I don't know.

Rey nodded. Judging by the black shroud coating Ben's thoughts, that was all she was going to get from him right now. "Do we have any money?" she asked anew.

Some. Here—but…

Rey lifted her head. But?

It took him some time to answer.

Hurry back…

He didn't want to be alone with his mother.

Rey kept her outfit simple this time. A forest green shirt that clung to her small frame, with brown capris and matching brown ankle boots. She wouldn't be doing battle in it, but she didn't have a lot of money on her. She would have to make do.

She tied her hair into a simple braid as she made her way back to the cottage atop the hill. Villagers smiled and waved, to which she smiled and waved in return. It would be nice, she thought, to settle down here… if there weren't so many things going on in her life that weren't allowing her to.

Gulls screeched overhead. She watched them and enjoyed the salt on the breeze.

The second she got to the cottage, she knew Leia had arrived before she even opened the door. Ben's worry and anxiety slammed into her full frontal. Had he been restraining himself until she'd
gotten back?

Rey pushed open the door, shut it behind her. The general was sitting on the couch with Ben, turned toward her, her hands clasped over her knee. Her son stared moodily into the unlit fireplace. Doom and gloom hung around him like a pale. It made Rey smile at his dramatics.

"I'm back," she announced needlessly.

The princess smiled up at her. "Good afternoon, Rey." Something in her eyes told Rey she was grateful for Rey's presence.

"Sorry I'm late. I needed clothes." Rey sat in a comfy chair across the room. "...Are you two catching up?"

She said hello.

Rey's mouth opened—her brows drew together. ...And then what?

Nothing.

No wonder Leia looked so relieved.

Say something to her, Ben! You can't just leave her hanging.

Ire flashed in his eyes. Glaring her down, he gritted out, "Hello, Mother."

The general glanced between them. Rey gave her a helpless, beseeching expression.

"Rey tells me the two of you discovered a knot in the Force?" Leia ventured.

Ben grunted.
Trembling fingers reached out to graze her son's hair. "It's gotten so long. Do you remember when you used to let me cut it for you? I was the only one you'd let near it."

Ben was ready to arch away from the touch. He didn't, though. He stayed perfectly still, barely breathing.

There was a yawning chasm in his heart.

"Ben…" The general sighed and let her hand drop. "I'm afraid there is nothing I can say to make up for the past. The decisions I made were poor… and I cannot change them. I never could have imagined that—" She paused. "Well… I think of you every day. I miss my son."

Rey found a spot on the wall to admire. This was an incredibly private moment, but Ben wanted her there.

Then the silence deepened for so long that Rey had to say something.

"He misses you, too!" she blurted. Ignoring Ben's wrath, she hurried on, "He just doesn't know how to say it! He's afraid to let you in again. He's afraid you'll hurt him again. He doesn't know if he can forgive you—but he wants to. He wants to try!"

Rey—

Leia touched a hand to her heart. She returned to gazing at her son. "Is this true…?"

"No—"

"Don't listen to him. It is true. I know, because I can hear and feel every thought and emotion he has. He's just being stubborn." Tears filled Rey's eyes before she could stop herself from getting emotional. But they weren't really her own. They were Ben's. "I don't have a mother or a father. He knows this. And he knows how devastating it would be if he had no one left."
She attempted to swallow past the tight lump in her throat. It wasn't budging. "He regrets every second of the day what he did to Han." Ben rose to his feet, and Rey's voice came out in a bark. "Ben Solo, sit down! It is not a weakness to love your mother! Don't you love me? Do you consider that a weakness?"

He bowed his head.

"She's not asking for a miracle, Ben. She just wants her son back." Rey's voice was quickly growing strangled, the world a blur of water. "At least do it for me. We are all alone in the world, Ben, but we don't have to be. Snoke isn't here anymore, telling you to surround yourself with no one, to trust no one. He…" She trailed off. Swallowed convulsively. It hurt. Every single inch of her hurt.

*It's not that easy, Rey!*

*So tell me, and I'll tell her for you!*

She was on her feet now, too, and they stared across the living room at each other.

In slow increments, Ben relaxed his posture. He still wasn't looking at his mother, but it was a far cry from storming out of the room.

*Fine. Tell her… that I don't blame her for sending me away.*

That was a complete contradiction from an hour ago, but Rey didn't comment on it. She gestured for Ben to move and then sat beside Leia on the couch. She reached over and grabbed her hands. The lines on the backs of them stood out, telling her age. So did the laugh lines around the corners of her eyes, but Rey wondered when Leia had really laughed last.

"He says he doesn't blame you for sending him away."

Ben vanished from the room altogether.

The general grew upset for a moment. Rey squeezed her hands to let her know it was okay.
And so, carefully, it began: Leia asking questions or making remarks, Rey answering them from Ben.

"He… I was frightened. I didn't know what else to do. He'd grown so powerful."

"It wasn't so much about sending him away…" Rey tried to sort through the black ball of Ben's thoughts. They came in images and translating them for Leia proved tricky. "It was when he found out the truth. The truth about Darth Vader."

Leia buried her face in her hands. "I know…" Her voice was muffled—thick, as Rey's had been. "I knew that I should have told him. It was about politics. His father and I had worked so hard…" She shook her head. "But there's no excuse. I should have told him."

The rage that came from across the cottage made Rey flinch. She did her best to hide it from the woman sitting next to her.

Then it was all-consuming.

"You should have!" she yelled. "You always put your political career first! You never thought of me! You left me alone! You made me who I am, and then you sent me away to Skywalker! Skywalker! My uncle, but a man I barely knew, and you didn't care, you didn't even cry! And then, in the midst of it all, I'm left to find out about my true heritage!"

The general leaned back despite herself, her brown eyes wide. Rey hated this, hated that Ben was using her as a vessel for his grief and rage. But she was the one who had pushed him into this corner, so what could she really do about it?

"You weren't even there to see me off! You had some—some function to attend, something that was more important than me! Everything was always more important than me! Your own son!"

Rey's teeth clenched over any further tirades. Enough was enough. _Ben, stop!_

_You wanted me to tell her how I feel!_
Not through me!

Well, it sounded to me that was exactly what you wanted!

Rey pushed off the couch and strode across the cottage. She found Ben in the bedroom, grabbed him by the ear, and dragged him back out into the living room. He was unable to struggle much like this without using the Force, and he wasn't stupid enough to try.

She let him go and shoved him over to his mother.

You've had your temper tantrum! Now listen to what she has to say!

When he didn't budge, she put her hands on his shoulders and pressed him onto the couch.

"Ben…" Leia reached for her son, thought better of it. "You're all I have left. Can't we forgive one another?"

"Is that the only reason you're here, because you have no one else to turn to?" Ben half-snarled.

Rey smacked him upside the head.

"…Fine," Ben growled. "But I'm not joining your Resistance."

"Does that mean you're still with the…?" Leia trailed off as she saw Rey making big "No!" gestures behind Ben's head. "Well, there's not much of a Resistance to join, in any case."

Choobies, this was awkward.

Rey knew it wasn't something that could be fixed in one sitting, but… she really wanted Ben to make amends with his mother…
Please, For me.

…For you.

Ben sighed. "…I... I can't promise I'll be any good at it, but... I'll... I'll try to let you back in..."

Whatever that meant, he had no idea, the thought resounding within Rey.

The General's eyes grew misty. She took Ben's hands into her own, much as she had done with Rey's not so long ago. "I love you, Ben. I love you more than I love myself. I know it will take time... but I want to be a family again."

He lowered his eyes.

"Now... Rey told me all about your adventures in the Uncharted Territories, but I want to hear them from you."

"There's not much to hear... We crash-landed on an abandoned planet, and there was this thing with the Force... I still don't trust it," he grumbled.

He wasn't used to talking openly with anyone except for Rey. It was nice seeing it unfold with the princess.

Rey plopped back into her chair. "Whether or not it's trustworthy, it got us back across the galaxy in one piece."

"And the two of you... you need to leave for a year?" Leia probed.

Ben grunted.

"That's what it said," Rey replied.
It struck her, as she sat there, that Leia and Ben weren't the only ones to have gained family back that day.

Rey had, too.
Rey came awake suddenly, and panic ignited in her heart as she found herself restrained. Where was she? What had happened? The last thing she remembered was that tall figure in black, prowling after her through the woods… the figure who was across from her now, waiting silently, no doubt for her to rouse.

"Where am I?" she demanded.

"You're my guest," he replied.

Her mind raced. "Where are the others?"

"You mean the murderers, traitors, and thieves you call friends?" He paused. "You'll be relieved to hear I have no idea."

Rage boiled inside of her, overcoming the panic. She didn't believe him. He had to know. He was the one who had whisked her away—it was his men who had attacked Takodana. This—this bastard—!
"You still want to kill me." There was an inflection of surprise behind the silver and black helmet.

"That happens when you're being hunted by a creature in a mask," she drawled.

A soft hiss as his helmet disengaged, and then her captor was lifting it and exposing his naked face. For a moment, she stared at it. She wasn't sure what she had expected. Inky black hair falling in careless waves around his face... brown eyes, dark and penetrating... a full mouth, slightly lopsided...

He wasn't beautiful, but he was captivating nonetheless.

Disgust hindered her thoughts. Disgust with herself.

He set the helmet down in what sounded like ashes and strode forward. She stared straight ahead, unwilling to glance in his direction. He came to a stop just beside her, and those eyes of his were boring into the side of her head. After a second, she couldn't help herself. She glanced at him briefly, and then resumed her solemn determination to give nothing away.

"Tell me about the droid." It was uttered casually, as though it wasn't an order at all. And it was real, human—not the voice from whatever it was inside the helmet that distorted it, made it lower.

It was like chocolate, dripping sensually down her spine.

"He's a BB unit with a selenium drive and a thermal hyperscan vindicator—"

"He's carrying a section of a navigational chart," he interrupted. "And we have the rest. Recovered from the archives of the Empire, but we need the last piece. And somehow you convinced the droid to show it to you. You," he scoffed. "A scavenger."

Arsehole, she thought.

He leaned in, just a little, his voice lowering. A confident smirk spread across that wide mouth of his. "You know I can take whatever I want."
It was the only warning given before his hand lifted, and he began to rifle through her thoughts.

"You're so lonely," he murmured as she tried to fight him, tried to lock him out of her mind. But every block she put in place, he evaded perfectly, as if anticipating her next move. And it hurt—it hurt, when she didn't want her thoughts read and he was forcing them out of her. All she could think was that it was mind rape.

"So afraid to leave…" His face drew ever closer to hers. "At night, desperate to sleep…"

No! No! Stay out!

STAY OUT!

"You imagine an ocean," he stated. "I see it. I see the island." He was quiet for a handful of seconds, digesting all the information at his fingertips. "And Han Solo." His voice tightened. "You feel like he's the father you never had." Something akin to laughter touched his tone. "He would have disappointed you."

"Get out of my head," she hissed.

He obliged but for a moment, drawing away from her. His hand remained outstretched. "I know you've seen the map." He was breathless. Was he having more trouble infiltrating her thoughts than he had let on? "It's in there, and now you'll give it to me."

Shite. Shite, shite, shite.

If she had thought his interrogation was painful before, it was nothing compared to now. She heard herself groan in pain as her eyes clenched shut. There was—something there, when he stroked the pure depths of her thoughts, something that hadn't been there before…

"Don't be afraid," he murmured. "I feel it, too."

No. She had to beat this. She had to fight him. She would not give in.
"I'm not—giving—you anything," she gritted out.

His smile was brief and cutting. Knowing. "We'll see."

He thrust his power into her mind.

She let out a choked sob. Sucked in air. Sweat was glistening on her face. Her head ached as though someone had taken a bludgeon to it. She was rallying her defenses, putting everything she had into it. She would not let this bastard win. She wouldn't!

And that was when she began to feel it—the reverse of power.

It was invisible between them, pulsing back and forth. He was much more practiced—she only had her awakening. She could feel the confidence of his thoughts. He knew he had her. That shifted quickly once she took the raw power lending itself to her and pushed ever harder against him. She was trembling with the effort, but she was doing it.

Panic widened his eyes.

"You," she snarled. "You're afraid."

She couldn't see the entirety of his mind, but that was all right. This was all she needed.

"That you will never be as strong as Darth Vader!"

Rey stared into the darkness, her heart pounding so fast, like it wanted to race right out of her chest. She clutched it, orienting herself. She was sweating, just as she had been in that interrogation room. Her shirt clung to her in an uncomfortably sticky way.
She cursed softly and put her face in her hands.

A large hand touched between her shoulder blades, and she flinched, startled.

"...You really did want to kill me," Ben murmured.

Rey didn't bother asking if he'd seen the dream. Of course, he had. The same way she saw each of his. It was just that usually, their sleep remained empty, joined by mutual comfort, by the knowledge that they had one another.

"Ben." Rey's voice cracked. "We have to decide what we're going to do. I can't dodge around it any longer. I've tried... I didn't want to put pressure on you, but..." She swallowed.

His hand fell away.

"I have to know that you won't go back to that," she choked out. "That you won't be that person again."

"Which person?" The promise of venom. "The one who hunted you, who took your thoughts in that room?"

She didn't care anymore if she upset him. She was tired of tiptoeing around the issue. "Do you still consider yourself the Supreme Leader?"

"That's not the question you want to ask, Rey," he murmured, deceivingly soft.

Since it was weighing heavily between them, she turned, resting on a hand as she looked at him. Shadows shrouded his figure, but she could make out his features in the moonlight. "Do you still want to rule the galaxy together, to destroy everyone?"

"You can read my thoughts."

"I've stayed out of those!" Annoyed, she got onto her knees and faced him more fully. "You must
decide, Ben. You must decide what you want. This is where we are now. We can't go further if we don't—"

"What do you want, Rey?"

"You know what I want."

"Do I?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Just as you've stayed out of my thoughts in that regard, I've stayed out of yours." His brows pushed together.

She remembered how she had once thought he wasn't beautiful. He still wasn't, not in a traditional way, but she loved that face more than she could ever say.

"I want to be with you," she whispered.

"But not at my side, ruling the galaxy," he said flatly.

"Is that really what you still want?!" she cried. "After everything, after—"

"What I want is to take you and leave, and never look back!" he shouted. "I am a selfish person, Rey. I will always be selfish. That won't change, no matter how much of your light is inside of me!"

"Take me and leave and…?"

He sighed and turned away. "Yes. I want to go to the edges of the galaxy, where no one can find us, and live out our lives there, unencumbered by those who would hold us back."
Well… It *had* changed from wanting to murder everyone.

"But we can't," she breathed. "We have to pick a side, Ben."

"Do we?" He glanced at her sharply. "Why? Who said so?"

"It's—it's the right thing to do!" she sputtered. What did he mean, *why*?

"We don't have to do anything we don't want to." He shook his head.

"But that's—"

"Do you *want* to help the Resistance?"

"Well, I certainly don't want to help the First Order!"

"Neither do I," he said. Ignoring her surprise, he shrugged one shoulder. "We let them battle it out on their own and disappear."

"That's—Ben, we can't—"

"Why *can't* we?!" he snapped. He put his hands around her shoulders and gave her a little shake. His brown eyes were as intense as she'd ever seen them. "Rey..." He licked his lips. "The Resistance is nothing right now, anyway. You know that. You *know* that. We can't fight their battle for them! Not and hope to win."

"Well, running away doesn't seem like a better idea!"

He cupped her face in his hands. She always marveled at how soft they were. It had to be the gloves he'd always worn, protecting them from calluses. "I can feel what's in your heart. I know it as well as my own. You don't want to fight with them."
"I don't want to not fight with them—"

"Rey." He pressed their foreheads together. Her vision blurred as she stared this close into his eyes. "We can do whatever we want…” he whispered. She hated how compelling it was. How it made her shiver. "I'm not asking you to go to the dark side."

"Then what are you asking?" she whispered back.

"That we train… and once we finish training, we decide then what we want to do."

It was clear to Rey that Ben thought she wouldn't want to join the fight any longer at that point. What was worse was that she couldn't safely say she would want to.

"But your mother…” Rey sniffled. "I don't want to leave her behind. We're all she has. She's all we have. Do you really want to just give her up like that?"

Ben sighed. He drew back a little, but only to soothe her bangs off her forehead. "You love my mother that much?"

"Don't you?" she countered.

He closed his eyes.

"Say what you feel, Ben," she whispered.

Why? You can feel everything without me having to.

"You need to learn to communicate with more than just me."

He grumbled, but he answered her. "Yes… I love my mother. But I don't think I can be the person she wants me to."
"Ben, I don't think she expects anything, at this point. She's just glad that you're not… you know."

He set his jaw. "I could never hurt her… even when ordered to." He drew his fingers through his thick hair. "…It's hard to let her back in."

"I know. But it made her so happy…"

They stayed quiet for a while, hands clasped between them on the bed. The moonlight shifted into shadows as clouds drifted across the sky. The cottage was just as silent as they were, floorboards having settled for the day hours ago.

"…So you're renouncing yourself as Supreme Leader?" she ventured hesitantly. She braced for the whiplash of his anger at the subject.

It never came.

"I'm fairly sure Hux already did," Ben muttered.

"And…?" Rey pressed.

"And nothing." Ben fell onto his back, pulling the covers over him. He patted the spot beside him. She fell onto her side to face him, and he tucked the covers up around her, too. "I told you. I don't want to deal with either side. I want to leave and not look back."

"But…"

He kissed her forehead. "But I want to be with you. I want what we have… And I'll do what you want to do."

She couldn't believe her ears. "…Why?"

"Because I want to leave, and you don't. I don't care to be a part of the First Order or the Resistance, and you do. If I don't care, but you do… I'll follow you. For now."
"For now?" she repeated.

"I'm not getting involved with either. But I will be where you are."

Rey smiled and kissed him.

He pulled her onto his chest and kissed her hair in turn.

*Go to sleep. And this time, try not to dream about the bad things.*
Don't Be Afraid

The sand was everywhere.

Her ears, her eyes, her mouth.

Each granule stung against her skin from the force of the sandstorm, and all Rey could do was keep her arms in front of her face. This wasn't unfamiliar territory to her. She just lacked the proper protective gear, like a mask and goggles.

She pushed onward, the sand at her feet encumbering her greatly.

As you are now, your thoughts, your beliefs, are too conflicted.

Rey shook the voice away. It didn't help any. It stayed with her, sinking into her skin, stinging as badly as the sand.

...you will realize the two of you continue to hold very separate views of the world...

Flames.

She shouted and leapt away. It was hot, too hot, the flames licking at her body, swirling around her in a vortex she couldn't escape.

If you do not merge completely...

She might have yelled Ben's name for help. She wasn't sure. It was lost in the bellowing of the firestorm. The flames weren't natural. They held immense heat, too immense, but they weren't harming her, weren't melting her skin down to the bone. Instead they held something more—something dark and foreboding.
...you will destroy those whom you encounter...

Sand went flying up around her, a shield against the flames. Her entire life, she'd hated sand, had wanted nothing more than to get away from it. Now she embraced it. Her mind couldn't handle this. Couldn't take the confliction. It was too much.

...perhaps even each other...

But the sand continued to hurt her, as well. She could feel her legs sinking more deeply into it. She tried to crawl out of it, only to meet more fire. No matter where she turned, crouched here on her knees, there was either the blistering sand or the consuming flames.

It is only a matter of time.

She wanted to choose the sand. It was the safest, after all. It couldn't hurt her like the so very real fire could. The sand was familiar, and in that familiarity, there was comfort. She knew how to adapt to the pain of the sand. The fire was too frightening, too foreign, even if it wasn't harming her like the sand was.

...willing to change...

Rey came back to herself. She stood with fresh resolve and held up her hand, palm outward. Her fingertips touched something cool.

The flames and the sand flew into a frenzy, combining, swirling around her ever faster and faster, a wider vortex than before.

But that was the thing.

When very intense fire met sand…

A palm pressed against her own.
The vortex froze in place, a sea of glittering glass. Her vision clear, she peered into her reflection. She had expected to see herself, yet Ben was there instead. He looked just as confused as she did by this revelation. Had he, too, seen the other side of him, deep within himself?

Rey understood, then.

"Those flames are yours," she whispered.

Rey slumped forward, and Ben's arms wrapped around her. She could feel his heart pounding beneath her ear. It matched her own. She was breathless, sticky with sweat like the night before. It was too warm in the room, too warm to be against another person, but she was too tired to move.

"How long…?" she rasped.

"Three hours."

"Three hours?!" She pushed upright and stared at him. "That can't be right. It felt like ten minutes at most."

The flickers of light from the fireplace made shadows dance over his face. "It took you three hours to find me." His eyes flicked to the clock on the mantelpiece. "I didn't feel anything until you did."

"Did I do anything outwardly?" She pulled at a strand of hair clinging to her mouth.

"No. You just maintained that meditative stance."

She frowned into the fire in the grate. "What happened when I found you?"

"It pulled me with you. I was suddenly where you were, on the other side of the glass."
"So I guess that exercise wasn't a rousing success…" Rey pulled a knee to her chest and wrapped her elbow around it.

Ben didn't trust Force Luke. They had time to kill, and he'd wanted to meditate on their own, to see if they could find one another in such a state. After all, the thing had gone on and on and on about how they would destroy each other if they couldn't find harmony. Ben had thought that it was exaggerating and that they would be fine on their own.

"You did find me." Ben tilted his head. "What did you see?"

She blinked at him. "You didn't catch any of it?"

"I told you, not until the end."

She sighed and crossed her legs on the floor. She was full of nervous energy, and she didn't know what to do with it. "I was in the desert again… I suppose that's where I go when I'm in a trance. And while I was fighting through a sandstorm, these flames appeared."

"That somewhat explains your comment, then."

"The sand and the flames battled it out…" She searched for the right words to describe what had happened. "I don't know. I remembered that I was meditating. And once that happened, everything turned to glass."

His eyes narrowed. "To glass?"

She nodded. "Yes… and all I can take from that is that… we were merging together on that… plane." Or wherever it was. "I realized the flames were from you. They felt like you."

"Intense heat meeting sand makes glass. But it has to be thousands of degrees of—"

"It was metaphorical, though," she pointed out. "Inside of us."
He hummed thoughtfully. "And you said these flames felt like me?"

She nodded again.

"And we created glass…"

"Yeah…"

"Okay." He assembled his long limbs into a meditative stance of his own. His eyes closed, lashes brushing over his cheekbones. "I'll try to find you now."

She found herself anticipating it. Maybe he would reach her more quickly? He was more experienced with the Force—with meditating in general. He had years and years of practice.

But Ben took longer.

Far, far longer.

Six hours had passed when she was tugged from reality into a crescendo of flames. She was able to watch from afar, from behind the sheet of glass. Ben was staggering toward her, the flames tugging at his clothes, his hair, his skin. They seemed much more insidious. She could hear their whispers but couldn't make out what was said.

Rey stepped closer to the glass.

Sand was pelting him around the fire, not making much of a dent.

Why was she here? When she had reached Ben, she had already realized she wasn't engulfed in reality anymore. Did she need to help him?

He made it to the glass. His palm slammed into it. She lifted hers and carefully placed it up against
his. Their eyes met. He was heaving from the struggle and sweat streamed down his face in rivulets. His eyes were burning from fear, from panic.

"You're running from yourself," she told him. "You have to accept who you are. You have to—"

Rey opened her eyes in time to see Ben falling onto his back, his chest rising and falling heavily. He'd pulled them out of the meditation.

"Ben—"

"Don't," he said savagely.

"Ben—"

"I said don't!"

She sighed. Ben's thoughts were a quagmire of poison, so she didn't press anymore.

Several minutes ticked past before he rasped, "How long?"

Rey bit her lip. She wasn't sure if she should answer him.

"How long?"

"Six hours," Rey said. She looked at the clock. "I was in there with you for an hour before you reached me. So seven."

He was super quiet.
"I have to go. I promised your mother I'd show up at the palace tonight. Will you eat something?"

As she stood, she found him looking up at her, his bangs plastered across his forehead.

"Don't go," he said roughly.

"Ben—"

"I need you."

"Your mother—"

"I need you!"

She flinched as he yelled.

"I have given up everything for you," he said raggedly. "Don't go."

She sat back down.

He had given up everything for her… Even when all he wanted to do was go fly away to the far side of the galaxy and be left undisturbed…

"Don't pity me."

"I'm not pitying you," she replied, taken aback. "You're right… I was only thinking you're right… Ben, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said shortly.
She crawled over to him, between his thighs, and looked down at him, her hair swinging around her face. He cut his eyes away, which she considered interesting, as she could read and feel everything in his heart if she really wanted.

It was a long time before he spoke, and his throat worked as he swallowed. "You're stronger than me. You always have been, and it’s… infuriating. I know so much more than you!"

"I'm not stronger—"

He scoffed. "Don't. You know it's true. Placating me—"

"That's not fair—"

"And life isn't fair, Rey."

They were fighting, and she didn't understand how they had gotten to this point. "Ben, if this is about… about the meditation, it's only because you have experienced more. You have more things to struggle with than I do."

His eyes flashed to hers. "You took my darkness that day like it was nothing."

"It wasn't, though! I had to—"

"I spent weeks preparing for that. To turn you. To bring you to my side. And for what? You absorbed it and you carried on."

Stung, she got up off the floor. "What do you mean, for what? Are you saying you're unhappy with our bond?"

"I'm saying it's infuriating to be bested again and again by a naïve little girl!"

Rey pressed her lips together.
Maybe Luke was right.

Maybe their honeymoon really was over.

"I'm done with your abuse, Ben," she said so quietly he no doubt had to strain to hear the words. "I am not your punching bag, and I never will be. You're pissed at yourself, so be pissed at yourself—don't bring it to me."

He was on his feet. "We're connected through this bond, Rey! You're so innocent, and at times it's sweet, but at other times, I want to take you—I want to take you and dirty you so that you can see the world as it really is!"

"I'm not that innocent!" she cried.

"There is no black and white, there is no good and bad, there is no—"

"All I was doing was reassuring you!" She took several steps back from him. "I said it myself, that you know more than me! I can't help how strong I am!" Tears touched her eyes, and she hated it. "You get to share this power with me! What's really the matter, Ben?!

"Nothing!"

"It's not nothing! Something is wrong!"

"I SAID IT'S NOTHING!"

"IT'S NOT NOTHING!" she screamed back at him.

"I LOVE YOU MORE THAN YOU LOVE ME!"

"I…” Rey was stunned. "What…?"
"I need you more than you need me. If the bond broken today, you would be fine eventually. You'd recover. You're surrounded by people who love you. You're strong. But for me..." His voice was hoarse. "I wouldn't be able to—" He couldn't seem to finish the thought.

"That's what you think?" Rey whispered.

"That's what I know."

"Ben, you've seen my heart a thousand times. You know that's not true. You know that I wouldn't be able to make it if—if we were separated..." Even the thought was too painful to contemplate.

Rey realized what those whispers were about, the ones she couldn't hear in his meditation.

They had made him doubt himself—doubt her.

"Then why won't you go away with me?" he said.

"Because I have... I have friends here, I don't want to abandon them..."

"And what if you didn't?" He caught her gaze again. "What if you had only me?"

"Well, then, of course I'd go away with you."

"So then you don't want to be with the Resistance because it's the right thing to do. You want to be with the Resistance because your friends are there."

Her mouth worked several times before she was able to get a word out that wasn't garbled. "I thought... Last night, we—"

"I know. I've just been thinking."
She took a breath to speak.

"What if we took justice into our own hands?"

And choked.

"We can't run around the galaxy like some vigilantes, Ben!"

"And why can't we?" he challenged.

"That's the same thing as wanting to rule—"

"It's not," he insisted. "We keep to ourselves."

"Then how…?"

He sighed impatiently, like she wasn't cottoning on fast enough, and it made her glare at him.

"What do you want to happen with the war?" he asked her.

"I want the First Order to stop… harassing and killing everyone."

"You want peace."

"Yes."

"You will never see peace."
Anger rose. "You can't know that—"

"This is what I was talking about when I said you were naïve!" Ben snapped. "You will never see peace! The galaxy is too big, and there are too many powerful people. But what if you could stop things you thought were right or wrong?"

"You just got done saying how there is no right or wrong."

"To me, there isn't. But you don't feel that way. I'm saying… instead of teaming up with the Resistance, we mete out justice in our own way. We rely on ourselves."

"That—that doesn't even sound like something you'd want to do…" she said uncertainly.

"It's easier to swallow than allying with the Resistance. And you've made it clear you won't go away with me to avoid all of it."

She frowned. "…But you and I have different ideas of justice."

"We do now." His eyes were feverish. "We won't after training."

It still sounded so much like on the track to ruling…

Listening to her thoughts, he brushed the backs of his fingers over her cheek. *I felt your heart flutter.* He smiled slowly.

She had the sense of a trap rising slowly around her.

*You like the idea of being at my side…*

Rey shook her head.
Ruling.

No. He was wrong.

Ben's fingers curled under her chin and tilted her head up. *You can't hide from me, Rey. You don't want to murder anyone... but it's a heady rush, thinking of how powerful we could be together...*

*You don't want to murder anyone, either.* Not anymore.

He kissed her softly with a sigh, his hands running down the length of her back to cup over the backs of her hips. He tugged her against him.

*After we train, then. You, by my side...*

*Don't be afraid.*

*I feel it, too.*
Chapter Notes

This chapter marks a turning point. A turn that I think will be favorable, but there's always a chance some won't like it.

Read on, my lovelies!

Soul searching was not Rey's strong suit. Not anymore. She'd spent too much time running since she'd left Jakku… Too much time running and not enough time for self-contemplation. She'd had a focus—several, in fact. Help Finn and BB-8 arrive safely, and then return to Jakku to wait for her parents. And when that hadn't worked, find Luke Skywalker. Find Luke Skywalker and ask for help in channeling the Force.

Bond with Kylo Ren.

Watch Kylo Ren kill Snoke and then spurn her when she refused his offer to rule the galaxy together.

Survive on Crait with the rest of the Resistance, land on Solaris, and spend time hunkered down, not using the Force for fear of attracting Ben's attention. Attracting his attention so they could leave Solaris and head for Naboo. Evading Ben's further attempts to reach her—winding up in his cottage from his mind game.

Fighting.

Bonding completely.

Threatening the safety of a planet, any planet, with their bond. Fleeing into the Wilds. Landing on that remote planet and meeting Force Luke. Heading back to Naboo to deposit their friends so they could leave for training…

Yeah.
"Does Kylo Ren know you're here?"

Rey looked up from watching the waterfalls on the pavilion. Since it had been a couple of days, Poe's cuts and bruises were at their worst, and he obviously didn't know the *Falcon* was repaired. "He knows I'm here for his mother."

"Right…" Poe came to stand beside her. He put his hands on the railing and followed her gaze to the falls. They could hear the roar of them even from here. "At the risk of that bastard attacking me again… Rey, are you sure you're doing the right thing?"

"But what if you could stop things you thought were right or wrong?"

"Rey?"

She pulled her attention from the falls. "I'm sorry. What?"

"I asked if you're sure you're doing the right thing."

"I'm saying… instead of teaming up with the Resistance, we mete out justice in our own way. We rely on ourselves."

"Rey…?"

Her eyes flitted to his.

"I have given up everything for you!"

Poe tilted his head, his eyes narrowing with concern.

Before he could call her name again, she asked, "Why wouldn't it be right?"
He looked at her as if he didn't know her. "You already know what I'm going to say."

"That it's because of Kylo Ren? I can hear and feel every thought he has, sometimes even before he has them. I'm in no danger."

"But the rest of us—"

"You aren't in any danger, either. Just as long as you don't cross him." She pushed away from the railing and began to head into the palace, so she could find Leia.

"That's it, then? We're not friends anymore?"

Rey turned. "Why would you ask that?"

"Oh, I don't know, because you won't stay and talk to me?" Hurt was reflected on his features.

She took a breath. "I have to go away soon."

"Yeah, I know. We all know." He leaned against the railing and folded his arms. "So?"

"So I may be different when I come back."

Poe stood up straight. "Yet you don't want me to worry about you, after a comment like that?"

"I have given up everything for you!"

"It's not your place to worry about me."

"Rey—"
"I'm sorry, Poe," she whispered. She turned back around before he could stop her, letting the cool corridors of the palace envelop her.

Ben had given up everything for her. And what had she given him in return? She'd taken some of his darkness, yes, but that hadn't affected her life very differently. On his end, he'd left the First Order, he'd partially come to the light side, and he'd thrown his fate in with hers. They were intertwined so completely they would never be able to be rid of one another.

Ben had had his own dreams, and they were ashes at Rey's feet. Even if those dreams weren't good, were evil, it didn't matter. They were still dreams. She'd been so focused on trying to redeem him for Leia—and, if she was honest, herself—that she hadn't given a single thought to how much more altered his life was because of it.

And what would it be like for him, should Rey decide to join the Resistance? They would never trust him. It was only Leia's orders that kept them quiet for now, and that was a select group of people. That group would grow larger, less willing to listen to a mother's concern for her son. They'd think about the common good, about ridding an evil. Destroying the man who had taken so much from the galaxy.

They were too hurt, too wounded, to hear reason.

Rey didn't blame them for it. She never had. She understood.

But if she knew these things, and she knew how Ben felt for her, how he'd rearranged his entire life for her… How could she expect him to fight with the "light"? The light that was still too bright, the light that shunned him, that would never forgive him?

Luke had talked about how Vader had redeemed himself in the end. But that was at the end… He was dead now, was dead in the act of that redemption. Ben couldn't do that, wouldn't go and sacrifice himself. Rey would never let him. Ben wouldn't want to, but that wasn't the point.

She took and she took and she took from him.
And what had she given him in return, besides her love?

She had to do something. She had to compromise somewhere. If she didn't, they weren't going to last. As Force Luke had said, they were going to have to change for the other. Ben was already doing this so much for her… she needed to meet him halfway.

Yet where to start?

Mentally rifling through the things he wanted, she could narrow it down to a few. Ruling together, which would never happen. Not unless—

She stopped herself.

Unless? There was an unless?

Fear seized her, sent goosebumps prickling over her flesh. Her mind spun as she tried to piece together what she had been feeling in that moment. She knew it wasn't the obvious: she wasn't going to murder innocent people to cut away their pasts.

Was it… the fusing of the vigilante idea with ruling…?

*You could do it,* a little voice inside of her whispered. She stood in the middle of a corridor, her eyes glued to the floor. *Ben won't kill any innocents. It's not that he's not capable of it anymore, he just won't. For you. He'd stay his hand.*

As for the others…

This galaxy was broken. There was no true leader. There was the First Order, there was the Resistance, there was the New Republic. All fighting. They were never going to see eye to eye. As Ben had said, there would never be peace. Looking back through the history of the galaxy, peace was so fleeting. A handful of years, maybe a decade or two, and then someone wanted to snatch the reins again.
It would go this way, on and on, well past the span of their lifetimes.

But couldn't they do something about it now?

Rey looked down at her fingers. They were giving the usual tremor when her thoughts veered unexpectedly.

She would never use the First Order to obtain peace. They were already too stained, too dirty, too evil. They could never inspire any sense of peace. No, people would only consider their reign a ruling, a dictatorship, no matter what Rey did to change it.

As for the Resistance… Well, they were numbered so few, it made more sense for Rey to be on her own, anyway. And besides, the emotional baggage from Ben wouldn't make it worth it.

Was this something she could really do? Or was it something her guilt was presenting, in an effort to make amends with Ben?

Did it matter?

Rey's fingers clenched into fists.

No.

She had to meet him halfway. She couldn't let doubt continue to gnaw at Ben's heart.

It wasn't true that he loved her more than she loved him. She loved him just as much. She was Ben's sole self-subscribed support system, so it only seemed unbalanced. If Rey didn't love him as much as this, she would never have completed her bond with him.

Need, on the other hand… Yes, he needed her more.

Both of these things were something she could do about.
And so she would.

As she continued her trek to find Leia, her thoughts wandered some more. Ben had pointed out twice now that the reason she was close to the Resistance was because her friends were there. At first, Rey hadn't understood why it mattered. But she remembered how she had felt when the Force Knot had put this temporary balance on them… she was gray.

If she was gray, why was she clinging so hard to the Resistance? Peeling back the layers… taking her friends out of the equation…

She didn't care about any of it.

No wonder he wanted to run off to oblivion and leave the rest behind. None of this was their problem. It was only their problem because Rey was letting it be.

Although gray, however, she didn't want to let the galaxy go to ruin. And it would, without interference. Her thoughts strayed toward vigilantes again, which was growing more and more favorable. If they were vigilantes, they didn't have to follow anyone's rules. They could do what they saw fit, in the way they wanted.

Every step she took toward Ben's mother, her reluctance to face the truth melted away.

Every step was freedom.

"You're so innocent, and at times it's sweet, but at other times, I want to take you—I want to take you and dirty you so that you can see the world as it really is!"

She did see the world as it really was. But she'd seen it through a shroud of desperate need she'd had for her friends. She hadn't wanted to be alone, not after she'd gotten a taste of what it was like to be surrounded by those who cared for her. But because of this bond, she would never be alone ever again.
It was time to let the past go.

She would just do it her way.

"Chewie said the ship was finished with its repairs... I take it you're here to say goodbye?"

Rey smiled. She was in Leia's quarters, which were easily double the size of what Rey's had been. It was homey here, carrying the princess' scent, her feminine touch in places, the touch of a general in others.

"Yes. But I wanted it to be quiet... you know the saying. Too many goodbyes, and you think twice about going."

"Would that be so bad?" Leia put her book aside and rose to meet Rey across the room.

"No," Rey replied. When the general's arms went about her, she hugged Leia in return. "I'll miss everyone. It's for the best. We'll destroy everyone with our power if we don't learn how to get it under control."

Leia held Rey by the shoulders. One hand lifted to touch her cheek. "You know I've come to think of you as a daughter..."

Rey's smile widened. She put her hand over the general's. "And I've come to think of you as a mother."

"Take care of Ben while you're away?" She didn't seem surprised that Ben wasn't there to say goodbye himself. Sad, but not surprised.

"Always."
Ben looked over as Rey fell into the co-pilot's chair. Her face was sticky with tears, and she scrubbed at them furiously. Luke was back in his red panda form, and he curled up in Rey's lap.

"I feel rested," he announced happily.

She stroked her fingers through his soft fur. "I'm glad. Do you have any idea of where we're supposed to be going?"

Yes. Set course for the Wilds, as you call them. Once we arrive, I will guide you from there.

Ben cast the red panda a distrustful look, but he worked on the controls with Rey to get the *Falcon* up and going. Rey thought of how Chewie had willingly let them take the *Falcon* without him. It felt so much like the wookie's, and perhaps it was. On the other hand, it was technically Ben's birthright.

"Ben?" she whispered.

What? He kept his eyes on the controls. He gave off the aura of someone who didn't know how he wanted to act. Judging by his emotions, he was still smarting from the day before and his failure on his end of the meditation.

Face clear of tears, she twisted in her seat. She put her hand over his, and he paused. She needed to say this before they left. It seemed important somehow, to shed the past away as they left the confines of Naboo.

Let's do it.

Do what? he replied cautiously.
Once we finish our training…

His breath caught in anticipation.

Let's take matters into our own hands.

Ben's dark eyes rose to find hers. *Do you mean that the way I want it to?*

*Ask me again. The—*the important part. *Ask me again,* she urged him.

He straightened slowly in his seat. After a moment, he haltingly obliged. *Take my hand?* He lifted it from under hers, away from the controls, and held it out palm up. *Be by my side?* His thoughts were clamoring together with excitement. He wasn't bothering to shield much, so she could feel everything. *Rule with—*

She took his hand in hers.

*I have conditions.*

Ben hooked a hand around the back of her neck and pulled her into a fierce kiss. When he withdrew, they were both panting a little for breath.

*I don't care. Whatever you want.*

*For now… no unnecessary bloodshed. The rest we figure out once we've finished training.*

His eyes were burning brightly.

*Agreed.*
Forgiveness

Chapter Notes

A few things. Firstly, vergences are mentioned here. They are a legit thing. Anakin was one. I research pretty thoroughly every chapter to make sure what I'm writing is right and not incredibly made up.

Some physics are mentioned in this chapter, and those were also researched. I mean, I already know a lot about physics, but they don't seem to apply to this galaxy, of course. So I had to look into that.

I'm glad everyone is enjoying the road so far, and the turn it took! You guys are super supportive, and with where I'm at right now, it really makes my day to hear so much from you guys. I mean, it'd be great, anyway, but it's especially important to me right now. Just going through some things.

Thanks!

"Tell me about the droid."

No.

Rey sighed in frustration. What do you mean, no?

This is not the moment. Show me the moment.

You can see everything in my mind! Show me yourself!

No.

Luke—

You must show me yourself. You must acknowledge it. And then you must overcome it.
"I know everything I need to know about you!"

"You do? Ah, you do. You have that look in your eyes. From the forest. You called me a monster."

"You *are* a monster."

"Yes. I am."

No. This was not even close, Rey. You are evading it.

"This will not go the way you think!"

No.

"It's time to let old things die."

No.

But Rey could see it, could see Ben's face, full of an intensity that struck her heart in a way nothing ever had.

Rey.

"I want you to join me. We can rule together and bring a new order to the galaxy."

Rey, *you cannot balance your bond if you do not root out the true source!*

*I've forgiven him for everything, you're asking me for the impossible!*
Nothing is impossible, only improbable. And this is far from improbable. As you said yourself, I can see the entirety of your mind. There is a buried, burning hatred, resentment, in your heart. It will fester if left unchecked. It will eat at you slowly, so slowly you may not even realize it is there. Until…

Rey didn't need him to finish that thought. I just… Luke, I don't know. Why aren't you pushing this hard at Ben?

Ben Solo has an entirely different battle to face.

Are you saying he has nothing he's harboring against me?

Yes.

Something entirely new struck her heart. In Snoke's chambers, it had been despair. Here, it was failure. Ben had no lingering resentment against her? Then again, she reasoned with herself, she hadn't done anything to him that would be lasting, scarring.

Scarring.

Like the scar on his face, for instance.

Well, clearly, he didn't hold a grudge about that.

The world of her mind faded away, and Rey was left staring at reality. Reality being a planet on the very edges of the galaxy. Luke had guided them here, explaining that it was a vergence.

"What's a vergence?" she'd asked aloud.

Ben's eyes had been feverish. "It's a pocket of the Force powerful enough to deny even the laws of spacetime. It can be as big as a planet… it can be as small as a stone. The Jedi Temple of old in Coruscant was built on one."
Rey didn't really know much about spacetime. There was relativity, or something, that had to do with time? But you had to venture outside the galaxy (theoretically) for it to be enough to take effect. Everyone in the galaxy was on a standard time. And she vaguely remembered Han casually mentioning once about how hyperspace was achieved by traveling through pockets of dimensional space, or wormholes.

Whatever. All she knew was that everyone in the galaxy aged the same, even if a planet's rotation was different from others, and that it made her head hurt thinking about it. A scientist, she was not.

In any case, the planet was pleasant and tropical. Another treat for Rey to experience—waves crashing along a beach, receding, sand sucking away at her feet. It was the only time in her entire life that she'd actually liked the sand. It was different here. Softer, not so coarse. And when muddied, it didn't cling too much, the water pulling it away.

Ahch-To was different. It didn't have beaches, only turbulent water, crashing against cliff faces with a vengeance much more powerful than this.

Trees swayed in the breeze as gulls called out to each other. Luke had identified them as palm trees. They had giant green and brown things under their broad leaves—coconuts. The first time they'd pried one open, Ben had used his lightsaber, and they'd lost all the milk. While he'd stared in frustration and embarrassed anger at the coconut, Rey had laughed so hard her sides hurt. The next attempt, they used something gentler, and the milk inside was quite different, but not bad.

There was a jungle here, too, as there had been on Solaris. It wasn't as dense, or as big in terms of flora and fauna. They hunted an aggressive brown creature with long tusks for meat, or they gathered fish. Freshwater was plenty, with several waterfalls and countless streams.

And the Force, which was always everywhere and in everything, was so vibrant here that the hairs on her arms had stood up when she'd first stepped foot on land.

Rey still wasn't sure how long this piece of land spread out for. They hadn't gotten to exploring all of it. Mostly, they'd set up camp in a cave, and this was where they trained daily.

She scoffed to herself. 'Trained.' More like mind games. The first two days had been about meditation, finding each other as they had attempted to in Naboo. Each night they went to bed mentally exhausted. Ben was far grumpier about it. He didn't like Luke being able to sift through his thoughts so easily.
Speaking of Ben, Rey had no idea where he was. Somewhere deep in the jungle, probably. Luke had them train in different places, to hone the bond more. She was at the beach herself, letting the waves soothe her. She was at the edge of the tidal line, her feet buried in wet sand, her elbows hooked around her knees.

Rey.

She sighed. *I don't want to do this anymore.*

*You must.*

Snow.

*You must find the rot. You must cleanse it. You must forgive.*

Heavy blankets of it, swirling around her, sticking to her eyelids, freezing in her hair. She'd been so incensed she hadn't been able to feel the cold at all, or appreciate the splendor of her environment.

*Forgive…*

A flash of red and blue. Grunts.

A fist slamming against a wounded chest.

*Forgive…*

Rey stood in the snow, her palms clammy around the metal grip of her lightsaber. Her brows hurt, they were so tightly furrowed, and breathing while physically exerted in this frigid air was hell on her lungs. She couldn't pause for a break. She had to let adrenaline drive her, or she'd fall, she'd die.

All she had was pure aggression, no finesse.
A tree crashed, and Kylo Ren was chasing her through a path between two small cliffs. She ran up the side of one, hopping away, limber as always. A roll onto the ground—she jumped up, slashing a branch between them to slow him momentarily as she raced ahead.

That didn't last long. With little time to prepare herself, she was once again parrying his attacks. The only problem was he was fiercely swinging, physically much stronger. Every slam of his lightsaber against hers sent her staggering back several paces. But she was blocking each one, no matter how much her body was taking a beating.

Abruptly trees were crashing behind her. She glanced at them briefly. They were going down fast. She whipped her head back around. Kylo Ren seemed unconcerned. He swung at her again, and they continued their dance, until she was backed up against a newly developed chasm. Sparks flew as plasma grinded against plasma.

His face was as soaked with sweat as her own. "You need a teacher!"

It was taking all she had just to fend off his blade.

"I can show you the ways of the Force!"

The rage that was running rampant through her homed in on that single moment as tears blurred her vision.

"The Force?" she whispered.

Her eyes closed.

The Force.

Peace.

Serenity.
The strength to do what she needed.

Her eyes opened, fresh determination inside of her. Kylo Ren had a moment to digest it before she yelled, using their momentum to swing their lightsabers to the side.

This time the battle was in her favor. It was she who was sending him stumbling away with every flash of her blade. A slice—part of his clothing burned away. Another—he cried out again from a wound to his shoulder. She prowled forward as he staggered away in the snow, his chest rising and falling heavily.

One final swing, her lightsaber behind her head with two hands and falling forward, connecting with his. She kicked him in the chest, and he fell into a drift of snow, flakes puffing everywhere.

She stalked him in a circle. He yelled as he got to his feet, and she screamed as he grabbed her wrist, angling her lightsaber away, but she held onto his just as fiercely. Before she knew it, she was driving his blade into the snow. He wasn't strong enough to fight her off, and as it disengaged, she brought her saber up, striking at his face.

As he groaned, on his back in the snow, she stared down at him, rage still roiling inside of her heart. Rage and so much damned grief.

He'd killed the only person who had ever been a father to her. A father she'd so desperately wanted. His own father.

Kylo Ren was evil.

She would never forgive him.

Tears soaked Rey's face, and she found herself sobbing. The cold of that night was gone as the balm of the tropics replaced it. She wrapped her arms around her knees and buried her face in them.
Yes. Again.

No!

Again!

Sparks flew as she stared into Kylo Ren’s face.

Again!

The branch slammed into the snow, earning her a moment of freedom, but only a moment. She flew forward, as fast as she could. It didn't matter. Kylo Ren was there in seconds at her back, and their lightsabers whirled.

Again!

Rey pushed her hands into the sand, dry heaving. Tears dripped off her cheeks and chin, and her whole body tensed. She choked on a fresh sob. She tried to focus on the granules of sand between her fingers, but Luke was already dragging her back into the memory.

She stabbed with her lightsaber, and Kylo Ren jerked back as the cloth at his shoulder burned.
He was on his back, flakes of snow stuck to his cheeks despite the sweat on his face. The ground roared and trembled as the planet began to tear itself apart. Rey stood over him, panting laboriously but victoriously, her lightsaber at her side.

Kylo Ren was evil.

"I can't do this anymore!" Rey sobbed.

*Then forgive him.*

"I have!"

*You have not. If you had, I would not be needlessly doing this.*

"Then tell me how! I—I don't know! I don't know how! I don't know what you mean!"

*It is something you must discover on your own. There is a pattern. Find it.*

Again!
"You need a teacher!" His eyes burned into her own from only inches away. "I can show you the ways of the Force!"

Plasma hissed. The heat of it washed over Rey's face in waves. It was probably contributing to the reason she was sweating so hard. In the darkness of the night, his eyes were pure black. Black like his soul.

Again!

Snow melted away as it met plasma. Rey's fingers around Kylo Ren's wrist were an iron grip. The Force was helping her—she was overpowering him.

Again!

"What are you doing to her?!"

Something necessary.

Rey, curled up in a fetal position, wet sand sticking to her cheek, could barely make the words out. It sounded like Ben was here. She wanted to call out to him, more than anything, because in that moment, she needed him. She needed him more than he needed her.

But she couldn't.

She didn't have the strength.
Why…? Why couldn't she figure out the puzzle…?

_Do not attempt to engage me, Ben Solo. You will not be pleased with the result._

Kylo Ren was evil.

"You need a teacher! I can show you the ways of the Force!"

Red light, blue light.

Sparks.

Snow, hissing where it met sabers.

"—show you the ways of the Force—"
…killed his own father…

Dark eyes, so dark, but shining with blue flickers from her blade.

A swing—a clash. Rey stumbled, nearly fell, got back up. Blocked another attack. Ben moved fluidly, so practiced she could tell he wasn't even thinking about his next move. He was five steps ahead of her.

Yes.

Gulls screeched. Rey watched them circle above. Yes?

Again!

"You need a teacher!"

Ben cried out in pain as her lightsaber connected with his shoulder. He didn't have time to clutch at it, to do anything but parry her next blow.
Ben's face, strained with the effort it was taking to pull his lightsaber away from her, from the snow. He panted beside her, made grunts that echoed hers.

"You need a teacher!" As blue sparks glittered in Ben's eyes, his face was earnest. There was something there she wasn't allowing herself to see. He didn't really want to kill her. He wanted her. He didn't know how he wanted her, but he wanted her. "I can show you the ways of the Force!"

Desperately pleading, hidden beneath the fervent cry.

Snow clung to Ben's hair, to his cheeks, his shoulders. It evaporated the second it touched the plasma of his saber. He stalked her much as he had on Takodana, patient, so patient. He knew he had her. He had only to wait until she fell, until she miscalculated, until she grew too tired to go on.

He hadn't known her then. He hadn't known the strength of her stubbornness. Or maybe he had, and had admired it, yet wanted to break it. Wanted to own it. Wanted it as his.

She stood over Ben as he lay on the ground.

The man who killed Han.

Who killed his own father.
Ben.

Ben, slashing at her with his blade, knocking out the tree she'd already struck once.

Ben, pushing his saber against hers as she tried not to buckle, to fall into the chasm at her feet.

Ben, his eyes bright with that familiar fervor, the fervor she loved, telling her to become his pupil.

Ben, yelling, wounded, as she struck at him.

Ben, crumpling after she swung her blade at his face, only the bare edge catching, just enough to create his scar.

Ben, staring up at her as she glared fiercely down at him.

Ben.

This world wasn't real. It was created from her memory. It was an illusion, drawn on this memory, and she was pushed into it again and again. This wasn't Starkiller Base, it was the depths of her mind. A mind where she could change things—even if she couldn't in reality.

Her knees buckled, and she collapsed at his side. She could have blamed it on the tremors rocking the base, but they both knew it wasn't that.

Ben's eyes searched hers. She knew what he was looking for.

It was what she had been looking for.
"Ben," she whispered, and he flinched in surprise at the use of his given name. Then his features pulled tight with a snarl. She stayed still as he lunged forward onto his knees, his gloved hand around her throat. She closed her eyes.

Chasms were opening in the ground all around them.

"Don't—call—me—that!" he hissed.

She looked up at him through her lashes. "I forgive you."

He pulled back, his hand dropping, his face blank with surprise.

"What you did will never be okay… but you torture yourself every day. And I can't blame you for it anymore."

His confusion grew by the second.

She put her arms around his shoulders and buried her face in his hair, which was damp from sweat and snow. His body grew rigged. She pressed her lips to his ear and whispered.

"I love you."

The sun was long gone, stars strewn across the night sky. Rey took a moment to orient herself, drained in a way she'd never experienced. At the same time, her body felt light, light enough to float away on the next wave. Waves, which were lapping at her shoulder, the tide rolling in.
Ben’s face appeared above her own. It was taut with worry. Rey?

A shaky hand reached up to cup his cheek. I forgive you. Fresh tears touched her lashes, and her nose burned.

He didn't have to ask what she meant. What happened? He blocked my access to your mind. Which, by the way, is very unpleasant. It's a potential weakness for us.

I wouldn't worry too much. He's the only one who can.

What happened?

He said… that there was a place deep inside of me that hadn't forgiven you. And he made me relive that moment over and over.

Which— He paused as her saw her thoughts from the day. I see.

I had to stop thinking of you as Kylo Ren. I had to stop thinking of you as evil. I had to realize you were just like me. I had to forgive you for killing Han.

He put an arm under her shoulders and pulled her up from the water lapping at her neck. Rey, I think—

She didn't get to hear what he thought.

Exhaustion swamped her, bringing a shroud of black over her vision, and she slumped against him, unconscious.
The Source Of His Corruption

It was well into the day when Rey woke up. She could hear the drip of water in the cave and the sounds of wildlife outside of it. The heat was a thick blanket against her as she sat up and examined her surroundings. Had she passed out on the beach?

She ran her hands through her hair. It was crinkled from sleeping with the tie in it, so she redid it, noticing the charred fish on a palm frond beside her. Ben had left her breakfast. She put her fingers to it and found it cold.

Her stomach grumbled hungrily.

It didn't care. It only knew she hadn't eaten in a day.

She nibbled on the fish and gazed into the jungle. It was unusual that Luke hadn't tried to wake her. He was a very stern mentor, very dedicated. Maybe he was satisfied with how she had handled her forgiveness for Kylo Ren yesterday? If so, Rey was all right with this. She still felt drained. Catching a moment of rest wouldn't be so bad.

It wasn't to last.

Rey, Luke called.

She sighed. She wasn't even halfway through her meal. What? She tried not to sound so churlish, but it was difficult to be in a good mood when one felt as though their entire body had crashed into a speeder.

I need your assistance.

With Ben? she questioned.

Yes. I have discovered the... source... of Ben Solo's troubles. He cannot handle this alone as I had
thought. He needs you. As you know, I cannot be of assistance, or it will invalidate the purpose of the exercise.

Concern trickled through her. *Is he all right?*

*Yes. But come. Quickly. I will show you the way.*

Rey picked her way through the jungle, very mindful of the fact that she was weaponless. She supposed she could use the Force to help her. It wasn't very mollifying. She wasn't used to being so powerful with it yet, so her first instinct was to reach for the lightsaber that was no longer there.

*You will be fine. I have soothed the forest.*

She frowned. *How often are you reading my mind?*

*Only when pertinent.*

Yes. But how did he decide what was pertinent and what wasn't?

Half an hour later, she came to a small clearing, in which Ben was lying prone on the ground. His face was strangely empty, his eyes closed. Not quite peacefully… there was something very off about it. Almost like a droid that had been powered down.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked.

*I have him suspended in the depths of his mind. It was the only way to root out the corruption.*

"Corruption?" She knelt beside her lover, and she no longer blushed at the term. Her hand rested over his chest, which rose and fell slowly, deeply.
Yes. That is why you are here.

Rey looked around. Sensing the need to be seen, Luke materialized in his glowing ball form. He hovered, his light fading in and out, glowing stronger at some points, like a star. She had never noticed that before. Then again, he hadn't given her much of a chance to look at him like this.

"Explain?"

Ben Solo has a very complex mind. It is riddled with self-doubts, hatred, guilt. Most of these directed at himself. My purpose was for him to face these feelings.

"He couldn't?" Rey guessed.

Luke bobbed. Yes, but to a degree that was abnormal. After days of repeated attempts, I rendered him to this condition and searched his mind more thoroughly.

She tried not to think of how easily that could have been done to her. But surely if he'd wanted to hurt them, he would have by now?

What I found was… startling.

Rey's intuition prickled. "There's something there?"

The one you call Snoke. It would appear his seduction of Ben Solo began at a very young age. This powerful Force user was able to entangle his darkness around him very thoroughly, to the point where it tampers with his memories of events. He has twisted everything around.

"But he's…" Her heart skipped a beat. "He is dead, isn't he?"

Yes. This is lingering damage. To put it in a way you would understand... Take a white tablecloth, and pour something very dark over it. The source of the darkness spreads into the tablecloth, soiling the linen so much that it is unable to be cleaned.
"Are you saying we won't be able to get rid of it?" Rey couldn't quite keep the fear out of her voice.

Luke moved in what was unmistakably a shake of a head. *Ben Solo is not a tablecloth. He will never be pristine again, but that is the same for all sentient lifeforms. However... this damage can be dealt with. That is where you come in.*

"Me?" Rey sat on her rump to get more comfortable.

*Yes. I am not certain where the corruption truly begins. We must go to the beginning of his most emotionally driven memories and work our way through until we find it.*

"What then?" she asked with no small amount of trepidation.

*I plan to pull his memories into an illusion. We are addressing his psyche, so the adjustment to the memories will be fictional, known only to us.*

"Wait, what?"

*I will pull forward his memories, Luke explained patiently. You will address him in each of these. His mind will not attack you—you are half of him; it will recognize that. But you will not actually be changing his memories. It is only cleaning his psyche. We will use this tool to do so.*

Rey wasn't really sure if she grasped that entirely, but she wanted to help Ben, and that was what mattered. "So what do I have to do? I mean, how will I…?" She straightened her shoulders. "What happens when I encounter his corruption?"

*Nothing. You will be safe.*

The fact that he needed to point out her safety wasn't very comforting. "Right…"

*Rest beside Ben Solo, and we will begin. I will link your minds back together, but I will pull you into his and guide you from there. Do not fight me. I must be very precise.*
"Why would I fight you?"

*You are being shoved into someone else's memories. It is possible you may not respond well, in an attempt to protect your sense of self.*

"I've seen the memories of others before."

*This will be different, I assure you.*

"I see inside of his head all the time!"

*Rey.*

She sighed. "All right."

Doing as instructed, she settled herself beside Ben, shoulder to shoulder. She looked up at the palm trees, waving in the breeze far above them. Sunlight streamed through the fronds hard enough to make her eyes hurt, so she closed them.

*Are you ready?*

She took a deep breath.

Let it out.

"Yes."

She'd barely gotten the word out when reality melted away, much as it had in their exercise yesterday. For a moment, she was surrounded by darkness. She didn't have to wait long before a bubble of light began to materialize in the distance. It was coming quickly, growing bigger and bigger by the second. By the time it reached her, it attached to her as if she were a bubble herself,
absorbing her.

A familiar room took shape. It was crisp, not rounded out and faded, eroded in the passage of time, as all memories inevitably were. People remembered moments, thoughts. It was never completely encompassing, not like living was. Rey had been here before… just not like this.

Plush carpet… beautiful coffee table… expensive sofa and couch… curtains over the windows open to reveal a city the like of which Rey had never seen. There were vehicles floating past and towers made of glass.

"Who are you?" The voice was sharp with distrust.

Rey whirled.

There, across from her, sitting outside his parents' bedroom door, spinning a black figurine between his fingers, was a young Ben.
"Who are you?"

The question came again, and this time, Rey could feel the Force behind it. She doubted he even realized he was doing it. Understanding for Han and Leia's situation came to her. Of course, they were frightened of Ben's powers at such a young age. She would have been, too. They just hadn't handled it very well, and Snoke hadn't helped.

"I'm your friend," she answered. Appreciation at the detail to the memory kindled inside of her. Having been a part of them, she knew Luke was skilled at his illusions. But those had all been false. This had originated straight from Ben's unconscious.

The boy scoffed. His dark eyes were as distrustful as his voice.

Rey was having a hard time not picking him up and squeezing him close. His ears were too big for his face, and they were very noticeable with how closely cut his hair was. She realized with a belated pang that it was styled just like Han's had been. She could see a bit of Han peeking out at her even now, in the way the child held himself. The set of his jaw, his shoulders. The narrowing of his eyes.

She crossed the room and sat before him, knees tucked under her, her hands resting on them. "Why is that so hard to believe?"

"Because I don't have any friends," he retorted hostilely. "Everyone hates me."

"That's not true," she protested.

He crossed his arms over his thin chest. "How would you know?"

"Well... I don't hate you." She did her best approximation of an encouraging smile, all the while hoping it didn't appear too nervous.
Ben continued to eye her warily.

She held back a laugh.

Han and Leia's raised voices carried through the door a moment later, and that sobered her. "…Are they always fighting like this?"

He shrugged and fixed his attention on his figurine.

"About everything, or…?"

"Father hates it here. He doesn't say so, but I can tell. I can feel his emotions. I never tell him, though. They don't like it when I can do something they can't." He spoke to his hands, mostly mumbling. He had that childlike way about him, the reluctance to trust her, the desire to be heard.

It was difficult to be taken seriously, or better yet, understood, when one was so young.

"What makes you say that?"

He hesitated, and it was plain on his features he hadn't meant to tell her what he had. He bit his lip for a moment. Debating on whether to talk to her? She couldn't tell here. She wasn't connected to his thoughts. She didn't like it very much.

How quickly she'd grown used to having access to his mind.

"They get really quiet. Then they won't look at me for a while…"

"That doesn't mean they don't like it. It just means they don't understand."

"They don't understand. And they don't love me anymore."

Brown eyes rose to hers. There was a half-frown on his face. Old defeat? And so early… How long had he been feeling this way?
"They're your mum and dad. I'm sure they must love you very much," she murmured, not knowing herself if the words were true. What flawed logic.

He bought it just as much as she did. "Having a child doesn't mean unconditional love."

"Ben, where did you hear something like that?"

"Nowhere," he muttered to his figurine.

Snoke.

Not just surveying, already acquiring.

It made Rey sick.

She couldn't do anything about it now. She had to try a different angle. Though the overall angle was eluding her. What could she do to make a difference? What could she say?

"Han and Leia are different," she said.

Any suspicion that had fled his eyes was back in an instant. "Who are you?"

It was time to be honest. Partially, at least. "I'm you. Well, half of you," she amended. "But still you. I know things you know. But..." She leaned close, as though she had a secret to tell. "I also know things you don't."

"Like what...?" It was wholly skeptical, curiosity lurking deep beneath it.

"Like the fact that your mother and father love you very much," she reiterated.
"No—" He closed his eyes and breathed with impatience. "What do you know about *me*?"

"Oh…" She hummed in thought.

"So you *don't* know—"

"I know you that you feel alone," she said, interrupting his smug tone. "I know that you think nobody else will ever understand you." She could tell this wasn't having the desired effect. Namely, because he shrugged. This was a given to him. "All right…"

She bit the inside of her cheek. She didn't know much about Ben at this age.

The answer slid through her, an insidious whisper.

"I know that when they told you you broke that boy's spine, you heard… *him.*"

He didn't look up from his figurine, but his fingers stilled around it.

"Although it's not really a 'he' yet, is it?" she mused openly. "Just a voice. A voice in the back of your head, telling you things, protecting you."

Ben's jaw set. "If you're a part of me, why haven't I seen you before? Why haven't I felt you?"

She placed her elbows on her knees, clasping her fingers in her lap as she shifted to sit on her rear. "Haven't you?"

Confusion touched his eyes.

Rey grasped one of his small hands.

A familiar spark lit in the depths of her mind, and Ben's thoughts touched hers. Rey quickly moved
aside the things he didn't need to know. She had much more practice, could keep him in a basic form of their connection. The way it had all started... when she was on Ahch-To.

He sucked in a breath. "...How...?"

"Ben, I have to tell you something." She clutched his hand. "People fear what they don't understand. Your parents don't understand you. Make them. Tell them how you feel, show them what you can do."

Doubt pulled his lips to the side. "I don't know..."

"You just have to—"

The door opened, and Han walked through. He nearly stepped over Ben, and father and son stared at each other, the latter with sad, wide eyes. Anticipating a punishment?

Han's face was clean-shaven, a startling contrast to how it would be over two decades later. Rey couldn't help but think that he was very attractive, this scoundrel, as Leia was fond of recalling him. She could see how once upon a time, he had been able to talk himself out of anything.

He sighed and put his hands on his hips. Then he jerked his head to the side, and Ben scrambled to his feet. As they left the room, his hand cupped over the back of his son's head and ruffled his hair gently.

"C'mon, kid," he grumbled. "You wanna go work on the 'con with Chewie and me?"

Ben gazed over his shoulder at Rey as he mumbled a yes. His eyes lingered on her until he was out of sight. And when he was gone, she was gone.

This was his memory.
Darkness again.

Rey struggled to get air. She clasped her hands under her ribcage, her head bowed forward.

Han. So young, so lively.

He hadn't even acknowledged her.

*He couldn't see me,* she thought. Which made sense.

It oddly still hurt.

*The next memory will begin soon,* Luke informed her.

"What about that last one? I wasn't able to do anything, you have to let me go back and try again!"

*Any impact you made would have been the same regardless of how this moment ended. He is in doubt of whether he should trust the whisper. You did this.*

She wished she could have done more.

*You did more than you realize. In the original memory, Ben Solo refuses his father's offer. Are you ready?*

"I am, but how sure are we that I—"

A bubble attached to her skin.
"It's you!"

A night breeze tugged at her hair. She couldn't see the stars, lost as they were behind a sea of smoggy clouds. She'd never witnessed such an event herself, but had heard tale from the odd traveler or smuggler at Niima Outpost. Pollutants would eventually clog up an atmosphere. That, and city lights. It kept the stars at bay.

Rey expected to find Chewbacca, as well. There was only Ben. He wasn't very much older, only a few years. He was sitting again, this time on a blanket over dewy grass. The cliff he had chosen to roost on overlooked the large city below. What had it been like, to grow up around so much greenery, so much life?

"It's me," she confirmed.

"I haven't seen you in a long time…" The distrust always lurking behind his eyes had been replaced by excitement. Maybe Luke was right. Maybe she had made an impression on him. "Why did you wait so long?"

Er.

Shoot.

"Things kept me away," Rey said vaguely. "Important things." She plopped down beside him. "Are you out here alone, then?"

"Chewie is—" He narrowed his eyes. "You already knew he was coming, didn't you?"

She'd had a strong inkling, and now it was confirmed. To Ben, she only shrugged one shoulder. "I meant to ask last time… do you and your family travel a lot?" This city was different from the last in that there weren't any vehicles zooming to and fro through the air.

"My mother is a senator and a princess. Father is a general." He eyed her. "How do you know some things and not others?" Ben had a very eloquent way of speaking most of the time, and it must have started young. He spoke with a grace far above his age.
She grinned. "How do you know I don't know them?"

He drew his lip between his teeth in consideration. "I don't," he conceded. "Then why ask?"

"Because I'm worried about you." She touched his shoulder—gasped a little when he slapped her hand away. "Ben!"

"I don't like it when people touch me," he mumbled to the blanket.

"Why…?"

He shrugged one shoulder.

"But I'm you. *I'm* not allowed to touch you…?" She maneuvered to try and see his expression. He kept turning his head away until she seized her hands over his ribs in a tickle. The shriek of laughter warmed her heart. He could have tried using the Force against her again, yet he let himself be at her mercy.

"Quit, quit," he begged from his position on the ground, doing his best to shield his sides from her attack.

"Only if you promise me that we're friends."

"Okay, we're friends!"

Rey relinquished her assault. Ben panted for breath, weak chuckles leaving him. She had never tickled anyone before, had only had it happen to her once, as a child. She wondered if Luke could bring her memories back from fragments and discarded the notion. It would be too painful to see her parents.

"You're pretty," he blurted.
She returned her attention to him. He was blushing but looked determined not to back down from what he'd said.

Her own cheeks grew red.

"You've never called me that before," she said. She could have kicked herself.

"What do you mean?" he predictably queried.

She couldn't answer him. Words were thick in her throat, and she was unable to detangle them. Choobies. She needed a moment to recover from that!

"I misspoke. I meant—"

"No," he cut her off. He was sitting back up, his eyes bright, burning. "I suspected it. I could feel it from that connection. You're from the future, aren't you?"

Of all the things to—

Rey burst out laughing.

If only he could understand the joke.

Time traveling… she had so many things she would do if she could…

"No," she wheezed.

He didn't find it very funny. "Then explain what I felt. I know it was something. I'm not a child."

"Let's just… say that I'm looking out for you," she said once her laughter had eased. "We're great friends, you and I."
He was dissatisfied with her answer. "Tell me the truth."

Judging by his expression, he was aware of putting the Force behind it.

"You can't use those mind tricks on me. They won't affect me. Just as I can't use them on you."

"You can use the Force, then."

She poked his stomach. "Course I can. I'm part of you, remember?"

"I have so many questions—"

Chewie roared, and Ben broke off. Intelligent eyes fastened on her after confirming the wookie was headed this way.

"You're about to go, aren't you?"

"Probably," she replied.

"You don't know?"

"I don't."

"You don't have control over this?"

"To an extent."

"So then why—"
"Have you thought about what I said?" Rey knew their time was running out. Chewie was almost at the top of the hill.

He frowned. "About being more open with my parents?"

"Yes," she persisted. "Have you?"

Something shuttered over his eyes.

"Ben?"

"My parents will never understand me. No one does. Not even Chewie."

"But I do—"

"And where were you?!" he snapped. "Gone!"

"Ben, no. It wasn't because I wanted to be, believe me!"

"How can I believe anything you say? I don't even know you! You're a part of me, but you're hiding yourself from me!"

"Don't shout. He'll hear—"

Rey exhaled.
That had not gone well.

"Why didn't you take me to an earlier memory?" she demanded.

I am only pulling forth the memories that have Snoke's engraved signature. In the first, Ben Solo despaired as his parents fought over what to do with him. In this last, he was contemplating severing himself from them.

"But he wasn't even twelve…! How could he…?"

Ben Solo believes he grew up alone. He put his family at arm's length very early. They rarely made the time for him that he needed. Snoke was able to sew the seeds of rebellion. It is a slow game, a seduction. Too much, and Ben Solo would have been suspicious. He attached himself as a whisper, quietly fueling these emotions from the background.

"Well, I did more damage there," Rey said.

Not entirely. Though highly suspicious, a piece of Ben Solo believes in you.

The question Rey had wanted to ask before came to her again. "Luke… these memories are so brief. How can we be sure that what I'm doing is even lasting?"

These memories may feel brief, but they are not. Much time has passed in the outside world.

"Much time?!" Rey stared into the nothingness of the darkness. "How much is much?!"

It will upset you to hear, and you should be focused for this task. But I do have your bodies protected, in stasis.

Full-blown panic winded her. She was very much not all right with this tidbit of information. "Luke —!"

Which is more important to you? Ensuring your body is all right, or working the majority of the
poison out of Ben Solo?

Rey gritted her teeth. She didn't like this at all. "Do I even want to know how much time has passed?"

Likely not. Are you ready to proceed?

"Can we get me in a closer memory?"

The signature—

"I don't care about the blasted signature!" Rey told him. "If you want this to work, he has to believe in me! I'm more suspicious than anything when I'm bouncing in and out of his 'life'!"

It will require more time in stasis, which you were just uncertain of—

Uncertain. That was putting it mildly. "If we're going to do this, then we're going to do it properly! We aren't going to rush it. He's too smart, Luke. If anything, you're making him warier of me than of Snoke."

This is true, Luke conceded. This is why I said I needed you, Rey. I may be able to see the entirety of his mind, but I am not human. And humans are highly unpredictable, even given their genetic code.

"Put me closer," she said again. "As close as you can."

Will the next evening suffice?

She nodded.

Very well. The memory is approaching.
Rey closed her eyes. When she opened them, she found herself in a bedroom. Ben was sprawled on his stomach, reading a book that was propped against his pillows. Without gazing at her, he murmured, "You're back again. Made you think, did I?" Now dark brown eyes sought out hers. "Are you going to answer my questions?"

He really thought of himself as clever, this one.

"No electronic book?" she mused.

"I like the smell of paper." His eyes narrowed. He closed the book over a finger. "Well?"

She pulled the chair in front of a handsome desk over to the side of his bed. Once she had gotten comfortable, she poked him in the shoulder.

"Do you think I'm evil?" she asked him.

"If you're me, and you're asking me if I'm evil, do you think I'm evil?" he countered.

"I think you're brilliant." Unlike with her, flattery worked with Ben. His shoulders were swelling, and his nose lifted. "You really are. And you're right: it was wrong of me to treat you like a child. I've decided I'll let you know something."

He sat up entirely, leaving his book, his eyes eager for information.

"I have come to help you. You bonded me to you, you made us connected. But now you're in danger."

"You are from the future!"

"In a sense. But that's all I can say."

"I'm in danger?"
"Yes."

"And I bonded you to me?"

"Yes." Only half of this was even true, but he didn't need to know that.

"But why—?"

"Ah-ah-ah," she said, raising a finger. "Remember, that's all I can tell you. Do you want to feel the connection again, so you know I'm telling the truth?" When he nodded, she found his hand. Once more, she swept everything important away, leaving only the simplicity of the connection. "Do you feel yourself?"

"Yes."

"Do you feel me?"

He closed his eyes. "Yes."

"Will you let me help you?"

A second passed. Another.

"Yes." He held onto her hand as his eyes opened. "But what do you need?"

"I need for you to trust me." She smiled as she brushed a finger over his eyebrow, pushing away a wavy bang. "Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes…" he replied more cautiously.
"Great!" she said, enthused.

Careful, careful.

"I need you to listen to the things that I say. No matter what happens... no matter what you think you hear. Please—believe in me."

"And you can't tell me anything else? Why I'm in danger?"

"I cannot," she confirmed. "But I can tell you that I love you more than I love myself, and I don't want anything to happen to you that I can prevent."

His cheeks burned as red as they had the night before, except she could see it better in daylight. He looked down at his lap.

"All right?"

He nodded once more.

"Good." She tried not to let her relief show. "I have to go."

"When will I see you again?"

"Soon," she promised.

You cannot see him every day.

"I know."
With this, you have bought yourself time until his next signature memory. I believe you will be familiar with it, as well. The incident of the birthday cake.

She'd only seen a flash, but she remembered.

"Keep them coming," she whispered.
Chapter Notes

Friendly reminder that this is not affecting Ben's actual memories, just his psyche! No one's said anything about that, I just want to verify it again. Okay, read on!

It's gotta get easier, oh, easier somehow,

'Cause I'm falling, I'm falling,

Oh, easier and easier, somehow,

Oh, I'm calling, I'm calling,

And it isn't over, unless it is over,

I don't wanna wait for that,

It's gotta get easier and easier,

So come with me

-Not Today, Imagine Dragons

He'd grown so much.

Rey slid onto a stool in front of the kitchen island. Straight across from her, staring morosely at a birthday cake, was Ben. His chin rested on his folded arms. His eyes lifted as he registered her presence and then widened.

"You."

"Me," she affirmed. "You look so sad." She knew why he was. From what she'd gathered on Naboo, this was his sixteenth birthday. Chewbacca was a short time away from coming in here to say his parents weren't going to make it.

She held out her hand to him. He took it without question, and the tension in his body rolled out of him as the light form of their bond connected. It made him grip at her hand more tightly. His
fingers, already slender and long, laced through hers. She didn't see the point in stopping him. He was only three years younger than her here.

"I'm never sad," he informed her.

They both knew it was a lie.

"Why did you wait so long?" he questioned.

"I have to pick and choose when to see you…" Rey squeezed his fingers. "When it's most important."

"And today is important?" Ben scoffed. His ears were still too big for his face, though he'd grown into them more. His hair was cut close to his head, probably the only thing that remained unchanging in these memories. Spots decorated his skin. She felt sorry for seeing them. She hadn't ever really had any growing up.

"Yes," she replied. "It's your birthday."

He lifted his chin from his still folded arms. "My parents…” His handhold adjusted—gripped to the point of near pain. Rey hissed as her bones ground together, but she couldn't yank away. Physically, he was stronger than her.

The bond twanged, badly offkey.

Choobies! He was trying to examine it!

"My parents…” he said again, trancelike. "They're not coming." As she fought to rip her hand away, he kept a steady hold on it, searching her thoughts. Despite herself, she was back in that interrogation chair, strapped in while he filtered through her mind without permission.

"Ben," she gritted out. "This isn't the way." She didn't want to hurt him, to push him away. If he didn't stop, she was going to have to.
"I did that to you?" He released her suddenly. His eyes roved over her face, searching for answers. She took her hand back and rubbed it. "I questioned you like that? Why?"

"Because you wanted to know something." She winced. Why did Luke have to make everything feel so real? If she hadn't known this was a memory and nothing more, she'd expect a bruise on her hand later.

"You hated me," he whispered. "You were strapped down with metal bonds..." As Rey had told Luke, he was too smart. "I was interrogating you. But I saw myself... I was the bad person. I was..." His eyes widened again. "I was a Sith."

He stumbled off the stool he was on and back up against a kitchen counter.

_That's promising_, she thought without a trace of sarcasm. If he had enjoyed the idea of being on the dark side, well...

"And... I... did what? I forced you to do this bond, to come back here? No, you said you were saving me... that I was in danger..." He shook his head. "Are you trying to prevent me from becoming a Sith?" Betrayal crossed his features.

"No!" she gasped. "No, that's not it at all. I told you, I'm—I'm not really from the future. I can't really change things like that—"

"Then you're changing something inside of me!"

Blast. Entirely too smart.

"Something you wanted changed!" she insisted. "Ben, you felt me... you know my intentions. You know I'm a part of you. Are you really afraid of me? Or are you afraid of yourself?"

His eyes narrowed. "Tell me everything."
"I can't do that," she sighed. She got off the stool, circled the counter—was very dismayed to find he was already towering over her. He hadn't grown into his full height yet, however; he was rounded in the shoulders too awkwardly. "Ben—"

He fell away from her. "If you're hiding things from me, I can't trust you."

"But you can trust him, right?" It was time to play her trump card. She hadn't wanted to, had wanted to wait a while longer. He was no longer giving her room for that option.

He stilled. "...Excuse me?"

"That voice in the back of your head," Rey elaborated. "That's what I'm here for. That's what I'm here to protect you from."

"I don't know what you're talking about—"

"Don't play stupid!" She was losing patience. She realized it was because she didn't much like being on the receiving end of that distrustful stare. "Someone talks to you. Someone makes you feel better about some of the things you do."

He was shaking his head in protest.

"Maybe it still hasn't developed into a person! But there's a voice, isn't there?"

Ben looked away.

"Ben, that voice is real." She took a tentative step toward him. When he didn't back away, she came close until she could put her hands on his shoulders. She tried to see his expression, but he was refusing to let her. "You want to forgive yourself, but you can't. You don't know how. You can't do it on your own. That's why I'm here. That's the truth, that's everything!"

Brown eyes lowered to hers.
Anxiety wrung through her. "What can I do to make you trust me?" She had no idea if Snoke was working him against her even now. She thought maybe more subtly, but it was still blocking progress on this front.

"Kiss me."

That brought Rey up short. "What?" Of all the things…

He folded his arms. His chin rose determinedly. "Kiss me. You said you love me more than you love yourself, right? You told me that years ago."

She certainly had. On the other hand, she hadn't said they were lovers or—

"The only way I would believe that you care about me that much would be if you're in love with me." His eyes had grown unreadable, as dark and shuttered as ever. "Otherwise, it's just a gain, isn't it? Something toward a bigger picture? Fulfilling a duty?"

"That's the problem here? You think I'm just doing my duty? Do you really like the idea of becoming a Sith?"

"No!" he snapped. "But I don't like the idea of being manipulated! I told you before, I'm not a ch—"

Rey cupped her hands over the back of his neck and jerked his head down to hers. She meant to just give him a peck—she was half-sure this was all due to the fact that he was a teenager—but something in his eyes stopped her. Maybe the vulnerability, the loneliness, the hope, the excitement.

She wondered what it would have been like for them if they had been normal… if they had met under normal conditions…

She grazed their lips together, her lashes sliding closed. As she did so, her hands slipped down his broad shoulders and found his. She let the watered-down bond swell between them, so that he could feel everything inside her heart at that moment… could feel her love… could know this wasn't a trap, a trick…
Ben made a quiet noise deep in his throat. He laced their fingers back together, his head tilting as he kissed her first this time. She knew she should pull away, but then she thought… why? They were near enough in age here, and she didn't think the real Ben would mind if she was kissing some form of him inside his head.

The thought twitched at her lips, threatened to bring a laugh.

His hands left hers. They came to rest at the small of her back, pushing her against him. She hesitated only a moment before letting her fingers wind through his hair. It startled her for a second. She was used to his wavy locks. Here, all she could really do was soothe her fingers against his scalp, petting the shorter strands of hair.

Rey let him guide the kiss the way he wanted. She had no idea what his experience level was—doubted it was anything. His tongue traced the seam of her mouth. She parted her lips to let him in with a soft sound. She had to teach him here. He was, for once, patient, learning, exploring. He got the hang of it rather quickly, and soon, she was breathless.

His arms hooked under her rear and lifted. A moment later, the coolness of the island was pressing into her legs. Their lips had parted briefly for the small bit of travel. His mouth was on hers again, and she wound her arms over his shoulders. The back of her mind was prodding her, reminding her that she had a mission, that she didn't need to get swept up like this.

But she couldn't help it…

"Now do you believe me?" she whispered over her pounding heart.

Ben rested his forehead against hers and nodded.

Silence coated the kitchen.

"…You loved me despite… me being a Sith?" he asked. "Or… did you only love me once I wasn't a Sith anymore…?"

He had a way of asking the most complicated questions.
"I loved you," she murmured. "But I was afraid. I didn't want to go to the dark side."

"And I'm on the light side now?"

"No."

Ben pulled back, confusion writ stark on his face. "There's... there's only the light and the dark—so does that mean I'm still—?"

"No." She bit her lip. "You're gray. Well... we both are."

"Gray?" he echoed.

Rey nodded.

"What does that mean? Exactly what it sounds like?"

"Mhm."

Ben's brows furrowed together. "...My uncle Luke always made it sound like..."

Rey strived to keep the surprise off her face. She'd only ever heard Ben refer to Luke as Skywalker.

"Luke was wrong about a lot of things," she said. "I mean, he was right about a lot of things, too. But on this... I... I don't know." She sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. "It's not so black and white anymore for us. I can't really say more than that."

"What do you do that's gray?"
"Nothing so far," she admitted. "We're trying to balance ourselves out. The bond I've let you feel is only a small portion of it." She reached over and dragged her fingertip through chocolate frosting. It looked incredibly enticing. She'd never had such decadence before. And in his original memory, Ben had slammed this cake into the wall. This wouldn't hurt anything. "That's why I said I had to help you learn to forgive yourself."

Ben was quiet for so long that Rey had to look over at him.

"Ben?" she asked around the chocolate smeared on her fingertip.

His head was bowed, his shoulders hunched in. "I do… terrible things, don't I? Why else wouldn't I be able to forgive myself?"

Rey chose not to answer. How could she? Ben had killed so many… he had so much blood on his hands, including his father's. And now that he was retreating from the darkness, he carried that burden every day. It was as she had said—she was here to offer succor from his worst memories. They just hadn't gotten to them quite yet.

She hoped they wouldn't have to.

"You love me despite this?"

"Yes." She put a hand on his chest. "Very much. But in order for us to be able to… function together, I have to do this. I'm the only one who can help you. I know I keep saying that, but it's true."

"What do you need me to do…?" he whispered.

"Ignore that voice," she breathed. "I know it's hard… I know it's hard to fight… everything inside of you. But you have to ignore it."

He shook his head. "I can't do it without you."

"What do you mean?"
"It's... it's a part of me now. It— it shadows everything I do. I don't think..." His voice cracked. "I don't think I can do it without you."

Oh, the merry circle that chased itself.

Chewie, right on schedule, roared in the other room.

Rey turned her head in that direction before facing Ben again. "I have to go. Please don't smash this cake. It's really good."

His eyebrows lifted. "What—?"

"I'll be back soon."

He grabbed her hand. "You said that last time. Years passed."

Torn, she sat where she was. "I'll see you sooner than that?"

He brought their foreheads back together. "If you want me to do what you want, then... I want to see you regularly."

Rey thought of the clock working against them—of the time passing rapidly around them even now. Luke would not be happy if she made that promise. But... if this was the only way to get the younger Ben to cooperate... Well...

They'd just have to make do.

"Okay," she whispered.
I have no words.

"What was I supposed to say?!" Rey cried. "If I told him no... who knows, maybe he'd be pushed even harder into Snoke's waiting arms."

We have no way of knowing that for sure.

"It doesn't matter," she huffed tiredly. "I know you said we can't do every day. But... we need to do something sooner. I—what's once a week?"

*How long do you mind being in stasis?* The question was incredibly dry.

"We have to do this..." Rey replied. "Even once a month? *Something.*"

*I will acquiesce. I merely wanted you to be aware of the consequences.*

"How does his corruption look?"

*It was thinned in places. However... we are still journeying into the heart of it. Perhaps we will manage to cleanse most of it with seeing him so regularly. Are you ready?*

"Yes."

Excellent. *Let us proceed.*

And so Rey spent a good deal of time diving in and out of Ben's adolescence. She had no idea how much time was passing in the real world, and she forced herself not to worry about it. What mattered was that they were slowly chipping away at Snoke's influence.

And it was going wonderfully until it wasn't.
"You've closed yourself off from the Force."

"I've seen this raw strength only once before, in Ben Solo. It didn't scare me enough then. It does now."

Rey watched as Ben raged.

A wave of his hand, and the contents on his desk sailed across the room and shattered against the wall. The furniture began to rattle, heavy pieces threatening to float. Someone was banging on the bedroom door, shouting. It sounded like Han.

"I don't—" Rey didn't understand. "What happened? I was just here—"

"You weren't just here!" he snarled, whirling on her. He was at his full height now, twenty years of age, terrifying with his anger. It was turbulent; he was out of control. "You see me once a month!"

"Ben," she said in a low voice. "I told you… I've told you for years. That's all I can manage." Before he could go off on her again, she grabbed his arm. "Ben, what happened?"

He yanked away from her. He paced circles around the room, breathing heavily. Han continued to do everything but kick in the door. He didn't sound very pleasant himself. All she could deduce was that they'd had a fight.

"Kid!" Han yelled. "Your mother—she's sorry, okay?! She doesn't… we don't know what we said wrong! I can't fix things if you don't tell me what's—"

Grumbling. Han wasn't very good at this sort of thing. Rey hadn't known him for very long, and even she knew that.

Time was a precious commodity. Rey pushed Ben onto his bed, and when he tried to get up again,
she shoved more firmly. His shoulders were trembling beneath her hands. Her touch seemed to inspire calm in him, and he hung his head. It made her wonder where the original memory must have led.

"I hate him." Ben's voice was barely more than a rasp. "I can't stand him. I can't stand either of them. All the hiding from me… they think I don't know… They're planning on sending me to Uncle Luke's… they haven't said it yet, but every time we fight…"

"Why are you fighting?" Maybe if she got to the root of the problem, she could do something about it.

"I've told you a thousand times, Rey." He leveled a baleful glare on her. "They don't understand me."

Rey was so lost. This… this shouldn't have been as bad as it was… He'd been doing well with his parents… They weren't holding hands, skipping through a field of flowers, but… well… they were at least somewhat social… And now he was here, saying he hated them? It could have been residue from the original memory, but Rey didn't think so. Something wasn't sitting quite right.

"Are you ignoring the voice?" She hadn't asked in a while. She hadn't had to.

Rey!

53 memories.

It had taken 53 memories for Luke to interrupt one.

Rey's shoulders drew back. For a moment, she thought maybe she had imagined it. But then Luke's voice came again, urgent enough for her blood to sing in warning.

Rey!

She had two seconds to be aware of it before she was choking.
Her windpipe was sealed shut. She clawed at her throat as her lungs protested for air. She stared at Ben, but he was puzzled. Once he saw that she was mouthing futilely for oxygen, he pushed up from the bed.

"Rey?"

Her skin was crawling. She had felt this touch before.

Snoke.

"Rey!"

Black spots began to dance gleefully along the edges of her vision.

"Rey!"

She collapsed to her knees. She was distantly conscious of flailing her hands. Ben's shirt was crushed in her fists.

Rey! I cannot free you, it will not allow me—

The grip on her windpipe tightened further.

Ben's room swam dangerously.

"Rey!"

She couldn't hold on anymore.
She sway to the right, fell onto her side. Ben's worried face hovered over hers—his words were so far away, so muffled.

Unconsciousness claimed her.

Rey gulped in air by the lungful, coughing violently. She retched, her hands on her knees. Nothing came up. How could it have? Despite the realism of the illusion, she hadn't eaten in the illusion, ever.

*We found one of the pivotal memories.*

Once she was sure she could trust her voice, Rey shouted into the darkness. "You told me it was safe!"

*I am to blame. I did not anticipate it... seemingly having a mind of its own. It is well-crafted, this monster that nests inside of him.*

"I was completely powerless!" she wheezed.

*I truly am sorry, Rey.*

She didn't want to be angry at him. She didn't. She only... she needed a moment to process what had happened, to move past it.

This was a complete reversal of the time she had spent with him. And despite the passage of time outside of this... realm, so to speak, she had come to see that it was well worth it. Knowing that she was helping Ben, knowing she was making a difference, getting to know him in a way she'd never be able to otherwise—these things had all been encouraging.

*As I said, this seems to be the tipping point of the pivotal moment we were looking for.*
Rey straightened. "He... He knew they were talking about sending him to his uncle. *Really* sending him off." She shook her head as she puzzled through it. "...The second I was in the memory, it wasn't like the others. It was as if everything I had done hadn't left a mark at all. It was such a dramatic change."

*Memories such as these are steeped in darkness, in Snoke's influence.*

"How can I go forward without being attacked?"

*I believe the best course of action may be to avoid mention of the voice, of anything related to Snoke. Would you like me to put you in a memory soon after...?"

"No. We'll do the usual. A month from now." Rey wrapped her arms around herself to try to stop the shaking. She really didn't want to be attacked again. She would have to go at this from a different angle.

"Okay," she breathed. "I'm ready."

*Should it happen again, I will be able to extricate you far more quickly.*

That wasn't as reassuring as he likely thought it was.

She was moving.

It was the first thing Rey noticed as she was absorbed into the memory. A window—things flying past it. Other... vehicles, like this one.

"Rey!"

She jerked her head around. Ben was seated across from her. He was dressed nicer than she'd ever
seen him. Formal black clothes, a white shirt with an origin of fabric she couldn't determine underneath. A scent wafted off him—cologne.

"Going somewhere?" she asked.

"You're safe!" Ben reached over and grasped onto her hands. His lashes fluttered as the connection zinged, and she carefully hid her fear away. Ben didn't scare her. It was Snoke. He was trying to ruin their lives even beyond the grave. "What happened?"

"I… had to deal with something on the other side," she lied. She hated to. She told herself it was for the best. Ben couldn't know the truth. It might tempt that corruption again.

He kissed her knuckles. "Are you all right now?"

Rey wondered if he'd have stayed this sweet even without turning to the dark side. "I'm great," she said. "Where are we going?"

A frown crossed his features, and he let her go. "A party," he replied. "A political junket, but they try to disguise it as something else. My parents need me to make an appearance."

"Well, you look very handsome." Rey dropped her eyes, feeling her cheeks heat. From the corner of her gaze, she could see a slow, almost smug smile poking that frown out of the way. "Ben, I was wondering…"

Hunched over, the ceiling of this thing low, Ben came to sit beside her. He put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him. She let him, allowing herself a moment to simply breathe him in. He never pressed for more than a few kisses, a patience she marveled at. He always let his emotions get the better of him, but in this, he'd held back.

"Yes?" His fingers slid into her hair.

"I know it's been rough with your parents. But have you thought about… being on your own?"

"At times."
"What's stopping you?"

He sighed, shifting uncomfortably. "...My mother."

"She doesn't want you to go?"

"My father's been leaving for longer and longer... We will go weeks without seeing him. She tries to hide it from me, but I know she's sad. I suppose... I suppose that I do not want her to think I am leaving her, too."

Rey had suspected it, but now she knew for sure.

Ben Solo was a complete and total mama's boy, and it made her smile.

The vehicle shuddered to a stop, and Rey climbed out with Ben onto a landing platform. Examining it from the outside, Rey could see the second half was separated from the cabin. A private cab? She knew the word, had heard it mentioned, but had never seen one. Ben went to the pilot and slid money into his palm. A moment later, the cab departed to join the other lines of vehicles.

Rey didn't speak. If she did, Ben would look like he was talking to himself. He gave a slight tilt of his head, and she followed him into a beautiful building of glass. Standing up while dressed in those clothes... Rey couldn't deny that it made her pulse speed a little. And with his grown-out hair, wavy and thick, he was beginning to appear more and more like himself.

He grabbed her hand and slid it into his pocket with his. The outside observer would notice his hand, nothing more.

They walked down a corridor, errant people scattered here and there, conversing over glasses of some sort of alcohol. Ben passed all of them without a second glance, and Rey began to hear strains of music. Two stiff-looking guards opened the doors for Ben. He pulled her inside, and her mouth parted despite herself.

The room opened onto the second floor, which was a balcony except for the edges. Below people
dressed like Ben or better were mingling, laughing; some were dancing. Most of the architecture was stone, and indeed there were alcoves all along the walls, higher up, with red curtains. Rey wondered who was in them, or what.

So this was the political gamut?

"The galaxy's finest," Ben muttered sarcastically.

They made their way to the floor beneath them. At the far end of room, there was an elaborate staircase connecting the two. A few partygoers waved to Ben, who nodded almost curtly. Rey knew that nothing would ever change the fact that he didn't care to be around people. It was too ingrained into his personality.

Ben came to the center of the room. A throng of politicians surrounded Han and Leia. The former was tugging irritably at his neck, where a tie was, and the latter's cheeks were a little rosy, owing to the glass in her hand, Rey suspected. But Rey's heart was aching. She hadn't seen Leia in his memories yet, nor had she seen Han for a while. They were, of course, aging just as Ben was.

Leia put her arm around Ben and pulled him forward. It broke their handhold, and Rey stayed back. She didn't mind observing.

The princess was dressed in a golden gown that clung to her body, pooling out only a little at the knees and having a small train. Han was outfitted similar to Ben. Had that been intentional? Likely. Rey could imagine Leia planning that out.

"Looking good, son," Han muttered.

Ben nodded but said nothing.

Rey felt out of place. It was different from before. Through his memories, he'd mostly been alone, and if anyone had ever appeared, the memory quickly ended. But this memory seemed based around this event. What had happened here? Luke chose the memories somewhat purposefully, tugging on ones that had any stain of darkness, no matter how small. Because Rey found a way to visit him once a 'month,' it meant he had to be even more selective.

The tinkle of glass filled her ears over the music. Rey had seen plenty of species come through
Niima Outpost. Never so plentiful as this, though. It was enchanting, watching species and races come together, no matter what their backgrounds or differences.

She got a warm feeling in her stomach. The only person she'd known from the New Republic was Leia. Well, and Han, but he hadn't really counted. He'd been too much a smuggler again by the time she met him.

Leia introduced Ben to various people. Rey tried not to let a sense of distress come over her. The time she spent in Ben's memories wasn't very much, hardly more than an hour. But here it didn't look as though she would be getting Ben back anytime soon. So why had Luke chosen this memory?

Then again, she mused, at this juncture, all of Ben's memories were coated in darkness. He could probably pick randomly.

Rey watched Han since she was free to do so. He was still cleanshaven, his hair threaded with gray. He had another nine years to go before he reached what she'd seen of him in her time. A half-smile was on the corner of his mouth as he chatted with an elderly gentleman nearby. His eyes, though, flicked here and there. What, perceiving threats?

Ben's hand closed briefly around her elbow. He covered it by then pushing his hair off his forehead. She took that to mean he wanted to be followed, and she did so. He led them back up the stairs, down a quiet corridor, and behind a red curtain. Judging by the balcony, they were in one of the alcoves, but Ben kept her in the shadows.

"Why are you always watching my father?" he whispered.

"I'm not," she whispered back. She didn't know why she'd lowered her voice, too. It wasn't like anyone could hear her. "I was just thinking about how similar you are."

Ben drew back. A moment later, he scowled. "We're nothing alike."

Afraid to push it too far, Rey let it go. "I'm taking it that you hate these events?"

He sighed with a frustrated frown thrown in the direction of the ballroom. "My mother likes to show me off. I don't know why. I do not play well with others."
This made Rey laugh.

Amusement touched the corner of his mouth. "This still holds true, I take it?"

"Yeah… it really does."

"How old am I there?" He made himself comfortable by leaning against the opposite wall. "You've never told me."

She hummed. "Remember when you promised not to ask me anything else about it?"

Ben rolled his eyes but nodded.

"Well… there you are, then." Rey fidgeted as her nerves grew. She had to do something… but what? She couldn't ask about it outright. This was the time, though—this was before he went to his uncle's for training. Whatever it was that she could make a difference about, it was somewhere in this chunk of memories.

His finger suddenly curled under her chin, drawing her from her thoughts. She looked up at his face.

"Rey, you asked me about the voice last time… Right?"

"R-Right…" Shite. She hoped nothing bad came of that.

"Didn't I tell you I would ignore it for you?" He tucked a few strands of her hair behind her ear. "Do you not believe me?"

"I do…" She rested her palms flat against his chest. She hesitated.

"What?"
"Things are going to happen. Things I can't—control or stop. And you… you may be tempted…"

His hand dropped from her hair. "This is about me being a Sith?"

"No, that's not—" She sighed. "I'm worried I won't be able to be there with you when these things happen."

But why couldn't she be?

She grew quiet. Her being there at certain events would only deescalate the situation, not prevent it. He was still going to do what he'd done in reality… he would go to the dark side. No matter how many memories she went through, that wouldn't change anything. Yes, she could keep chipping away at his darkness… It wouldn't matter.

She'd been here for him enough, hadn't she? Enough to go to the places that mattered? To strike at the heart of the problem?

Rey looked up at him. He was silent. Had he been studying her?

"What is it?" he asked.

"Ben, while I'm here with you… a lot of time passes," she said. "I have to…" How could she word this? "You may not see me for a while."

"Why?" Already, he was on the defensive, ready to be stubborn, to hold onto her.

"I want you to make me another promise." She grabbed his hands. "Promise me that whenever you see me, no matter what's happening, you'll listen to me. You love me, don't you?"

"Of course. Rey—"
"That no part of you will attack me."

He yanked free. "I would never attack you. That you think I would—"

"No—" Blast it! "You won't be able to—help it. I—when you see me, I want you go to quiet, I want you to take my hand…" She couldn't change fate. His memories, even if they weren't being altered, would all lead to the same thing. Snoke was too tightly wound through this part of him. This strategy wouldn't work anymore.

"Rey…"

She stopped. There were tears in his eyes.

He looked away and blinked quickly.

"I don't want to go without seeing you… I need you…"

Rey put her arms around him and buried her face in his chest.

Then he was gone.

Everything. The music, the laughter, Ben's scent, the feel of him.


_I feared if the conversation continued, it would take a dangerous turn. Ben is still highly unstable emotionally. Based on what I see in his mind, it would have resulted with him lashing out at you._

Yes, that was about right.

_I sensed you had an idea?_
"I'm buried enough in his psyche now," she said. "And besides, we're not far off from when he goes to his uncle, right?"

We are not, no.

Rey exhaled. She was so tired…

But it would be over soon. She would address the memories that were turning points, or close to them. She'd discovered all the ones in his childhood. There was nothing left but this.

Filled with fresh resolve, she spoke to the darkness around her.

"Take me to the night he destroyed Luke Skywalker's temple."
In Takodana, Rey had seen this torrential downpour when she'd touched Luke's lightsaber. Now she felt it, had to blink water out of her eyes. Despite the rain, fire was consuming the structures of buildings Ben had seen to. Clothing and hair quickly becoming plastered to her, Rey sought out her other half. Since this was his memory, he couldn't be far.

She found him a few yards away, staring at the ruin he'd wrought. There were others with him, the friends she'd heard of. A girl, five boys. The boys were jubilant, going over the night amongst themselves. The girl was silent, standing not far behind Ben, almost as if she were his right hand.

Rey stepped into Ben's field of view.

She was scared. Scared her words wouldn't reach him. Scared Snoke's influence would try something again.

But no one ever got anywhere cowering in the dark.

His hair stuck to his face like hers. Water slid off his nose and cheeks, his chin. She was avoiding meeting his eyes just yet, but then she couldn't any longer.

Rage.

Grief.

Betrayal.

Ben's irises flashed to gold.

He couldn't say anything—not with his companions there. Rey took his measure, her heart pounding. Wondering if he would follow, she turned and headed across the muddy grounds. The heat from the fires washed over her, a contradiction with the coolness of the rain. Footsteps
squelched behind her.

There was a stand of trees ahead. Rey slipped between, the rain diluted somewhat from the boughs overhead. Ben came to a stop just behind her.

The rain was so loud, falling harder than ever. Thunder rumbled.

"Why didn't you tell me?" The words were chipped ice. "Why didn't you tell me my own uncle would attack me in my sleep?!"

"I couldn't," Rey said, aghast. "I can't change anything, it wouldn't have mattered!"

Ben's hand closed over her neck, and the next thing she knew, her back was slamming into a tree, her feet dangling. He leaned in close, his lips curled back in a savage snarl.

"If you can't change anything, then why are you here?!" he demanded.

"That's not what I meant!" she gasped out around his fingers. "Ben—stop—put me down—"

He squeezed tighter. Bark dug into her back hard enough to leave bruises. She choked, her hands scrambling over his, trying to push it away. Just when she thought she would have to try and use the Force somehow, he dropped her.

"What did you mean, then?" he asked coldly.

"Snoke's influence… it's still here… he—"

"If it wasn't for Snoke, I would be dead right now!" Ben shouted. "He warned me this would happen—he warned me against you!"

The knees of Rey's pants soaked in mud, she lifted her head. "If he warned you against me, it's because he wants to maintain his hold on you."
"And Luke?"

"I thought I told you not to listen to the voice." Rey shook her head. "You promised me you wouldn't!"

"That was before," he said shortly.

"Before what?"

"Before my uncle tried to murder me!"

"So that's what you've been doing?! You've ignored his voice, but you haven't made it go away?!" Rey got to her feet. Her hands collided with Ben's chest, and she pushed. The only reason he staggered back a step was because she had caught him by surprise. "I'm trying to save you!"

"If you were trying to save me, you would have told me about Luke!" Ben snarled. "You would have prepared me!"

"Ben—"

"No! If you want me to trust you again, I need answers! Real. Answers!"

"Fine!" Rey was at her tipping point. Somewhere deep inside, she had hoped it wouldn't go this way. That Ben wouldn't try to kill his uncle. But it only meant she was right. All she could do was lessen the emotional damage of what was to come.

"Fine?" Ben scoffed. "You hardly—"

Rey put a hand behind her. She gripped onto the slick bark of the tree and used it to push herself to her feet. "But then you listen to me, and you keep your promises!" she continued as if he hadn't interrupted. "Are we understood?!"
They glared at each other in the darkness of the night.

Ben looked away first.

"I—"

Choking.

Rey dug at the invisible fingers around her neck. It wasn't Ben. It was Snoke; she'd know that feeling anywhere. His influence was trying to kick her out again. She wouldn't let it this time. She didn't need the Force knot's help. She could do this on her own. She had to. It was the only way to make any real progress.

"Rey!" Despite his misgivings, Ben stepped close. "Rey, is something attacking you? Rey!"

She fumbled blindly for his hands. He gave them to her, and as their connection opened, that darkness burned away in the light of their love. Her face crumpled, and she bit back a sob. She had to be strong. She could fall apart later.

"You're attacking me, Ben," she said.

"What—?"

"The thing I'm trying to save you from... every time I get close, it... it attacks me like that... it tries to shove me out..." She sniffled and looked up at him. Maybe the rain would hide her tears. "It doesn't want you to feel better."

He seemed to be at a loss for words.

A first.

Ben always knew what to say, especially if it was cutting and clever.
"You have to save yourself, too," she said.

"Show me what I did!" He was holding onto her fingers so tightly, he was blocking the circulation flow.

"Ben—"

"I'll keep my promises!"

"I'll show you... I will... but..." Rey bit her lip. "You might not like what you see—"

"Me being a Sith?"

She nodded.

"You've had me wondering about it for years. Not knowing, knowing how you keep secrets from me—it is pushing me away from you, Rey."

"How do you feel right now?" she choked. "Do you feel good about what you did?"

"Of course not!" he shot back. "I was defending myself!"

Defending himself against the other students who refused to follow him?

"But what's your plan from here? To follow Snoke, even though I told you he was evil?" Rey bowed her head. "This is what happens, Ben... This is what happens when you listen to Snoke..."

The images poured free between them as she lowered some of her shields. Ben, stalking her on Takodana during the attack. Interrogating her. The fight on Starkiller Base, the wounds she gave him. She could have shown him more, but these were the ones she had taken part in.
She deliberately kept his father's death out of it.

"You're in his army," she said. "You and your friends. You kill so many people. You take out an entire solar system—"

Ben dropped her hands. His expression was unreadable.

"Ben, your uncle is still alive," she said. "He's not dead."

He started to walk away from her.

"Ben!" she cried. "Come back!" She caught up to him, grabbing him by the arm. "You promised —"

"What's the point?"

"What?"

"What's the point?" he repeated numbly. "No one wants me. Why should I care what happens anymore?"

Rey felt her heart break. "Ben…"

"And I only see you when it's convenient for you. I don't know who to trust anymore."

"You've seen how I feel, Ben."

"But it could still be a lie, couldn't it?" he challenged.
"What would I gain from that?" she asked, exasperated. Why did this have to be so damned difficult? "I've given you everything you've wanted from me to earn your trust!"

"I want to be alone," he said, pulling out of her grasp and walking away again.

"Ben!"

Rey's body was dry as the memory disintegrated. She stared around, started pacing. What could she do? What would make a difference? He was so wound up in his emotions. Snoke's influence had its own chokehold on him, and it seemed like Rey was only making it worse.

*He still loves you, Luke* informed her. *That was another turning point. His thoughts were consumed with what he had done. With what he knew he would do, once you showed him.*

"I don't know how to break through," she whispered. "Does he… does he continue like he did in real life…?"

*As I have said before, this is not altering his memories. Every memory I show you cannot be changed, no matter what you do. The events are permanent.*

"Then how—?"

*Your presence is what is important here. It is making its mark. You cannot change anything, no, but you can talk to him while these things happen. You can reassure him that no matter what happens, you will be there for him.*

"How can I reassure him it'll be all right, and then—and then he does all the terrible things despite his love for me, even in the fake memories? It doesn't make any sense."

*That is the result of his mind. The unconsciousness of the human mind is completely clear, every memory perfectly embedded. What humans lack is the ability to pull them to the surface in a wholesome form.*

"And?" She wasn't sure she understood where he was going with this.
So in this form that his memories take, they are recalled from the unconscious. And the unconscious will continue to give me his memories in which they were experienced. As they are not being altered, this will continue to be the case, no matter how you are presented to his psyche. What matters is not the events of what transpires—it is how you reach him emotionally.

In other words, his mind takes your presence and files it, so to speak. He will continue to follow his real memories, even in the illusion I have woven. He will adapt. For example, after this last memory, he will go to Snoke. His mind will shape the events. But what you have said to him, how you have helped him, weighs in the back of his mind. Which is precisely where Snoke's influence also weighs.

"And that's all I can do?" She tried not to feel defeated. "Show up and tell him I still love him, no matter what he does?"

Why are you upset? This is a great achievement.

"I... I felt like I was doing something more, that's all," she sighed.

You think that his love for you should have been enough to change his actions?

"Yes..." Even though she had known it wouldn't happen that way. Luke was right. Why was she getting upset? But knowing she shouldn't be and experiencing it were two different things.

If this were reality, it would have been. Think of it this way... this is history that has already occurred. Even if time were to be split and changed, two results would present themselves—the original and the new. Time is never really truly changed, Rey. The first timeline will never go away. It only appears that way.

"I didn't think changing time was possible—"

It is not. But... at times, I grow bored, and this is how I entertain myself. Ruminating over the what ifs? At any rate... nothing can be changed... But you can be there for him... it helps more than you think...
"How?" The question was full of derision.

*With this memory, the stain on his mind was reduced dramatically.*

Rey's pulse skipped. So far, they'd only managed to just keep steadily hammering away at it, and it was slow going and frustrating. "How much?"

*You are imprinted on his mind, even if he follows the same path. Continue to be there—continue to show him you love him, even while he is in the midst of his worst-doings. Ben Solo thinks he is alone. I believe he fears your bond may be severed, or that you are somehow hiding from him deep-seated resentment.*

"But that's not true," she gasped. "He really feels that way?"

*It is not something he is consciously aware of. Which is why we should return to the task. You must prove to him he is not alone—that you are not going anywhere. I believe only then will he be able to forgive himself and move forward in this life.*

"But… Luke—I did change *some* things. Like the cake—"

*Those are tiny things. You must look at the bigger picture, such as the night he thought his uncle was attempting to murder him. Things such as those would not change.*

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

*Would it have mattered?*

She frowned. No. It wouldn't have. She'd still have had to do everything she had.

"Take me to the next pivotal memory," she said.
"And you, loyal of all my students, will become Kylo Ren—Master of the Knights of Ren," a terrifyingly familiar voice rumbled. A room Rey had never seen before materialized around her just after the statement, and so she wasn't surprised to see Snoke.

Ben lowered his head, his gloved hand over his heart. It was strange to see him like this. The black clothes, the equally black cape, the black and silver helmet. Behind him knelt six others dressed similarly, though their helmets differed enough to tell them apart.

Snoke sat on a throne. He seemed to like them. His grotesque features were pulled into an evil grin even now.

"Yes, my master," Ben said, his voice changed lower and to something not human through that mask.

"Good. Rise."

Ben obeyed with the others—tensed. He'd realized she was there. His head turned subtly toward her. Since she had his attention, she stepped close to him and took his hand. Half of her expected him to fight it. He didn't. He understandably didn't close his fingers around hers, either. It would have been seen.

With the glove in the way, the bond didn't open.

Rey observed as each of the 'knights' were given a task. She got the impression that while Ben was their leader, Snoke obviously got the final say. Then everyone was instructed to file out, and Rey jogged lightly by Ben's side to keep up with him as they went through some sort of compound. Stormtroopers jumped out of his way when they saw him coming.

A labyrinth of corridors. Rey stopped trying to keep up with them after the fifth turn.

Ben stopped in front of a door and palmed a device. It opened—he looked around twice—and then grabbed her by the shoulder and shoved her in. The door hissed closed behind him. She could tell that this must have been his bedroom, although there were so few trinkets to establish any individualism. It could have been a stormtrooper's room, if not for the fact that it clearly belonged to someone of a higher station.
Rey paused in looking about when she heard Ben's mask coming off. He held it at his hip, his eyes dark, distant.

"I thought you gave up on me."

"I would never give up on you." Hells, she hadn't given up on him even when she'd wanted to. That's what had started all of this. "Why would you say that?"

"How we parted…" Ben drew idle designs on the surface of the helmet, watching his fingers work.

"You said you needed some space." Rey sat on the bed. The mattress wasn't very accommodating, stiff and uncomfortable.

"I said I needed to be alone." Ben carefully put the helmet on a desk and then faced her. "Rey, you can't save me."

"I realized that I can't change anything," Rey said. "I know I said that last time, but… I really can't change anything. All I can do is be here for you. I want to be here for you. Will you let me?"

Ben set his jaw, though his eyes remained conflicted.

"Look, I'm not going to try and talk you out of anything. I know your past. I'm still here. I know what you've done. I've forgiven you. I just want to be near you."

"How can I know that those words are true?"

She wordlessly held out her hands.

His chest rose and fell in a deep sigh. He lowered his eyes, then began tugging off his leather gloves. They dropped unceremoniously to the floor, and he sat beside her on the bed. He showed her his palms, and she slid her fingers against them. She always enjoyed how big his hands were, how they could nearly swallow hers.
"Listen to Snoke, don't listen to Snoke… just let me be here," she pressed. "It's not a trap, and if it was, it would only be to bring you closer to me. To help you with your guilt. And… to let you know you're not alone. I'm here. I will always be here."

Ben gazed out into the room. She cupped his cheek and turned his face back toward her.

"I love you." She'd never said it so directly before.

His eyes widened slightly. "My master says there is no room on the dark side for love."

"Is anything I'm doing inhibiting you from—?"

Rey broke off. Ben was kissing her, and she put her hands on his shoulders, her palms sliding over his neck. It was with more heat than she was used to in his memories. Before she could become engrossed in it, he pulled away to kiss her forehead.

"I love you," he whispered. His eyes were closed.

Hope sprang within her heart. "I love you, too."

"No matter what?"

"No matter what." Being with Ben, becoming his other half, completing their bond… it meant knowing and accepting what he'd done.

"You should go. I am expected somewhere." He kissed over her brow. "Come back soon…?" The words were fragile, uncertain.

"Always." She put her arms around him in a tight embrace, turning her nose into his hair. She inhaled deeply.
His fingers stroked the back of her head.

She pulled back to give him one last smile, and then the memory faded away.

See? The Force knot said. *He needs to know he is not alone. That you will never desert him. You will be pleased to know the stain is retreating more and more quickly.*

That did make her pleased.

*How would you like to proceed?* Interesting that he was leaving that in her hands now. *I would do so carefully. The influence may grow more desperate now that it is being weeded out.*

"The turning points," she said. "We… we'll keep doing that." As long as she could hold onto her bond with Ben in the memories, she wasn't as scared of the influence. She knew now that their bond was capable of driving it away.

Luke didn't ask if she was ready this time. A bubble formed, and Rey waited.

*We're almost at the end,* she thought. *We can wake up soon, Ben.*
The bedroom door slid open, revealing Ben, who was decked out in his Knights of Ren attire. He paused when he saw her, but his mask was on, so she couldn't read his expression. She had only just arrived and was sitting with her back against the wall of his bed, her hands folded in her lap.

"Time has not caught up yet, I take it?" he asked.

She shrugged one shoulder. Before, seeing him like this would have sent a quiver of fear, and then anger, through her heart. With the mask on, Ben was quite imposing. It didn't help that he was so blasted tall.

Ben removed the mask before stalking across the room. He looked dark and broody. She missed the sweet boy who had lit up every time he saw her. But that was then... this was now. Snoke had stolen Ben from the world. All she could do was stay by his side unconditionally.

"I told you... we're together after."

One large, slender hand grabbed her ankle. She had a second to process it before he jerked it, and she yelped, sliding down the bed. He placed his hands on either side of her head against the mattress, nestled between her thighs. They gazed into one another's eyes for a moment.

"Have we fucked?"

Rey rolled her eyes.

"Oh, now my language insults you?"

"I just haven't heard you refer to it like that." She reached up and flicked his forehead. "It's a bit more than that."

He scowled, rubbing his sore forehead. "We've made love?" he asked scornfully.
She giggled a little. "No."

His features went blank with confusion.

"We haven't... had sex like... that. The kind you just turned your nose up at. But it's more than just 'fucking.'" Rey tried not to blush. Just because she didn't curse that hard that often, it didn't mean she had to be a prude. "We love one another. It won't ever be just sex."

Ben made a thoughtful noise. Rey had a hard time noticing—his hand was tracing over her collarbone, along the curve of her breast.

"I think I would be jealous of myself," he murmured. "And I would like to make things easier for whoever I am now, but..." He tsked. "You are just too damned beautiful." His hands glided over her thighs as he straightened his back.

She turned her face away.

"Do I really compliment you so little?"

"We've been busy." Her pulse wouldn't slow. Why was she surprised about the unfolding events? Yes, Ben hadn't done more than kiss her throughout his childhood and early adulthood... But he was an entirely different person now.

"That is not a very good excuse." Ben slid his hands over her hips. "Look at me."

Her eyes snapped to his. His lips curved into a knowing smile.

"Oh, don't get so cocky," she said.

"I just enjoy seeing you respond like that."
"Like what?"

"You like it when I give you orders."

She snorted.

"Some of the time," he amended. His fingertips toyed with her knee—slid lower, over the hard muscle of her thigh beneath her pant leg. "Take off your shirt."

"No," she refused him, just to be contrary.

"Take off your shirt." The words were soft but powerful.

Heat prickled over her skin, made her swallow. She found her fingers were gripping the end of her shirt, and she was tossing it off, over the side of the bed. She wasn't sure where it landed.

She knew she didn't need to encourage him. But he was right… sometimes, she did like it when he told her what to do.

"Don't let this go to your head," she breathed.

"It already has." He watched her from under the veil of his long lashes. He placed a hand over her stomach, his fingers spreading. "…I wait for these moments, you know. The moments when I have you."

"You do have me."

"Not the way I would like. Not by my side."

"Well, rest assured, I'm by your side. I'll be by your side forever."
"You believe in forever?" He laughed softly. "I suppose you would have to, to state that so brazenly, without a trace of irony."

"I didn't until our bond was completed." She shifted until her elbows were beneath her. "Things were different after that."

"Why? Let me guess: you can't tell me."

"We became a part of each other." They were close enough to the end, and it wouldn't change anything, anyway. Rey didn't mind elaborating for once. "I took your darkness. You took my light. We're inseparable now. But powerful, so I'd like to see anyone try to tear us apart."

"How powerful?"

It was her turn to laugh a bit. "Powerful enough."

"And that is all you will tell me?"

"For now. I think it's sufficient."

"And what if I don't?"

"I'd say you'll have to be patient, though I know that's not one of your strong suits." She made a face at him.

He huffed but only lowered his eyes. His hand trailed down her stomach. They both watched it make the trek to the waistband of her pants.

"You have stopped asking me what happened last."

"It's mostly the same to me at this point," she confessed. "I'm here to be with you, nothing more."
And on and on it went.

Watching Ben spiral away into the depths of darkness was harder to see than Rey had initially imagined. All she could do was keep a straight face, devoid of emotion on the matter. Any sign of judgment of his actions and their tenuous relationship would crumble.

Some days Ben was quiet, thoughtful, mulling over guidance from Snoke. (It took everything in Rey’s willpower to let that go.) Other days he fell into one of his many rages, and woe the person, usually a stormtrooper, who got in his way. He never brought it to Rey—would curtly dismiss her. She had no choice but to go, then.

How much time had passed in the real world…?

Ben didn't so much as touch her sexually again. On one of his better days, he told her that he wouldn't be able to handle it—wouldn't be able to handle thinking of someone else putting their hands on her, even if it was his future self, in a sense.

When she arrived in some memories, he was bitter at her presence. Luke always assured her there was no reason to worry. She was doing well. The stain was shrinking, faster and faster.

Until…

Screaming.

Crying.

Pleading.

Blaster fire.

Rey stared around at the wreckage of a small village. At first, she was confused as to where they were—often they went to planets Rey had never even heard of. Not that that meant anything. She didn't know much about the galaxy. But the sand everywhere, that was familiar… she knew it by heart.
Jakku.

Flames flickered, ate hungrily at what they could. Rey dodged out of their way, trying to spot Ben. What she saw instead were two stormtroopers carrying an unconscious Poe Dameron between them. She knew then that this was recent—that this was right before she'd escaped this wretched planet.

There! Up ahead!

"Ben!" she called.

He paused in the act of striding onto his vessel. His head tipped in her direction, over his shoulder. A ball of plasma shot across the grounds and scorched into a wall. It made Rey jump a little. Where had *that* come from?

Red and orange chased one another over the silver of his mask, reflected form the fire. The villagers continued to cry out, and Rey's boot grew wet. Confused, she looked down to find bloody sand caked over it. She traced the source to an elderly man, dead a foot from her. But on further inspection, the blood didn't seem to be coming from him—no, it was from the pile of villagers.

Without a word, Ben left her.

The memory fell apart.

"This is where BB-8 finds me," she muttered to herself. "What was after that…?"

Snoke had been trying to get Ben to kill Han. Rey saw those meetings herself—they were the ones where he told her to go. He kept reassuring himself that he could do it, that he could take the life of his father. Rey should have told him that he would, but she couldn't bring herself to. It was too painful to even think about.

Which meant—
"Luke, no!"

The interrogation chamber. Rey looked around blindly. This wasn't what she was worried about—it was the pivotal moment after this. She didn't want to do it. She didn't want to watch Han Solo die again. She wasn't sure if she could stomach it.

The Other Rey was unconscious in the chair. Ben was doing his part across from her, waiting in the shadows for her to rise. Rey stepped forward then, hesitating only a moment as she glanced at herself. Did she really appear that way...? Choobies, this was strange. How innocent she had been... Full of the hardships of life, yet keenly unaware of her destiny.

"This is where I met you," Ben said from within his helmet. "In the forest on Takodana. I was wondering when it would happen." He chuckled. "I must admit it's odd. Growing up with you... and then to see you, and you're afraid of me."

"I didn't know who you were. Only your reputation." Rey couldn't tear her eyes away from her memory-self. "You're going to interrogate me, and I'm going to hate you even more."

"I don't like it," he told her. "I've known since I was sixteen that this would happen... You showed me that day. Yet here we are, thirteen years later. I am still unprepared."

Rey didn't know what to say to that. She didn't like it, either, but what could she do?

"Tell me what I found within your mind, Rey."

"Why, so you can spare yourself the act?" she asked, genuinely curious.

He inclined his head.

She sighed. Well, there wasn't any harm in it, was there? And if she could spare her memory self a bit of pain, then so be it. It wasn't real, but that didn't matter. When faced with herself, it was as real as anything.

"The droid has it. BB-8 is his name, you see." Why was she telling him that? Because she thought
of BB-8 as a person, that was why. That little droid had more personality within himself than most of the people Rey had encountered. "But you know that. What you don't know is what you see from my dreams… the ocean, the island, what it means."

Ben was hanging on to her every word.

She shrugged at him. "That's it."

"That's it?" he asked in disbelief.

"I prove to be very good at the mind game torture for a novice." She flashed a grin. "I'll spare your dignity with what was said, but… you didn't acquire the information you wanted."

He took a somewhat menacing step toward her. His hand rose. It was trembling. He growled and turned away. She appreciated that he'd managed to grasp a hold on his temper.

There was a sudden gasp. The Other Rey was staring around, completely disoriented.

_And that's my cue_, Rey thought.

The scene dissolved.

Rey looked down at her hand. It, too, was shaking.

"Please don't make me do this," she whispered.

_It is the most pivotal moment of all, Rey_, the Force knot said.

Please… Please… Please…

She was on Starkiller Base. Luke had done her a favor—Han was already falling over the bridge.
Rey couldn't make herself watch and had to turn away just as an arrow flew in their direction. Ben yelled. A moment later, he grabbed her by the elbow and yanked her around. She clenched her eyes shut—he gripped her beneath her jaw and squeezed until she opened them with a small cry of pain.

"Another thing you didn't want to tell me?"

"Would it have mattered?" she gasped.

The ground heaved tumultuously under their feet.

He curled his lip.

Rey stood on her tiptoes, putting her arms around his shoulders, and she buried her face against his hair. He froze for several seconds. His arms came around her, holding her close to him. They didn't have much time. Starkiller Base was being destroyed even now.

But she couldn't go without doing this.

"I love you," she choked out. Tears were on her face. She had been closer this time, closer to where Han had fallen away from the world and those who loved him. It had been its own form of torture.

"Even now?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered. She kissed his ear and pulled away. "Even now. Now go!"

He didn't need to be told twice.

"Am I done?" Rey asked. "Is it over?"
Penetrating darkness.

"Luke?"

She felt her lashes flutter open. Above, palm trees swayed, and light danced through their fronds, leaving dappled spots on the ground. The ground was mostly sandy. Soft sand, no coarseness to taint it.

Her head… was being pillowed…?

Ben's face appeared over her own. The length of his facial hair was startling, not to mention his regular hair. The latter was well past his shoulders, as thick and wavy as ever.

"Ben?" she whispered. "Am I… are we awake?"

He nodded.

She broke into a grin. "That beard is terrifying. It does not look good on you."

"That's what you have to say to me?" His eyes narrowed. But then a smile touched his mouth and, shockingly, his eyes. "What happened? I woke up, and you were there beside me."

"Luke didn't tell you?"

"He said it would be best to hear it from you." Ben rolled his eyes to show what he thought of that. He sobered, his lips thinning as he pressed them together. "Rey… how long has it been?"

"I—I don't know," she replied. "How… How do you feel?"
"I…" He closed his eyes. "…I feel unburdened…"

She sat up at that and had the surprise of seeing how long her hair was. Ignoring it for now, she put her hands on his shoulders. It had worked, it had worked! "I'm really glad."

A softness she hadn't seen before entered his eyes. He wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her. "What did you do to me?"

"Are you angry?"

"No." He kissed her again. "I'm grateful."

Ben, freely admitting he was grateful for something?

"Let's get cleaned up," she said. "And then I'll tell you everything. But—but first…" She lifted her head. "Luke?"

The miniature star materialized in front of her, bobbing lightly.

"Luke, how long has it been?"

_Are you sure you are ready for this answer?_ he asked.

"Yes," Rey replied, a little loudly. As much as she had been up to the task of helping Ben with his burdens, that had been a long time to be trapped between darkness and memories. She had put off asking about the length of time, so it wouldn't distract her, but now she needed to know.

*Very well. A total of three years, four months, six days, eleven hours, eighteen minutes, and thirty-six seconds has passed, according to the galactic standard time.*

Ben and Rey were stunned into silence.
Shall we carry on with your training, then?
Haircuts & Good Feelings

Chapter Notes

Your guys' continuous support is so awesome! I love, love, love, LOVE you! The end of this chapter will continue into the next, have no worries.

"I feel as though… somehow… I've known you most of my life. But I know this is not possible."

The refresher was quiet except for snips from a pair of scissors and those softly uttered words. Rey had never cut hair before. She was getting a crash course. She only hoped she didn't butcher Ben's lovely locks too much. He might kill her for it. He was a little vain.

She grinned at the thought.

Remembering Ben was talking to her, she refocused her attention on the strands of hair in her fingers. "Well… I'll tell you the truth about what happened in your head…" Snip, snip. Snip. Damp black strands fell to the floor. "But in return you have to promise not to get angry."

"I already said I wasn't." He went to turn his head—she put her fingertips on his skull and faced it forward. "Sorry," he said casually, but a jolt had struck her heart. Ben never apologized for anything. At least, not without a huge to-do about it.

"It's all right," she replied somewhat breathlessly. She cleared her throat and shifted to another section of hair. "You said you weren't—yet."

"How could I be? I feel fine, better than fine." He turned his head. Rey tsked and grabbed his head once more, turning it back.

"Be careful, or I'll accidentally cut off a huge chunk of your hair," she scolded.

"And I don't think I would feel that way if you had done something wrong to me."
Lack of paranoia, check, Rey thought. Before The Memories, as she had taken to calling it, or BTM, Ben would never assume something hadn't been done to him. Was he in complete and total trust of Rey? Was he choosing not to hold onto the negative feelings associated with doubt, with suspicion? Likely only the former. Some part of Ben would always be paranoid.

"I don't feel as if I did anything wrong." Snip, snip, snip. "I just wasn't sure if we would both agree with that statement in the end."

"You really don't plan on telling me?" Ben shifted to look up at her. His brown eyes were curious, a warmer, lighter color beneath the direct beam of the light. His face was clean-shaven again.

"I don't plan on massacring your hair, but you're not leaving me much of a choice," Rey mused.

He took the scissors from her. "Rey."

"Okay," she sighed. He wasn't going to let this go. She shouldn't have expected otherwise. "I will tell you, but promise me you won't turn your head around unless I tell you to." She arched her eyebrows.

He smiled amicably. The sight of it arrested her heart. Would she ever get used to it, these smiles given to her so freely? After everything she'd gone through, they'd gone through, it was instinctive to memorize them. Rey didn't know if something would take them away from her, and she didn't want to find out.

Ben held up the scissors. His smile had formed a grin of its own, and then they were both laughing for no reason at all. Rey had an attack of the giggles so hard her side was aching. Ben's chuckles were more muted, but they grew louder the longer she laughed.

"What—are—we—even—laughing about?" she gasped out.

"I'm not sure. Take these scissors."

Rey did so and wondered why she was cracking up. Was it because they had been asleep and in stasis for almost three and a half years, and neither of them had any idea of what had happened in
the galaxy during their absence?

"Please don't cut my hair until your hand is steady," he laughed, and she giggled harder. "I wouldn't want to have to go bald."

A few minutes later, the giggles at last ceased. She sniffled and wiped the corners of her eyes. She returned to snipping at his hair and held up her end of the promise.

"Luke told me that you were having trouble confronting your past. He said it was because of Snoke's influence, that it had corrupted you to the point you couldn't handle it on your own." She kept her eyes down as she worked, her voice soft. "He told me he needed me to help get rid of it. He failed to mention how much time would pass until I was already inside your mind."

"And… how did you go about this exactly?" Ben's voice was carefully neutral.

Worry stayed her hand, but she made herself go on. She owed him the truth, even if she was afraid of what would come of it. He could get it from her, anyway, if he really wanted to. Their connection was back in place, their shields low, their emotions flowing freely between them. But he deserved to hear it from her.

"Um… I'm not entirely sure how it all worked out… He said a lot of things that didn't make any sense to me, but… He said we would have to work on your psyche, so he took your memories of your life and sent me into them. He said they wouldn't be altered, and I mean…" She sighed. She was butchering this.

Forcing herself to calm, she went back to the beginning and explained everything in slow, serious detail, not leaving a single thing out. She told him about how she saw him grow up through his memories, and how she'd tried to assure him she would always be there for him. How she wanted to make it to where he didn't feel so alone.

She didn't know if this was the best idea, disclosing all of it. She was essentially telling him she had manipulated his psyche so that he wouldn't feel so burdened anymore. This was why she had been afraid of his response once he had all the information at his disposal.

Ben was quiet for a time. She didn't interrupt his thoughts, not wanting to anger him. She could feel him on the other side of the bond, pensive. It honestly felt like he was sorting through his emotions, trying to decide how he should react.
He drew a knee up to himself, hooking an elbow around it, moving carefully so he didn't dislodge her hand. "I'm not upset."

"Hmm… Are you sure?"

"Yes," he said. "It's… almost shameful to think that I could not handle this on my own. But if what you say is true, I suppose I never would have been able to. And that only makes the shame worse, that I let Snoke manipulate me so thoroughly. I had no idea the damage extended so deeply."

"Right…"

He caught her hand and held it to his shoulder. "I feel like I might have been angrier before this," he chuckled softly. "But there is no need for me to get upset. We needed my half clear to balance the bond, and… you succeeded, you know," he murmured. "You are in my heart. I only wish I could have returned the favor…"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"You were so lonely like me. But you had no one," he elaborated. "I would have liked to reassure you as you did me."

The thought of that was sweet enough to make Rey tear up a little. She waited until her throat was clear to squeeze his fingers before withdrawing her own. "How short do you want your hair?"

"Like this, I think." He gestured.

A few snips into the task, Rey spoke again. "Thank you for the thought. And… I'm glad you feel like I was with you for so long… Because—that's how I feel now."

"And nothing in my memories made you doubt me at all?"

"No."
"I have done some terrible, terrible things."

"I was there for those, too."

"And you are still here."

"Hey." She leaned her head over his, looking at him upside down. "I will always be here. I wouldn't have said I'd be at your side if I wasn't going to."

"That is true," he murmured.

She kissed him and then straightened herself in the chair. "What do you think has happened since we've been asleep?" It was the first they'd broached the topic. Their immediate concerns had been to get clean. Then they'd addressed Ben's end of things, and now here they were.

"Mother's probably recruited more people to join her cause."

Rey kept her surprise to herself. Yet another item to catalogue. Ben was talking about his mother almost casually. "I agree. What about the First Order? Do you think Hux—?"

"If Hux is still their leader by now, I would be…" He shook his head. "While I know the majority of the First Order hated my existence, they despised his even more. The way he treated the senior officers, most who had been around from the Empire… Snoke only kept him around because he was easy to control and to use."

"You're saying it's entirely possible someone else is in charge?"

"Yes. And if he is still in charge, I imagine it is because he's being manipulated once again. He is as mad as his father was, or so I have heard."

"Do we know of any—well… do you know of any possible candidates?" she asked, correcting herself midway.
"The only feasible ones would be the other Knights of Ren."

"Do you think they might, since… you disappeared for three years?"

He grew thoughtful. "Two. The other four would never dare go against me." While Rey was wondering how much of that statement was ego, he explained, "They have seen firsthand what it is like to fight me, and they have lost each time."

"Right. I don't know, I think Deo Ren would be a contender, or Ami Ren."

"You know about the Knights of Ren?" he asked sharply. "You really saw so much of my past?"

"Lived it with you," Rey replied. "Once a month. For most of your life. I saw all the Knights of Ren, I know all their names. I know some of the missions they're on. Not all."

She waited while Ben processed this.

"They have to go," he said after a time. "They will be the first obstacles in our way, the most absolute threat." He was chewing on a thumbnail as he talked, some sort of nervous gesture. "Rey, why are we talking out loud? Not that I mind it."

She blinked. I… I guess I'm so used to not using this bond anymore. As she said the words, it opened the bond between them more, and a welcoming feeling touched her heart. I missed this.

He was closer than he ever could be physically this way.

It's all right. I only just realized myself.

We take them down.

Yes.
All six of them.

Yes. Does this bother you? Will it be a problem?

Rey had seen some of the things the other Knights had done. From a purely practical standpoint, Ben was right, they were the biggest threat. They were Force users, and powerful ones at that. They couldn't tend to their plans with those six running amok.

No. She lowered the scissors. All right. Go look in the mirror.

Ben got up and did exactly that. He pushed his fingers through his hair, which was still a bit damp. He played with it until it looked right to him. Rey stood back worriedly, hoping he didn't hate it. She liked it, but she wasn't the one who had to wear it.

His hair was longer than it had been before they slept. It brushed past his shoulders, heavy and thick, fluffy at the ends. He practiced pulling it up in a band. He seemed to like a style where while it was tucked back, it covered over the tops of his ears. This left the sharp cheekbones of his face visible.

He let it go, setting it to straights.

"Do you want me to cut more?" she asked.

No.

"Are you sure you like it?"

Instead of answering, Ben came to where she was, sliding his arms under her rear and lifting. She gasped, barely holding onto the scissors, her arm going over his shoulders to steady herself.

You like yours at that length?
Rey nodded. Her hair swept past her hips, which was where she had cut it. She had it in a high ponytail now. If she didn't like it, she could always cut it shorter later.

_On our to-do list… Find a way to get you a lightsaber. Finish finding our balance. And…_ Rey squeaked as Ben left the refresher and stepped into the corridor of the _Falcon._

_And?_

Ben entered the crew quarters and tossed her onto a bed.
What the Hell Would I Be Without You?

Chapter Notes

Smut happening this chapter. If you want to skip it, make sure you scroll to the last two scenes at the bottom first!

Rey’s wrists were jerked apart and slammed against the mattress on either side of her head. The invisible hands of the Force kept her in place, though she wasn’t trying to escape. Heat had just clenched her lower belly and was spreading throughout her body. Her breath came quick as she studied Ben's glittering eyes.

She could see everything he had planned for her, and she was already wet in anticipation.

Ben made quick work to the front of her pants. Not long after, he was sliding them off her hips,

EVERYONE, PLEASE READ BEFORE CONTINUING

I know it's marked as a whole for the story, but gauge in here that may offend some of you guys. Likewise for proceed, please bear this in mind. I mean this if I want any complaints when I gave fair warning!

All right, please proceed. : )
over her thighs, past her knees, and to the floor, her underwear with them. He made a sound deep in
his throat and knelt between her legs, his tongue tracing a line up her core. She bit back a small cry,
but she couldn't control her hips from arching.

He was someplace else, lips trailing fire over the inside of her thigh, which made her toes twitch
from tingles. He rose, leaning over to place his hands by her ribs. His dark hair swung forward
around his face, framing it in a veil. She wanted to reach up and touch his face. As he processed
that thought, the bands of power at her wrists tightened.

*You're not going to let me touch you?*

He kissed her to shush her, even though she hadn't spoken the words out loud.

*You are so damned beautiful.* His lips brushed behind her ear.

Rey blushed a little. Had that stuck to his psyche, the disbelief that he never complimented her
enough?

*Look at me.*

Her eyes flashed to his.

*Tell me you want me.*

He knew she did. Rey almost protested—closed her mouth and blushed harder.

*Tell me!*

"I want you," she choked out.

Ben grabbed the bottom of her shirt and ripped it off her body, over her restrained hands. His soft
palms covered her breasts, his thumb rubbing over her nipples. She gave something close to a sigh,
but when she moved into his touches, his hands fell away. Frustration filled her. She glared at him. Why was he teasing her?

*How much do you want me?*

Rey hooked her thighs over his hips and rocked her own up against him. His breath hissed out, and she could feel how hard he was, straining against his pants. The first time they had ever had sex, she'd been sensitive, so sensitive to everything. Her body had gone three years without it, and somehow the sensitivity was even worse.

Maybe it had known what it was missing.

Ben dragged his thumb over her lips, tugging lightly on the bottom one. His hand slipped around her neck and gripped delicately. He leaned even closer to her, by extension grinding against her and making her breath catch. She shivered from the tingles of heat spreading through her. She could feel it, and she wanted it, she wanted it inside of her.

He pressed his lips against the corner of her mouth. His hand slid lower, over to the right, cupping a breast again. He teased and tugged at her nipple, harder and harder, until the line of pain finally flared up. He kept her on the edge of pain and pleasure after that, watching her face as he pinched her nipple tight. He could feel everything inside of her mind and he still wanted to see her expressions.

*Let me touch you!*

No. Ben replaced his fingers with his mouth. She made a whimper-y noise as he suckled on her nipple. He didn't linger—he moved on, his lips just barely skimming her skin on the way down to her belly button. He bit at the faint rise of her tummy there. He rolled his eyes up to see her as he continued his quest to her core and barely mouthed at her. His tongue flicked against her clit.

She bucked, and his hands fastened around her hips and held her in place. She groaned in frustration and tilted her head back. Why? Why was he torturing her?

And then his tongue was sliding firmly between her folds. She gasped as he suckled at her clit, moaned when his tongue pushed at her entrance, dipping in for a brief taste. Wet kisses against her thigh.
He stood and opened his pants so they could fall around his ankles. He ran his fingers through his hair, and her mouth went dry. Like this, she could see the perfection of his body. Long torso and limbs, but she wanted to lick over the ridges of his abdomen.

She pushed upright as best she could with her hands bound. She slipped onto her stomach, her elbows beneath her, and dragged her tongue over the head of his cock. She had the satisfaction of hearing his soft groan of surprise, and then his fingers seized in her hair.

Ben paused in the act of tugging her head forward. His eyes met hers uncertainly.

Do it.

His eyes filled with the heat of renewed confidence. He wasted little time in yanking her close, shoving his cock into her mouth without a care for her comfort. Rey wasn't sure why she liked the rough treatment. She just did. Her arousal was fanning ever higher, and abruptly the bands at her wrists fell away. This left her free to wrap her palms around Ben's sharp hipbones, which was exactly what he had intended by releasing her.

Rey heard herself choke. But his cock was over her tongue, and there was something so intensely erotic about having him in her throat. It didn't make much sense, but maybe it didn't have to. Maybe it was okay to like something without a reason.

You like it because you see it as a small sign of ownership. But you own me just as much.

She couldn't refute this. He saw everything in her mind.

Her throat was quickly growing bruised, and the choking had her eyes streaming. He fistfed her hair and pulled her head away, and she sucked in a huge gulp of air. His thumb traced over her lower lip again, where it was swollen and hot. She closed her eyes. Her body was on fire, it was aching.

Ben grabbed her and easily twisted her onto her stomach, like she weighed nothing at all. She felt his cock rub over her wet folds, and her breath hissed in. One hand gripped her hip as the other
wrapped around his erection, guiding it to her entrance. He dipped an inch inside, thrusting shallowly.

_Ben, I swear—!_

_Take it, then. Show me how much you want it._

This aroused, there was no room to be embarrassed. Growling, she knocked herself back, not stopping until he was buried to the hilt. Her eyes rolled back, and her hands clenched the sheets. She hadn't been filled this way in so long, too long. Her cunt was stretched wide open, and he was in so deep.

Ben cursed. _So damned tight._ His arousal was hot enough to nearly bring her under for a moment. It was a heavy blanket over their bond. She squeezed herself around him, and that flame forged higher. It was indescribable to feel things like this, to know what it was like to be inside of herself because there was nothing hidden between them. And he knew her, was flooded with the sensations pouring in from her end.

He almost came undone right then and there.

_Too much?_

_Not enough. Never enough._

His arm hooked under her breasts and tugged her up against him. He pulled her hair away from her ear and nibbled on the lobe, beginning to rock slowly inside of her. A frisson of anticipation tightened her nipples, made her groan quietly. She tilted her ear into his teeth, found his hand, laced their fingers.

Everything was so heightened from the bond. All he had to do was use his free hand to rub into her clit, and she gasped sharply, orgasm dragging her under. He moaned, burying his face in her neck as she clenched around him with sudden wet heat.

_Fuck._ Ben glided his lips over the line of her shoulder. _I am not going to last long._
We have all night.

He nipped her neck. *It's your fault.*

*Oh?*

Ben hummed, working his hips harder, his thrusts going deeper. Rey tilted her head back on his shoulder, her eyes sliding closed. It was too good. Maybe after this they would have to put a partial barrier up so they wouldn't go insane from both accounts of pleasure.

She slid her fingers into his hair and turned his face to her. He kissed her, and she melted beneath his lips, her tongue tangling with his. The truth was that whenever he kissed her, she completely lost herself. She could admit that now.

Orgasm claimed her again, starting a chain. They rolled through her, had her writhing against him. He had to grip tight onto her hips to keep her still enough to move. He sped his pace up, his knees knocking her thighs wider, nearly bouncing her on him. She could tell he was close, and cries poured from her at the friction.

He pulled out, giving a few quick jerks of his wrist on his cock. He angled down, burying his face in the back of her neck as he panted. She listened to them breathing, her own chest rising and falling hard. She could feel his heart pounding at his chest near her shoulder blade.

*I missed that. I missed you.*

*I am here.*

She twisted around, enough to cup his face and bring their lips together.

Yes, she thought. *You are.*
A child's laughter.

Rey echoed the laugh, running after a little girl. She shrieked as Rey caught up with her and lifted her into the air. Rey held her high and nuzzled their noses together. The girl put her small hands on Rey's cheeks and patted them.

*Mama.*

The world cut away. It was just as fragile as before, blurry, muffled, never quite in focus. Snatches of color here and there, nothing more. Grainy at the corners.

*Here, little one...* Rey picked the girl up from her crib. The child was bawling, and it was the middle of the night. *Did you have a bad dream?* Her fingers soothed through black curls. *It's all right. Mommy loves you. Daddy loves you, too. Isn't that right?*

*Give her to me.* The child was pulled from Rey's arms. Ben kissed her forehead and held her close, his palm rubbing over her small back. Immediately she began to calm with sad little sniffles. *There we go.*

He looked up and smiled at Rey.

Rey stared at the ceiling of the *Falcon.* She could almost taste her pulse.

Maybe Ben hadn't seen it. Or if he had, he wouldn't remember in the morning.

Ben sat up, clearly awake, and pushed his legs over the side of the bed. He grabbed his pants. There was a rustle of fabric as he put them on. He walked out without a word, never once glancing in her direction.
She swallowed.

*Ben?*

There was no answer.

*Ben?* she asked again, telling herself not to panic.

*I need to think.*

The bond closed to the point where she would have to fight to keep it open. She was left alone in the dark, contemplating the vision.

"Ben," she whispered.
This chapter is shorter. I wanted to add more, but everything I've got planned just didn't fit, so I had to leave it as it is. Hopefully this chapter will soothe some of you. : )

The air was actually a bit chilly as Rey made her way off the Falcon. She shivered and rubbed an arm, looking for where Ben could have gone off to. It had been, by her estimate, a few hours. They had gone to bed when it was pitch black outside, and now pink was touching the horizon.

She'd debated on whether or not she should just wait him out. But they had never hidden anything from each other before, and she couldn't bear the idea of doing so now. It was a vision, nothing more. They could change in a heartbeat. Luke had told her that on Ahch-To, and she knew Ben must know the same. He must.

Where could he be?

The connection was still shut tight. In Rey's mind, it felt similar to a brick wall. She could climb it, if she wanted. She could plow through with a show of force. But she thought about if a time ever came where she needed privacy, how upset she would be if she was denied it. Best to figure it out on her own, then.

Intuition was niggling, so she followed its call to the beach. Ben wasn't in sight. For a moment, she was arrested by the sight of the colors on the choppy waves. It was so beautiful. Peaceful, too. She hadn't had a chance to relax in the sand, or even to watch the sun rise. But now was not the time. Shaking herself out of her reverie, she hunted onward.

Footprints! They were high enough up that the tide hadn't eaten away at them like it had the others. Legs built with long practice of scaling dunes, she easily hopped through the sand in pursuit. It looked like they were trailing away into the jungle. She would probably lose him here. She wasn't really that great at tracking.

But she could track him with the Force, she realized, even if she didn't open the connection.

Satisfied with this revelation, she closed her eyes and knelt in the sand, fingers digging into it.
Once upon a time, it had taken ages to concentrate, to find the energy of the Force. Now it was like breathing, and the flow of lifeforms lit up inside of her. Their bond fueled her power, and like on the Nameless Planet, it reached far and wide.

The signature of what could unmistakably be Ben glowed brightly about a mile away.

*Found you,* she thought.

She went deep into the jungle and tried to keep quiet as she ventured. There wasn't anything particularly vicious here, no, but she didn't want to draw unwanted attention. Besides, she looked at it like a game, a way to improve her stealth skills.

A roaring met her ears. She tensed, crouching, hands splayed to either side of her. After a moment, she was able to identify the sound as a waterfall. Relaxing somewhat, she resumed her quest and soon came across it. Mist pressed cool kisses to her skin.

Nothing here indicated where Ben could be.

Then she saw it—past the waterfall, just behind it, in fact, some boulders marking a subtle path. A hidden cave?

Rey was limber and used to slippery surfaces. It was second nature to climb onto the wet boulders and make her way, careful step by step, into the waterfall. The water thinned at the side, and she slipped under it and into the cave. Her clothes and hair were damp now.

She walked until the roar of the falls faded and there was only the steady trickle of water. Darkness pressed in on her, made her wish she'd thought to find something to light. But it wasn't too hard to navigate the passage with the Force to guide her.

"Ben…?" she called, her voice catching.

There was no answer, and the darkness seemed to deepen.

Choobies.
Maybe she should go back…

But the Force was so strong here—he had to be nearby—

A hand wrapped around her ankle.

She shrieked and flailed as she was dragged down onto a lap. Her instincts warred. Half of her wanted to attack her assailant, the other half knew it was Ben and was trying to calm down. Her heart pounded, her pulse in her throat.

*Don't do that!* Then she remembered he’d shut down the bond. "Don't—"

He kissed her.

The connection opened, and the touch of his thoughts against hers made her relax.

*I am sorry.*

The apology caught her off guard. She pulled back to look at him and remembered belatedly it was too dark to see. She felt along him until she could cup his cheek and stroke over his cheekbone with her thumb. He leaned into her touch. She heard him exhale.

*It's all right,* she assured him.

*I was caught… entirely off guard. We have never discussed children, and you should probably know that I never intended to have any. I never—my father—*

*It's all right,* she said again.

Is it, Rey? He caught her hand in his. *I do not want to be a father.*
It was just a vision, Ben. It's not… it's not set in stone.

Frustration shot through the connection.

What? What is it?

It is not you. He exhaled hard. She heard his head thunk against the cave wall. What if that never changes?

Then it never changes.

You would do that for me? You would forgo having children?

I never planned on being a mother, I guess… It wasn't something I thought about. Not until now. But is that really what you want?

I have been trying to answer that question. I still haven't come up with an answer.

Rey debated on speaking her thoughts. She kept them carefully thin, so he wouldn't be able to piece them together. But she grew restless enough that she had to speak them. Ben, you're not your father.

I know that.

Do you, Ben? she echoed in a mimicry of his earlier statement.

Believe me, it is something I have sworn not to be since I was a child.

I was there. I saw. But I also saw a child who ached to belong with his family. Either way, you can learn from his mistakes, you—
I do not want to talk about this anymore.

Ben…

I really don’t.

She pressed her lips together around a sigh. I don't want to leave it this way.

What other way is there to leave it?

I’m—I’m not ready for children. Not for a while. But the vision, it seemed… like a long time away. You were older. We…

Rey. A warning.

Ben! she snapped first. Their connection felt like they were mentally butting heads in a very real way. Don't shut me out. Don't do this.

I am not shutting you out. I have simply exhausted the subject.

Ooooh, he could be so stubborn—

Are you open to… talking about this again, later down the road?

He was silent for a while. She could feel him genuinely mulling over his answer.

Later down the road. Much later.
Okay, she agreed. Do you want to get out of here? Someplace… dry and warm? How did you find this place, anyway?

The first day of our 'training,' I was exploring the jungle. I had not been able to return to it since.

I like it. She stretched out her legs, as they were going cramped. Ben… you know… you don't have to hide anything from me, don't you?

Yes. He let out another breath. Reluctantly, his thoughts spilled forth. I was—afraid to let you see what was in my head. I didn't want to upset you. I… did not want you to think I loved you any less… There was pain in the words. He hated being so vulnerable.

I would never think that. Her hand patted the wall until she got a good enough grip to climb to her feet without issue. Never.

"Okay," he whispered.

She smiled, even though he couldn't see it. Let's go?

Yes.
Montage

Chapter Notes

Heeeeere we are, guys! <3 xoxoxo.

Training.

Or pure, physical torture if Rey had a say about it.

From sunup to sundown, with only a small break in between for food to keep up their energy, they worked themselves to the bone. Luke had them start off with sprints in the sand. At first, it had seemed obvious what to do. Stretch and run for exercise.

No.

With longer legs, Ben was often several feet ahead of her. He wasn't as used to the sand as she was, but he made it up for it with that long stride. That was when Luke began to harangue him about how he needed to learn to be on Rey's level, at Rey's pace. Why? Because this was the goal: to move together seamlessly. It didn't matter what they were doing. They needed to be of one mind when it came to fighting.

It was only when they could jog beside one another without effort that they moved on to the next area. They found fallen limbs from some of the sturdier trees in the jungle and fashioned mock weapons out of them. Rey wanted to pretend it was her quarterstaff, and Ben wasn't opposed to it. They practiced on top of a fallen tree over a chasm, the river churning past below.

It turned out Ben wasn't as spry as Rey. The only reason he kept his footing on the log was entirely due to the Force. Did this aggravate him? A little. But Rey had stopped laughing at him two days in, which was about when the seriousness of the situation sank in. They really did need to learn together. And besides that, she had to concentrate, too, half relying on the Force herself.

Standing on a log was tricky, never mind sparring.
Sometimes they were worked up enough after practice to take it out in the bedroom. Other times, they were just too tired.

Rey was sore. Her legs were sore, her thighs screaming from the sprints. Her arms were sore from the jolts of Ben's mock quarterstaff knocking into her own. Sore, sore, sore.

As time passed, the sprints barely winded her. When she ran at Ben on the tree, she moved perfectly in sync with him. Thrust, parry, thrust, parry, parry, thrust, the two resembling a mirror and its reflection. The blisters on her hands had hardened into calluses. And when she fell asleep at night, every muscle in her body wasn't screaming in pain.

Some days, Luke forced them to meditate. He wanted them to find each other faster, to be able to tap into the other in a heartbeat. This still took hours, and Ben grew sullen every time he took the longest. But at least they were making progress, Rey thought.

The days began to blend together. The only thing that changed in their environment was that it grew slightly colder. Not cold enough to need heavier clothes, never detracting from the loss of how much time was passing.

And then one day, Luke told her he had a surprise.

Almost there.

Rey exchanged a glance with Ben. They had been walking for a while, but now the scenery was… different. Considering how long they'd trained over every part of the island, this was disconcerting.

I hid this area from you, Luke explained. You were not yet ready to face what was inside.

"Okay…" Rey said slowly. Luke generally didn't keep things from her, and she didn't like the idea that he had woven an illusion without her knowing.
I apologize, Rey. I did not do this out of ill intent. I should have asked your permission first.

"It's all right," Rey said. If he was punishing himself over it, what was the point in being angry? Best to let it go. "You said we're almost there?"

Yes. It is just ahead. The miniature star zoomed forward without waiting for them.

This part of the jungle was denser. The tree branches were closed tightly overhead, and the chatter of wildlife died down to the occasional call of a bird. Sweat touched the small of Rey's back as mugginess set in. It felt stale here almost. She didn't like it. Even the jungle on Solaris wasn't quite this creepy.

A low hissing drew her attention to a large snake wound over the bough of a tree. It had enough coils to wrap around both Ben and Rey. It stared them down but didn't move. The pattern on its hide was loud with color.

I don't like this, Rey thought. She remembered the cave on Ahch-To. Do you think this is where the darkness on this island is?

Not every planet has an obviously clear line between light and dark. I've learned to... acclimate to dark patches of the Force, and this does not feel like one. It's dangerous, but it will not trick you like the cave.

Why would Luke be leading them someplace like this?

You are safe, Rey. I would not let anything harm you, Luke promised. You are my friend.

Ben and Rey exchanged another glance. He scowled. She shrugged.

And what should appear, but a cave sitting high on a slab of rock. It was steep on all sides, mostly unclimbable, and looked like it continued that way for some time. So how did anything get up there? Probably through flight or another entrance elsewhere in the jungle.

In this cave, there are scales of a powerful creature you could use to build a lightsaber, Rey, Luke
said. He appeared by her shoulder.

Despite herself, excitement lit within her heart. "How powerful?"

_Her kind is rare on this planet. See how most of the jungle is quiet here? They are afraid to get too close._

"I don't have a weapon," Rey said. She could have smacked herself. "Using the Force should be fine." Ben was smirking, and she narrowed her eyes at him.

_You can get to the cave this way. If you will follow me again?_

Rey's heart drummed up a beat. She told herself she wasn't nervous. She'd handled all sorts of threats, after all. And with the Force, she could most likely soothe whatever it was into compliance. By herself, maybe not, but surely with their bond?

Luke guided her quite a ways north of the cave. Eventually, the rockface sloped down, enough for someone to climb it. Rey took a breath, backing up. Then she shot off, leaping, getting a good foothold. Her hands gripped a large tree root poking out of the rocks to hold onto. It was sturdy enough that she was able to use it to climb the rest of the way up.

She dusted off her pants once she was on solid ground again, panting softly. The path was straightforward back the way they had come, up to the cave. Ben was where they had left him, and she waved.

_Do you want me to help you?_

_No, she said. I think I've got this._

_You think?_

She didn't reply.
Luke came with her inside the cave. With the way he was bobbing ahead of her, it was very much like a wobbly light. Rey tried to keep herself calm, collected. She would need to be both things if she had any hope to overcome this creature. Whatever it was. Choobies, she couldn't pretend she wasn't nervous anymore!

The tunnel opened into a small cavern. A beautiful creature was watching her, its eyes a deep purple. Its body was white and feathery, except at the tips of its two wings, where it looked like a light crust of rock coated them. Its tail was covered in the sparkling, crusty substance, too, and the tips of its furry ears. It had four legs, and all were tucked under it. Its face had that feline quality she associated with the giant cat in the tunnels on Solaris.

The creature got to her feet. Her wings spread open, and they were big.

_Those are scales_, she realized.

It took a menacing step toward her. Rey grabbed at the Force and began to thread it through the creature, using her own strength coupled with Ben's.

There was just one problem.

_It is resistant to the Force_, Luke said. _This planet is a vergence. It is too familiar with the Force to be swayed by mind tricks._

Rey kept her temper in control, barely. With the creature advancing on her, immune to the touch of the Force, she was absolutely... going to be... screwed...

"Luke, why did you bring me here, then?!" she half-yelled.

_Well, if you—_

The creature pounced, and Rey dodged out of the way. It kept going, and something inside of Rey really panicked. She was already taking off behind it, and just as they cleared the opening to the cave, she lunged onto its back. It was a move that she would later regret.
Later being two seconds after launching into the air.

Rey held back a shriek, her hands full of feathers at the thing's shoulders. It roared angrily and
began to shake itself, as if trying to dislodge an annoying fly. This consisted of rolling barrels
through the air with Rey screaming and clinging it.

Thing, as she called it, twisted all around. It zig-zagged. It divebombed. It rocketed into the
atmosphere. Rey was hyperaware of the crash of ocean waves below. She really was screwed. If
she lost her grip here, she'd slam into the water and never be seen again. If it was over land, well,
she'd be broken into pieces, anyway.

Rey tried anew to tempt Thing with the Force. She thought desperately of any calmness she had

Thing raged on.

_Pleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleaseplease!_

They were spiraling toward land. The beach flashed past, their shadows growing on the treetops
below. Rey tried not to look. She didn't want to watch as she splattered to her doom. The powerful
wings beating beneath her thighs grew still, holding air.

The cave, in the opening through the trees!

Rey knew it was her last chance. She grabbed onto a crusty spot and yanked, and with it came a
scale she crushed against her palm. Thing didn't even notice. It landed, reared backwards, and Rey
began to fall with a shout. The Force gripped her, and she was in Ben's arms. Thing vanished into
the cave with a last irritable roar.

Ben set Rey on her feet, and she opened her palm proudly. "Look! I got one!" she panted.

His expression was blank.

Why?
He held out his hand, and there glittered what had to be twenty scales.

"How—?!

"They were all over the cave."

"But—Luke, he said—"

_I was attempting to tell you that you had nothing to fear from her. Her species is powerful, yes, but also very shy and unlikely to attack unless extremely provoked._

Rey stared at the glowing ball. "Then why didn't you stop me from following it?"

_Because it was entertaining._

She looked from Luke to Ben. Ben's lips were twitching.

Rey was soaked in sweat, her hair was standing up on end, and she'd torn some of her clothes in the tumbles through the air. She had taken on the beast to get a scale, nearly risked her life to do so, and they were telling her it had all been for nothing? That she could have just herded it off and taken a scale once it was gone, as Ben had done?

Furious, she stomped off.

Ben's laughter echoed behind her.

The sound was sweet, but she wasn't going to let it cool her anger.

Hmph!
Two Out of Three

Chapter Notes

Our time on the island is almost at an end. : )

"No, that one."

This?

"No—that one."

This?

"No—that one."

T-This?

"You can read my mind; how do you not know what I'm pointing to?!" Rey burst out.

Luke drooped dejectedly. His shine even seemed to dull a bit. *You are not picturing the object in your mind. I can only read clear thoughts, Rey.*

She swallowed her frustration and envisioned more calmly what she wanted. At this point, she could have gotten it by herself twice over, but she was comfortable where she was and didn't want to move.

She held her hand out as Luke sent the piece of metal over to her with the Force.

"Thank you," she made herself say.
Whenever she got engrossed in building or repairing something, she forgot to control her voice—she forgot everything except the task at hand. Luke didn't know that. She needed to try to be nicer. She wasn't intentionally being mean, at least.

Rey was seated on the floor with her legs crossed and scrap metal all around her. Luke was helping her build her lightsaber, pulling knowledge from Ben's mind. He hadn't hesitated to state, "But here are some adjustments. Ben Solo's was hastily made." He wasn't wrong. Ben's kyber crystal was cracked, and that was why it jetted out in a cross as it did and subsequently needed vents on either side of the weapon.

Finding the scrap metal on the \textit{Falcon} had been a pain. Chewie and Han had left everything in complete disarray. Eventually she'd rooted out a bin of scrap metal, lodged behind a stack of metal crates, containing who knew what. Some of the scrap still had wires attached to them, like they'd been given up as a bad job. The good news was that there had been enough metal for Ben, too.

Ben hadn't spoken at all about his decision to craft a new lightsaber. Not out loud. His thoughts were solemn—he didn't want to be burdened by the past, and that meant his lightsaber was a casualty of war. He'd quietly taken his share of the metal and disappeared into the jungle. Rey was in the main hold of the \textit{Falcon} with Luke.

It was their second day into the project. Ben had come in late in the day the evening before, kissed her goodnight, and went to sleep. At dawn, he was gone again. Rey didn't think he was being secretive. He just needed some time alone. Since she knew it wasn't about her, she felt easier giving him that space.

\textit{Rey, you should eat. You have been at this for hours.}

"I know," she replied.

But once she'd started a task, it was very difficult to give it up until it was completed. Only then would she be satisfied.

Besides, she was almost done.

\textit{Ben Solo finished his several hours ago}, Luke said thoughtfully.
"He did?" This piece went there, and then this piece went there… "And he's still in the jungle?"

*He is practicing with the new weapon.*

Rey grunted in acknowledgement, her tongue between her teeth.

*He has had the other one for so long, he is having to adjust for—*

"Yes!" she whooped.

*Ah. You are finished.* Luke bobbled around in what Rey could only assume was cheer. *Now ignite it.*

Rey scrambled to her feet and held out her lightsaber. It ignited perfectly. She grinned at Luke, and then sent her thoughts to Ben. *I want to spar. Luke said yours is done, too.*

*Meet me at the log,* he said without hesitation.

Ben held his lightsaber at his side. A brilliant white beam emitted from it, sparkling almost. His eyes were locked onto her own weapon.

*A quarterstaff?*

Rey lifted her lightsaber. Plasma shot out from both ends. It was the length of the quarterstaff Luke Skywalker had sliced in half.

*You have not practiced with it—you could slice off a limb—*
She gripped the saber in the middle with both hands. A moment later, the pieces parted, and she was graced with two smaller sabers, each the same color as Ben's.

Ben's brows crawled up his forehead. Abruptly they lowered, and a smirk touched the corner of his mouth.

*Don't hurt yourself.*

These were, of course, fighting words.

Rey shot forward, and Ben parried. The clash of the sabers sang within Rey. When channeling the Force, there was very much less danger of cutting off one's limb. They'd been practicing together for so long, weeks and weeks, that it was almost like a dance. The only difference now was the fact that their weapons had very real consequences.

They leapt and darted over the log. Plasma sizzled every time their sabers collided. Though Rey had two lightsabers, Ben was somehow overwhelming her. He had the advantage of brute strength behind every blow. She was being backed up, toward her side of the river, and he was unrelenting.

*The purpose is to move in unison,* Luke reminded them.

Rey barely heard him. This wasn't a regular practice. This was seeing how far along they were, who was the strongest, the fastest. Rey could have dived into Ben's mind and anticipated any move he was going to make, and he could have done the same to her. But this wasn't about that. She wanted to win on her own.

*Two out of three?*

*You're on.*

Rey snapped her lightsabers together and spun the resulting staff. It sheered the log off, and Ben lost his footing. He struggled only a moment—he used the Force to jump, to backflip over to his side of the river. Rey had done much the same. The log crashed into the river, the larger piece jamming between the banks.
Ben gave her an annoyed look. She grinned. It faded as concentration took over, and she used the Force to propel herself across the river. The second she landed, she was dueling with Ben again. She kept the sabers together, fighting with the quarterstaff. Ben had said it was more dangerous, but she'd been handling staffs since she was twelve, when she'd found a place of her own in the desert to get away from Unkar Plutt. The two ends were plasma, and that didn't matter. She could fight with a staff in her sleep. She'd long learned how not to hit herself with one.

They tarried through the jungle. The terrain was bigger, and they were able to go all out. Ben certainly didn't hold back. Rey knew how he moved from months of training. With just their practices alone, she was able to parry every attack almost before it happened. Ben didn't bother hiding his thoughts. He knew she wasn't dipping into him, that she knew his body language. It was giving him the same advantage.

Ben's lightsaber went for her head. Her sabers parted, and she used both to block his, twisted uncomfortably back, almost losing her footing. Sweat poured down her face and neck, the heat of the plasma not helping at all. It was difficult to push back from this angle. He pressed forward with all his weight, and her knees buckled. His boot connected with her shoulder—just enough to tip her over—and he twirled his saber. It came to a rest just before her throat.

One.

Rey glared, pissed she'd lost the first round. She hadn't wanted to rely entirely on the Force, but now that had changed. She called to it just as she had on Starkiller Base, the last time they'd fought with sabers. Ben's saber fell away to signal the end of the round. She got to her feet, her breathing deepening away from the pants that hounded her lungs. She closed her eyes, becoming one with the Force, with her surroundings. It was even more powerful here, as a vergence.

Her eyes snapped open.

Rey pursued this time. Ben's lightsaber flashed up and down, left and right, fending off her quarterstaff. Rey came at him with everything she had, slamming her sabers into his over and over. He deflected each attack easily. In fact, he didn't seem to be perturbed at all, his expression smug. This bastard. He thought he was going to win.

How did he think he'd gotten that scar?

His thoughts brushed up against Rey's. Rey could see in his mind that he was calmer than he had
been then, that he was more confident in how he knew her body. She took that to mean she needed to change it up… so she did.

Rey took off running in the opposite direction. While she did so, she shut down the bond as much as she was able.

Ben's boots pounded on the earth. She'd gotten a head start with the element of surprise. Now she was going to have to keep the lead. She was spritely, but those long legs of his…

She jumped, and then she was up in a tree. She pressed herself against the trunk, using the Force to restore her breathing to normal. Her pulse fluttered and then slowed. She was able to keep quiet as Ben caught up with her below. He came to a halt a few feet away, looking around. He knew she was in the area. He just didn't know where.

"Rey!" he shouted. "I will find you! Come out now!"

Fat chance, she thought.

Ben growled under his breath. Rey waited until she was sure he was resuming his chase and fell from the tree onto his back, slamming him into the ground. She kept her boot between his shoulder blades and separated her sabers, pointing them at the back of his head.

"One," she said.

He spat out dirt. "Who climbs trees?"

"Me," she said. "Final round?"

His hand went for her ankle as it had in the cave behind the waterfall. Rey shrieked as he tugged, and she toppled sideways. She disengaged the sabers to avoid injuring herself. She stumbled back against the tree she'd come from. An all too frequent thunderstorm roared familiarly overhead, and rain fell in heavy buckets. The drops sizzled off Ben's lightsaber. Rey ignited her own.

Their sabers dropped to the ground as they lunged at each other. Ben had her in his arms, where
were tucked under her rear. Rey put her fingers in his hair, her lips parting under his. His hands reached for the clasps in her clothes. He got a hand around her breast and squeezed, his lips leaving hers to journey to her neck.

It was as Rey was closing her eyes to the rain that she saw it.

A vessel, through an opening in the trees.

_Ben!_ she thought, the connection wide open once more.

He looked up, following the source of her panic. The vessel was growing more and more clear as it came closer.

Clear enough to see that it was from the First Order.
The Bad Guy

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. Been dealing with trying to get this job, so many interviews, ugh.

Running.

Heavy breathing.

The crash of feet through underbrush.

Unrelenting rain and jagged streaks of lightning.

An enormous peal of thunder.

Rey didn't know how or why a First Order ship was here. It had no rhyme or reason. They were on the far edges of the Uncharted Territories. It had been nearly four years since they had disappeared off the face of the galaxy. And now, out of nowhere, their enemy had found them? It defied believability.

_Probes_, Ben said.

All the way out here? After this long?

He didn't answer.

That didn't bode well.
She was just grateful the storm was covering up any noise they made.

Unfortunately, they'd been across the island, and the vessel had landed near the *Falcon*. That was miles of land to cover in a very short amount of time. Even with the Force, Rey's lungs were burning. She was making it so far, so fast on pure adrenaline. They couldn't afford to waste time. Every second the First Order was here was an increasing threat. Why? Because they had nothing to protect the *Falcon*, and it was their only way off this planet.

Rey wasn't worried about their own well-being. They could more than handle whatever the Order threw at them. The problem was that she absolutely did not trust the Order to leave their ship well enough alone. She kept expecting to see some sort of explosion in the distance, signaling the end of Han's legacy. Then again, as much as it would pain her to depart with said legacy, they could probably take the Order's vessel.

*Rey—it will be all right. Calm down.*

*Calm down?!* she tossed back at him. *If you weren't worried, you wouldn't be running as fast as me!*

*I simply meant that clogging your mind with possible outcomes will only slow you down mentally. Focus. We will handle whatever comes once we arrive.*

Rey supposed he wasn't wrong. Knowing the paths she could take would prepare her better, but her thoughts weren't spiraling toward that. They were pure panic.

*You're right. I'm sorry.*

The situation was so dire that any shred of smugness didn't radiate from his end of the line at all—and Ben *loved* being right. He relished in each victory, no matter how small.

Way too much time later, they arrived at the bluff that overlooked the beach where the *Falcon* roosted. Rey and Ben flattened themselves to the ground and looked at what they were up against. Stormtroopers, dressed in gray, red, and black, were gathered around the ship. Their had their blasters out, clearly guarding the area. Further down was the vessel they had come in on—a small ship that had likely come from a much larger vessel in space.
These things were ominous, but not so much as the figure in black with a chrome mask, speaking with one of the troopers. He was gesticulating at the storm, the *Falcon*, and then the vessel.

A Knight of Ren.

Lightning flared dramatically with a cracking *boom!* of thunder fast on its heels.

*That's Deo, isn't it?* Rey asked.

Ben nodded, his eyes intent on the scene.

Rey's sense of victory felt hollow. She'd known Deo would present a threat. She just hadn't expected to run into the bastard so soon.

*What's with the stormtroopers? What do those colors mean?*

*I have no idea. I'm assuming they are his guard.*

*Knights of Ren get a guard?*

*Not before.*

This was growing more and more interesting.

*All right. So what's the plan?*

The sea was churning tumultuously. Waves were growing in height as they collided with the beach. Some of the stormtroopers shifted nervously, turning so their backs were facing the jungle. Idiots, she thought. Though she might have been uneasy, too, were she standing where they were. Water was the last thing she was familiar with.
Are you ready?

It was a question they asked one another a lot.

More than ready.

Okay. Here is what we will do…

Rey strolled onto the beach near their pursuers. The stormtroopers jumped nearly out of their skin, and then ordered her to halt, their blasters raised. Rey ignored them, keeping her hands behind her back and her eyes fixed on the Knight. He'd turned at the commotion. Now his mask left him impassive. Rey had no idea what he was thinking.

Deo Ren held a hand up. His men lowered their weapons, but only halfway.

She came to a stop a few yards from him. It was difficult to make out anything with the raging storm, yet she had no doubt he would hear what she said perfectly fine. She could feel his eyes on her, intent behind the mask.

"Hello, Deo," she said, setting the tone for the rest of the conversation.

He was clearly caught off guard. He looked taken aback, and a moment later, he tensed. Rey had the sense that he was attempting to read her thoughts. She laughed inwardly. The odds of that happening were akin to Ben's personality taking a complete 180: very unlikely and high in the realm of impossibilities. Their connection forged a wall that was incredibly difficult to break. They'd spent months working to make this so.

"Curious," he said through his mask, the modulator making his voice deep and empty. "Who are you?"

"Someone," she replied.
"Are you going to be difficult?" He tilted his head.

"Are you?" she countered.

She could feel his smile, even if she couldn't see it. He closed the distance between them, leaving the boarding ramp. Rey hadn't closed it earlier when she'd rushed to duel with Ben. Now she was regretting that decision. But how could she have expected company?

Luke, who had been quiet this entire time, suddenly spoke up. *Rey, do you need my help?*

*No,* she replied.

"What brings you out here?" Rey queried. "This is a quiet corner of the galaxy."

"Oh, I suspect you know why I'm here," he said. "Where is Kylo Ren?"

She kept her expression blank. Unlike him, she didn't have a mask to hide behind. "Who is Kylo Ren?"

"Nice try," he scoffed. He pointed behind him to the *Falcon.* "This is his ship."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken," she replied. "That's my ship."

"Then how did you know who I was?" he sneered.

"Lucky guess?" Within her mind's eye, she could see Ben systematically taking out the stormtroopers. While Deo was distracted, and in the confusion of the storm, Ben slipped up the boarding ramp and out of sight.

"Who are you, girl? I won't ask again."
"Rey," she said. "You know, it's really rude to talk to people with a helmet on like that. I might be persuaded to tell you more if you took it off, so I can see your face."

"Why? You already know who I am, after all," Deo drawled.

"Perhaps I like the way you look." Rey was not skilled in the art of flirtation. That didn't mean she couldn't try. She did so now, lowering her lashes, tilting her head to one side as he had done. She likely looked absolutely ridiculous.

Maybe he didn't think so, because a moment later, he was removing his helmet, the helmet Rey had identified him with.

Rey assessed what she already knew. A muscular man around the height of Poe. That was where the resemblance ended. Deo's hair was strawberry blond, his eyes a burning blue. Handsome in the traditional way. There was nothing special about his face, but maybe that was to his advantage. It looked trustworthy, hiding the predator within.

He gave her a charming smile as the rain plastered his hair to his face. "I really must know where we've met."

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me," Rey muttered. And to Deo, "Let's say I used to be a member of the First Order. I admired you from afar."

"Let's say I believe you." Which he didn't. It was too far-fetched. As far-fetched as, say, the First Order finding them over three years later. "If you admire me so much, why are you refusing to cooperate?"

"How am I not cooperating?" she replied. "You said this ship was someone's named Kylo Ren. I said it was mine."

"If you were really a member of the First Order, you would know who Kylo Ren is." Deo's smile grew. "But I suspect you're not as stupid as you look."

Well, he certainly wasn't holding back, now was he?
Rey raised her eyebrows, expression otherwise impassive.

"Where is Kylo Ren, girl?" Deo demanded.

She needed to stall for more time. Ben had taken care of all the stormtroopers inside the Falcon except for one. He placed them near the boarding ramp, and Rey could tell whoever it was, they were still alive.

"How about we play a game?" The rain was falling hard enough that she was nearly squinting. She had to raise her voice to be heard over the uproar. "You answer a question for me, and I'll answer one for you."

Deo smirked, his amusement slanting his eyes. "I don't play games. I get straight to the point." He lifted his hand and clenched his fingers in an imitation of a Force choke.

Rey watched him patiently.

The man's brows furrowed. He threw his hand out, stronger now. She knew what he had to be feeling: some type of shield all around her. She didn't mind waiting while he tossed his hand out, again and again, more and more furiously. He shrieked, his face splotchy with his anger.


She could tell he wasn't used to rejection or failure. His behavior reminded her of Ben, though Ben hadn't lost his mind over something in quite a while.

"The same as you," she said. "I guess I'm just stronger."

Deo ignited his red lightsaber. He was getting straight to the point. Probably thought he could hack her through, and it'd be over with. Rey hated to disappoint him. She held out her right hand, which was closed around the hilt of her lightsaber. She ignited it, rain crackling over the white plasma.
"A Jedi?" he scoffed. "I didn't think there were any left." He raised his lightsaber strangely—high above his head. His body pulled into some sort of stance Rey had never seen. She thought it looked ridiculous, but he was staring so seriously. Probably some sort of swordsmanship she didn't know.

"I'm not a Jedi," she yelled over the rumbles of thunder. "But you really don't want to fight me." He wouldn't listen. Of course, he wouldn't. They never did.

"If you're not a Jedi, then what in hells are you?" he yelled back. He stalked toward her, his other hand held in front of him. Then he was close enough, and Rey deflected his first attack. It set the fight, and stormtroopers were shouting and running. Deo looked behind him—saw the shape of Ben dealing with his soldiers. His face changed into something almost feral, some fierce satisfaction.

Rey swung her lightsaber around, and Deo barely blocked it in time. He fell back, and Rey advanced, slamming her saber into his, over and over. Deo was stronger, but Rey was borrowing some of the Force from Ben. They were a team now—they could work together without having to know the other's thoughts, just knowing instinctively the needs and the wants. She utilized it, the strength fueling every attack.

"My quarrel is not with you!" Deo shouted. "End this fight, and I will show you mercy!"

She knew what he considered 'mercy.' "I'm good, thank you."

Deo somewhat jabbed with his saber. Rey threw her own saber up, again and again, parrying effortlessly. The blades collided and grinded on each other with sparks, putting Deo's face close to her own. She observed as he realized she wasn't breathless, wasn't tired at all. Were it not for the rain, he might have seen how she'd barely broken a sweat.

Those eyes suddenly widened. He swung his head around and found Ben standing behind him, his own lightsaber lit.

"You have a lot to answer to!" Deo snarled.

Rey pushed on her saber. He remembered their fight in time to stagger out of the way. Rey moved around him to be by Ben's side.
I have one of the stormtroopers unconscious so that we can question him after this.

It was his way of telling her Deo wasn't valuable for information. That he was useless to them, and evil, and could be taken off the game board. Which was a shame, Rey thought. After all, Deo didn't like playing games.

Why did she not care if Deo died? Because through Ben's memories, she knew Deo didn't give a damn for anyone but himself. He took what he wanted, raping, pillaging on smaller, less developed worlds. His only use was to be sent as a bully to deal with Snoke's clients, dolling out death whether it was needed or not. Whatever sent a message.

"Kylo Ren," Deo hissed. Rey could only figure out what he said by reading his lips. "It's been far too long. I never imagined these probes would amount to anything. Maybe we should give the First Order credit for their technology where it's due. Nearly four years is a long time, but there's a lot of the galaxy to cover."

"You've been looking for him since he left?" Rey asked.

"Everyone has," Deo said. "But don't you worry your pretty little head. I have no use for you. You'll be dead soon enough, and none of this will matter anymore."

He really had a lot of confidence for someone who had seen firsthand he couldn't lay a mark on her.

Rey looked at Ben.

Ben shrugged.

Rey extended her hand, and Deo flew into her grip, his lightsaber yanked out of his hand simultaneously. It fell uselessly to the sand as he dug and slapped at her hands, his eyes rolling back as he choked.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't end your life right here," Rey said.
He grinned through the steady suffocation. "The rumors are true, then," he gasped.

Her eyes narrowed. "Rumors?" she asked sharply.

Rey.

Right. They had a prisoner.

_Do you want me to do it?_

"Goodbye," she said. Deo's lightsaber shot into the air, and Rey deflected it with the Force, directed it into her own hand. She showed him the crimson plasma. His eyes were locked on it as she stabbed him in the stomach, running him all the way through. He made a small choking noise and fell over, his eyes turned sightlessly upward.

Rey and Ben stood next to one another, looking at Deo's body. Ben was assessing her thoughts —Rey was assessing her thoughts. Was she okay with this? It was one thing to say what their course of action was, it was another entirely to act on it.

She reflected on every piece of news she had from Deo, delivered to Snoke. The heinous things he'd done, and he'd had no problem whatsoever bragging about them to his friends. His fellow Knights. Deo was rotten to the core, whatever shred of light that might be buried inside of him locked deep out of reach. Not all of the Knights were this way. But Deo was the worst, the most fully submersed in darkness.

_Are you all right?_

Rey disengaged Deo's lightsaber before setting her own down and walking to the waves. She threw his lightsaber as hard as she could, the Force propelling it. It was eaten by the sea, never to be seen again.

_I'm fine. You said we have a prisoner?_

_Yes. He'll be far easier to manipulate. He may not know anything about the higher-ups of the_
Order, but he would have the gist of their mission. Let's wake him up.

Luke appeared, hovering by her shoulder as Ben pushed through the sand to the *Falcon*.

*You are upset that you are not upset?* Luke said. *Humans make so little sense to me at times.*
A Show of Power

Chapter Notes

Smaller chapter. I had to make it this way, unfortunately. But you guys know another update will be soon. Happy Easter!

Two Weeks Later…

It was a very lovely day. Temperate with just a hint of a breeze. Not a cloud in sight, the sky a bright, cerulean blue.

Perfect for a battlefield.

One stormtrooper, two stormtroopers—three, four. They went sailing through the air with yelps of surprise and landed in a nearby trench, hard enough to knock them out. Rey took this opportunity to hunker down beside Finn. His expression went from bewildered to ecstatic.

"Rey! You're here! You're here!"

A stormtrooper crashed beside them and didn't move again.

"And so is he," Finn said. Rey knew he meant Ben, who was just behind her. "Where the hell have you guys been? We've been looking everywhere—!"

Rey stood. "Don't follow me, Finn."

"Why are you always telling me that?!!" he called after her.

She fell into step with Ben. They crossed the battlefield without a care in the world, never mind the orbital bombing or the people fighting on land. A Walker had trashed half of the city that stood on
the edge of this grassland. It was ancient looking and would never recover from such destruction.

**Rey, we have company.**

Where? Rey looked behind her. Oh, good grief. "Finn, I'm being very serious! You should *not* follow me!"

"I—we thought you were *dead!"* Finn took her hands. "Holy crap. I just saw how long your hair is."

"We are standing in the middle of a battlefield!" Rey reminded him. "I need to take care of this, and I need *you* not to get yourself killed! Please—promise me you'll evacuate everyone out of this area. It's going to get dangerous."

"More dangerous than this?" The words were half-sarcastic, half disbelieving.

Rey said nothing.

"Oh, okay, see, now you've got the serious face on." Finn shook his head. "We *don't—* He stopped. Someone was talking to him on his headset. "Yes! I'm on it!" On it probably being the fallen ship he'd been tinkering with before.

"Finn." Rey put her hands on his shoulders. "Finn, look at me." She waited until he did. "I've *got this.*"

Maybe he saw what she was trying to convey in her eyes. Maybe he'd realized they didn't have any time to argue because a fresh round of bombing was on its way. Either way, he pulled away in frustrated disgust and took off, shouting orders in his headset for everyone to clear out.

Rey rejoined Ben. They walked forward once more, long stalks of grass brushing against their thighs.

The First Order's army was massive, but they hadn't brought all of it to Venia, the last supporter of the New Republic. Venia was small and had nothing to fight back with. It was the members of the
Resistance who had taken a stand against the Order and sought to protect this planet. Or, more importantly, to protect the lives on it.

A TIE bomber soared overhead. Rey and Ben raised their left hands in unison. The pilot slumped in his seat and the ship spiraled out of control. It hit the ground a few hundred feet away and fell apart. Pieces pinwheeled into the distance. The explosion was almost enough to knock them off their feet.

They moved systematically over the field. The bombers, they made short work of. The grasslands were spewing smoke left and right. The ground shook every now and again. Screams of the Resistance and First Order alike rent the air.

It was nothing to silence the troopers. Blaster energy bounced away from them. The beams could often be manipulated to turn on their user. They left the members of the Resistance alone. Only two tried to fight them, and a look from the duo was enough to send them running. And they hadn't even accessed a fraction of their power.

*We may draw more enemies when this is all over. We're too powerful.*

*Powerful enough to fend off those enemies.*

They reached the city, and it was here that they began to truly tap into the Force. Walkers were sturdy, difficult as all hells to take down. It usually took several pilots to upend one of them. Fortunately for Ben and Rey, they weren't just pilots.

*Attack the joints.*

Rey funneled their power to the where the legs connected to the cockpit. The Force vibrated as they asked it to do their will. Steel and titanium screeched as they peeled back. Rey's hand shook. Perspiration dampened her brow. The legs collapsed, the cockpit following after in a minor explosion.

Blaster fire echoed everywhere, not nearly as strong as it had been. Rey knew the Resistance would quickly overpower the stormtroopers. There wasn't enough of the First Order left to pose any problem. It made Rey grin savagely. They'd thought they had it in the bag. This was the result of the arrogance.
Rey faced the city. Its castle stood bastion to the buildings it had lost. It was surrounded by rubble and the moans of the dying. Innocent people had been trapped. A waste of so much life in the Order's determination to wipe out the New Republic and any who stood by it.

*It's in there,* Rey said. *The reason we came here.*

*I know.*

*She won't let you melt back into the shadows.*

*She will if she does not know I'm here.*

*I'm not going to lie. Not to her. She deserves more. She deserves you.*

The journey through the city was an unpleasant reminder of how bad things had gotten while time passed. Doctors and healers rushed to and fro, attending to the victims of the attack. Citizens gathered in throngs to lift heavy rubble, freeing those trapped beneath. The cobblestone under Rey's feet was cracked, the stones worn smooth.

*How soon do you think it will be before they send reinforcements?*

*It will take long enough that these people should be able to escape.*

They made it to the castle grounds. A pair of men stood in front of an iron wrought fence, their expressions stony. Rey was so used to having free access to anything that it took her a moment to realize they weren't going to let her through because they didn't know who she was. She didn't have time to waste—they needed to get inside the castle immediately.

She waved her hand. "You will let us through."

"We will let you through," they mumbled, working to get the fence open.
Ben was studying her as they trailed through the courtyard. She raised an eyebrow in question, but he only looked ahead again. They reached another set of guards. Ben was the one who waved his hand now. The castle enveloped them, the bright day vanishing into the shadows.

What little security the castle did have circled them with blasters. Ben sniffed disdainfully. As he did so, the weapons flew into the air and hovered like a warped child's mobile. The sound of steel reached Rey's ears as the men next pulled out actual swords. She could see why they had been protecting the castle. They'd never have made it out there.

A husky, familiar voice filled the room. "Let them go, gentlemen. That is my son."

The men fell back, expressions ranging from disbelief to curiosity. Rey's heart swelled, and it was with real happiness that she threw herself into the princess' arms. Leia's scent overcame her, faint like flowers. She rested her cheek against Rey's hair and soothed a hand down her back. It reminded Rey of the time they had comforted each other with the news of Han's passing.

"Oh, your hair has gotten so long." Leia pulled back and cupped Rey's cheeks with a smile. Her eyes crinkled at the corners. "Everyone thought you were dead. But I didn't." She turned to Ben and pointed at the ground. "Get over here."

Her son reluctantly came forward. As soon as he was within reach, Leia enfolded him in a hug. Ben's arms hung awkwardly at his sides. Leia stood on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek and then let go of him. She took Rey's hands in her own.

"You have to tell me everything," she said.

"I will. But first, I need you to give me your prisoner." Rey stared directly into her eyes.

Leia released her, stepping back. Her eyes narrowed, her face closing into something distrustful. Rey experienced an unexpected pang. There was more of his mother in him than Ben would ever admit. She'd looked just like him then.

"What prisoner?" the General asked. "We have several, though the Order hasn't realized it yet."
Rey didn't hesitate. "I believe his name is Armitage Hux."
"Dress warmly," Leia had said. "Where we're going is even colder than Hoth."

Alone in the cockpit of the *Falcon*, Ben and Rey watched the approaching planet. It was as white as Crait had been, but continents were broken up by frozen water. That was what R2-D2 had chittered at them as everyone had fled Venia for safer locales. Rey hadn't given it too much thought until Ben had explained how cold, exactly, Hoth was. He'd never been there himself. He knew the stories from his mother and father.

This was where the majority of the Resistance was hidden. Arna III, nestled in a tiny system past the Outer Rim. Rey had to admire Leia's spunk. If the First Order could hide out in the Wilds, why not the Resistance?

Rey sighed and leaned back in the co-pilot's seat. Her fingers drummed on the armrests as she thought about what had led them here.

"Give us the information we want, and this won't hurt," Rey said to the stormtrooper Ben had left. She knelt in front of him, where he was propped against a wall. "I'm sure you've heard of Kylo Ren's techniques. His interrogations."

The trooper, already pale, turned a ghastly white. To his credit, he only looked more resolved after a painful swallow. His lips pressed together. He wasn't going to talk.

"There's no need to be loyal," Rey insisted. "I'll even leave you alive. All you have to do is tell me what I want to know. Can you do that?"
He shook his head.

She sighed. She had to try one more time. "Look. I admire your dedication to the Order. I do. But I've been on the other end of Kylo's methods of obtaining information. And I promise you, no matter what you've heard about it, it's ten times worse in actuality."

"Traitor!" the man roared. "He's a filthy traitor!"

*You are wasting your time. He is brainwashed. FN is an abnormality.*

Rey got to her feet. A moment later, Ben came into the man's line of sight. The trooper immediately began spewing more garbage, only to choke as an invisible hand squeezed around his neck. It seemed four years had been enough for the fear of Kylo Ren to fade away.

Ben's gaze was cold, distant. "You are going to answer my questions," he said. "And yes. This will hurt." It was a hint of Kylo Ren without the darkness shrouding him. Ben was a powerful Force user, and it had been a long time since Rey had seen him in action. Practicing together was different. She was never his target, his enemy.

The man's screams echoed through the *Falcon*. Rey waited to feel uncomfortable, but it never came. Instead she watched and assessed the information Ben was pulling from the stormtrooper. If she were honest with herself, maybe she did find it a little… well… kind of sexy… But it was only because she could see his profile, could see what he looked like as he worked.

In the four years since they'd left, the First Order had developed a Council, which was spearheaded by the Knights of Ren. The first few months after Snoke's demise had been awful. The Knights quarreled among themselves to be the top of the pack. One had won in the end, and the others weren't strong enough to defeat him. He was the Supreme Leader, with the Council directly under him.

The Order resumed their takeover of the galaxy. This involved hunting down every member of the New Republic and any of their supporters. The Resistance was assumed dead. For years, no one had seen hide nor hair of them. Until several months ago, when they'd appeared at several of the Order's takeovers.

General Hux had declared himself Supreme Leader once Kylo Ren had been missing for a month. For a time, no one contested his seat on the throne. That changed with the Knights of Ren, and last
anyone knew about Hux, he'd been shipped off to the planet they kept their prison on. The trooper didn't know which planet.

There weren't many New Republic supporters left. Most of them were being finished with in the next two weeks. The trooper had friends in his fellow troopers who knew all about it, as they were assigned this mission. These friends didn't convey which systems, which planets, however.

They were going to need more information from a different source.

After that, they put the trooper to sleep and tossed him out of the *Falcon*. They needed to decide where to go next.


"Yes?"

*I do not think I will be leaving with you.* As Rey grew a little upset, he continued. *My home is here now. And the two of you are balanced enough to not need me.*


He materialized as a star and floated over to her face. His shine grew bright, and Rey threw up an arm to protect her eyes. When she lowered it again, she jerked in surprise and staggered across the corridor, slamming into a wall. Luke wasn't a star. He wasn't a creature, either. He was a person.

He was Han.

What was this, one last way to annoy Ben?

The Luke Han held out his arms. Rey stayed pressed against the wall, her lips trembling. This was vastly unfair. Why was Luke doing this? What purpose did it serve?

The illusion smiled, and Rey couldn't look at it anymore, she had to stare at the floor.
Hands touched her shoulders. That did bring her gaze up, but the illusion had changed form once more. It was Luke Skywalker, and its blue eyes were filled with fondness.

Rey, I cannot hold you to say goodbye without the arms made to do them.

"So you had to choose these forms?" she choked out. "Why not be yourself?"

I have no self.

"That's not true, and you know it. If you concentrated, I know you could take the form of a human. One of your own making."

Rey… Luke sounded embarrassed, something Rey hadn't thought he was capable of.

"I mean it. Come on, then. If you want to hug me, then you have to do it as yourself." She was speaking to the wall, unable to bear gazing at Luke Skywalker again.

All right… it is safe to look…

Rey swung her head around, curiosity getting the better of her. Her heart gave a startled thump, and she felt sorry for the workout it was receiving today. She honestly hadn't expected the person standing before her.

Luke smiled. Honey brown hair hung around her face in soft waves. Her eyes were the color of lilacs. She was the same height as Rey, the same build. But she had fuller lips, and her face was shaped like a heart.

"I admire you, Rey," she said, her voice sweet, serene. "You are honest, and that is rare for your kind. So is your kind heart. You are such a good person. You will always be my friend."

Rey's eyes prickled with warmth.
"Do not be afraid." The Force knot put her arms around Rey and held her close. Her fingers stroked through her hair. "I will always be with you."

Tears were trickling slowly down Rey's face. "If you say you will always be in my heart, I may have to hurt you," she croaked.

"But I will be. I will be with you wherever you go." The girl drew away.

"What do I even call you now?" Rey sniffled, wiping at her face.

"Breeze."

"That's not a real name." Rey found the breath to laugh, though it was choked. She didn't know why she was getting so upset about this. She'd known they would part ways eventually. She just hadn't expected it to be this hard.

"It is not. But I like the wind when it is like that the best. It is peaceful. And I want you to remember that when you feel the breeze on your face. I want you to remember me, and I hope it brings you peace."

"Luk—Breeze—"

Goodbye, Rey. Breeze was a star. She zipped around Rey's head, dusting her with little balls of light. Then she was gone, streaking into the distance.

Ben touched her shoulder. She jumped, having forgotten he was there.

That was more than a little nauseating.

Rey knew she should feel the same. But as she was so prone to saying, she had very little friends. Breeze had touched her heart, and Rey wouldn't forget her soon.
Where should we go?

I'm not sure. You know more about the galaxy than I do.

Ben sighed and shoved his fingers into his hair. I have an idea. But it could be dangerous.

Rey gave him a look.

It's Coruscant. The First Hold has a tight grip on it. I'm sure it's only gotten worse.

Why there?

Any kind of information can be bought there. You just need to know the right price.

All right, well where before that, so we can stow the Falcon away?

Do you think my ship is where I left it?

Rey frowned in thought. You don't think the Order will recognize it?

I doubt it. It is an Order vessel.

They won't want to know the serial number or... or something like that, to verify it? Rey asked as she followed him to the cockpit.

It's Coruscant, he said, as if that explained everything.

"Right," she muttered. "Are we forgetting anything?"
"Lightsabers?"

Rey looked. "We've got them."

"Clothes?"

"They're all here, I think. Unless you left some outside—?"

"No. Then we're good to go." Ben slid a hand behind her head, tilting it up so he could kiss her forehead. "It will be all right. Are you forgetting that we're very powerful Force users?" He nipped at her ear to accompany the tease.

"Yes," she admitted. "Sometimes."

He laughed, a quick little thing. It soothed Rey's worries, and they both took their seats. Rey hit the buttons to raise the boarding ramp. They were leaving those troopers marooned on the island, and neither of them much cared. It was a better fate than death.

*Goodbye, Breeze,* Rey thought. The *Falcon* blasted into the air. The self-destruct Ben had fiddled with in the settings of the Knight's ship exploded behind them. Metal rained down, splashing into water, rolling over sand. Then there was only the blue sky to look at as they veered mostly straight upward.

*Goodbye, Rey.*
Some Acclimating

Chapter Notes

I'm glad people were sad to see Luke/Breeze go. I feared everyone found him/her super annoying! Glad that wasn't entirely the case.

This chapter is a bit more lighthearted.

Ben and Rey watched their ride soar away. They looked at each other, and then at the road before them.

Rey pressed her lips together.

The seconds ticked past.

She sighed and folded her arms.

Why not make it a little more obvious you're pissed at me?

It's been almost two weeks, two weeks, and we still haven't seen this piece of junk!

It is NOT a piece of junk!

Oh, yeah? Well, when we have to travel the entire galaxy in search of it, when we could just give up now and take an ordinary vessel to Coruscant—

We need that vessel!

Why? Why do we need it so badly?! Sentiment?
When do I do anything for sentimental value?

Rey huffed. You could just tell me.

You could just read my thoughts.

I am trying to respect your privacy!

Then stop questioning me and instead trust me.

The two simmered at one another, steam all but shooting out of their ears.

Rey pointed to the road that lie ahead. Holy ground.

We—

No! she shushed him. No! Holy! Ground!

He rolled his eyes. I heard him—

HOLY. GROUND.

It was Ben's turn to press his lips together.

Twenty miles on foot! We'll be here until evening! Rey threw her hands up in the air. All because of their precious holy ground! Who in their right mind would consider proper spaceships an intrusion of faith? They were fast, they were convenient, and they didn't leave so much as a trace.
We'd best start now, then.

Rey swiveled her head around to glare at him. Is this funny to you?

A little. He smirked. But only because you find it so irksome.

Since there was no dignified response to that, Rey took that as her leave to stomp down the road. Their goal, a very tall mountain in the distance that disappeared into the clouds, wasn't going to be reached on its own. Their boots needed to get walking.

Choobies, it was going to be a long day.

"Sir! Excuse me! Sir!"

The wagon Rey was chasing slowed to a halt. And it was an actual wagon. Wheels and everything. Some sort of furry creates pulling it along.

"And I thought Jakku was pretty much nowhere," she muttered.

A man who seemed to be more wrinkles of skin than anything peered out at her from beneath bushy white eyebrows. The horns of his species graced either side of his head. Dark spots covered light green flesh. His teeth were dull and flat like a human's.

"What do you want?"

"We need a ride to that mountain," Rey said. "Or as close as you can get us."

"I don't want no trouble."
"Trouble?" Rey followed the driver's gaze to her companion. Ben was scowling and had been for the whole exchange. She shook her head and returned her attention to the driver. "Sir, we're not trouble, I promise you. Please give us a ride?" She fastened on her biggest smile, or as big as exhaustion would allow.

But the man continued to be difficult. "That there is a hooligan, miss!" He spat to the side. "No respectable man wears his hair that long."

Ben advanced.

"Okay!" Rey put her arm over his chest to keep him back. She flailed her free hand at the man. "I really didn't want to have to do this, so I'm sorry." She put the Force behind her words. "You are going to give us a ride to the mountain, and you are not going to speak the entire time."

While he spewed verbatim, she gave a little push on Ben's chest, and he relented. They came to the end of the wagon and hopped in. There was nowhere to sit—just the bed of the wagon. Vegetables likely indigenous to this planet were in crates all around them. Ben and Rey wiggled into spots, swaying with the wagon as it resumed movement.

_You could scowl less, she said. At least while we're doing something important. Like flagging a wagon down._

_You should have done the mind trick first. Creates less of a hassle._

_I was trying to be nice. No one said I can't be nice._ Rey shrugged. As far as she was concerned, being gray said nothing against good manners.

_Fine. Discover it for yourself then._

_FINE._

_FINE!_
perpetual autumn. The reds, oranges, and yellows were new to her, but she'd heard what the season was, so she knew what that meant. Things in transition to dying, the earth of the planet taking back what it had grown. But here, on Seilenca, that meant it would sit beautifully like this forever, poised in between.

The trunks of the trees were white with gray chunks of bark in places. They were spaced far apart, yet their branches stretched wide. The ground was a carpet of red and orange leaves. A very small path wound through the forest, the path they were on now. And above, through the holes in the leaves, a moon that was broken apart. It was in three big chunks, the rest strewn in pieces across the sky.

She was just ready to go home. They'd gone to Naboo to discover Ben's ship was missing. From there, it was a scavenger hunt to narrow down its location. It had been won in a bet to a man named Skoomer. Skoomer sold it to C'hren. Laboun conned it from C'hren. Sai stole it from Laboun, who stole it back and then sold it to Preshrendu. And Preshrendu... well, Preshrendu had sold it to a monk, who had hidden it here on Seilenca.

Of course, no one said anything if a monk flew an aircraft by the holy mountain, but Rey and Ben were forced to hoof it.

Either way, Rey was tuckered out. They were having a merry chase with the ship, but they had also never been truly alone together, for a long length of time. It led to bickering. It wasn't so bad. They got over their snits relatively quickly. And Rey knew once she was used to him, and he to her, the bickering would stop. In the meantime, it drained everything out of her, the mission, the bickering.

Ben knocked his boot against hers.

Rey sat up, jarred awake. What was happening? Had she dozed off? She must have. The sky was dark, and the wagon had slowed to a halt. Not to mention that mountain was a whole lot closer. Ben climbed over the side of the wagon and told the man not to go anywhere. The man continued to stare a little stupefied into the distance.

She climbed off the wagon the normal way. Her bones creaked wearily. They'd already been halfway there when they found the old man. Her body did not appreciate so much walking or being jammed between crates in an uncomfortable position she then fell asleep in. She stretched her arms before putting her hands on her hips.

*The temple is this way*, Ben said. *We can't take a wagon. They did not make a road past this point. See it? It's mostly overgrown.*
How much more walking do you think it is? Rey wished she could go back to sleep.

_Not too long._ Ben took a step forward—looked over his shoulder. He came close, grabbing Rey's hand and twining their fingers together. He pulled her along with him onto the darkened path. Rey knew he wouldn't hold her hand for long, but it did make her smile.

The ship was parked right in the middle of the grounds!

Rey could feel all the blood rushing to her head in a rush of inconvenienced rage. These little…! And if only the people down in the village knew! They would lose their minds entirely! They may even come after them with pitchforks! Because why use a new tool when you can stay with the primitive ones!

"I am getting all kinds of different threads of anger from you," Ben told her. "Is your head going to explode? Should I worry?"

Stupid sarcasm.

Stupid scowl-y man and stupid sarcasm.

"We will take the ship," Ben went on. "Look, they're entirely hopeless. No security in the least. Yet watch them get angry when they come out in the morning and their ship is gone!"

_And I thought I was the angry one._

Ben stared at his ship for one second longer and then turned to her. They were on the edge of the path, hiding behind a fallen tree log, scoping out their surroundings, planning their next move. Which was going to be climbing into that ship and leaving, because as Ben had said, there wasn't any sort of security in place.
Besides, even if there was, they could easily handle it.

*Are you—?*

*Yes.*

They made a break for it. There wasn't a single light on in that temple, candle or otherwise. As Rey buckled herself into the seat behind the pilot's, Ben cooed under his breath to the controls. She rolled her eyes only a little.

*Next stop is Coruscant?*

*Yes.*

Ben's vessel rose higher and higher. Rey looked at the autumn world below. Billions of planets in this galaxy, and some appeared so perfect. She was sad to leave them.

*I'm worried about your mother.*

*I am, too.*

*I'm nervous.*

*Why?*

*I've never been to Coruscant. You make it sound... challenging.*

*It is an ecumenopolis. That means the entire planet is a city. Or moon,* he added thoughtfully. *Do you want to see a memory?*
Rey almost asked to. She really wanted to know. But he was also making it to where she wanted to see it for the first time with her own eyes.

*I don't think I have ever met anyone excited to see Coruscant.*

*You make it seem exciting!*

*Hold steady. We're about to hit lightspeed.*

Stars blurred, rushed past. When they faded away, space revealed ships of every kind coming into and leaving Coruscant. The planet itself was a brown color. She could see all the lights even from here. There were so many of them.

*It is pretty.*

*Yes. Pretty dangerous. But I've already come up with a plan.*
The TIE silencer had a stealth field generator, which was what had kept it hidden on Naboo—until it was stolen somehow. Ben used it now, invisibly zipping in and out of traffic, never once running the risk of hitting someone. No one had any idea they were there. It was best that way. Not only did they not have to worry about alerting the First Order, but people did not generally respond well to seeing a starfighter.

Coruscant was so many words, but the one that pervaded most was "overwhelming."

Rey stared and stared. Seeing the city from space was one thing—up close she got a better sense of how big it was. It was bigger than even the city on the Unnamed Planet. And if one was looking down, one could see that it was comprised of countless levels, as though it had built on itself for so long no one remembered what the bottom looked like.

*Believe me. You do not want to see the bottom.*

She had the words ready to reply when she saw it: the glass building.

"That's where that party was, where I saw your mom and dad!" she said thoughtlessly. "*I have* been here before."

*...What are you talking about, Rey?*

She bit her lip. She'd never went over what memories she had seen with Ben. Of course, her statement had been a little strange. "Um… when you were younger… you attended a party here."

*I know that. I meant*— He searched for words.
"I was with you…" she explained. "No one could see me. Only you. I saw you in your cab on the way in. We went to the party together."

Ben was so, so quiet.

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfor—"

_I'm not. I—feel strange. I feel like I know what you're talking about, but I can't recall you there. And I want to._

Why?

He kept his attention on the controls. _Because then things would feel less… alone._

Ben didn't open up like this very often. She didn't want to ruin it by saying or thinking the wrong thing. She was working out how to reply when he asked, _Show me?_

_Are you sure?_ she replied uncertainly.

_Why wouldn't I be?_

_It's not—it…_ She didn't know. Not for the first time, she wished Breeze was here, so Breeze could explain. She was so much better at it than Rey. _You may not… like seeing yourself, like seeing me, and not… not being able to remember…_

Damn, she was useless at psychology.

_I disagree._

Of course, he did.
All right, but I reserve the right to say, "I told you so," if this blows up in our faces. When do you want to see? After this? They were in the middle of traffic, after all.

Despite her words, Rey's heart skipped a little. She'd spent nearly four years in Ben's mind, seeing everything there was to see that was pertinent to the cause. Ben recalled none of it, as Breeze had promised. He wasn't meant to. That didn't make it less… she didn't know. She didn't know how to describe that emotion inside of her. She had shared his soul, and she was the only one who had walked away with the recollection of it.

Yes. It's jarring.

Was he getting the nostalgia from being in Coruscant with her, and was unable to access what should have been memories?

Yes.

Rey leaned forward in her seat to put her arms around his shoulders. She had to rest her cheek against the back of his seat to do so. One of his hands briefly touched hers, and she could feel his emotions rise to the surface, the ones of love. She let him go and lifted so she was once again able to peer out the windshield.

So what's this plan you mentioned?

Ben lowered the craft, curving away from traffic. There's a shopping district here. We'll be able to find what we need.

And what's that?

You'll see.

Rey twitched her lips to the side in skepticism. It lasted only a moment. She was realizing Ben was using more and more contractions, and she was trying to figure out when that had started. But the days were such a blur now.
Don’t you think now is about the time I get to be let in on the plan?

Not a word.

She narrowed her eyes. Well, where are going to land this thing, then?

Someplace.

I hate you.

No, you don’t.

Urgh.

She hated it when he was right.

I’m pretty sure this isn’t a parking space.

Ben activated the generator. It is now.

Rey looked around. They were indeed in some sort of shopping district—of the immensely shady kind. She didn’t find this much of a problem. Niima Outpost was sketchy, and she’d handled that on a daily basis. She knew how to take care of herself, even without the Force.

It was nighttime, so the lights were neon and bright on the shop signs and storefronts. Some sort of bass thudded nearby, likely from a pub. The temperature was warm, the air humid. A man of some race Rey didn’t recognize tottered about, with two droids to hold him up between them. The droids
were bare minimum. Had their encasings been sold?

All right, look at me.

Ready for the plan, Rey obeyed. She found herself rocking onto the balls of her feet. They were at last in Coruscant. It was time to get things accomplished!

I've taken us here because there’s someone I know that I can get information from. Valuable information. Ben looked intently into her eyes. But I can't take you with me.

Rey frowned, her elation dying. What? Why not?

Ben sighed. He won't tell me what I need to know if you are there.

Why not? Rey reiterated. You're going to use mind tricks on him anyway, right?

I am not. Ben saw her puzzled expression, put a hand on her shoulder, and guided her over to a quiet alley. It was just in time for a group of partygoers to stumble past, laughing hysterically amongst themselves.

Rey resisted the urge to ask another why not.

Mind tricks don't work on him.

Then what in hells am I going to do?

There’s other information I need you to retrieve. Ben shoved his fingers into his hair. But first, we need… costumes. I don't know how much information the First Order has on us, but I wouldn't put it past them to recognize you. And they'll definitely recognize me.

Given how many stormtroopers were patrolling the city, Rey found this reasonable.
We split up for half an hour. We meet back here. Then I will go over the next part. Find something you could question people in… without anyone taking notice.

And what is that supposed to mean?

Ben cupped her face in his large hands and dropped a kiss to her forehead. *It means you look like a goody-goody. Even if you use mind tricks, someone is bound to notice.*

*So I’m suspicious looking?* Rey didn't sulk often. She indulged herself now.

*Very much.*

This was such a blow to the ego. After growing up amongst ruffians and vagrants, Rey would have thought she had a more badass mien.

*Half an hour,* Ben reminded her before taking off.

Rey almost asked how she would buy things without money.

And then…

*Right. Mind tricks.*

It was almost funny how years ago on Naboo, she'd been so upset with Ben for making her use mind tricks on a shopkeeper. Now she didn't so much as bat an eyelash.

Ben was waiting for her as she made her way back to their meeting spot. It had been more like
forty minutes. Rey hadn't been able to decide what she wanted. There had surprisingly been so many good options.

She frowned. His "costume" consisted of pulling his hair off his face and sharper clothes, the kind that said he had money and wasn't afraid to use it. He looked handsome, but it made her feel silly. People only knew Kylo Ren from a mask—very few people knew what his actual face looked like. It gave him an advantage on the costume front.

Ben's eyes ran over her getup. *I knew you would go for a bounty hunter.*

*Yes, well, that's not surprising when you can see my thoughts.* It wouldn't have been exactly difficult to look in on her while she was shopping. *Why didn't you tell me not to?*

*Because this works for you.* He flashed a rare grin. *There's a casino several blocks from here. It's… dodgy, but a reputable source of information. You don't even have to slick palms with the Force at your disposal. Just don't be too obvious about it.*

Rey folded her arms, wine colored leather creaking. She was decked out in it, and her boots came up to her knees. A half cape she didn't understand the function of hung from one shoulder. In her blaster holster she'd stuck her lightsaber. The ensemble was completed with gloves and a head piece. A cloth masked the lower half of her face.

*What am I looking for?*

*Find out what the Order knows about us. Find out anything you can that happened while we were away.*

*Your source won't tell you?*

*My window with him will be brief, and I need to ask more pointed questions.*

Rey wasn't sure how she felt about this. It sounded more like Ben could do everything on his own, and he was just giving Rey busywork. It rubbed her the wrong way. But they couldn't be at each other's sides constantly, and it was information they needed. The stormtrooper's intel in the vergence was limited. He knew who Kylo Ren was and had no idea about anything concerning
Rey, and his knowledge about events only pertained to what happened at the base.

*I will tell you when I'm done, and we can meet back here again. All right?*

"All right," she grumbled.

He kissed her cheek and left again.

Rey slowly began walking in the direction of the decrepit casino. Under her breath, she practiced all sorts of voices. If *she* looked innocent, then it only followed that her voice sounded innocent, as well. Sadly, she wasn't very good at this. Nothing sounded right, and in the end, she started mocking Ben's voice, remembering how he'd sounded in his helmet. It was deep and exaggerated, and she was having some fun.

"My window with him will be brief, and I need to ask more pointed questions," she mocked. So self-important!

Someone cleared their throat.

Rey whirled and almost died on the spot from embarrassment.

Ben held up an object. …*I forgot to give you your voice modulator.*

Had he heard everything? Was it possible he hadn't?

He fastened the modulator to her head piece, under the cloth to be near her mouth. His movements were slow and pointed, and he never once let his gaze drift from hers. She stood there in increasing discomfort, beyond mortified.

Ben finished toying with the device and leaned close to her ear.

"I do not sound like that," he whispered.
She swallowed. Her face was ten shades of crimson.

He smirked and kissed her cheek again, lingering. *You should really work on your imitations.*

As he turned to go, Rey grabbed his hand. *Ben, wait.* She had to do this now, while she had the courage.

She closed her eyes and found the memory he'd wanted. The cab ride, the things said, being dropped off at the glass building, making his appearance with his parents, taking her aside, the conversation in the alcove.

"*I don't want to go without seeing you… I need you…*"

Ben inhaled sharply. The memories had been fast, but clear.

*Ben, I—*

He lifted her half-mask and kissed her, his other hand snagging around her waist to pull her closer. She made a soft noise that he devoured with his mouth, his tongue prying her lips open. She let herself be lost in the sensations, her hands gripping his arms.

*We'll talk about it more later. I have to go.* He drew his lips away, brushed them along her eyebrow. …*Thank you.*

She watched him leave.

After a moment, she took a breath to steady herself and then headed to the casino.
The place was seedy enough that Rey made a face. It stank like choobies, was extremely dark, and the carpet was sticky. The clientele ranged from sketchy to extra sketchy. Rey was glad she wore a mask. It wouldn't be good if people saw how disgusted she was. There were denizens in here worse than Unkar Plutt, and Plutt was often covered in his own drool, among other things.

Where to start?

Someone yelled in outrage, and a table went flying, chips and money raining down. Rey was proud of herself when she didn't flinch. Appearing jumpy wouldn't help her cause. Three very angry gentlemen were clobbering the hells out of each other. A beefy alien broke them up and made them leave.

Well, at least there were some standards to this place.

"Hey there, miss," a customer slurred. He grabbed her hand. "Want to give me a—" He cut off with a screech when she broke two of his fingers and thrust his hand back at him. It was deep enough in the casino that security hadn't noticed, so she drifted off before they could.

If she were being honest with herself—and she always tried to be—she was shaking just a little bit. Plutt had been very clear that the moment he got her alone, he would do whatever he wanted to her. Every day, she dreaded stepping up to his hovel to get her portions. He breathed heavily, nasally, and let his eyes rake over every inch of her. It was like being raped by his gaze.

It was ten times worse here.

Finally she made herself shake off the feelings and focus on the goal. She could freak out about it later, if it came to that. This was more important. Despite this, she avoided the unsavory people, resolving to only question them if she had to.

The casino was several floors. She drifted through foul-smelling smoke, the exchange of chips audible even over the low music playing. By the time she'd made it to floor beneath this one, she was more in command of her posture. She radiated confidence, she knew. She didn't try to do anything else. She didn't have enough prowess to pull off sexy.

Or maybe she did. Some eyes tracked her.
It wasn't until she'd found her way to the lowest floor that she found her prey.

She knew immediately that he would be mostly immune to tricks. He was far too cunning. She also knew that maybe if she got his guard lowered first, she'd be able to pick through his head.

The man's company departed from the table they were at. A hologram figure cursed and blinked out. That left her new friend, and he ran his eyes over her appreciatively as she stepped up to him. His hair was dark brown, his eyes a shade of gold. A small scar crossed through an eyebrow, down to his eyelid, barely visible. From a distance, he'd looked human. Up close, she could see two horns protruding out of his hair, black.

She sat across from him.

"Well, now, what's a bounty hunter want with me?" he asked. He had a charming way about him—if you didn't see in his eyes that he had no qualms with killing someone. "I'll tell you now, I have a steep price." He crossed one leg over the other and leaned back in his seat.

Rey hadn't tried the modulator yet, and had to cover being startled when her voice came out deep, electronic. "I'm looking for someone," she said.

"Yes, that's evident."

Rey flicked her gaze over the room. No one was so much as looking in their direction. No one cared.

"The only question is who?" the man grinned.

Rey decided to call him Scar. "Have you heard the name Rey?"

"Who hasn't?" Scar grabbed his drink, ice clinking as he took a sip.

Her heart squeezed into a vise.
"The rumors are true, then."

Damn. She'd hoped Deo only meant within the First Order.

"Now if you're looking for information on her, no one knows that." Scar didn't seem to have a problem outlining what he didn't know. "But I do have something about the man she disappeared with." Scar's grin grew into the realm of feral.

He had something on Ben?

"It'll cost you, of course."

"How much?" Rey didn't have the first clue about being a bounty hunter. Getting straight to the point seemed like something one might do.

"Oh, lass." Scar set his glass down and straightened the cufflinks on his sleeves. "I haven't dealt with currency when it comes to a woman in ages."

Was he suggesting what she thought he—?

Scar smiled deviously, an eyebrow cocked.

Yes. He most definitely was.

Disgusting.

Rey reached up to turn off the modulator. She wasn't sure she could use the Force through it. She lowered her hand to her lap, her fingers spread, and spoke softly. "You are going to tell me everything I need to know." If he knew as much as he let on, this venture wouldn't be a complete waste. Half the customers here could barely see past their liquor, or whatever some of them were drinking.

Scar laughed. "What do you think you are, some sort of Jedi?"
Rey tried again, her voice firmer. "You are going to tell me everything I need to know."

His face darkened. "My race is immune to such tricks. Funny, I didn't think there were any Jedi left in the galaxy."

"People keep saying that," she agreed. This was unfortunate. She was going to have to be rough. "That doesn't make it true." Not that she had any idea, but she couldn't let him know who she really was.

She stood, and Scar rose with her. He reached for her. She grabbed him and pinned him on the table with a headlock. He grunted, struggling.

"You're going to tell me everything I need to know," she hissed, grateful that people continued to pay them no mind. Probably didn't want the trouble. "Or this is going to get very, very ugly." And she found she meant it.

"I'm not afraid of a scrawny lass like you," Scar spat.

Rey grabbed onto his balls and squeezed.

Scar screamed bloody murder. Rey tossed him around, until his back was on the card table. She kept one hand on the family jewels, her other fingers snagging into his tie and yanking. He choked, his face red and sweating.

"Bitch," he gasped. Predictably, a weapon appeared in his hand. Rey sent it flying with barely a thought, and any others on his person. A total of three spiraled out of range. "You're her, aren't you? The woman who disappeared with Kylo Ren."

"You are going to tell me everything you know," Rey promised. "If you know of Kylo Ren, you know he can torture information out of a person's head. Guess what? I know the same trick, and you're not immune to that one."

"Fuck off!" Scar retorted. "I'll never tell you anything!"
Rey concentrated, staring into his eyes. She'd never done this before. She remembered how Ben had done it to the stormtrooper, remembered how she herself had deflected Ben's attack back on himself. It was all about exerting their will.

Scar screamed.

This method was so much more effective.

She relented enough to let him go and take a step back. She'd already gained a nugget of information. She just needed the rest. "Are you going to cooperate?"

He made a run for it.

She sighed.

The Force grabbed him and yanked him back to Rey. They were drawing a little attention now, so she carried him over to a dark corner dedicated to storage. Everyone went back to what they were doing. Maybe they thought their eyes were deceiving them. Most of the galaxy thought the Force was a myth or legend.

"Please, please, I'll tell you anything!" Scar begged, the man reduced to desperation and tears. Rey kept him pinned against the wall while she decided what to do next.

He couldn't be swayed by the Force, and he knew who she was. She had no doubt in her mind that the second she let him go, he'd tell the First Order. The First Order, which was crawling all over this damned city.

She knew what Ben would do. Ben would kill him.

But maybe there was another way…

"Do you want to live?" she asked him.
"Y-Yes!"

"Then I want you to listen very carefully." Rey gripped onto the man's chin. "You are going to let me manipulate your mind."

"I-I-I don't even know how!" he sobbed.

"You'll figure it out," she flatly assured him. "Or I'll have to take it out of you the hard way. And you saw what the hard way was like."

Scar whimpered and closed his eyes.

"Great start," she said. "Now open up your mind."

Rey emerged into the cleaner air of the city. She had liked the role she'd played in the casino maybe too much. She knew it was nothing more than a power trip. But at least Scar was still alive. Alive, and mind tricked into thinking he never saw her. She'd buried that deep into his psyche.

I take it you're done?

Yes. I'm headed to the meeting place. Do you still need time?

No. I'm here already. I was waiting for you to finish. I didn’t want to interrupt.

She turned her modulator back on. Who knew who they would encounter in the city?

Ben was leaning against the alley wall. He lifted his eyebrows when he saw her.
We need to get going. Quickly. He took her hand and pulled her behind him. Her mind flashed to Jakku, when she'd yelled at Finn to stop dragging her around like that. With Ben, she found she didn't mind it as much.

Why are we hurrying?

I sold the ship.

What?! she exclaimed.

We'll find passage out of here. But we need to do it fast.

Ben, what aren't you telling me?

Do you remember the fact that this ship passed from hand to hand?

Yes…?

Well, there was a reason for that.

Aha.

That ship is a prototype. And I believe I told you a long time ago that its controls are set to my specifications.

Right…

He waited for her mind to catch up.
Her eyes widened. Those con artists were foisting the ship off to one another, on the premise that it worked properly. They didn't talk about how they couldn't get it to operate fully because they didn't know the control system. And now Ben had done the same to his informant?

Yes. And when he realizes I fooled him, it will be difficult to leave Coruscant.

Who is he?

A powerful man.

And you got the information we needed?

Yes. And I saw that you did.

Yeah…

How did it feel, Rey?

You know how it felt, you were in my head.

I want you to tell me in your own words.

I liked it too much, she admitted, trying not to squirm.

But you kept control. That's the important part. Savoring the power trips, yet keeping them in check.

Rey didn't reply. Her face was hot again.

I knew when I asked you to be by my side, I knew it wasn’t a mistake. And every day, I see that
more and more. He gave her a dark smile over his shoulder.

How far are we away from real transit? She couldn't meet his eyes. She was still processing everything that had happened. But... she... she liked that he liked it...

Not too far. We'll leave here, get the Falcon on Naboo, and then go to our next destination.

And what destination is that?

Fierce, savage joy emitted from his end of the bond. My mother is alive—and she has something we desperately need.

For once, she couldn't take it anymore. She had to know. She reached into his thoughts, and what she found certainly caught her attention.

General Hux? But our information from the trooper said he was in prison. For years. He wouldn't know what we needed to know.

He has been. But he has an admirer. Someone who fed him information. Someone who visited him frequently.

Admirer? she echoed.

One of the Knights of Ren.
Chapter Notes

Wheeee, another long chapter, my lovely lovelies!

The Present

Resistance Base on Arna III

It was so cold, Rey felt certain that at any moment she would turn into a block of ice. And she wasn't even outside. She was deep underground, with insulated walls, and was dressed in enough clothes to outfit a small family. Yet still her teeth chattered, hard enough to threaten her tongue's safety.

Are you okay? Ben couldn't quite hide his amusement, though she appreciated the thought.

I'm fine. Okay, so... I promised your mother I would spend time catching her up. I need to waddle that way.

Ben tensed.

What?

Nothing.

It's not nothing. Say it.

I said it's nothing.

Ben—
Rey huffed around her impatience. She knew exactly what it was. The more she persisted, the stronger his feelings on the topic grew. He was uneasy about the fact that she was going to be around his mother for an extended period of time.

You don't have to be there, so why—? She cut herself off as more of his thoughts circulated. The truth was, he wished he could talk to his mother, too. He just didn't know how to. And while it was tempting to coax him into visiting the General, all of Rey's energy was dedicated to not dying from the cold.

I'll be back.

I'll be here.

Rey kissed his cheek—he turned his head and caught her lips. She closed her eyes and leaned into him. He nipped playfully at her mouth and nudged her away.

She left the room and entered the busy hallways of this underground base. Places of the walls were old, with patches of ice showing through. The rest was new, shiny, doing its best to keep the cold out and the warmth in. Lifts carried people to and fro. Other people bustled around her, all with expressions intent on their task.

Despite the cold, this place was amazing. The base was completely invisible from the surface. There was a small opening in the mountains, which one had to know was there, as the constant blizzards were whiteouts and greatly hindered sight. (Or so she was told.) Rey could only draw the conclusion that the General must have known about, or at least heard of, this place beforehand.

There was enough tech underground to make Rey wonder where it all had come from. Leia had mentioned a wealthy investor, so likely it was that. Rey had seen the hangar when they'd landed the Falcon, and it was loaded with ships, half of them X-wings. That had been about an hour ago. They'd been taken on a brief tour, and no one had really paid them much mind. This wasn't surprising. There weren't a lot of people who had known Ben and Rey before they left.

"Oh! Rey!"
Rey blinked and looked around. Rose was headed in her direction, her eyes bright.

"Hey," Rey replied with a smile. "How are you—? Oof!" Her arms were full of the technician. Rey readily hugged her back. When she'd initially left Jakku, it had taken her a little while to adjust to being touched. But it was also something she'd craved, and she never had a problem reciprocating affection with a friend.

"The General mentioned you were coming here! It's so good to see you!"

Rey caught sight of the ring on Rose's finger and raised her eyebrows. Rose, already in mid-ramble, paused to follow Rey's line of vision. She blushed prettily, her smile so bright it made Rey's strengthen, too.

"When?" Rey asked.

"About six months ago," Rose said. "We're in danger everyday… We decided we didn't want to waste anymore time, you know?"

"That's so sweet," Rey replied. And it was. "I'm really happy for you."

"Thanks!" Rose beamed. "Hey, you look lost. Are you looking for someone, something? It took me weeks to figure out my way around here. It's a maze."

"The General," Rey said. "I have an… appointment with her."

"Oh, sure! Right this way!" Rose started forward, and Rey fell into step with her. "Finn was telling me about what the two of you did on the battlefield." Her voice had grown hushed. "No one can believe it, especially the ones who didn't see it. Is it really true? Did you really dismantle the First Order's taskforce like it was nothing?"

Rey considered what to say. She hadn't anticipated discussing this with anyone but the General, and now she wasn't sure why. Of course, people would be interested. "It wasn't nothing," she said.
"You're being modest, aren't you?"

"Maybe," Rey said around her chattering teeth.

"You'll get used to the cold, too," Rose assured her. "Just remember to always have your skin covered if you go aboveground. We had a real problem with frostbite when we first came here. It can hit easily in about five minutes if you're not careful. Everyone has to go outside in pairs, and we have to be super diligent about making sure there's no red spots on anyone's faces."

"Frostbite?" Rey queried. It was a term she hadn't encountered yet.

"Um, it's like… Well…” Rose rooted around for a definition. "The easiest way to explain it to you is like this: the lower the temperature is, the higher you have a chance of your exposed skin getting frostbite. And frostbite is like… Do you know how burns work?"

Rey nodded. The duo ducked under a low pipe sticking out of the ceiling.

"With first degree, second, third?"

Another nod.

"Frostbite works in the same way. It's basically destroying the tissue in varying degrees. And if it gets bad enough, it'll turn black and… Well, you get the idea."

"Frostbite very bad," Rey said, and Rose giggled. "It sounds painful."

"It is! Just be careful. Watch your nose, your ears, your fingers, your cheeks, those are the most common places."

"Got it."

Rose grinned. "I missed having you around, Rey."
"Awh," Rey gushed before she could help herself. "I missed you, too, Rose."

Another hug was exchanged.

**Women.**

*Mind your own business,* Rey tossed back.

Ben was notably quiet, and the bond tightened enough that his thoughts weren't immediately accessible. Rey didn't take offense at this. She would have done the same thing.

"So what's it like being married?" Rey asked.

"Oh, honestly, I wish I could say it's been great, but it's really just been the same. We're so busy!" Rose looked around in a way that made it obvious she didn't want to be overheard. Then she lowered her voice. "But the sex is amazing."

Rey laughed. She hadn't had nearly enough girl talk in her lifetime, and she was enjoying it immensely.

"W-Well... how are... you two?" Rose was so nervous to ask the question that she couldn't even look at Rey.

"We're great," Rey said with another easy smile. "And don't worry: the sex is amazing."

Rose and Rey grinned.

Rose stopped at a door. "Okay, the General is in here." She grabbed Rey's hands tightly. "Please find me later! Finn wants to see you, too!"

"I will," Rey promised.
Rose hurried off with a wave.

In a considerably better mood, Rey knocked on the metal door.

"Come in," the General called gruffly.

Rey opened the door and poked her head around it.

Leia was bent over a desk. When no one said anything, she looked up. Her work face melted away at the sight of Rey. "Come in, come in!"

Rey obeyed, shutting the door behind her. She noticed it was considerably warmer in here and spotted some portable heaters placed around the room. It wasn't enough to make her want to vacate her clothing, but it made the cold more bearable.

"I'm glad you got here safely. Did you get settled in?"

"Mostly," Rey replied.

Leia left the desk to come over to Rey. They embraced. On Venia, it had been brief. Here, Rey sank into the other woman's arms, clinging. Leia touched the back of her head, and her other hand rubbed over Rey's back. Rey rested her cheek on Leia's shoulder and closed her eyes.

She'd never had a mother. But like she'd told her on Naboo, she saw Leia as one.

Finally Rey drew away, and if she sniffled a little, the General didn't comment on it. Instead she drew her over to the only bed in the room, and they sat on the edge of it. Aside from the desk and bed, along with a mirror on the wall, there wasn't any other furniture in here. Rey understood why it was sparse. The Resistance was constantly on the move and might have to evacuate at any time.

"Your hair is so long," Leia said. "I know I said that the last time I saw you, but it's still surprising." She chuckled. "It looks good."
"Thanks," Rey replied. "I'm still getting used to it myself."

Leia raised her eyebrows in question.

Rey smiled ruefully. "How much time do you have to listen? It's a long story."

The princess placed her hands on her knees. "I cleared my schedule for the evening. No one is supposed to bother us unless it's an emergency." She hesitated. "…Is Ben—is he all right?" Pain tightened her eyes. "I can't ask him myself. And he closes himself off from the world."

"He's great," Rey assured her. It was getting warm enough that she shed her outer layers. It still left her in three shirts and a jacket. "He… He wants to talk to you himself, he just doesn't know how."

The other woman sighed. "We were so close once. He began to pull away early on, and I was so wrapped up in the New Republic, I didn't…" She trailed off and then shook her head. "Well, you know the rest."

Rey took her hand.

Leia smiled and placed her other hand on top of Rey's. "I'm just glad to see the two of you again. I knew you were alive, but I was so worried. You could have let me know you were all right, you know."

"I would have, if I could have," Rey said. "Something happened that we didn't… anticipate."

"What do you mean?"

"Well…” Rey took a breath. Let it out. "Let's get comfortable, shall we?"

In the end, comfortable meant sitting on the floor while Leia played with her hair. Rey might have been able to sit on the bed, but she was six inches taller than the General, and it would have made it difficult for her to reach her hair properly. Rey didn't mind so much, though. She had a pillow
under her rear to block the cold from the ground.

Why was Leia playing with her hair? Because she'd always wanted a daughter someday, and with Rey's hair being so long, she wanted to pull it into some sort of style. Apparently, this was what mothers and daughters did.

It made Rey feel pretty warm inside. She could sit with her knees drawn up to her chest, her arms wrapped around her shins, and talk while the soothing motions of the comb was tugged through her hair.

Rey didn't tell the General everything. Plans of "vigilante justice" and/or eventual "galactic domination" were between her and Ben. Partly because no one needed to know that, and partly because they hadn't really discussed in entirety what was going to happen. For now, they were moving piece by piece, eliminating threats. Such as the Knights of Ren. Once that was taken care of, they would decide their next move.

What she could tell the General was the rest of it: finding balance with their bond. She had to backtrack to the Unnamed Planet to talk about Breeze, and went from there, sticking to the highlights and not the personal bits. She ended with parting with Breeze and taking off to figure out what had happened to the galaxy while they were asleep.

When she finished, silence took the room. The only sound to fill it were Leia's fingers working through Rey's hair.

"And what are the two of you going to do now that you're back?" Leia asked after several minutes had passed. No doubt collecting her thoughts.

"We're still deciding," Rey lied. "We heard about the Knights of Ren taking over the First Order, so we're... investigating, I guess. Then we got intel on Coruscant that led us here."

"The same intel that must have told you about the ex-general?"

"Yes," Rey confirmed. "Although I don't know who it was. Ben wouldn't let me go with him."

"It must have been Lando," Leia muttered. "I heard he was in Coruscant. But what's more troubling is how much information he was fed. It means we have a leak."
"Lando?" Rey questioned.

"Calrissian. A close friend of ours, but just as much of a conman as Han was." She tsked. "The last I really heard from him was when the scandal came out about my real father. That was years ago."

"Well, Ben… conned him actually. We had to leave Coruscant fast."

"Just like his father," the General muttered.

"I think so, too. Did you know Han was teaching him that stuff?"

"I knew Han took Ben with him on the *Falcon,*" Leia confirmed. "However, I was under the impression they weren't doing anything *dangerous.* I should have known better."

Rey giggled a little.

"You were right to leave Coruscant quickly. Lando is not someone you want to cross." The General hummed. "I'm really concerned about that leak now."

"Do you want me to go?"

"No, no. Do you know what information he gave Ben?"

"He told him about how you have General Hux, and how Hux had an informant from the Order. He told him where the Resistance would be next. That was it. He didn't know anything else. Not even how you *got* General Hux."

"That was a conversation I was planning on having with the two of you," Leia said. "It could be worse. It's not Lando I'm concerned about, though I'm surprised he told Ben anything given what happened with his father…" She trailed off. "Let's not worry about that right now. Here, I'm almost done with your hair."
Rey chewed her lip, lost in thought.

She badly wanted to discuss something with Leia. She was only uncertain of how it would be received. But surely not so terribly…?

"General?" Rey asked, her voice quavering a little.

"Please call me Leia," the other woman insisted. "Really. I mean it."

"Okay," Rey said a little shyly. "I… I can't really talk about… this with Ben. But—I do need to talk about it, and I don't know… I don't know who else I could…" She cleared her throat. This was more difficult than she had thought it would be.

Leia was quiet, waiting patiently.

Rey let out a puff of breath. "I had a vision," she said.

"All right."

"And in this vision…" Rey wet her lips. "Ben and I had a child, a little girl."

Leia's fingers stilled in her hair.

Rey turned her head to see her for the first time in nearly an hour. She knew her eyes were wide and vulnerable because that was exactly how she felt. "He didn't take it well. He never… he said he never wanted to be a father. And—and I understand that. And I believe him. But in the vision, he was so…" Rey resumed looking forward. "He was a great father. And visions don't necessarily mean anything, I just…"

She just? What was she trying to say?

"…I wanted… I wanted you to know… I thought maybe—you'd be happy, or—"
"I am happy." The words were a little choked. There was a moment of silence. When Leia spoke again, she had her voice under control. "I'm very happy. I want that for the two of you. And... ah, hells, I'll say it. I never thought I'd get to be a grandmother. The thought that maybe I will be..."

Rey smiled to herself. She was glad she had told her.

"I have a lot to thank you for, Rey. For my son especially. If not for you..." She sighed. "He would be lost."

"I'm glad you pushed me to save him," Rey whispered.

Leia kissed the top of her head and then patted her shoulders. "I'm done. Go look in the mirror."

"Okay." Not knowing what to expect, but cheerful nonetheless, Rey climbed to her feet. Her limbs protested, and her foot was asleep. The tingles were uncomfortable as she made her way across the room to see her reflection.

Uh oh.

"You don't have to keep it," Leia said from behind her. "I just wanted to know what it would look like."

It did look pretty. It did.

That wasn't the problem.

When Ben saw this..."I saw you wear your hair like this in his memories," Rey said.

"I did for a long time," Leia replied. "Do you like it?"
Rey touched her gloved hands to the braided buns on each side of her head, over her ears. She liked it, yes. Would Ben? Not a chance.

"Yes," Rey said. Damn. Well, she couldn't undo it now. Not when Leia had bonded with her over it. She'd figure it out later, probably pull it out before she saw Ben again.

Rey turned to the general. "May I ask you something?"

"Sure," Leia replied, blinking in curiosity. "Do you want to take the braids out? I'll understand."

Ah, double-damn. That wasn't what she had been about to ask, but now she was going to have to carry the hairstyle at least for a day. Leia's happiness weighed more than Ben's discomfort in that moment.

"No, I love the braids." Rey came back over to her. "Are you... Are you okay with—... Ben and I being together?"

Leia laughed in surprise. "Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know." Rey lowered her eyes.

Leia sighed fondly and took Rey's hands in her own. How her hands weren't cubes of ice, Rey had no idea. "You have my full-hearted approval." She squeezed Rey's hands. "I couldn't be happier about it."

"Okay." Rey smiled shyly again. "Thanks." She wondered how full-hearted her approval would be once her plans with Ben unraveled. She'd cross that road when she came to it.

"Don't mention it." Leia released her. "I wish I could get you in to see Hux sooner, but it's a bit of an ordeal. You'll see him tomorrow, first thing."

"Great." Rey was halfway across the room when she turned again. "Leia... I want you to have a
family again. I'd like to give that to you."

And like Leia had pretended she hadn't seen Rey's tears earlier, Rey now extended the same courtesy. She gave one last smile and headed out of the room.

She was relatively certain she could find her way back. She even managed to get halfway there before she ran into another familiar face.

"Rey!"

"Oh! Poe!" Rey swallowed as she came to a stop.

"I heard you were here. I almost didn't believe it." Poe's eyes took in her hair buns, assessing. He flashed his usual grin. "You were with the General, huh?"

"Maybe," Rey chuckled.

"You look good."

Rey hesitated.

"I didn't get to see what happened at Venia. Are the stories true?"

"Maybe," she said again.

She felt… awkward. She didn't know why. They hadn't parted well, and it had been years. But Poe's brown eyes were filled with his usual roguish good humor and confidence, and his curls were still tousled around his head. He had on civilian clothes, bundled up just like the rest of them.

"About what happened—"
"I'm sorry I was such an ass—"

They blinked at each other as they spoke at once, and then laughed. The sound broke the tension.

"It's okay," Rey said good-naturedly.

"Look, it was good to see you. I'll have to catch up with you later, I need to meet with my team. Don't freeze to death, okay?"

"I'll try. I can't make any promises."

They waved and parted ways.

Rey wondered who else she would bump into on the way back to her room.

It turned out to be Ben. They almost crashed into each other coming around a corner. Had he been searching for her with the bond?

She looked at him. He looked at her. His eyes migrated to her hair.

She waited for his head to explode.

Keep it, he said after a few more moments fraught with tension.

You don't hate it?

I feel as though I should. But I don't.

Well. That was good. Right?
Did you find anything out about Hux?

She said we can go see him in the morning. What were you looking for?

You.

Oh?

You seemed… I don’t know what you seemed. Upset, I suppose. And you had the walls up. I was coming to see if you were okay.

I am. Your mother and I had a heart to heart.

Ah, he said, like that explained everything. Perhaps it did.

Well, now what?

Now we go back to our room.

And?

We practice handling a power trip.

Rey swallowed. What does that mean?

You know exactly what it means.

We don’t have anyone to—
This place is full of people.

Innocent people.

Do you really think every person on this base is innocent?

No, but how would we tell the difference?

There are ways. Trust me. Now follow me.

Rey watched his back as he took off. She wasn't sure how she felt. She didn't want to torture anyone for no reason at all. Or beat them up. Or cause them unwarranted pain in general.

He sighed and showed her his thoughts, his intentions.

Her breath caught.

Oh.

Why are we doing this?

Because I found it immensely arousing watching you on Coruscant. His eyes glittered at her. And you're half a step away from sliding into darkness if you don't learn control.

I had control! she protested, even as her body flushed.

Barely.

Damn, but she hated it when he was right.
It wasn't even going to be that big of a deal. Find someone susceptible to mind tricks and manipulate them. It didn't require anyone getting hurt. Yet he wanted to watch her do this. He'd said because he found it attractive, but it was so small a thing…

*Fine, but that means I get to watch you interrogate Hux.*

Ben narrowed his eyes. He stepped close until he was in her space again, looking down at her. Her pulse thudded at her throat.

*You like that?*

*M-Maybe…*

He pulled her against him and brought his lips to her ear. She could hear his quickened breathing, could feel the outline of his arousal against her stomach.

*Which part do you like?*

She couldn't believe they were having this discussion. She couldn't believe she was humoring him!

*I… It was difficult to think like this. I like watching you… I like the way you look…*

*Tell me the rest.*

No. She couldn't.

*Tell. Me.*

*I like the way—…* Rey clenched her eyes shut. She was afraid, afraid to say it to him.
Tell me! His hand squeezed over her hip.

She had been so cold, so cold she couldn't stand it, but now she was on fire. She almost resented him for it.

I like the way—I like the way you make them scream.

Ben's mouth crashed onto hers. He pushed her against the wall, his body hiding hers from view. His kisses were rough, heated. His teeth sank into her lips. She did her best to keep up with him, her hands fisted in his coat.

Ben—

He broke away. He was breathing hard.

Don't forget.

Forget what? she asked in a daze.

That half of us is darkness. We toe the line. Nothing more.

She nodded quickly. It wasn't like she was telling Ben to go interrogate people. She just kind of enjoyed it when he did. Damn, what in hells was wrong with her?

Nothing is wrong with you. Nothing. I love you. He kissed her forehead. It's okay, Rey. I won't let you fall. I promise.

O-Okay.

Do you believe me? He looked into her eyes.
"Yes," she whispered.

_We're balanced. And these things were already inside of us when we found that balance. That's why I said we toe the line. Do you trust me?_

"Yes."

_You need to practice more, or it will catch up with you and spiral out of control. That's how the darkness works._ He gathered himself, actively slowing his breathing. Pulled himself from the threshold of temptation. _We'll wait. You're right. It's better that way._

_For?_

_Hux._

Rey smiled. Now that, she could do.
"You came to me on your own." Leia set her tablet down, shifting figures around. She was seated at her desk. She wouldn't lift her eyes.

Ben tried not to fidget. He hadn't been alone with his mother in years. Rey had been at his side each time he'd encountered her. Not that he minded. He preferred it really. But he couldn't sleep, and he was restless, and it was his mother…

He blamed the light inside of him. Before, he would have said it made him weak. Now he would say that it had its downsides. Either way, he couldn't ignore it. The darkness wasn't there to submerge him, to make him pretend he didn't love her.

After a few minutes of silence, Leia finally glanced at him. She sighed, and a small smile touched the corner of her mouth. Ben remembered how she would play with his hair before he went to sleep at night, soothing him into slumber. She wouldn't leave his side until then. He barely saw her, saw either of his parents, but before she went out to parties or meetings, she did at least that much.

"I don't know what you want me to say, Ben."

"I don't want you to say anything," he replied.

"Then why are you here? On Naboo—"

"Because I—" He frowned and lowered his eyes.

He didn't know why.
"I'm sorry," he found himself saying.

He heard her chair move over the floor. A moment later, her footsteps shuffled until she was right in front of him. Her hands cupped his face, and his eyes burned, and he closed them because he didn't want her to see. He was still so weak. He wondered if that would ever change. But Rey was slowly teaching him that emotions weren't bad. That they meant something—that they meant he was alive, not dead inside.

"I know," Leia said. "I know you are."

His lips trembled. His nose burned. He blinked fast and turned his face away.

"I'm not..." He trailed off. Frustration was building at his inadequacy. He'd never opened up easily, not even to his own mother. "When you were on the bridge... I didn't—I didn't shoot. I couldn't."

Her hands slipped away. "I thought you had. I almost died."

Agony tore at him anew. "Someone else shot. If I had known they were going to, I would have... stopped it. I would have frozen it. I wouldn't have let you be hurt." He looked her in the eyes, uncaring of the desperation he knew was in his gaze, his voice.

She placed her hands against his chest. She was so tiny, his mother. Once, he had been the tiny one. He had fit in her arms, on her lap. And she was strong, fierce. Everyone took her seriously, no one doubted her. How many times had he been on the other end of that stern glare? How many times had she called out to him, telling him to stay out of trouble? He was haunted by the decisions he had made, the actions he had taken. His mother was alone now, and it was his fault.

"Ben," she said softly. "You are my son. You are a part of me. I still remember carrying you inside of me." Her smile was rueful. "I love you. I will always love you."

They hadn't been able to talk like this on Naboo. Ben had still been unfamiliar with Rey's light inside of him, had been unwilling to face anyone from his past. He'd done it to make Rey happy. It had been good seeing his mother, but he hadn't been ready. He wasn't even sure if he was ready now.
"Thank you for telling me," Leia said. Then she put her arms around him and rested her cheek against his chest. Every other time she'd hugged him, he had stood awkwardly. Now he tentatively wrapped his arms around her in turn.

His voice came out in a hoarse whisper. "I... I love you, too, Mom."

Rey's eyes slipped open. It took her a moment to orient herself. Her thoughts were still tangled with Ben's. She had to breathe and put herself back in her own mind. She sat up in bed, looking around, already knowing Ben was gone. The "dream" must be happening right now, then.

She was freezing. She tugged her boots on, shoved her arms into her coat. She'd pulled it off to take a nap. She wondered what time it was. Would Finn be awake?

The hallways weren't as busy as before, but they weren't empty, either. Rey sniffed, still shaking sleep away. She hated naps. It left her feeling so drained. This one had caught her by surprise, and she'd surrendered to it. Maybe it was a good thing, though. Ben had gone to his mother, and that was more important.

"Excuse me?" Rey reached out to a passing technician. Her voice was still thick with sleep. "Do you know—do you know who Finn is?" The Resistance was much bigger now. It was entirely possible not everyone was familiar with every single member.

"Yeah. He's a few hallways over, just keep going right, you'll get there eventually."

"Thanks."

If Ben was occupied with Leia, then Rey would seek out Finn. She had missed him terribly, so what better time to catch up?

The hallways were a little more difficult to maneuver when one was drowsy. Rey peered around, trying to shake the grogginess off. She eventually did, and when she made it around the third
hallway, she could hear voices.

"Well, tell him I'll be there soon!"

_Bweeeep whooo._

"I will be!"

_Whooommmmm._

"BB-8, I swear—Rey!"

"Finn!"

They ran at each other, knocking the breath out of one another as they collided and embraced tightly. Rey had seen him on the battlefield, but that hadn't been a proper place for a reunion. She clung onto her best friend, her eyes shining with tears. Then she pulled away, sniffling around a laugh.

"It's so good to see you!" she said. "See you when I'm not dealing with the First Order, I mean."

"Rey, I'm just so glad you're alive. I know I said it then. But I can't say it enough." Finn held her by her shoulders. "Are you going to tell me what happened?"

"We were training on this planet that was a vergence in the Force. It didn't follow the laws of space-time, I guess, because when we got back, four years had passed." Rey may have told Leia the truth, but that didn't mean she wanted everyone else to know, not even Finn.

Oh, but how would she explain her long hair?

"Okay," Finn said slowly. "I'm going to pretend I understood half of that."
Good, he wasn't giving it a second thought.

"But at least you're here now! We need your help now more than ever!"

Rey had been a little afraid of this. "The Resistance has really gotten so big," she said.

BB-8 rolled into her legs.

She grinned and knelt in front of him. "Hey, there, BB-8."

He whistled merrily.

"I missed you."

A series of beeps and clicks.

"You missed me, too? I would hug you if I could."

Beeeeeeeep.

Rey laughed and put her arms around the spherical droid. Then she rose, and BB-8 rolled away, whistling all the while. Finn muttered gloomily.

"You were fighting with BB-8 when I got here. What about?"

"Nothing. Poe's just being really demanding right now. We have a lot going on."

"Oh, so... so you're on his team, then?"
"Yeah, I'm a pilot." Finn grinned proudly. "Have been for a while. One of the best."

"That's great. I saw Rose. She said you two were married!"

"Oh, that…" Finn's grin grew a little shy. It was an expression she hadn't seen on him before. "Yeah, we got married about six months ago."

"That's really great," Rey said again. "You two are good together." She experienced a strange pang. After a moment, she was able to identify it as sadness. No one would ever tell Rey that Ben was good for her. No one would ever approve. She didn't need their approval at all, it just…

Nothing in her life would ever be normal again.

"You think so?" Finn fished.

Rey smiled. "I know so."

Rey?

She withdrew inwardly. **Ben?**

**Where are you?**

*I'm with Finn.*

No response.

That about figured.

"I keep seeing you do that," Finn said.
"See me do what?" Rey tilted her head.

"Your face gets all weird." Finn mimicked what he must have thought she looked like. "Like this. And you go super still. Then you relax again."

"Oh, um…" Rey chuckled nervously. She wasn't sure what she should tell him. But surely a smidgen of the truth was harmless? "Didn't you see me do that when we were together before?"

"Uh huh. It was weird then, and it's weird now."

"Ben was talking to me," she said.

"Like… telepathically?"

"Yeah, um… so I'm not keeping you from Poe?" Rey shoved her gloved hands into her coat pockets. Everyone hated the cold here, but she had it worse. She'd grown up in a very hot, very dry desert, and she now regretted every wish she'd ever had that she could experience the cold just once.

"He can wait just a minute."

"Or I could walk with you?" Rey offered.

"Yeah, okay," Finn said agreeably.

They made it an entire hallway without talking. It was highly unusual. Finn was a chatterbox. Maybe he just felt strange being around her after so many years? The thought made her sad again. She loved Finn. He was the first friend she'd ever had.

"Speaking of Poe…" Finn began.
"Oh, no."

"Kylo—" He saw her look. "…Ben really did a number on him."

"Uh huh," she agreed. This was not what she wanted to talk about.

"You didn't even try to stop him."

"They were going to fight eventually," Rey said. "It was better it happened when Ben wouldn't use the Force on him. Or a lightsaber." Really, it could have been much worse. Ben could have killed Poe. He would have, if it wasn't for Rey.

"But—"

"Finn?"

"Yeah, Rey?"

"Is this really what you want to talk about after four years?"

"No, I guess not," Finn muttered. "So is… Ben any different?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is he going to help us fight the First Order now?"

All the awkward topics, rolled into one package.

"Are you?" Finn pressed.
"We're going to fight the First Order," Rey said. Hopefully that would be enough.

It was. Finn gave a whoop of delight.

"But keep that to yourself for now, okay?" Rey stressed.

"Why?"

"The First Order doesn't know we're here," she said. "And… it needs to stay that way." They came to a stop in a corridor outside the hangar. "Please just take my word for it?"

"Yeah, sure, okay…"

"It was good seeing you."

Finn gave her one last hug, which she returned. She smiled as he waved and disappeared into the hangar.

That was touching.

I didn't realize it would be so hard.

He didn't need to ask what she meant. He already knew.

Are you hungry?

So hungry.

I figured out where the cafeteria is.
You're going in there? Rey asked, surprised. Ben desired to be seen by as few people as possible.

I'm hungry.

Fair enough.

I'll meet you there. Show me where it is?

Rey mused to herself as she made her way to the cafeteria. Her hands were warm enough to take off her gloves, so she tended to her hair, which she knew was likely standing up. It gave her fingers something to do while she tried to figure out how she felt about what had happened earlier that day. When Ben had told her he was going to teach her to toe the line.

Oftentimes, Ben's darkness was buried, fueling the balance between them. It rarely rose to the surface in obvious ways. So he was right, in that regard. She had absolutely zero practice with handling it. And she did need to learn. It wasn't like it was ever going to go away. Trying to master control over it to some degree was better than letting it run amok and tipping her over.

Four years ago, she would have readily said that she would never be tempted to go completely over to the dark side. Even when she'd bargained with Ben, back before they'd completed their bond, some part of her had known she could prevail in the face of his darkness. It was different now. That darkness was a part of her and had begun to show itself like the creeping, insidious thing that it was.

She remembered what it was like being on the other end of Ben's interrogations. Yet now she enjoyed his methods on others? It didn't bother her. Should it have? Before it would have. Was questioning this futile, creating more trouble than it was worth? It seemed like a waste to mourn the loss of her innocence when it wasn't going to change how she felt presently.

Ben would help her get it under control when it occurred. She trusted him.

The smell of food reached her as she hit the cafeteria. Ben was propped against a wall, arms folded, looking imposing as usual. When Rey saw him, the rest of her worries melted away.

Waiting for me?
He nodded.

*What are the chances this food is really awful?*

*High. It could be worse. It could be space preserves.*

Rey wrinkled her nose.

But...

*I'm so hungry, I'm willing to risk it.*

They got their food, heaping piles of something unidentifiable, and found a table. The room wasn't very large. People were in and out so much it didn't make sense to dedicate a giant room to the cause.

Neither spoke until their stomachs were full enough to stop growling.

*The Resistance somehow discovered the First Order's planet, where they kept their prisoners. They were looking for information, so they took several high-profile prisoners and Armitage Hux. The former were useless, and the latter was spotted with a Knight of Ren bestowing him information before they left. I do not even know how they managed to remain undetected.*

*At any rate, they did.*

*They're holding them in a prison here, but it's deep beneath even this base, and the security clearance to get there... well, it would be nothing for us, but it's better to play nice for now. We'll be going first thing in the morning.*

*Is Leia going to let us be alone with him?*
If she doesn't, we'll dissuade the guards.

It sounds like a plan.

More chewing.

Ben didn't look at her as he soaked a piece of bread in the tepid soup they'd been served. It was evident that most of the foodstuffs did not come from this planet. He'd avoided the strange vegetables entirely.

Are you changing your mind?

About what? Rey washed down her meal with an equally tepid drink. She pushed her tray away. She had grown tired of the food in the vergence, but fresh fruits and fish were much better than this.

About… what we discussed earlier.

About toeing the line?

He nodded. I heard your thoughts on the way here.

I'm only worried. But… it's okay. I worked through it. I trust you. Rey could see now what she hadn't before: Ben was looking forward to this, and the idea that she might back out was disappointing to him. Really, it's okay.

He looked considerably more cheerful at that. Tomorrow, then.

Tomorrow, she agreed.
So, there hasn't been a chapter this long since chapter five! It's a very close tie, I think this one is, like, three words longer or something. There's a lot going on! And, as always, I have the warning! Proceed with caution, this is NOT WORK SAFE!

Rey knocked on Leia's door. It was incredibly early, and she was having trouble keeping her eyes open. She knew as soon as she got going more, she'd perk up. She hadn't gotten a wink of sleep last night. Her thoughts had spiraled around what would happen today. Ben had eventually put up the
wall enough so that he could sleep, even if she couldn't.

She wasn't sure where the General was, or when this was supposed to begin. But she couldn't sit around and wait. She was far too antsy beneath the exhaustion.

There wasn't a response, so she knocked again, more clearly. "Leia?" she called.

Rey waited a few minutes before carefully opening the door and peeking her head in. The General was nowhere to be found. Her eyes caught sight of Leia's ring on her desk, the gold one inlaid with two blue stones. Surely the woman couldn't be too far away? She wore that thing everywhere.

"Hellooooo?" Rey kept her voice low. "Anyone there?"

Shoulders slumping, she sighed and came into the room. She supposed it wouldn't hurt to wait for the General to return. It was warmer in here than it had been yesterday, so she took off her gloves and stuffed them in her pockets. She really needed to get some of these heaters in her own room. The cold would be so much bearable then.

She'd even let Ben spoon her last night, and she never let him spoon her, because he was huge and smothered her. It was usually her who did the spooning. But desperate times called for desperate measures. And it hadn't been too bad, really. Not something she wanted to make a habit of, but welcome at the time all the same.

Rey looked at Leia's ring again as she chewed on her lip. She made her way over to the desk.

*Is she there?*

*No.*

Ben sampled her thoughts. *You're going to wait for her?*

*I don't see why not.* Rey tilted her head to the side. *Ben, do you know where your mother got this ring?* She showed him.
No. Why does it matter?

I… I've felt this before…

Felt what before? Alarm shifted through the bond.

This pull, I've felt it twice before…

Rey picked up the ring.

The world as she knew it went dark. She stumbled away, caught unprepared each and every time this happened. It was because her surroundings became so real, it was as if she was a part of them. As she fell back, the sounds of blasters going off filled the air. The hallway that engulfed her was the same one she'd first seen on Takodana, something from the imperial era.

What is this?

Ben's voice was so far away, and then it was gone entirely.

Leia was young, so young. She had to be roughly around Rey's age, when Rey had started her adventures. A long white gown trailed to the floor, and she knelt in front of a much shinier R2-D2. She was recording a message, and Rey caught the tail end.

"Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You're my only hope."

The image fell into fragments, and harsh breathing filled her ears. She looked behind her and then gasped, falling away from a tall figure in black. He had on a helmet, and Leia was before him, her hands cuffed. He had his hand on her shoulder, restraining her as she stared, trembling, at the scene before her. An entire planet exploded like it was nothing.

Rey swallowed and turned away, unable to look. She was in a prison cell, and Leia was sprawled out, stirring from her sleep to see a stormtrooper before her.
"Aren't you a little short to be a stormtrooper?" she asked skeptically.

"Huh? Oh, the uniform!" The trooper took off his helmet to reveal Luke, his face so fresh and innocent. "I'm Luke Skywalker. I'm here to rescue you!"

"You're who?"

"I'm here to rescue you! I've got your R2 unit! I'm here with Ben Kenobi!"

Rey was just processing the "Ben" in that when the scene melted into another corridor. Han was heading toward them, also in stormtrooper gear, a blaster in his hands.

"Looks like you managed to cut off our only escape route," she said scathingly.

"Maybe you'd like it back in your cell, Your Highness," he snarled.

The memories began trickling faster. There was a stint in a smelly chute, in which they almost got crushed after dealing with some sort of tentacle creature.

"Put that thing away! You're gonna get us all killed!"

"Absolutely, Your Worship! Look, I had everything under control 'til you led us down here!"

Rescued by C-3PO and R2-D2.

"I take orders from just one person: me!"

"It's a wonder you're still alive."
A procession of events that involved close calls with death. It was truly a wonder they had made it off the ship they were on in one piece. Rey could only deduce that it was the Death Star, perhaps the first one. What else could have destroyed a planet like it was nothing? And through it all, Han and Leia's bickering remained consistent.

Rey found herself next in the cockpit of the *Falcon*. Han was looking smug as he pulled off a glove.

"Not a bad bit of rescuing, huh? You know, sometimes I amaze even myself."

Leia smirked, unimpressed. "That doesn't sound too hard."

The memories whirled, flashing by. Taking on the Death Star, the Rebellion's victory. Tears poured down Rey's face. Not just for Han, but also for Luke. Were these the memories tied to this ring? Were these the things Leia reflected on?

Han's winning over of Leia was slow going. She was resistant to his charms, and they continued to fight. The war with the Empire continued, until they were on Hoth, which looked as cold as Arna III, although Leia had said it wasn't.

"Come on, you want me to stay because of the way you feel about me!"

"Yes! You're a great help to us. You're a natural leader!"

"No! That's not it! Come on. Ah-ha! Come on!"

"You're imagining things!"

"Am I? Then why are you following me? Afraid I was gonna leave without giving you a good-bye kiss?"

"I'd just as soon kiss a wookie!"
"I can arrange that! YOU COULD USE A GOOD KISS!"

Luke was injured, and to spite Han, Leia kissed him. Rey knew they thought they weren't related, but it still made her cringe.

"Why you stuck up, half-witted, scruffy-looking nerf herder!" echoed around Rey as Rey ran away, desperate to be free of these memories. They were painful, she didn't want to be a part of them any longer.

The world swayed, trying to hold her in, trying to enfold her in new memories. Han and Leia's voices rang out around her, chasing her. Rey could see the light ahead—she was almost free.

"You like me because I'm a scoundrel. There aren't enough scoundrels in your life."

"I happen to like nice men."

"I love you!"

"I know."

"Rey! Rey! Rey, stop—calm down! Rey!"

Rey inhaled deeply, her lungs burning as if she'd been deep underwater. It took her a moment to realize where she was. In Leia's room on Arna III. The other woman was holding her arms. She heard something hit the floor and looked down to find the ring spinning between their feet before coming to a halt.

Leia cupped Rey's face in her hands. She soothed stray strands of hair off her forehead. "What's wrong? What happened?"

Rey shook her head mutely. Her throat was too tight, her thoughts were too tied up. She was shaking, and it had nothing to do with the cold. The other memories had never impacted her like this. The other memories had never starred Han and Luke, not like this.
"I can't—I—I have to go!" Rey sputtered.

"What are you talking about? Rey!" Leia cried as Rey flung herself out of the room, running blindly. She didn't know where she was going. It didn't matter, so long as it was far away from here.

There was a corner in the hangar that was left undisturbed. Rey sat curled up in it, legs to her chest, arms around her shins, the hood of her coat pulled over her eyes. She wasn't crying anymore, but she was numb. Ben hadn't said a single word. Rey knew he had seen it all.

A pair of boots crossed her line of sight. Rey didn't look up, focused on the ground. Her jaws hurt from how tightly her teeth were gritted against the cold.

"Hey there." Poe crouched before her. "The General is looking for you."

"Okay," Rey said hoarsely.

Poe opened his mouth and shut it.

"I'll be back soon," Rey said. "I just need a moment."

His hand reached out and pushed her hood up. He gazed at Rey until she lifted her eyes to his. His softened at the corners, and he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Don't," she whispered.

Poe's hand dropped. "If... he wasn't here... would I have ever stood a chance?"
Rey couldn't say anything. She wouldn't even know where to begin. Ben must have been listening more closely than she'd thought, because a wave of anger came from him. Poe was in so much danger, and he had no idea.

She stood up and wiped her nose. "I have to go. I need to see the General."

"Rey…" He touched her shoulder.

"Poe, stop!" She didn't mean to lash out at him, but it happened. "You're my friend. You will only ever be my friend. I don't want to hurt you—please stop making me."

"I'm not satisfied with that answer!" Poe followed her. He grabbed her arm and dragged her back to him.

"I don't care if you're satisfied or not!" Rey shouted. They weren't alone in the hangar, and their voices carried. Heads turned in their direction. She lowered her voice with effort. "Let. Me. Go."

"How can I know you're safe?"

"It's not your job to know if I'm safe!"

"If we really are friends, then it is my job!" Poe jerked his chin up. "You disappeared for four years with Kylo Ren! I'm not supposed to question that?! Do you think I'm the only one worried about it?!"

"I don't care!" Rey was so frustrated, she could scream. This was not the time to be dealing with this. Not with what had happened in Leia's room, and not with what faced her under the base, in the prison cells.

"You should care!" Poe bellowed back. "He's evil, Rey! He's killed hundreds of thousands of people! Do you really think he can just change?!"

"I do!" she yelled.
"Then you're an idiot!"

"YOU'RE THE IDIOT!" Rey finally let her scream out. She ripped her arm violently out of his grip. "And if you continue to act this way, then I can't be your friend!"

"You're making a bad decision!"

"You're the one making a bad decision, Commander Dameron!"

The use of his title made his eyes go flat. "So that's the way it's going to be, then?"

"That's the way it's going to be," she replied.

"I can't believe you won't even listen to reason."

Rey was so exasperated she threw her hands up. "I can't believe we're having this discussion! Right here, right now! Because if you knew *a thing* about me, you would know to stop! But you don't know, Poe!" She thrust a finger at him. "I'm not as precious as you think I am, and I resent the fact that you can't look past your feelings for me to see the truth!"

"So I imagined all of it?" He stepped close, against her finger. "I imagined the way you looked at me, spoke to me? You kissed me!"

"I kissed your cheek!" Rey snapped, even as Ben's anger boiled to white and blinding.

"It's the same difference!"

"WHY ARE YOU SO STUBBORN?!"

"WHY ARE YOU?!"
"I AM NOT IN LOVE WITH YOU!" Rey advanced, and Poe staggered back. "I WILL NEVER BE IN LOVE WITH YOU! AND NO, IF BEN WASN'T HERE, I WOULD STILL NOT BE IN LOVE WITH YOU!"

"AND I DON'T BELIEVE THAT FOR A SECOND! I KNOW WHAT I SAW, I KNOW WHAT YOU FELT!"

"YOU'RE IMAGINING THINGS, POE!"

"I AM NOT! AND HE'S BAD FOR YOU, REY! THE THINGS YOU TOLD ME HE SAID—HE'S BAD FOR YOU! HE'S NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR YOU!"

"Whoa, hey!" Finn stepped between them, putting Rey at his back. "Poe, hey! Poe! Calm down! Back off, man!" He put his hands against Poe's chest and shoved when Poe refused to relent. "Back off! Walk it off! Walk it off!"

Poe growled and stalked off, kicking something on his way that clattered and rolled. Technicians jumped out of the way, avoiding his wrath.

Finn turned to her. "Hey, are you okay?"

Rey shook her head, ducking it so he couldn't see the tears in her eyes. She was going to burst into sobs at any moment, and she didn't want to do it here, in front of an audience.

"Okay." Finn wrapped his arm around her shoulders and steered her out of the hangar. He shushed her and rubbed her arm until they were deep within the base, in an isolated corridor. "It's okay." Her face crumpled, and he pulled her face against his shoulder, holding her close. "Shhh, it's okay."

He glanced up suddenly. "Oh. Rey, uh…"

Rey sniffled and lifted her head. Ben was there. He looked murderous, but it wasn't directed at her. He held out a hand. She took it, and he pulled her away. She waved goodbye to Finn, who waved back with a weak, worried smile.
Ben didn't say anything until they were back in their room. Rey wrapped her arms around herself, uncertain of what would happen.

"I will kill him," Ben threatened.

"Don't," she said. "I took care of it." She wiped at her eyes, letting her gloves soak her tears.

"Yes, this is clearly you taking care of it." He sat on the bed and pulled her onto his lap. He pressed her face to his chest.

She wriggled until she was comfortable and leaned into him. "We'll be leaving after we interrogate Hux, and then we won't see him again. We should go find your mother."

"Or maybe we should talk about what happened with the ring."

She swallowed. "It's happened before, it's not unusual. With Luke's lightsaber on Takodana, and again on Naboo with your bird figurine."

"And you just… see these memories?"

"Yes."

"That clearly?"

"Yes."

They were quiet for a while.

*I've never seen my father like that. They told me stories, but this was different.*
Are you all right?

What do you think?

You'll hate me for saying it, but you really are a lot like your father.

You're right, I hate you for saying it. When she lifted her head, he pulled a face. I just want to pretend it didn't happen. Can we do that?

Sure. All right.

Are you ready to find my mother, or do you need more time to—?

No. Let's do this. I want to think about anything else. Anything else other than what happened in the last hour.

I am in complete agreement.

"Rey, are you sure you're okay?" Leia's face was creased with concern.

"I am. I promise."

Leia clearly didn't buy it, but she didn't press her. "I'm going to lead you to where the lift is. They know to expect you down there." She hesitated. "If you get anything out of him, don't hesitate to share?"

"Sure," Rey said, knowing they wouldn't be able to share everything.
"Excellent." She took them through a maze of corridors that required clearance after clearance. When they made it to the lift, she cupped Rey's cheek and patted Ben on the chest with her other hand. "All right. I'll see you two later."

Leia watched as they climbed onto the lift and it began to lower. Rey held her gaze until she disappeared from view.

Do you still feel up to this?

Isn't that what I should be asking you?

I'm fine.

So am I.

Okay, then.

Okay.

It got darker the deeper they went into the base. The lighting was sparser down here. The lift rolled to a stop, and they got off it, taking in their surroundings. The ice patches on the walls were numerous. It was colder than above, but not like on the surface.

They came across two guards.

"Ben Solo and Rey?"

Neither of them said a word.

"Come with me." One of the guards departed from the other and started down a corridor.
You need a last name.

Rey wasn't sure what he meant by that statement, and she didn't inquire. She'd never had a last name. She'd had ample time to adjust to it. Did that mean she liked it? Of course not. Who wanted to feel like they didn't belong anywhere? As Ben had told her years ago, she came from nothing, she was nothing.

Poe's shouts that he didn't like what Ben had told her were a phantom whisper at her ear.

You know that I know that you are not nothing. I've said before that I should have worded that better.

I know.

Do you?

I do. She glanced at him.

Good.

They came around a corner, and the prison revealed itself. Unlike the cells on the Death Star, these were bigger, and had a thick wall of glass in front of them, so the contents were visible. As they passed the cells, they were able to see most of the prisoners were likely former stormtroopers. Half of them brooded, the other half were asleep on benches bolted into the walls.

They kept walking. When they finally encountered Hux, he was in a chair similar to the one Rey had found herself in. Bands kept him in place. Like the other cells, there was an intercom next to the glass that allowed speech back and forth. Nothing would get past that glass, not even sound.

The good news was that he was isolated enough that they could conduct their business. The bad news was the guard wasn't leaving. He'd stationed himself against the wall.

I'll do it. Rey waved her hand and said the magic words. The guard hobbled off without a
backward glance.

Ben stepped in front of the glass. Hux saw him, and his face went apoplectic. It turned red enough to match his hair, and his mouth moved, no doubt streaming with obscenities. He had a beard on his face that looked like it had been there for a while.

Rey took a breath and held it. She pressed the intercom.

"—and a filthy traitor to the First Order!" Hux finished with a heave of his chest.

The smile Ben gave Hux was more than a little sinister.

"Armitage Hux," he said. "We meet again."

"Did the Resistance send you to question me?" Hux sneered.

"I sent myself to question you." Ben chuckled darkly. "Look at you. Not the grandiose mark you planned to make on the world. Without Snoke, you are nothing. Your aspirations are worthless. Meaningless."

Hux took the taunt. "And you're doing so much better, Supreme Leader? You're garbage! You were then, and you are now, especially since you are allied with rebel scum!"

"Still so loyal to the Order," Ben all but purred. "How long have you been in a cell exactly? Oh, yes. I believe it's been about four years? Yet here I stand, free, while you remain imprisoned, tossed from one organization to the other, useful only for canon fodder."

"If I am so useless, Kylo Ren, why are you here?" Hux snarled. "Clearly I am worth something if you've deigned to grace me with your presence."

Ben tipped his head up a notch in acknowledgment. "I suppose you're right. But I wonder what you'll be once I'm through with you?"
"The worst you could do is kill me, and believe me, you would be doing me a favor!" Hux leaned forward against his restraints. His hands were clenched into fists.

"There are things worse than death," Ben said softly. "You know that as well as anyone. But I suppose you need reminding." He looked to Rey. "You can go first."

She put herself in Hux's line of sight.

"Ah, yes, you must be the girl who has caused so much trouble. Kylo always did have a weak heart. He failed to subvert you, nearly died at your hands, and then lost you once again once you murdered the Supreme Leader." Hux fixed her with an ugly glare.

Rey blinked. *You told him I killed Snoke…?*

*I was angry.*

She decided to let that one go. It was time to play good imperial, bad imperial. "My name is Rey, not that you care. Since you're so familiar with Kylo, then you know what will happen. He'll pull your thoughts directly from your mind, and it will be agonizing," she said with emphasis. "You have a chance to tell us what we want to know. I give you my word that if you tell us the truth—and we will know if you're lying—we'll walk away, and you won't see us ever again."

Hux's laugh was derisive. It was more than derisive—it was loud, and quickly escalating into maniacal. From what Rey knew about him, he'd always been a crazy bastard. Maybe he'd finally snapped completely.

He calmed himself a minute or so later, tears in his eyes. "Oh, that's lovely, Ren. Is she as stupid as she sounds?"

Rey was really beginning to resent being called stupid by members of the First Order. She kept her temper in check. "I'm stupid for granting you leniency if you cooperate?"

"You're stupid, *girl*, for thinking that I would ever agree to such a thing," the redhead snarled. "Or that I would ever believe you."
She chuckled to herself. "I've extended a courtesy, nothing more. I take it that you will not cooperate, then?"

"The two of you can go straight to—" He broke off with a scream as Ben exerted his will upon Hux's mind. It was high-pitched, almost girlish. Ben released him a moment later, and he stayed panting in his restraints, his face glistening with sweat. "Is that all you've got, Ren?" he goaded.

Ben smiled.

He extended his hand, his eyes closing. It was likely out of habit, as he didn't really need to do that anymore. Their command of the Force rarely called for concentrating unless they were doing something very strenuous.

Hux started screaming again, and he didn't stop. Rey tried to remain impartial—she really did. She folded her arms and managed to keep her expression neutral. On the inside, things were much different. Her heart was pounding, for one. For two, watching Ben was, as always… scintillating.

His long lashes brushed his cheeks. His face was almost peaceful, his brows lightly furrowed. She appreciated this profile of him. He looked handsome, and something about his intent was what was contributing to her pounding heart. To take something ugly and make it beautiful. He was so in command of himself.

Rey bit the inside of her lip. Her eyes flickered to Hux, who hadn't stopped his agonized cries. The knowledge Ben was searching for passed through Rey's thoughts. Hux was a pure fount of information when it came to the Knights of Ren. He was fighting Ben's will, and it was only making it worse for him.

This went on far longer than it had with the stormtrooper. The pulse of power Ben was using filtered through her, so that she shared in the high of collecting pertinent information. To have so much control over someone—to know they were useless to fight one's every whim.

Her mouth was dry. She looked down at the floor and tried not to think about the heat that was starting to throb through her. Both guards came running at the screams, and she sent them away again so that Ben didn't have to break his hold on Hux's mind.

Ben abruptly stopped and grabbed her. She had a second to wonder what was happening before he pressed her against the glass and his mouth crashed onto hers. Their arousal was sparking too high,
feeding into an endless loop between them. She parted her lips under his, her hands clenching into his coat.

Hux panted out an insult. Rey's fingers squeezed, and he cut off with a strangled gasp. She knew they needed to regain control, to rein it in just for now. But Ben's tongue was hot against hers, and she knew he was hard, and if she pressed herself against him just so—

She wrenched away, breathing hard. She released her hold on the Force before Hux choked to death. Ben buried his face against her shoulder.

*I want you.*

*I know. I want you, too. Let's finish this first.*

*I want you to do it now.*

*Okay.* She was nervous. She'd only done this once on Coruscant.

*I want to see you.*

She took a breath and pushed off the glass. Hux managed to look derisive. It didn't last long.

She exerted her will like a hammer, slamming it into Hux's mind. Ben watched her steadily, biting his lip, his lashes lowered as he leaned against the glass. His face was close to hers, and as Hux's yells rang out again, his teeth closed over her ear, his tongue sliding against the lobe. She swallowed a moan as heat prickled her skin. It was difficult to focus on the information they needed when he did that.

He dragged his lips to her neck, his fingers now gloveless as they moved over her thigh. Rey found herself actually concentrating in an effort to keep the interrogation going. Ben's hand slid between her legs, rubbing her through the cloth separating him from flesh.

*This is very unfair.*
You love it.

That wasn't the point.

Hux screamed more obscenities about how sick they were. Rey barely paid him any mind. Her attention was already split between pulling free what she needed to know, and what Ben was currently doing. Was this a test? Because if it was, she didn't think she was going to pass.

He came up behind her. His hand slid down the front of her trousers, and her breath hissed in as he pushed her panties aside and dipped his fingertips into her wet folds. He bit her ear again, her neck, kissed her throat. His fingers traveled down to her entrance, and he pushed two in, and then quickly a third.

I can't focus—

You're almost done. Finish it.

She was almost done. She could do this. She could.

You're so wet.

Obtaining information. She was obtaining information.

I want to be inside of you.

She was nearing the end of what the ex-general knew. She just had to be a little more patient.

Don't you want me inside of you?

Rey growled as she picked the last of what she needed out of Hux's head. The man slumped in his
restraints, unconscious. Rey whirled, tearing at Ben's clothes. It was a mutual endeavor. She was slammed against the wall beside the glass as they both got his trousers open. Then he was lifting her, she was wrapping her legs around his waist, and he was shoving inside of her, not stopping until she'd taken all of him.

He started a hard, fast pace. She clung onto his shoulders, mouth near his ear so he could hear her ragged breathing. His hand came up around her neck, pushing her back against the wall. His fingers curled just under her jaws, not quite cutting off her air, but with enough pressure that she could feel the strength he was holding back. She put a hand over his wrist and kept it there, staring into his eyes as he fucked her.

**You are mine.**

"Yours," Rey gasped out, and the sound only heightened his arousal. He growled, his fingers digging in a little more. She squeezed around him as she came, wet heat spilling over him, the grind against her clit too much to ignore.

"Yesss…" he hissed, biting his lip, his free hand digging into her hip. He jostled her higher on the wall and then put everything he had intoramming into her. She gripped onto his shoulder, closing her eyes and tilting her head back against the wall.

Then he moaned her name, pulling out of her, grunting as he pumped his cock. Seed spilled onto the floor. Rey didn't even want to think about how that was going to get cleaned up. She was too busy reveling in the aftermath.

His hand left her neck. She shifted onto her feet and pulled her panties and trousers back up. He took a moment to rest against the wall beside her, panting for breath. Rey took this opportunity to fix her hair. The wall had not been kind to her high ponytail, and it was now falling out of its band.

*Was that as good as you wanted?* A moment of insecurity took her.

He grabbed her hand, lacing their fingers as he lifted it to his mouth and kissed the back of it. It was all the energy he had left in him at the moment.

*Good. That's good.*
Don't be afraid.

I'm not.

Ben pushed himself back into a vertical position. He kissed her cheek. I love you.

She grinned at him.

I know.
Thank you, guys, so much for your responses to last chapter! This chapter is tying up some loose ends from it.

"It has to happen, Ben."

**Well, I don't like it!**

"There's two options! You can kill him, which is unacceptable, or you can let me really talk to him without fear that you're going to kill him!"

**No!**

"You don't trust me?"

Ben snarled at her, stopping briefly in his pacing to do so. **I don't trust him.**

Rey sighed and sat down on the bed. She'd known this conversation wouldn't go over well. She hadn't even wanted to bring it up. But she needed to. Poe was never going to even somewhat understand if she couldn't talk to him without a shadow. Being too afraid of how Ben would handle it made these encounters with Poe incredibly difficult.

She understood. Poe fancied himself in love with her, and Ben wanted to rip his head off. If the situation were reversed, she probably wouldn't take too kindly to it, either. That being said, she would trust Ben to handle what needed to be done.

"Ben, I really want to take care of this before we go," she said softly. "I don't want to leave it this way."
“Fine! Do whatever you want!”

And he stormed out of the room.

Rey buried her face in her hands.

"What do you want, Rey?" Poe didn't look up as he tended to his X-wing.

"Can we talk?" she asked. She had to lift her voice a little. The hangar was noisy with repairs and people coming and going. The opening in the ceiling was closed off to keep out the continuous blizzard.

"No," he said gruffly.

BB-8 twittered at him.

"Shut up, BB-8," it sounded like he muttered.

The droid drew back. His twitters turned into shrills.

Poe cursed and dropped his tool. He climbed down from the ship and landed with a slight jump in front of Rey. He had a smudge of dirt on his cheekbone, and his hair was sticking up in places. Exhaustion was soaked into the lines of his face. His eyes were cool, unfriendly.

He crossed his arms. "You don't want to talk to me every time I want to talk to you, and now you're here? Why?"

Rey inhaled. "I couldn't talk to you before."
"And why is that?" he sneered.

"Don't be nasty," Rey snapped. "I don't have to be here. But I'm trying. Doesn't that count for something?"

Poe had the grace to look ashamed. He sighed and scrubbed a hand over the back of his head. "Fine, okay." He started walking, and Rey followed. They came to a stop further away from the uproar of the hangar, where they didn't have to half-yell at each other to be heard.

"I couldn't talk to you before because of Ben," she said. She pushed on as he opened his mouth, "And not for the reason you think. We're connected through a bond in the Force."

"You told me that on Solaris."

"It's different now than it was on Solaris." Rey also crossed her arms. It was easier to look at the floor than it was to look at the ace pilot across from her. "We completed our bond. That means… it means we're—we're in each other's heads. We know everything the other is thinking and feeling. We can wall it off a little, like I'm doing now, if it's necessary, but… it's symbiotic."

"Symbiotic or unhealthy?"

"Symbiotic." Rey wet her lips and set her jaw. She collected her thoughts for a moment and then met his gaze. "He has my light inside of him. He's not evil, Poe. I know you want to think that, and maybe you always will, but he's not."

Poe shook his head. "I'm never going to trust him. I'm never going to forgive him."

"And that's your right," Rey said. "I don't expect you to. But you need to understand that… I don't need to be rescued."

He scoffed. "I'm not trying to rescue you." He turned to face the hangar at large, his fists on his hips.
"Poe, it's been four years, why—?"

"I don't know!" he said. He stepped in closer to her, and she made herself stay her ground. "I was over all of this. And then you show up—and you're so beautiful, Rey. And you're with him, and I can't stand it! Even—even if it's not with me, you deserve so much better!"

"He doesn't treat me horribly, Poe."

"Yeah, okay."

"What is it going to take to make you believe that I'm okay, that I don't need to be rescued?" she said exasperatedly.

"Stop—saying that about me rescuing you, it's not about that!"

"Isn't it?!"

"NO!"

"Then what is it about, Poe?!" They were yelling again, and Rey didn't like it, she needed it to stop. She put a hand to her forehead and walked a few paces away from him, showing him her back. Maybe this was a terrible idea. Maybe she should go.

She hated this. She wanted to make up with Poe, she wanted to be friends again, and he was making it so hard.

"Fine, maybe… it is about… rescuing you," Poe said behind her. "But that's only part of it. That doesn't make my feelings for you any less real. Do you think I like to be this way? Do you think I like flying off the handle? This isn't me! You drive me crazy, I— I see you, and I go crazy, I can't think! And then I do stupid shit! And it's going to wind up like it always does, where I say I'm sorry for being an asshole, and then turn around and be an asshole again a second later!"

Rey turned back around. "And you don't think that's unhealthy?"
"Don't—turn this back on me like that. Don't do that."

"It's what you're doing to me. It hurts me when you say those things about Ben. Leia has her son back, Poe. You respect Leia more than you respect anyone. You don't trust her judgment?"

"It's her son, her judgment is compromised," Poe said dismissively.

"Is it? Ben killed his father. Yet she still was able to forgive him? That goes beyond the bond of a mother and child." Maybe. She didn't know. She didn't have experience in that field.

Poe was shaking his head.

"Okay, I'm done. You refuse to be reasonable. I really tried, Poe."

Poe grasped her wrist before she could leave. "Rey, don't go."

"Why?" She let him keep her wrist for the moment. "Why are you doing this? Why do you want it to be like this between us? I don't understand!"

"Because I'm in love with you!" He released her to bury his fingers in his curls.

"So—so that's it, then?! You love me, but you can't have me, so we can't be friends, we can't make this right?!"

"Why is it so important that we remain friends?!"

"Because I don't have a lot of friends, and I value each one!"

"I don't want to be friends!"
"Fine!"

"I want to be as close as possible! I can't stand here and look at you and pretend that all I feel for you is friendship!"

"Why do you think you're in love with me?! You barely know me!"

"You barely knew Kylo Ren, and you fell in love with him!"

"That's different!"

"How, Rey?! How is that different?!"

"Because—because—"

"BECAUSE WHY?!"

"I DON'T HAVE TO ANSWER TO YOU!" Rey exploded. "Anything I say to you isn't going to matter! You're not going to believe me! So I'm not going to waste my time trying!" She whirled and stomped away.

He grabbed her elbow. Before she could go off on him about it, he had her up against him. She had precisely one second to digest this, and then he kissed her, cupping over her ear with his free hand.

She yanked away and slapped him.

Poe touched his cheek.

"Ben is my other half!" Rey yelled. There were tears in her eyes, and she hated him for it. "I can see the entirety of his mind. Do you think if he was evil I wouldn't know? Do you think that I don't know every single thing about him? What about you, Poe? What if I was inside of your mind? Would you hide things from me?"
"I—" Poe was flabbergasted. "Of course, that's normal, everyone has secrets—"

"Ben and I don't!" Rey returned. "We have no secrets! I know every single terrible thing he has done—and he knows every single terrible thing I have done! How do you think we took down the First Order on Venia? Do you think that someone could use the Force like that on their own? You have to be completely in sync with someone to do that! You have to spend four years training inside of someone's mind to do that!"

"I—"

"As much as it is possible for someone to be married, more than married, without actually being married, we are married! We are married in the mind, and in the heart!" Rey couldn't see from the blur of her tears. "He is literally my other half! And when you insult him, you're insulting me!"

"Rey—"

"No! I'm done!" She scrubbed at her eyes with a sniffle. "I don't even know why I was fighting so hard for our friendship. It doesn't matter. You don't want to be friends, anyway, you said so yourself."

"Rey—"

"Good-bye."

"Rey, stop!"

"Stop following me!"

"Rey, come on, stop!" Poe grabbed at her elbow more gently. "I didn't—I didn't… know, okay?"

"You didn't want to."
"Maybe I didn't, but I do now. Please don't go. I feel like a total heel. I had no idea. If I had known—I wouldn't have kissed you. I'm sorry. Please look at me?"

Rey stopped struggling. Poe let go of her, and she sniffled again, pressing her lips together so they wouldn't tremble. She didn't think he loved her. She thought he loved the idea of rescuing her. And that was why she would have never been with him, whether or not Ben was there.

She had never needed rescuing.

Not from Unkar Plutt and other comers to the Niima Outpost. Not from Ben himself in the aftermath of Snoke's throne room. Not from Crait, not from Solaris. Not from any other number of difficult situations that she had been forced to deal with.

There was only one time in her entire life she'd needed a rescue. It was when she'd been on her knees before Ben, staring into his eyes and willing him to trust her, to believe in her, while Snoke ordered him to take her life. And that was just because he'd thought of the lightsaber thing first.

She didn't need a knight to sweep her off her feet. She needed a partner.

"I'm sorry," Poe said. "I'm—I'm not that person. I don't kiss married girls."

"I'm not married—"

"Sure sounded like it to me." His grin was rueful, and he put a hand on top of her head. "I'll never trust that asshole. But... I'll leave you alone about it from now on."

Rey squinted her eyes at him, not bothering to hide her skepticism.

"I mean it!"

"You meant it the other times, too!" She smacked his arm a few good times.

"Woman, quit—! Quit it!" He rubbed his arm. "Ow. You're strong."
"I'm really strong," she agreed.

"I can see that…" Poe's smile grew wry. "But if he hurts you, I'm killing him, okay?"

Rey let out a pffft.

"Wow, at least pretend I have a chance in a fight with him. You're bruising my ego!"

"He broke your face the last time," Rey said.

"That's just because he caught me off guard," Poe replied.

"Uh huh."

"It is!"

"Uh huh."

"Rey!"

"Mmhmm."

"I'm hurt that you have no faith in me." He touched his chest.

"I'm just a realist."

He clutched at his heart and staggered back a step. "Ow, I'm wounded."
"Well, I'm glad to see you guys are getting along again!" Finn announced from behind them. They turned to see him striding across the hangar, his hand up in a wave. He coughed and crossed his arms as he arrived at their sides. "'Cause you know, um, I didn't want to have to kick Poe's ass or anything."

Rey's laughter filled the hangar as Poe protested loudly in disbelief. For a moment, it was like being back on Solaris.

*Our minds and hearts are married?*

Rey jerked in surprise. She hastily waved at the other two and departed. *How long have you been listening in?*

*From the beginning.*

He had? And he hadn't lost his mind? She would have felt great outrage from his end whether the walls were up or not.

*I told you I didn't trust him. He kissed you.*

*Okay, I'll give you that. I wasn't expecting that. But you saw that I slapped him.*

*I did. Just get back here.*

*Why? What can't you tell me now?*

*Just get here.*

*Okay, okay.*
Rey walked into their room. "What is going o—" The rest of the sentence was swallowed by Ben's
lips on hers. His arms circled her waist, and her hands slid into his hair as she rose on her tiptoes.
By the time his mouth broke away, she was flushed and out of breath. "What—?"

*The things you said.* He rested his forehead against hers. *And by the way, you never would have
figured out the lightsaber thing.*

*That's not true! I would have!*

He laughed as they exited the room to find his mother, fending off Rey's swatting hands.
The Radar Technician

Chapter Notes

Fiftieth chapter! I decided to do something a little… fun. As a milestone. I hope you guys like it, hehe.

As Ben and Rey stepped into Leia's room, they were greeted by the sight of three individuals around her desk: Leia herself, Poe Dameron, and an unknown. Ben tensed, prepared to leave, but pieces of the conversation drifted their way.

"…Need to find Matt. He's the radar technician we have in the cells," Leia was saying. Her hands were planted on top of her desk. She hung her head.

"What's the big deal?" asked Unknown. "The troopers are all brainwashed, anyway. Half of them don't have a personality."

Poe and Leia laughed, the sound somewhat derisive.

"What?" asked Unknown.

Poe crossed his arms. "Matt…" He shook his head. "He straight-up sucks, it's awful, no one can get him to shut up. Kylo Ren this, Kylo Ren that. You should have seen him asking the General questions! 'What's Kylo Ren's favorite color?' 'Did you know how awesome he was going to be when he was a baby?' 'What was the first indicator, do you think, that he was on the dark side?'"

"All right, Dameron, enough. I've got a headache just thinking about it," Leia muttered. She looked up, and the others followed her gaze to where Ben and Rey stood in the doorway.

_Run._

_What, why?_
Ben was halfway out the door when Leia's voice rang out, "Ben Solo, you come back here right now!"

Ben sighed and obeyed his mother. He didn't go anywhere near the desk, and his hands were clenched at his sides. Rey could feel his effort to stay cool, to not go over and snap Poe's head off his shoulders. He kept himself close to the doorway for a quick escape, whenever the opportunity presented itself.

"You're perfect," Leia said. "He'll tell you *anything*! Why didn't I think of this sooner?" Leia jerked her head at Unknown, and he left looking relieved. Ben and Rey parted briefly to allow him to pass between them.

"One of our prisoners was a radar technician for the First Order. He had a higher security clearance than the others. The problem is, we can't get him to talk."

"We did interrogate General Hux," Rey pointed out. "We have information from that to give you."

"General Hux's information is limited, even if he did have an informant within. He wouldn't have the security access that Matt does because he's been in prison for four years." Leia sighed. "The only issue is that Matt is… a great fan of my son's."

"To say the least," Poe muttered.

Ben narrowed his eyes at the ace pilot. "The First Order's campaign was highly successful. Our workers were completely dedicated to their work, and to those they served."
The two men glared at one another, at a standoff.

Leia cleared her throat. "Do you think you can do this for me, Ben? Talk to him? I'm sure he'd tell you anything you wanted to know. The Force wouldn't even be necessary."

Ben wouldn't break his staring contest with Poe, so Rey spoke up. "We can go. Just tell us the information you need?"

"Ben will know what to ask." Leia looked at her son and the commander. "Are you two finished, or…?"

Ben curled his lip. He exited the room, and Rey followed suit with a wave good-bye. Poe winked at her, and she knew he'd been having fun goading Ben. It was easy to goad Ben, sure, but that didn't mean he should have done it, so she rolled her eyes at him.

Men.

They knew the way to the prison. They'd been there only a handful of hours ago. It wasn't as if their clearance would have expired already. Rey wondered why Leia hadn't had them do this in the first place. Maybe she just hadn't thought about it, like she'd said, or maybe she had thought it'd been handled, under control. Maybe she hadn't wanted to thrust a big Kylo Ren supporter in Ben's direction. Maybe—

*Are you done speculating yet?*

*If you had such a big supporter, why didn't he notice you when we were in the cells earlier?*

*Plenty of the prisoners were asleep. Perhaps he was one of them.*

*How do you feel about this? Do you feel comfortable?*

*I'll be fine.*
They were down the lift and into the prison. Rey shivered as Ben asked one of the guards were Matt was. Even the guard groaned a little at the thought of having to deal with the technician. Rey's curiosity grew. He gestured, and as they came around the corner, he pressed the intercom.

"Prisoner. Stand up."

Ben and Rey looked bemusedly into the cell. A second later, a blond man with glasses was plastered against the glass of his cell.

"Supreme Leader Kylo Ren! It's you!" His voice was low and deep, almost dry despite his enthusiasm. "I dreamed about this day!"

*He looks... like you... if you were wearing a wig...*

*We look nothing alike.*

But—it was—a doppelganger! How did he not see this?

"I dreamed I was you, you know," Matt continued. "I had your lightsaber, and I was able to use the Force to throw one of my enemies into some sort of machine." He shrugged like it was nothing. "It was awesome. Can you teach me to do that for real? I think I can use the Force—I've tried, you know. Do you have an eight pack? I heard you had an eight pack. Can I see your lightsaber?"

Rey's mouth hung open a little.

"What would you say was your biggest achievement in the First Order? My favorite was when you took out five of those Resistance pilots with only two shots! Is your hair that natural color? Are you coming back to the First Order, to take over as Supreme Leader? Could I become your apprentice?"

Rey looked at Ben. His face was impassive, and so were his thoughts. He was trying to decide how to feel about this.

"Did you always know you were going to be on the dark side? Is that why Supreme Leader Snoke found you? What's it like to be a Knight of Ren? When you destroyed the Resistance fleet, how did
it feel? Is this your girlfriend? She's beautiful." Matt took a breath long enough to face Rey. "What would you say—?"

Matt's eyes rolled back, and he collapsed on the ground.

*Good decision.*

Ben lowered his hand from where he'd waved it. *Our propaganda campaigns were far more effective than I imagined.*

*Or he's just crazy. You really don't think you look alike? Because he is the spitting image of you!*  

*We look nothing alike,* he reiterated. *I was going to just pull the information from him willingly, but it's not worth the headache. I put him asleep so I could do it that way.*

Rey smirked. *How sweet that you didn't want him awake during the process.*

Ben huffed. *There's no reason to hurt him. He's practically in love with me.* He nodded to himself. *Such diligence should be rewarded.*

She laughed. *You're kidding, right?* He looked at her. *Oh, you're not kidding. Well, I don't think you need me for this, so I'll be—*

*Right here, with me.* Ben eyed the figure sprawled out on the floor of his cell. *He scares me.*

*You have command of the Force—*  

*I don't care. For all I know, he derives greater power from the Force being used on him.*

*That's ridiculous.*
"We're back with the information!" Rey announced cheerfully.

"Oh, good," Leia replied. "That didn't take long."

"Ben knocked him out. We pilfered through his mind after that." Rey sat on the edge of Leia's bed, bouncing a little. Ben took up a post against the wall. "Isn't it strange how much Matt looks like Ben?"

The General tilted her head. "I… haven't thought of it. I suppose if you squinted… maybe…?"

What?!

How was Rey the only person who saw this?

"In any case." Leia pushed herself up from her chair, her tablet in her hands. "Thank you for getting the intel you did. It will really help us. Do you want to debrief me about Armitage Hux first?"

You want to do it?

No. Just going through that guy's mind was exhausting.

Rey bit back a grin. She turned on the bed, drawing one leg up on the edge, holding onto her knee. She was grateful Leia wasn't making them have some kind of big, official meeting. It would make it feel more like Ben and Rey were there to join them, and they weren't. This was just a pitstop… as nice as bonding with Leia had been.
Once Ben and Rey had told Leia all the information they'd been willing to impart with, they departed from her company. They needed to get back to their room and decide their next course of action.

Something of a plan was taking shape. They'd shared everything that had to do with the First Order except for the Knights of Ren. While they were taking care of them, the Resistance would be chipping away at the First Order, armed to the teeth with intel. It would be less for them to deal with once they were finished with the Knights.

*I think we should handle Hendou Ren. He's closest.*

*I agree.*

*So how do we tell the Resistance... and your mother... that we're leaving?*

*I was thinking the truth. We tell her we're handling the greater threat. She won't interfere. No one is unhappy.*

*So is that your natural hair color?*

*I will not dignify that with an answer.*
You've Changed

Chapter Notes

I want to thank everyone for the super amazing support last chapter. And every chapter, of course, but this one especially. A lot of you wanted to see more Matt, and so I have given a small cameo before we leave Arna III.

Rey zipped up the last of her luggage. It was three bags, and they carried everything she owned, aside from her lightsaber, which was at her hip. Ben had even less. He had precisely one bag and wouldn't be upset to lose anything in it. Rey wasn't sure why this bothered her. No, wait, she did. Somehow in the last four years, she'd gotten very materialistic.

The biggest bag held clothing. The other two were small. They contained knickknacks—the pieces of her old lightsaber, which had fallen apart again, and the figurine of a bird from Ben's cottage, as well as the leather bracelet he had given her. The last items were the first two books of the texts she'd obtained from Ahch-To. They were so dry it was taking Rey ages to read them.

She fastened the bracelet to her wrist now. She hadn't worn it in a while. She stuck the smaller bags inside the big bag, and then pulled the strings on it. She usually kept everything on the Falcon, but she hadn't known how long she'd be here, and walking back and forth to the hangar to get something would have been annoying.

Rey pulled the bag onto her shoulders, threading her arms through the straps. They'd decided to sleep on Arna one last night. Now it was time to find Leia and say goodbye. And Finn. And Poe and Rose.

Ah, blast, and BB-8.

Well, BB-8 would be with Poe. Right. Two for one.

Are you with your mother?

Yes.
I'll say good-bye to everyone, then.

All right. Take your time.

Take her time? She would have thought he'd have been gunning to get away from quality time with his mother as soon as possible. It was nice that that wasn't the case.

Okay. Thank you.

She made her way to the hangar first. It was the most likely spot for Poe and Finn, and they'd be able to point her where Rose was, hopefully. People kept bumping into her, until she got close to the wall so she wouldn't be in the way any longer. It was so busy. Why? Had Leia formulated a plan already?

"And tell the other team that if they don't wait for my signal this time, it will not be pretty!"

Poe's was the first voice to come pouring out of the hangar. He was having to shout to be heard over the general ruckus. His eyes landed on Rey as she cleared the corner, still a few yards away. He took in her braided hair buns and the pack on her shoulders and sighed.

"Already?" he asked.

"Already," she said. She paused as she observed the agitation on his face that had nothing to do with her. "What's going on?"

"Oh—" He sighed and rubbed his hand over the back of his head. "Nothing, we've just got new orders from the General."

"Yes, I meant besides that," Rey said.

"It's just that Matt!" Poe growled. "He's so damned obnoxious. The General has him tuning some of the radars in the older ships. The sad thing is, he's good at what he does, better than any radar
"But he worked for the First Order," Rey said dubiously.

"Apparently just knowing that Kylo Ren no longer fights for the First Order was enough to make him change his tune." He scowled. "He's being shadowed by two of our techs, and they're both armed to the teeth."

"All right, well, in that case…" she trailed off. "You seem busy. I was just going to say good-bye. Is Finn in there?"

"Yeah, he's near the Falcon, actually. It was good seeing you, Rey." He patted her on the shoulder as he swept past her.

What Poe had neglected to mention was that that weird guy Matt was also near her ship. Rey passed him on the way—he was fiddling with something on an X-wing. The other two techs hovered over him, one of them yelling irritably.

"Hurry up, Matt!" said the one on the right, a woman who looked a little too young to be in the Resistance. But what could Rey say about that? She was young herself. "I haven't got all day!"

"Yeah, lunch is soon!" said the woman's partner, a man somewhat shorter than her.

"What's the problem, Matt?"

"Yeah, what's the problem? I thought you were one of the best radar technicians here, Matt."

"If you're so great, then why in hells are you taking so long?!"

"COULD YOU PLEASE STOP YELLING AT ME?!" Matt exploded. "You're starting to stress me out!"

"Don't take that tone with us!" said Male.
"Yeah, you'll regret it!" Female warned.

Matt straightened abruptly and thrust his hand out. His fingers were curled in a familiar gesture. Female started choking, clutching at her neck, her eyes wide in horror. Male grabbed her, shouting, holding her close.

"No! No, Mira, no!"

The blond tech looked victorious.

Female and Male dissolved into laughter, howling from the hilarity. Fury broke over Matt's face for the trick.

"Jerk faces," he muttered.

Rey had seen enough. Shaking her head, she shrugged her pack higher on her shoulders. She could see Finn in the distance. She would just go to him and pretend this had never happened.

"It's you!"

Choobies.

Don't turn around, don't turn around, don't turn around—

"The beautiful girl! I need to know the answers to some questions!" Matt called. He wasn't bothering to lower his voice, and it carried through the hangar. Rey walked faster, intent on getting out of seeing range. "NO! WAIT! I NEED TO KNOW HOW BIG KYLO REN'S PENIS IS!"

More laughter than Rey had ever heard in one place broke out around the hangar. It hounded Rey's heels as she made a run for it. By the time she got to Finn, he was already full of his own questions.
"What's going on? Oh, no, why the bag? Are you leaving? No, Rey, don't leave!"

"Okay, just..." Rey grabbed Finn's arm and dragged him along after her. Once they were safely within the *Falcon*, she released him. "Sorry. I didn't want to be out there anymore."

"You're good," he assured her. "But why are you leaving, Rey?" He touched her arm.

"Ben and I have some things to attend to," she said.

"Things with the First Order?"

"Uh—yes." She hadn't counted on having to lie so much. It was starting to depress her. But the alternative was the truth, and that wasn't possible. And in a way, she wasn't lying, the Knights of Ren were a part of the First Order.

"Rey, what if I wanted to go with you?"

Rey was taken aback by the question. "You can't. You're a pilot here. And you have Rose, the two of you are married, I don't—"

"I know that," he sighed.

"Then I don't understand, Finn."

"I envy you."

"What? Why? You hate Ben—"

"You can go wherever you want to go. You can do whatever you want to do. And you don't have to worry about anything. You don't need anyone else." Finn's voice was as soft as it ever got. He placed a hand on his chest. "Just Ky—Ben, I guess, and he's as strong as you are."
"Okay…" Rey wasn't sure where he was going with this. "You can do those things, too, you know. You don't have to have command of the Force to leave."

"I can't turn my back on the Resistance!"

"Well—all right…" She chewed on the edge of her lower lip. "Finn, help me out here. I really don't understand what you're trying to say."

"What if I asked to go?" He was on his first question again. "I know about Rose, I know about the rest. What would you do?"

"I—you could come, of course, you could come," she said. He would regret his decision immediately after tagging along with her, but if this was what he wanted to hear… "You're always welcome with me, Finn. You know that."

"Do I? You've been gone four years," he pointed out.

"I—I haven't changed, Finn. I'm still myself."

"You're not."

"What do you mean, I'm not? Of course, I am."

"You're not, Rey, and that's okay. I just wanted to know where I stood with you. Thanks for saying those things." Finn hugged her close for a handful of seconds, and she hugged him back, her mind reeling in confusion. "Okay, I've gotta get back. We're flying out soon. Part of a team to scope out a potential First Order base."

Rey waited until he got to the boarding ramp before calling his name. "How have I changed?"

He looked up at her over his shoulder. He grinned.

"I'm serious!"
"You're half of another person now, right? That's what you told Poe. Of course, you're gonna be different."

"Right…"

"Bye, Rey."

"Bye, Finn."

Okay, so she had known that some of her morals had changed. But she had assumed that at her core, she was still herself. What was different now? And was it that obvious to detect? Finn wasn't known for being good with subtleties, and he'd said something.

Rey placed her pack in the crew quarters. She stared around at the beds, her hands on her hips. She was pensive. She was never this pensive.

How was she different?

And was it a good or bad change?

Rey ran out of the Falcon. She didn't slow until she'd caught up with Finn. "Hey!" He looked at her, and she tried to catch her breath. "A good or a bad change?"

"Why is this bothering you so much?" he asked.

"It just—please answer the question?" Rey begged.

"You're… quieter. You have a presence."

"A presence?"
"Yeah," Finn said. "Kind of an intimidating one. And you look completely in control of yourself, which you're not really known for."

"Hey!"

"You're confident." Finn smiled. "Before when you were confident, you came up with a plan on the drop of a credit. You had no idea where it was going to end up, or if you'd be able to do it. Now it's the opposite. Your confidence isn't a façade."

"And why is this a bad thing?" she questioned. Leia was confident, and no one judged her.

"It's not. It's just different."

"Oh." Rey thought about that. She noticed Finn had gone out of his way to avoid Matt as they walked around the hangar. "Okay."

"It's not a bad thing," Finn insisted. "In fact, I'm pretty proud of you." He crossed his arms, a teasing glint in his eye.

"You're proud of me, are you?" Rey laughed. "Because you're so much wiser than me, now that you're married."

"No, I'm so much wiser than you because I'm married to Rose."

"Ahhh," Rey said. "I see."

"Do you?"

"Mhm."

"Do you see?"
"I do indeed."

"Then why don't I like that tone?"

"I think you're imagining any tones here."

"Oh, am I?"

"Mhm."

"Am I, Rey?"

Her solemn face cracked as she started giggling again. "You goof. Come here." She held out her arms for another hug, and Finn rested his chin on her shoulder. "I meant what I said. You're my best friend. That hasn't changed, not even in four years."

A long sigh left him. "I needed to hear you say that."

"I know." She pulled away with a smile. "I was going to say goodbye to Rose, do you know where she is?"

"Not here," Finn said with a frown. "You just missed her, too."

"What, where is she?"

"At another base, one of our smaller ones."

"Wow, how many bases do you guys have?"
"You know, even I'm not sure," Finn chuckled.

"That doesn't surprise me."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what it means." Rey pushed him. "Go on, then. Get in your X-wing and go blow things up."

Finn walked backwards as he called to her. "That's not what this mission is for!"

"Ten credits says Poe finds a way, anyway!"

"You're on!" Finn waved, turning back around. Rey watched him leave. She didn't move again until he'd been swallowed up by the pilots and techs running around.

"Please be careful," Leia entreated. "And don't stay away so long this time, either."

"We won't," Rey promised. Ben grunted something similar beside her. "I'm sorry we have to leave so quickly."

"Well, that's all right," Leia said as she took Rey into her arms. "But you're wearing my hairstyle, and I wanted to say it looks cute." She smiled as she touched one of the hair buns. "I really do like it on you."

"Thanks," Rey said, hoping her blush wasn't too obvious. "I like it, too."

Ben cleared his throat.
"That's his way of saying he doesn't like the direction the conversation has taken," Leia said wryly.

"He is really grumpy that way."

"Isn't he?"

Ben bared his teeth at Rey, but it just made Leia and Rey laugh harder. When they parted, Rey had to touch her finger to her lashes to wipe away a tear. Their chuckles died into only the occasional giggle.

"If we're done here?" Ben said stiffly.

Leia pinched his cheek and then gestured for him to go.

**I don't like the two of you conspiring against me.**

Rey hugged Leia, her third hug of the day. It lasted longer than the other two. Both women were reluctant to let go of one another. Leia finally did first, smiling after them as they left. Worry was in her eyes.

*Have you ever noticed that you have the same chin as your mother?*

Ben's brows furrowed. **What?**

*You do. And the rest of your face is completely Han's. You can really see it in the profile.***

*Rey—*

*And also, Matt wants to know what your penis size is. He yelled it for the entire galaxy to hear.*
Ben stopped.

Tilted his head.

Tipped his head back, his face scrunches up.

*Imagining the visual?*

*He did not ask you that.*

*You don't believe me? Look and see!*

*I'd rather not.*

*Are you blushing...?*

*No. Go away.*

*We're going in the same direction, to the same place!*

*Then let's end this discussion.*

*Uncomfortable?*

*Rey—*

*All right, all right, fine. I'll drop it.*
Thank you.

But he really looked like he wanted to know the answer.

Rey!

She slid her hand into his with an amused giggle. He gave her his patented grumpy look. He glanced ahead again. His hand wrapped around hers.

You're lucky you're adorable.

You've told me this a lot. Should I start taking offense?

Ben put his arm around her shoulders, regardless that they were in public, and yanked her against him. He kissed her hair with a slightly exasperated sigh as they resumed walking. Rey was comforted enough by the action that she fell into a happy silence.
"Is this really necessary?"

"Is there a problem?"

"It's a cloak."

"Yes."

"A cloak."

"You keep saying that as though I don't know what it means."

Rey bit her lip as she attempted to formulate a reply. With none was forthcoming, she sighed and looked down at the fabric in her hands.

Her companion fastened his cloak to his shoulder. He had been fiddling with his clothes in front of the mirror for ten minutes.

"Okay, but—"

Ben sighed.

"I'm wearing black for you!" Rey said. "Why does this need to include a cloak?" She held the thing up for the umpteenth time. "I don't see the point."

He left the mirror and grabbed the cloak from her. He fastened it her shoulder in the same fashion as his. He stepped back to admire, his eyes lingering on her body in places. She fussed with the cloak where it rested on her shoulder.
A second sigh was issued from Ben’s mouth as he came up behind her and guided her to the mirror with gentle pushes.

All right.

So maybe there was something to this cloak thing.

Rey studied her reflection. She had on a clingy black top with dark gray trousers tucked into over-the-knee boots. The boots had a small heel on them and were as black as her shirt. Fitted black gloves covered her forearms, but they were fingerless up to the second knuckle. The ensemble was smart and snazzy, and she liked it, no matter that Ben had picked it out.

Her cloak was also black, with a silver fastening at her shoulder and a silver lining. It swooshed behind her impressively and was lighter than it first appeared. Its collar fit to her neck. She liked the way it made her outfit more badass.

*But what do we do when we fight? Wouldn't this get in the way?*

*You take off the cloak when you fight.*

What…

*Then why put it on in the first place?*

Ben gathered up the ball of her former clothes and tossed them into the pack with his own.

*You're really not going to answer me?* Rey hurried after him. Ben worked his Force magic with the sales clerk. He didn't slow down for her, walking at a clipped pace out of the building. *Come on, tell me!*

*The splendors of the cloak are something you will have to discover for yourself.*
Yes.

Rey chuckled around a sigh. They walked side by side, cloaks snapping in the wind. For a small moment, she could understand the appeal.

The *Falcon* waited for them on the outskirts of the city. They'd found a planet on the Outer Rim that was civilized and somewhat up to speed on modern technology. They'd needed supplies. That had morphed into the extra errand of finding new outfits.

It made sense. They were a team, and they were powerful. Being crisply dressed the way they were could only make them appear more imposing.

They caught an air cab. It took twenty minutes to skirt the boundaries of the city. From there, they headed into the *Falcon* and prepared for liftoff. Rey took their bags and placed them in their various homes while Ben worked on powering up the ship. A handful of minutes later, she gripped the back of his chair and dropped a kiss to his cheek. She slid into her own chair and fiddled with the controls.

They peeled off the ground, angled as they tore through sky. Space enfolded them. Ben input their destination. They made sure nothing was in the way and then punched it into hyperspace.

The Gimbdo System was on the outskirts of the Outer Rim. Ten planets revolved around its star. Half of them were uninhabitable due to their proximity to it. The other half were clustered together, almost like a chain of islands. Numerous moons dotted the space-scape of the planet they were about to land on.

Endorom was a wondrous world of flora. The jungle flowers on Solaris had been the size of people. The ones here were easily four times that. They floated through the air, fragrant and giving the atmosphere an almost pink-ish glow. Enormous trees were silent sentinels on the ground below, and beneath their boughs, golden lights the size of Rey's thumbnail flitted about.
The castle they'd been looking for sat on a rocky cliff overlooking a vast lake. The building was massive in its own right and incredibly elaborate. Architecture the likes of which Rey had never seen poked pillars into the sky and was built into the mountain sitting behind it.

*It's pretty. Do you think the Falcon is covered enough?*

*These woods are pretty thick, and the planet is underdeveloped. I don't foresee a problem.*

Rey held out a hand for a golden light to rest on. One hovered briefly over her palm, winked out, and reappeared a foot away. She had thought they were some sort of insect, but it looked to be made completely out of light.

*We'd better get started. It's a long walk.*

One giant full moon and three crescent moons hung suspended in the sky. As night began to deepen, a mist came out to play. The number of golden orbs increased exponentially. They bounced around Ben and Rey's heads, darted to the treetops, vanished, twinkled in the distance. They were a good source of light, preventing the duo from stumbling over the giant tree roots.

The orbs danced over the surface of the lake. Sometimes they touched the water, skipping like stones, leaving ripples in their wake. The water was clear enough to reflect the moons and the stars.

*If I could disappear anywhere, I think it would be here.*

*Here?*

*It's so peaceful.*

An hour later, they stopped outside the castle gates, surveying everything. Stormtroopers were
posted nearby, and others combed the grounds.

*What an idiot.*

*I'm surprised the Order hasn't realized yet.*

*They're probably not as on top of things as Snoke was.*

Rey had to admit that Hendou had gall. Ben and Rey hadn't entirely known what to expect when they landed here. Hendou Ren oversaw the finances for the Order. Ami Ren had been the one to dispense the information to Hux about Hendou's location and purpose. Did she know what he was truly doing in this system? Mining special minerals wasn't the only thing.

By the looks of things after Ben and Rey's investigation, it seemed Hendou Ren was embezzling money. He'd been posted here to oversee some of the mining as *part* of his routine, not a fulltime job. Yet he'd turned it into one, deciding, apparently, that he was going to take over the system on his own.

What his long-term plan was, Rey couldn't say. But the only way he'd have the funding to back up this tiny kingdom—and they'd seen troopers on the other planets in the cluster—would be from said embezzlement.

Ben glanced at her.

*Same plan?*

*Same plan.*

They rose into standing positions. Ben didn't need to straighten his cloak, and Rey resented it. She was constantly fumbling with her own. It was all over the place. Like now, for instance—it was draped awkwardly over her arm.

The slight shake of Ben's head was born from fond exasperation.
They fell back into position at each other's sides. All the training they'd gone through on the island to walk together, at the same pace, on the same breath, it was coming into fruition now. It was the same stance they'd had on Venia. Rey was happy they were getting to utilize it again.

The closest village to the castle was twenty miles away. The road was well worn, the earth holding the flatness from carts. It led straight up to the gate, and from behind them, it spiraled downhill. They approached the stormtroopers there, and it was clear they weren't used to anyone being here this time of the night.

Rey instructed the stormtroopers to escort them into the castle. They obeyed, and Ben and Rey were flanked on either side. Their cloaks snapped from a stray breeze. She anticipated that they might have some trouble with the other stormtroopers, and so anyone that gave them trouble was added to the guard. After their group grew to ten deep, no one questioned them. It wasn't as suspicious anymore.

It took four grand courtyards to reach the castle. Stormtroopers were placed on all the walls. Hendou was prepared to take out any adversaries.

He definitely wasn't expecting two Force users.

The inside of the castle was lavish. Centuries old rugs, magnificent tapestries, every sort of cabinet and vases lining the corridors. Hendou had clearly taken this away from whoever ruled here before. The castle was too old for it to be otherwise.

The throne room came into view. They walked down stone steps, their eyes flicking over the walls. There were numerous nooks for troopers to hide in. Rey grazed her fingers over her lightsaber, prepared to draw.

The room was large and circular. Another set of steps led up to the throne, a throne which held a black figure in a silver mask. He was draped over it without a care in the world, head perched on his upright fist, his elbow digging into the armrest.

Hendou raised his other hand. The stormtroopers accompanying them spread out, blasters raised, forming a loose circle around Ben and Rey.

"You're up late," Rey said.
"I sensed a ripple in the Force," Hendou replied, his real voice stripped by the modulator in his helmet. He flicked two fingers in their direction. "Kill them."

Blasters went off at a rapid fire.

Adrenaline poured into Rey. In a heartbeat her lightsaber was drawn, and Ben was at her back. She kept it in one piece, a blur of white. Blaster rays bounced back to troopers, and they began falling in crashes of armor. She rotated with Ben, deflecting the shots from the eaves.

A trooper tried to bum rush her. She kicked his chest, and he went flailing away. She separated her saber into two, spinning the one in her right hand and slashing at a trooper, the one in her left still wildly shielding from the onslaught.

The room grew hazy.

Rey hadn't even begun to tire. She faced a fresh wave of troopers, positioning her feet.

"Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop!" Hendou shouted.

It was another few minutes before the blaster fire halted. The stormtroopers fell back, weapons still raised, none of them firing. Quite a lot of fallen troopers graced the floor. It seemed Hendou had realized he was wasting his soldiers.

Rey turned to Hendou. He was standing, and as she watched, he took off his mask. He tossed it behind him onto the throne and shook free golden-brown curls. They were tied at the nape of his neck, and his blue eyes were light enough to be almost gray. He had a thin mouth and a narrow nose, but his jaw was strong and pronounced.

"Is that you, Ky-Ky?" Hendou cooed. "Why, if I had known it was you, I wouldn't have fired!"

Ben twitched his lightsaber.
"You don't believe me? That hurts, that hurts!" Hendou half-jogged down the steps toward them, more of a jaunt. He came to a stop outside of saber range. "I've always believed you."

Rey was frozen in indecision. She could cut him down in an eyeblink, but she hadn't... well... Things lately sure weren't lining up like she had expected them to.

"So where've you been, then, mate?"

Ben extended his arm, the tip of his lightsaber poised in front of Hendou's nose.

"I like the new saber!" Hendou whistled appreciatively. "Looks less like a toddler threw it together. I'm so glad you got rid of it. We all mock you behind your back about it."

Ben said nothing. Rey wondered when he was going to lose his temper.

"But you already knew that, didn't you? I expect you know what everyone has always said." Hendou crossed his arms, unbothered by the fact that hot plasma was an inch away from his face. "But that's why we were friends, yeah? They always talked about me, too. Some friends we had."

Hendou smiled expectantly.

Plasma crackled.

Blue eyes slid to Rey. "What's most surprising is seeing you with a woman. She's a babe, though, isn't she? Her ti—"

Ben's saber switched targets to Hendou's groin.

"Okaaaaay, someone's sensitive!" Hendou spread open his arms. "Welcome to my humble adobe. Castle Sitrine! Glorious, glorious!"

Sitrine?
That's his real name.

Hendou looked hopefully between them. "Tea, anyone?"
Thanks for everyone's response to Hendou/Sitrine. :)! I really love him, so it makes me happy that other people like him, too.

Sitrine—as Rey was already calling him because it fit him more than Hendou—waved his hand. The stormtroopers filed out with uneasy tilts of their head, their blasters partially raised. They didn't agree that the Knight needed to be without backup, which was ironic considering Ben and Rey had dominated the room in a handful of seconds not five minutes ago.

"Are you really not going to say anything, then?" Sitrine pulled his lips into a pout and made his eyes wide and vulnerable. "You're just going to point your lightsaber at my cock all threatening-like?"

What's your game plan here?

Ben's thoughts darted everywhere. He hadn't decided yet.

Do you want me to handle him?

No.

I can handle him.

No.

It would take three seconds—

No.
"You want him alive?"

"—in hells are the two of you doing?" Sitrine inquired loudly. "Having an inner conversation? How is that—?" His eyes narrowed. "A Force bond. My, how quaint."

Rey smoothed her features back into an expressionless mask.

"That certainly explains a lot." The Knight sighed. "Come now, Ky Ky. Decide already what you want to do. I'm growing bored."

"Nothing ever entertained you for long," Ben growled.

"Oh, goodie, he spoke!" Sitrine clapped his hands in exaggerated delight. "You always were the pensive sort. Staring moodily into the distance and what have you. Such a sensitive, tortured soul."

"Shut up," Rey snapped.

"Oooh, and she's got spunk!" the Knight trilled. "Excellent choice, mate, excellent choice."

"You're not half as clever as you think you are," she said.

"I'm not?" Sitrine slammed a fist into his open palm. "Well, that pieces together a few things!"

*He's your friend, isn't he?*

She hadn't ever seen Sitrine's face in Ben's memories. He came and he went as he pleased. While she knew about the Knights, knew all their names, knew what they had been doing at the time, that was the extent of it. Ben's memories had revolved around Ben.

*He was.*
"There's nothing I can say to liven up the situation?" Sitrine continued. "Should I drone on about all the memories we have together? For instance, when I serenaded you naked in front of Skywalker with my underwear on my head?"

*He did what?*

"Or the *other* time I was naked and faced, and I rode that blurrg? Remember, its pack was following me, and we trashed that settlement? I'm still not welcome on that planet!" Sitrine laughed. "Oh, and the time we locked Deo in with Hux, and neither of them could get out because we'd taken their weapons and jammed the door controls? And their condition for getting out was that they had to—"

"Are you finished?" Ben interrupted.

"No." Sitrine went on merrily, "Aren't we wanted on, like, ten underdeveloped planets?"

"That was you."

"It was you, too!" Sitrine insisted. He turned to Rey. "He was quite the partier back in the day."

*Don't believe a word that comes out of his mouth.*

Sitrine was counting on his fingers. "Barbarak… Indoine… T'ln Na—"

"Keeping you from killing yourself is not the same as participating in your insane activities!" Ben thundered.

"Don't be that way," Sitrine whined. "I've got loads of wonderful memories. We've done so many things together."

"Name one."
"I just named four! Well, three-and-a-half. You didn't let me finish about why we're wanted."

"You are wanted."

"You are, too!"

"Hendou—"

"It's Sitrine, darling. Don't hurt me by calling me Hendou."

Ben's growl grew louder. "Hendou—"

Sitrine rubbed his fingertips around his nipples, his eyebrows raised.

Rey burst into a laugh and then quickly smothered it.

Ben gave her a dirty look.

Sorry.

"What's your plan, at any rate? Kill off your brethren?" Sitrine mused.

"You aren't my brethren anymore," Ben said coolly. "And I'm sure the others will agree with me."

"Certainly, they will. But I am not the others."

"Aren't you? You attacked me."
"Well, how was I to know whether or not you hadn't been seduced to the light side?" Sitrine gave a mock shudder. "Do you want to be Supreme Leader again, is that what this is about?"

"Emperor and Empress," Ben said.

"Ambitious." Sitrine gave an impressed nod. "I should tell you, then, that I have control over the finances of the Order." He studied his nails. "One might draw the conclusion that if they partnered with me, they could have access to the Order's funding. Access to help fuel your reign before it begins, eh?"

"I'm sure there's a price," Ben drawled.

"Oh, there is. But I say enough with the small talk. Stay here tonight? Dine with me? I'll have the cooks prepare a meal. They're not so bad, you know." Sitrine lifted his fist, knuckles out. An eyebrow cocked. "Remember the blood oath?"

"Blood oath?" Rey murmured.

"We take it very seriously," Sitrine said. "We're brothers, Ky and I. Don't let him fool you into thinking anything else."

"You attacked us—" Rey began.

"Darling, that was ages ago. My allegiance has changed. Catch up, now."

To Rey's astonishment, Ben bumped his fist against Sitrine's. The latter wiggled his fingers with an enthusiastic, "Huzzah!"

Sitrine bounced over to his throne to retrieve his helmet. "Tell one of the many to take you to the best suite in the castle! Aside from my own, of course," he chortled. He brushed past them as Ben's lightsaber turned off. "Meet you in the dining hall in an hour!"

A stormtrooper appeared after him. "You can follow me this way."
Calm down.

Rey didn't cease her pacing, her fists clenched at her sides. *This is a trap. I know it is.*

*It isn't.*

*He attacked us!*

*I know how Sitrine's mind works. He's been my friend for a long time.*

*How am I just now hearing about this?*

*It wasn't in my memories?*

*I had to try and choose where to go. It never really came up. Not to that extent.*

"Rey." Ben caught her by her shoulders. *It's not about trust. It is about knowing how much we overpower him. Sitrine is not a fool. Well... he is a fool. But he knows when he's lost. He's sensed our power. Deo didn't because the vergence hid it from him.*

*If he knew it, why did he attack us?*

*Because he's an asshole.*

*Is this... is this something to do with men being men? Rey put the heels of her palms to her forehead. I won't be able to rest easy while we're here. She frowned up at him suddenly. You took a blood oath with him?*
I was… drunk.

You're never drunk.

For a reason.

Rey put that one together. Ah.

What's done is done. He's willing to make an alliance. We're going to need funding eventually.

She sighed and sat on the window seat. Down below was the lake. The moonlight was so bright, and the sky so clear, that very little of the world remained shrouded in darkness. Like light in a city at night.

Ben was right. Having money was an enormous upside. They'd intended on killing Hendou Ren, but… if he really wanted to switch over, as he'd said, well… There was no reason to kill him unless they had to. And right now, they didn't have to.

Besides… Ben having a friend was a nice thought. He was her dark prince, but she was glad she wasn't the only person he could open up to. Rey had friends, and it was always awkward because they couldn't be friends with Ben, too. They had no interest in trying.

The object of her thoughts ran a gloved hand over the blanket of the four-poster bed. The frame was made from some wood Rey had never seen before—likely from the trees outside. The inside was almost red, and with the varnish, it brought out tiny white streaks. Interesting, considering the tree bark was black.

We hadn't counted on letting any of them live. Rey pushed up from the window seat. She didn't want to get comfortable. They were having a meal soon, or so Sitrine had declared. What about in the end… do you want to keep him alive?

Do you not?
That's not it. I just want to be prepared for... I just want a plan.

A knowing smile touched Ben's mouth.

She narrowed her eyes. What?

You don't want to get attached to him in case we have to kill him.

Is that so unreasonable?! she huffed.

No. He dropped a kiss to her head. I do not want to kill him unless I have to. Rey?

Yes?

Trust me.

"Okay," she said softly, and she resolved to let it go.

The suite consisted of three rooms. A sitting room, a bathing room, and the bedroom. A door connected to another suite, and she had no idea why until Ben told her that it was for the wife. She couldn't imagine sleeping apart from Ben, but they weren't married for duty.

Carpets covered the stone floor to keep it from getting too icy. The furniture was fairly uncomfortable, although it looked tasteful. Books were everywhere, some of the spines brittle, and written in a language Rey could only begin to guess at. The tub in the bathroom was ornate and had clawed feet. Sweet smelling soaps were spread out on the counter. A desk had residence in the bedroom, enormous with plenty of drawers.
Rey inspected them, not sure what she was looking for. She yanked drawer after drawer open, and there was nothing of importance. Yellowed paperwork covered in a tidy scrawl, feathered… pens?, ink of some sort, an odd little knife that wasn't sharp, wax, a seal imprint, journals.

She slammed the last drawer shut.

The books were next. She searched through them, behind them. No false pages, no sign of anything hidden.

Lifting the tapestries did not reveal a secret door. Double checking that the desk drawers didn't have a false bottom was also fruitless. The sofa cushions were clean, high shelves didn't yield a key to who knew what.

Nothing.

Ben grunted from where he was stretched out on the bed. He had a hand over his eyes. What?

There isn't anything. Not that I really expected to find something. She gave the room a long look. She could poke around it more later. We should go, it's been about an hour. She bit her upper lip as she considered the sitting room at large. How difficult do you think it would be to keep him asleep while we searched his suite?

Moderate at most, but he's always been a deep sleeper.

So you're not against looking?

Of course not. I never said we wouldn't find anything useful. I merely don't believe that he will attack us again.

Rey supposed that was more than fair. After 'dinner', then?

After dinner.
I've had some people say that Lando is to Han as Sitrine is to Ben. I love it!

Blind faith.

It wasn't a concept Rey was familiar with. She had demanded it of Ben countless times, yet now she was the one who struggled to ignore finely tuned instincts. If their roles had been reversed, Ben would never have trusted Sitrine... but he would have tried for Rey, all the while keeping his trouble radar up.

That was really about all she could do—ensure that they weren't caught unprepared.

The click of their boots echoed in the corridor as troopers led them to wherever Sitrine was. Not for the first time, Rey observed the heavy amount of history in this place, history Sitrine had stolen. She wondered what he'd done to the former owners of the castle. Killed them, no doubt. The thought upset her, but only because it was wasteful. Needless deaths were unacceptable.

How did he handle the people in his 'kingdom'? Did he tax them? Did he ignore them? As someone in charge of finances for the Order, it seemed unlikely that he would have just let them be. No matter how underdeveloped a planet, currency was currency.

Rey's eyes trailed over possible hiding spots, should they get attacked and need to defend themselves. They had great command of the Force, but these corridors were narrow. It wasn't improbable they might be caught unawares.

Will you relax?

Excuse me? Rey looked up at Ben.
We will not be attacked. I am far more paranoid than you. If I am relaxed, why aren't you?

Because—your judgment is compromised! He's your friend. You're biased.

Ben sighed. Do you have backup plans with your friends?

Backup plans?

In case they decide to turn on you?

No! Of course not. They wouldn't.

Why not? You are with me now.

Because they wouldn't! I trust them.

And I trust Sitrine. Please... relax.

But my friends aren't on the dark side!

He thinks I'm still on the dark side. We haven't told him otherwise. He has no reason to attack me. Drop it, Rey.

Rey didn't like being told to drop anything. She took a breath to protest, but one look from Ben made her clamp her lips into a straight line. This was supposed to be a democracy. They were supposed to be in equal agreement about any decisions they made. That was the only way the bond would work, would stay balanced. Breeze had taught them that.

Rey... Ben grabbed her and dragged her down a smaller, lesser used corridor. The troopers they had been following continued on, oblivious. Do you want to be in my mind? Do you want me to share this certainty with you?
"One of us needs to be alert."

Annoyance pinched Ben's features. Rey.

*Fine!* She didn't like it, but if she didn't do it, they were going to fight. And the last thing they needed to do was fight on enemy territory, regardless if Ben thought Sitrine was a threat or not.

Ben was waiting, so Rey closed her eyes and reached out to him through their bond. His thoughts slid against hers like gentle waves on a beach, and she let them pull her under. With them came the certainty of years of friendship sparked by an instinct words could not describe. It was strong enough that for a moment, Rey felt that Sitrine was her friend, too.

He pulled the bulk of his thoughts away. They always operated on a shared thought system, albeit loosely. It was easier to function that way.

*Better?*

Rey let a breath escape. She searched inside of herself. The worries that were there before were a dull hum in the background.

She nodded.

*Good.* Ben kissed her forehead. *Let's find our escort.*

"Hullo, friends!" Sitrine shouted merrily. His voice rang through the very tall rafters of the dining hall.

"You don't have to yell," Rey said dryly. "We're right here."
She looked around the hall while Sitrine went on about their lateness. A rectangular room with tables laid out. A dais rose at the end of the room where the king's table rested. Sitrine sat on the tabletop, his arms on his thighs.

Did it get lonely in here, dining alone? Or did he make people dine with him?

Behind Sitrine dishes of food were covered. As Rey drew closer, she could see silverware laid out, along with goblets that had jewels encrusted into them. She doubted this was the type of spread that had been served here on a day-to-day basis. Not if they didn't want to be robbed.

"You made the stormtroopers cook?" Rey asked, wondering if the food was edible.

"Course not. You'd have to be lacking taste buds to enjoy anything this lot came up with. I kept the old kitchen staff and all the servants. They keep the place running."

"Even in the middle of the night?" Rey raised an eyebrow.

"I have special visitors! There's no time to celebrate like the present." Sitrine slid off the table. He had changed into more comfortable clothes. A forest green shirt accented the muscles on his chest, and his trousers were also slim fitting. He kept his lightsaber in the blaster holster wrapped around his thigh.

"Were they shocked to see you in civilian clothes?" Rey asked.

"I only wear my Knight clothes if it's called for. That helmet is damned uncomfortable. You can barely see out of it! Out of any of them. Do you know how many stormtroopers I've seen talking to walls? It's a wonder they can shoot anyone!"

Ben and Sitrine clasped hands in the way that brothers do. Rey wondered idly if she was dreaming. It was a side to Ben she'd never seen. She hadn't decided yet if that was disconcerting.

"I hope you're hungry, doves," Sitrine said. "I'm still not entirely sure what meat I keep getting served, but it's delicious. Here, sit down, sit down." He collapsed into the biggest chair.
Rey didn't want to sit beside him. She didn't want to sit with her back to the room, either. She grabbed a chair and put it on the side of the table. Ben sat at the end of the table, so he could be beside her.

"Awh. You two are way down there!" Sitrine whined.

"You can always move," Rey said.

"But it's my special chair." Sitrine stroked the back of it with a suggestive waggle of his eyebrows.

Well, then.

"Ah, all right, all right." The Knight pushed out of his chair. "But we're going to need servers." He clapped his hands and said something in a foreign language. Humans with long, pointed ears came out, dressed in the sort of clothes servants wore.

Sitrine sat himself two chairs down from Ben. He turned so that he could see them better. He opened his mouth, but then his eyes tracked Rey's as they followed the servants. She ignored him. She was looking for signs of any sort of abuse. They were nervous, but relaxed. Not unhappy, which was interesting. Did they enjoy Sitrine as their new king?

"Your woman is very watchful," Sitrine observed.

"I have a name," she said without looking at him.

"Oh, you have to let me guess what it is!" Sitrine gushed.

"You already know, I'm wanted by the First Order," Rey said. Honestly.

"Damn, but you're right," the Knight sighed dramatically. "Ah, well. Here, brother, have some of this wine. It'll knock your socks off, guarantee it."
Ben shook his head in the negative. "I don't drink."

Sitrine laughed. "For good reason, my friend! Still, have some, anyway. Consider it a favor. And you are wanting my favor, yes? Well, this'll help that right along!"

Ben sighed. "Fine." He nudged his goblet over to his friend, who picked up a glass pitcher of wine and doled out drinks to Ben and Rey both.

Rey had the feeling that she shouldn't drink. She smiled at a servant as they put her plate back in front of her. The girl went pink, but she gave a careful smile back. Rey looked down at the meal she'd been dispensed. Vegetables of some sort, and that unidentified meat.

"Here, Sitrine." She cut a piece of her steak out and placed it onto the Knight's plate. "Eat this." She smiled gamely.

"Oh, you!" Sitrine twinkled. "As if I'd poison you!" He stabbed his fork into the meat and popped it into his mouth. He pretended to choke and then gripped the back of his seat and the table, shaking madly. This behavior broke on a laugh, and Sitrine looked to Ben for approval. "Right?"

Ben rolled his eyes good-naturedly.

This was so bizarre.

So, so bizarre…

Rey cut herself another piece of steak and watched as Sitrine and Ben began to rehash the good ole times. Ben laughed hard enough at one point that tears touched his lashes. It was mostly Sitrine making jokes, regaling him with tales. Ben was the listener, and the more wine he imbibed, the greater his mirth.

She was tempted to make a crack about needing to be drunk to truly enjoy Sitrine.

Their plates were cleared in time, but the wining continued. Rey refused to touch her goblet. She was serious about one of them needing a level head. She just hadn't considered that if one half of
them was drunk, so, too, became the other.

The downside to this was that it was intensely uncomfortable. Her body didn't have the buzz that Ben's did. Her thoughts abruptly grew murky and difficult to string together. She tried to put up a wall and couldn't remember how.

Sitrine and Ben's voices echoed as the world took on a tilt.

It was feeling drunk without being drunk.

She grabbed at her goblet of wine and downed it in three swallows. She held it out for more and downed that, too. Then she slumped back in her chair and waited for her body to catch up.
A night of drunken fun. Love you guys!

Rey had never been this drunk before.

She giggled from her chair as she watched Ben and Sitrine make arses of themselves. They were currently in the middle of a "penis" lightsaber battle. It had started with Sitrine positioning the hilt of his weapon at his groin, igniting said weapon, and then waggling it around like it was actually his dick. Ben subsequently followed suit, and now they were gently clashing their sabers together.

"That's a good way to lop your cocks off," Rey observed. She threw her legs over the arm of her chair, slouching, folding her hands over her stomach.

"Pish posh," Sitrine retorted. "Do you think this is our first go around? Voooom—voooooommm!"

"Why are you making lightsaber noises when it's lit?" Rey asked rather cheekily.

"Rey!" Sitrine admonished, calling her by her name for the first time. She giggled harder. "Just be cool! Kylo, get your woman under control." He tossed a wink her way.

"Rey," Ben drawled around a giggle of his own. He pulled his expression back into a straight face. "If I do what he says, am I getting laid tonight?"

"No," she said cheerily.

"You heard her," Ben said. He knocked Sitrine's lightsaber out of his hands and to the floor.

Sitrine stared at the floor… floored.
Rey giggled to herself.

**Oh, that pun was terrible.**

"How dare you?!" Sitrine gasped at Ben. "I thought we were friends! I thought we were brothers!"

"We are," Ben said.

"If that's true, bend over the table so I can spank you with that platter," Sitrine sniffed.

"What? No."

"Come on, do it!"

"Fuck off!"

"I'm trying to, darling, but you're not letting me."

"Do it!" Rey jeered.

**Whose side are you on?**

*The side that sees you get spanked by a man shorter than you.*

"Oh, piss off, the two of you! No more telepathic conversations! They have now been outlawed! So says I, King Sitrine!" Sitrine declared.

Rey was laughing, her head tilting back from the intensity of it as she clapped her hands. She hadn't had alcohol in four years. She was in a happy bubble, one that told her she could say and do
whatever she wanted, her worries far away. It was spreading to Ben, influencing his own drunkenness and forming a loop.

The world went fuzzy. When it cleared, she was tracking with Ben down castle corridors. Sitrine was ahead of them, and his laughter bounced over the walls. For a moment, Ben's disorientation mingled freely with her own. She swayed, and Ben caught her, wrapping an arm about her.

"Who is ready?" Sitrine said as they walked outside.

"I am!" Rey cheered, pumping her fist in the air.

"Ky Ky?"

Ben gave a wavering thumbs up.

"Excellent." Sitrine strode over the courtyard they were in. "It's over here. I use it when I have to make my rounds. Quicker than you can believe."

Wait, what?

*We are looking at his new speeder.*

Rey let Ben get a few feet in front of her before letting out a whoop and running at him. She jumped up at the last second, and his arms caught her legs, holding them to him. She wrapped her arms loosely around his neck.

"Faster, faster!"

"I am not your steed."

"Awh," she pouted.
"Don't disappoint your woman, Ky!" Sitrine chortled.

"I HAVE A NAME, SITRINE," Rey said loudly.

He pretended to rub at his ear. "Simmer down, woman."

"Don't talk to her that way," Ben said.

"Don't you tell me what to do!"

"I will tell you what to do if I want to!"

Sitrine and Ben began a slapping hands fight, reminding Rey of two toddlers.

"All right, break it up, break it up!" Rey meant to sound serious, she did. Instead she was cackling.

Sitrine and Ben parted. The former punched the latter's arm before running forward to a line of vehicles. They all came to a stop at an empty spot. Sitrine fisted his hands.

"THOSE FUCKERS!" he yelled. "Damn it! It's gone on too long. I have to do something about it. They're giving me no choice!"

"I'm lost," Rey stated.

"I am, too," Ben mused.

"There's a group of bandits past the village. Ever since I killed the king, they've started raiding the village," Sitrine said. "All the villages in this 'kingdom', really. I don't need any of them—I don't need to save them. But to take it to the castle? Oh, it is on, bandits. It. Is. On."

He looked so dramatic and serious that Ben and Rey burst into laughter.
Sitrine scowled at them over his shoulder. "I'm being serious, guys!"

They laughed harder.

"You're coming with me to go mete out their punishment!" Sitrine said, promptly wobbling to the side. He'd turned around too quickly.

"Punishment, punishment!" Rey cheered. Then she sobered for a moment, "Wait, we're not killing people, are we?"

Neither male was listening.

"We'll take my second-best speeders, then," Sitrine said, and Ben nodded agreeably.

"Maybe we shouldn't be driving speeders right now," Rey suggested. "Maybe we should wait until morning."

Again, neither of her companions showed the least bit of interest in anything she had to say.

Sitrine climbed onto a speeder. It was slim, shiny, and it looked fast. Much better than the clunker Rey had operated every day on Jakku.

Ben helped her to her feet, and she sat behind him on the second speeder. She secured her arms around his stomach. Hopefully they wouldn't die in fiery crashes tonight.

Sitrine took them to a rather large house a few miles from the village—a village that was significantly tiny and had seen better days. The homes were almost hovels, and the lights were out in each one. No one was awake, or if they were, they didn't want anyone to know.
Their destination, on the other hand, had clearly flourished. They dismounted from the speeders in plain sight, and Sitrine staggered, igniting his lightsaber and swinging it.

"Oi! Thieves!" he yelled.

Two burly men at the front gate of the estate flexed their muscles. Rey laughed, and they looked right at her. She waved.

"Bring your 'leader' or whoever the fuck he is out here," Sitrine ordered. "Right now."

"I'll do it, but only for a laugh," said the guard on the right. He nodded to his buddy and departed.

"You're not going in there?" Rey murmured.

"It's too far," Sitrine whispered.

"Lazy," she said. "Why aren't they afraid of you?"

"Probably never seen a lightsaber," he replied.

"A weapon is a weapon," she argued.

"Look, I never said they were bright."

"Bright enough to know Basic. Where would they have learned that from?"

"Fuck if I know."

"You're not concerned at all?"
"Ky, quiet your woman. I'm too drunk to think with all these questions."

Rey rolled her eyes. For the love of—

An indeterminant amount of time later, the guard returned. He was with a woman. She had pointed ears like the rest of them, and her blond hair was longer than even Rey's. She was curvy… busty with wide hips and a killer arse. She had on some sort of breastplate, her boots tipped with metal. The rest of her was clad in leather.

Her eyes went from Rey to Sitrine to Ben—and then lingered. A saucy smile took over her mouth.

"Hello, handsome. My subordinates didn't mention a yummy treat was waiting for me."

Rey lunged.

Ben caught her with an arm around her waist and tugged her back.

"They also neglected to mention they were bringing me a treat," Sitrine purred.

The woman with the glorious breasts barely batted an eye at him. "So to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"I thought Cassini was your leader," Sitrine said.

"He was until I took over a month ago." Busty's smile was feral as she narrowed her eyes. Once again, she was turning her attention to Ben. "I don't have time for would-be gods, but I can make the time for you."

I'm going to kill her.

Wait.
"You're very brave for someone being faced with a lightsaber," Sitrine drawled. He hiccupped a little and sniffed. "Why aren't you terrified?" He spun his lightsaber and almost caught the ground on fire when it sparked too close. "Oops."

"It's difficult to be afraid of someone who can barely stand up," Busty retorted.

"How do you know Basic?" Rey asked. She wasn't sober herself, but she was marginally better than Sitrine. "This is an underdeveloped planet."

"The stormtroopers, as they call themselves, will gladly run their mouths."

"My men don't accept bribes," Sitrine said.

"I never said I bribed them with money," Busty said archly. "I've been learning the language since you arrived on our planet. The rest of my people call you gods, but I know better. You're a more advanced civilization than we are. That doesn't make you gods."

"Well, this has been a lovely discussion, but now I'm going to need you to tell me where my vehicle is," Sitrine said.

"Oh, you're not getting it back," Busty said. "My plan worked. I knew you'd come see me eventually. You're going to give your castle to me and pledge your allegiance, as well."

Ben, Sitrine, and Rey all burst into laughter.

Sitrine bent over, pounding his fist against his knee. Then he turned to his companions. "Did you feel that? The pulse of the Force?"

Rey clutched at her sides. "She thinks she can mind trick us," she gasped.

"It's really rather adorable." Finished laughing, Sitrine flicked his fingers, and the blonde woman was yanked across the three feet that separated them. Her throat landed in Sitrine's fingers. Her blue eyes bulged with surprise as he cut off her air with what looked like his actual hand and not the Force. She clawed at his hand desperately. "What else can you do, pretty?"
The guards came forward menacingly. Rey waved her hand, and they flew into the stone fence and went still.

"Holy shite," Sitrine said. "You just did that without any effort at all."

"We're very, very, very powerful," Rey emphasized with a nod. "Very." Then she stopped nodding because the world was spinning unpleasantly. She should have eaten more to soak up the wine.

"Don't kill her." Ben's words carried a slight slur.

"This, coming from you, the Jedi killer?" Sitrine questioned dubiously.

"Don't do it." Ben shook his head. "I know the urge is strong... but ignore it. You can do it. I believe in you." He kissed his fingertips and then waved them at Sitrine.

Rey laughed at his expression. "You're so toasted."

"I am as toasted as you, Rey," Ben said.

"Sitrine, the grass!" Rey warned.

Sitrine shook himself from his daze and lifted his lightsaber. It was the second charred bit of ground for the evening. He looked to his captive.

"Oh. Right. You're here." He loosened his grip. "My mate Kylo here says not to kill you. But he didn't say I couldn't harm you." His saber rose abruptly as he stepped back, and Rey watched as the red blade took off both the woman's hands.

Her shrieks rent the air. Rey wrinkled her nose at the hands and the cauterized skin. She could smell it, too. Gross.
"Seeing as you and your men rape and pillage my land daily, I thought I'd give you the traditional treatment for a thief. You're going to tell me where my toy is, and then you're never going to fucking bother me again," Sitrine hissed. The woman was sobbing and looking at her arms disbelievingly. "Or my people."

"I can't even fault him. She's a terrible person. Thieves at Niima faced the same treatment. Rey turned away from the scene. And if she had touched you, I would have done it myself."

**This is an interesting new facet of your personality,** Ben observed.

*I don't like it.*

*I do.*

Rey took her own speeder on the way back. Ben had the one they'd shared, and Sitrine had the new one. Once they got back to the castle, Rey could hear Sitrine humming happily. They placed all the speeders into their rightful spots.

"It's time for bed," Sitrine announced. "I'm not as young as I used to be. I'll see you two tomorrow." Without waiting for a response, he headed indoors.

Ben waited until he was gone to whisper into Rey's ear.

"I want to fuck you."
If you aren't happy with the way the story has gone, then again, please feel free to stop reading. I'd rather you did that instead of attacking me first. :D I normally hate to make statements like that, because I don't like drawing attention to it, but it happens enough, and it's hurtful enough, that I've decided to say something about it this time.

There is no reason to be ugly if you don't like the story. Period.

That being said, this is another NWS chapter!

EVERYONE, PLEASE READ BEFORE CONTINUING

I know it's marked as a whole for the story, but gauge in here that may offend some of you guys that may offend some of you guys. Likewise for proceed, please bear this in mind. I mean this if want any complaints when I gave fair warning!

All right, please proceed. :)

Rey's back hit the wall of their bedroom. She giggled breathlessly as Ben yanked her shirt off. He realized he couldn't without removing the cloak. He did that and then returned to his prior task. She tried to help him get her naked by kicking off her boots. This involved almost slipping to the floor when she tripped. Ben caught her, smothering a laugh against her lips.
She got his cloak off and pushed his shirt up. She didn't even need it off. No, she just wanted to slide her tongue along the ridge of his pectoral. While she was there, she glided it over his nipple. His breath hissed in, and he jerked back. Ben had very sensitive nipples.

Both their hands worked on opening his trousers. Rey fell to her knees and pulled him into her mouth once he was free. He groaned, gripping her hair and tugging her off him.

**No. I'll come.**

She grinned deviously at that and flicked her tongue against the head of him. He grabbed her up under her arms and carried her to their bed, whereupon they stumbled as he nearly dropped her. Laughter exploded from Rey as she fell onto the mattress. Ben laughed with her around the kisses he was depositing to her breasts. Those kisses trailed down her stomach and disappeared between her legs.

His tongue parted her folds, and she gasped, rocking her hips against his lips. He grabbed them and held them against the bed as he tormented her with his mouth. She could feel the stubble on his chin grazing over sensitive flesh. His eyes burned into her until she had to turn her face away.

**Look at me.**

Rey swallowed.

**Look at me, Rey!**

She obeyed him, and he sucked on her clit intensely enough that she managed to get her hips to rise a couple of inches off the bed. Her fingers seized in his hair. The yell locked in her throat broke free. Orgasm slammed into her, leaving her blinking from the stars.

Ben rubbed his cheek against her thigh, his lashes lowering. He kissed her there, and his mouth left a damp spot. He released her as he crawled back up her body and slid between her thighs. She was distantly surprised that he could focus so intently while they were this drunk.

He lined up against her cunt and drove inside, bumping against the end of her. She gripped the sheets, winded, brows furrowed tightly enough to hurt. For several moments, they stayed that way,
Ben poised above her. He rained gentle kisses onto her face.

*I love you. I love you so much.*

"I love you, too," she whispered.

"I don't tell you enough," he whispered back. "Not nearly enough." He dragged his cock along the inside of her core as he pulled out to the tip. He slid back in slowly enough to make her groan.

"You tell me enough," she argued.

"No. No, I don't." Another thrust designed to make her go mad if he didn't give her more friction soon. "You are beautiful. You are perfect."

"Nobody's perfect," she gasped.

"Incorrect." Ben's teeth sank into her shoulder, worrying a bruise there. "You are—to me. You are to me."

Tears pricked at Rey's eyes. He never talked to her like this. She knew how he felt, of course, she did. But this was different. This was giving word to the emotions he carried inside of him. He'd never done that, not like this.

"You're only saying this because you're drunk," she murmured. Her nails sank into his lower back, her thighs spreading as she inched her hips up. Damn, she needed *more*. This teasing he was indulging in was torture.

"That doesn't mean that I don't mean it," he said. His next thrust had more force behind it than the others, but only a little. "Even if we weren't bound… even if we weren't bound, I would still want to spend the rest of my life with you."

Damn. He was making it increasingly difficult not to cry. "That's not true. You remember how we were before. I wanted to kill you."
"I have confidence that you would have grown to like me eventually." It was a strained chuckle. He wasn't as unaffected by his pace as he was pretending. He picked it up, his thrusts coming harder. Slow still, yes. And sharp, sharp enough to send jolts of pleasure through her.

"That's some confidence," she returned with her own chuckle.

"You know it's true," he said, staring into her eyes again. His chin tilted up. His eyes narrowed. "We're destined."

"You believe in destiny?" she asked, surprised.

"I believe in us." His arms slid under the small of her back and lifted, shifting the angle of her hips. He managed to reach even deeper. "I believe in you and your ability to see past my faults."

She couldn't reply for several moments; her throat was closed too tightly. It was a mixture of arousal and being touched by what he had said. She wanted to treasure every word coming out of his mouth. It was a shame they were drunk, but then, he wouldn't be saying these things if they weren't.

"I am good at that," she admitted.

His next chuckle was low in his throat and made the heat in her blood spike up. "Mmm. Do that again. Clench around me again."

She obliged, squeezing her cunt around him as hard as she could. It was difficult because of his size. It seemed to do the trick—his eyes clouded over like they had a moment earlier. His head dropped, and his breath hissed between his teeth.

"Fuck."

"More," she demanded. "Ben—give me more. Now."
He grasped her wrist and kissed the inside of it. "No."

"Ben—"

"Ask me nicely," he murmured, eyeing her over her wrist. "Be sweet to me, Rey."

"I thought you liked it when I was bossy."

"I do. But right now, I want you to be sweet." His tongue tasted her pulse. "Can you do that for me?"

Normally, she'd argue, she'd hold out, out of sheer stubbornness. He was keeping her right on the edge, however, and she didn't have the patience to deny him. After a few rocks of his hips, she submitted, drawing her fingers down his chest.

"Fine," she sighed.

"I'm waiting," he sang softly.

"Ben…" she began.

"Yes?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Are you going to let me finish?"

He grinned shamelessly.

She swallowed again. "Will you please give me more…?"

"Give you more of what?" he asked in a sly tone.
"M—More," she said, blushing. She showed him her thoughts.

"Say it out loud," he said.

She was going to murder him.

"No, you won't."


"And the magic words are…?"

"I love you," she said.

His lips brushed hers. "I love you, too. Hold onto me."

She wrapped her arms around his neck in time for him to start pounding between her legs. He put his entire strength into it, but they both knew she wouldn't break. She took the beating of his hips, his cock. Pleasure lanced under her skin. It wasn't long before she came again.

"Fuck, it's so hot when you do that," he said as she soaked him. His eyes closed. He bowed his head once more, and then he truly let go. Rey knew she was going to be so sore in the morning. It was completely worth it.

"Rey," he gasped, burying his face in her neck.

He started his habitual pull-out, and she locked her thighs around his hips. He looked down at her in confusion.

"It's not safe—"
This part she couldn't say out loud, it'd be too embarrassing. *You know I'm—well. You know it's... in the next couple of days. I know... I guess there's a small risk? But... I want... I want to feel it, I've only felt it once...*

*I still don't know how I feel about—*

*We don't have to,* she said hastily. *It's all right. I promise. Don't worry about it.* She'd known he probably wouldn't agree to it, yet it was still disappointing in a small way.

"Fuck it," he sighed. "We only live once, right?"

"R-Right," she said, surprised.

He kissed her hard enough to bruise.

He resumed his pace, and within a few thrusts, he stopped, shooting deep inside of her. She could feel the heat of him, marking her, making her as his in more ways than the usual. She liked it. Relished in it, even. Not many things could be so intimate as this.

Ben shook his hair back, panting. He groaned tiredly and collapsed to the side of her so that he wouldn't crush her. As he pulled out of her, his seed trailed down the insides of her thighs. They both stared up at the canopy of their bed.

*Do you regret it?* she asked worriedly.

He slid an arm under her head and pulled her against his shoulder. He kissed her hair and stroked her arm.

*No,* he said.

*Do you think you'll regret it tomorrow?* Like this, her face was hidden against him. She didn't have to see his expression.
No, he said without hesitation.

Are you sure?

I wouldn't have come inside of you if I wasn't, he reassured her.

"Okay," she said in a tiny voice. Then, So you like it...?

It was... incredibly sexy. He kissed her hair again.

She relaxed against him.

They stayed that way until they fell asleep.
Thank you to everyone and your kind words! :) You're all super awesome!

Since a lot of people have talked about these two things, I'm going to list them and address them:

Is Rey Getting Pregnant? Is Sitrine Trustworthy?

No, she's not.

Yes, he is.

This next chapter is serious again! Getting back to business! Whoo!

Running.

She was by herself, she was never by herself.

Corridor after corridor flashed past, their lights glaring brightly.

She was afraid.

The sound of footsteps reached her ears, clearly belonging to stormtroopers. She swung around to throw a hand out and send them flying away from her.

Nothing happened.

She stared at her hand in disbelief. She tried again.

The troopers closed in, their blasters trained on her. A Knight came toward her, his mask on, his lightsaber ignited at his side.
“Just as I predicted. If I cut him off from the Force, you're similarly afflicted.”

Terrain she had never seen before. Fog swirled around her, and mud sucked at her feet. The scent of decaying things overwhelmed her nose. The very air seemed to be a deep crimson haze.

"BEN!” she screamed.

Her voice echoed, carried away on the wind. She listened desperately for a return shout. There was only the wind, howling in her ears, whispering her yell back at her. It left her heart hollow with despair.

She didn't give up. She pushed on, the earth intent on taking her down, so that every step was a battle. Her throat grew raw from her pleas. A sob locked in her throat.

"Ben!"

Her boot was stuck. She tripped, collapsing into the dark mud with a yelp. For a moment, she lie there, the stiff wind drying the tears on her cheeks before they could finish dripping off her face. She pushed up with her arms, struggling to her feet. Mud caked her from the chin down.

One foot in front of the other, until she was walking at a steady pace again, determined to find a way out of here. She would not die here. Not when she could still save Ben.

"Go!” Sitrine shouted. A man around her height took off running. Sitrine grabbed her wrist and started running. She hastened along, too weak to tell him not to do that.

Stormtroopers appeared on the horizon. Sitrine dove down a corridor to their left. She panted for air, the stitch in her side painful. She wasn't well. Sweat streaked her skin, which was a pasty color,
and her hair clung to her neck. Her lips were cracked. She looked as though she'd lost weight.

"We're running out of time!" she gasped.

"Don't talk like that! We'll make it!"

A lightsaber pierced her stomach.

Her knees hit the ground. The lightsaber pulled out of her, and she clutched at her wound. She lifted her head to see her attacker. The world grew blurry at the edges, and black spots danced over her vision.

"You," she gasped. "Why?"

"Because you're too strong. Nothing that powerful should be allowed to live. You're a threat to this entire galaxy."

Her mouth opened. She had a response formulated.

She no longer had the strength to speak, and she slipped sideways, the world tilting with her. Her head hit the floor.

Why? she thought.

Why?

Everything went dark as she drew her last breath.
Rey came awake screaming.

Ben's arms wrapped around her, pulling her against his chest. She trembled and squeezed her eyes shut. It had been so real, dying. She could still feel it, the sensation of slipping from this world. It tore at her, made her want to get up and run and never look back.

*It's not going to happen,* Ben said. He cupped the side of her head with his palm and placed a kiss to her hair. *It's not.*

But it was. It was.

*Don't think like that. It won't happen. I won't allow it.*

"You won't allow it?" she whispered. "How?"

*It's a vision. It doesn't mean anything. You know that—you told me so yourself. Remember?*

That was different. That was... about children. *This is about me* dying. And maybe even you. We were separated, and I was powerless, Ben. I couldn't do a single thing to help either of us. *What is going to happen? It's not a vision, it's a warning.*

Rey pulled out of his arms and slipped off the bed. She was still naked from their lovemaking. She grabbed her undergarments and started yanking them on. She had to do something. Anything. She didn't want to think about this. It was too real, too terrifying.

*Rey.*

She tugged the rest of her clothing on. Fiddling with the fastening to her cloak was easier than looking at him.
Do you remember who it was…? I can't.

Rey drew breath to say that of course, she remembered, and then stopped. No. No, actually, she didn't remember at all. That was even more troubling.

"I don't know," she said. "I just… remember… betrayal. It wasn't Sitrine, though. He was trying to help me. I… remember… knowing that Sitrine wouldn't reach me in time… and… my last thoughts were of you—of how I couldn't save you."

"Rey…"

She blinked hard.

But who had been her betrayer?

"Someone is going to try to separate us. I couldn't use the Force—and someone said something about how they knew if they cut you off from it, it would sever it with me, as well." Rey crossed her arms beneath her breasts. The mystery was deepening. "Does that mean that someone has the ability to do that, to take the Force away from us?"

"There are ways," Ben said. "None of them are pleasant."

"It was the First Order, obviously. The stormtroopers."

"Likely one of the other Knights."

Rey nodded. That made the most sense.

Well… she said. If we don't figure out a way to stop what we saw… I'm going to die.

Ben was grim-faced.
What do we do? she asked tremulously.

We don't separate. Ever. Not unless we absolutely have to. If someone... had taken me, they would have done it while you weren't around. How else would they have overpowered me?

How else indeed.

She wasn't going to rest easy again, not after that. She only hoped she could put it from her mind enough that it didn't hound her every thought.

Rey put her face in her hands and went to the window. It was already daylight. She couldn't tell what time it was. The haze of pink from the flowers in the atmosphere made it difficult to determine where the sun was. Not that it might have mattered here. Who knew how long a day took on this planet?

Rey. We have to put this from your mind. It's important. You'll get distracted. Mistakes could happen.

She bit back a harsh retort. Something along the lines of, "It wasn't you who died in the vision!" But he didn't deserve that. He was speaking truthfully, and he was right. She could become too distracted.

She wished the goosebumps prickling over her arms would leave.

Her head was killing her. Maybe it was for the best it wasn't very bright outside. She was glad she wasn't sick. This hangover could have been much worse. In fact, she suspected it would worsen once they got around Sitrine.

I'm afraid, Ben.

Ben paused in dressing to glance at her. I know.

A lengthy silence transpired, in which neither of them looked at one another. Their uncertainty hung in the bond, twisting around them both.
**Do you want to stop…?** Ben asked. **We can.**

She released a small snort.

He stiffened. **Your life is more important to me than my… goals. If you say it's off, then it's off.**

**And what would we do then?** she retorted.

**We'll figure it out.**

She shook her head and turned back to the window. Golden balls of light swirled through the air. One of the moons was close enough that it filled a vast majority of the sky. She examined its pockmarked surface, craters galore. Did it take the brunt of the asteroids for Endorom and its sibling planets?

**Rey. Are you listening to me?**

**Yes.**

**Look at me.** He waited until she conceded. **Do you want to stop?**

Despite her protests, she knew that Ben meant what he said. Would he come to regret it in the end, though? The question was a hushed voice at the back of her mind.

She inhaled slowly. If she did nothing, if *they* did nothing, then the First Order would continue to take over the galaxy. They were, perhaps, the only ones who *could* do something. The Resistance might eventually, but that was still years away unless they got extremely lucky and managed to take them down in one fell swoop.

Even the Empire hadn't abandoned its post easily. Its dregs had formed the Order.
We need to ask Sitrine about... any kind of development, she said. They have something, something that blocked our access to the Force and to each other. Maybe if we know what it is... we can find a way to destroy it. There is no way it was mass produced. There aren't enough Force users to justify—

She trailed off, thoughts sliding into place. They made it for us.

We were gone—

They didn't believe we were. They wouldn't have sent probes. They weren't one hundred percent certain they would find us, but they knew we weren't dead. They were waiting until we returned. Because we'd have to return eventually, right?

Ben frowned thoughtfully. But no one knew of the bond. They know I disappeared with you, but...

Bond or no bond, you're still powerful. I'm powerful, or so it's rumored. The rest of the Knights fought to be alpha... we found out from Hux who won. And it was Tro'dai Ren. And it's Tro'dai who was your fiercest competitor at Luke's temple... and after. He's also the smartest one. It's not beyond the realm of possibility that he prepared for the day you came to take your place back.

She nibbled at the inside of her lip. You said there were ways. Maybe he already has something?

It's... possible to use something that blocks out the Force. Items like manacles. The technology isn't widespread anymore, not since the Empire destroyed most of the Jedi. The need for it died out. It's probably something like that.

Again, Rey. We stay together—we don't allow ourselves to become separated.

Rey nodded. The lake shimmered in the sun, showing the reflection of the moons.

Let's go find Sitrine. He stopped by the door. You coming?
Yeah.

She gave one last look at the lake and followed after him.
"Well, the two of you certainly look worried," Sitrine drawled.

They were standing in his study. Sitrine had his boots up on his desk as he slouched in his chair. He lifted a finger and pointed it like a trigger at Rey.

"Pew pew," he said.

Rey was boiling over with enough anxiety that she took his feet and shoved them off the desktop. While he was still protesting, she reached over and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. She jerked him toward her until their faces were only a few inches apart.

"Damn, woman! If you're pissed at me, just say so!"

"I don't have time for this anymore!" she snapped. "I'm hungover, I'm hungry, and I didn't sleep well. Now stop yanking us all around by our arses and tell us what we need to know!"

"You haven't specifically asked for anything—ow, ow, ow!" he yelled when she grabbed his ear. "All right, fine, fine! Simmer down! Ky, tell your woman to release me!"

"He is not my keeper, Sitrine!" Rey growled. "Are you with us, or are you against us? I need to know, so I can decide whether or not to skewer you with my lightsaber. Which would you prefer? Your head knocked off, or sliced through the middle like Snoke? I'm amenable to requests."

"There is no need to be so hostile! Let go of my ear!"
"Tell me!"

"I'm with you!"

Rey released him.

"On one condition." Sitrine jumped back before Rey could grab him again. He put the desk between them. "I don't do things for free, woman! I'm a businessman. Isn't that part evident? I mentioned to you yesterday… There's a price."

**He's scared of you**, Ben realized with some amusement.

**He should be**, Rey harrumphed. He needed to be afraid of someone. Might as well be her.

"What's your price?" she asked.

"This next part requires Ky Ky's attention." Sitrine cricked his neck and pushed his intertwined fingers out to crack his knuckles as he began to stroll around the room. He did so leisurely, picking up baubles and examining them before setting them back down.

Ben lifted an eyebrow, but otherwise remained silent, waiting.

"We have amongst us a Knight who would be willing to become allies with you… If you can recruit him, then I'm all yours." Sitrine flashed a wide smile that showed off his dazzling white teeth. He tossed some sort of paperweight into the air and caught it.

"Which one?" Ben murmured. "Not Ami or Tro'dai."

"No. Not in a million years." Sitrine chuckled to himself. "Ami or Tro'dai. That was adorable."

Ben rolled his eyes with the air of someone who had been suffering under Sitrine's presence for ages. "My question still stands."
The shorter man lifted his index finger into the air with a grand gesture. "Rellen."

"Really." Ben made an expression of half-surprise, half-acceptance. "Not Bramble?"

*Bramble?*

*I… have no idea. He chose that name for himself and no one questioned it.*

"Bramble isn't the man in charge of the military."

"I stand by my original statement." When Sitrine tilted his head in question, Ben sighed. "How exactly would we get on board a military vessel to the general?"

"Aren't you the two most powerful people in the galaxy?" Sitrine queried. "At least, that's how it seemed to me. I've never felt the Force ripple like that."

"We're not gods, Sitrine," Rey said. "Get your head out of your arse."

Sitrine ignored her. "I can come up with a meeting point." He pulled his thigh onto the cabinet he was leaning against. He rested his elbow on his knee. "He'll agree to hear you out. You know he will. He's always liked you."

*Another friend?* Rey asked.

*Sort of. Not as close as Sitrine and I.*

"That doesn't mean much of anything these days," Ben said. "I'm wanted."

"Yeah, but I'll talk some sense into him. He'll at least agree to meet you. Where that might be, I have no idea." Sitrine tucked his hair behind his ear. It was loose from its hairband today. "Could
be a trap. Probably not, though."

"Probably not?" Rey interjected. "You want us to meet with someone who may very well kill us, and then you'll take our side? Why don't I just kill you here right now?"

"Well, you won't," Sitrine mused.

"And why is that?" Rey narrowed her eyes.

"Because I'm far too pretty." The Knight laughed to himself. He straightened and tucked one foot over the other, his hands braced on the cabinet. "Lighten up, Rey. You keep frowning like that, and your face is going to stay that way."

Rey had nothing nice to say to that, so she just kept quiet.

"Kylo knows I'm talking sense," Sitrine said. "You have me, in charge of money... and then you have Rellen, who is in charge of the entire army. Surely the fruits of labor are enough to risk it with Rellen?"

He has a p—

*Don't.* Rey knew Ben was right, but she didn't want to hear it. It rankled too much. Sitrine knew exactly how to get under her skin, and she was on edge enough as it were. Her vision kept playing in the back of her mind, refusing to relinquish its hold on her. Right now, everyone seemed like an enemy.

"So stay here while I get in contact with Rellen, all right? And once I've gotten contact, I'll work with him on a meeting place... preferably one not too risky. How does that sound, Mrs. Solo?"

Rey whipped her head around so fast she hurt herself a little. She turned scarlet. "That's not my—"

"Isn't it, though?" Sitrine pushed away from the cabinet. "It might be a few days before I can get in contact with him."
"Why so long?" Ben asked, unperturbed by the title Sitrine had thrown her way.

That was nice. At least one of them was stable. Rey's heart was about to burst out of her chest, it was beating so hard and so fast. It was actually leaving her a little winded. The flush on her face didn't help, driving the temperature up.

It was hot.

It was really, really hot.

Rey fought the urge to try and cool her face. That wouldn't do. She couldn't let Sitrine know that he had gotten to her. Not about this.

"As of two days ago, he went on vacation."

"Vacation?" Rey blinked. "You're in the middle of a war."

"And Rellen likes to get his tan on," Sitrine replied. "It's a bit annoying, honestly. He's so vain. And terribly, terribly dry. I never know if he's having fun at me or not."

"He is," Ben assured him.

Sitrine waved a hand. "At any rate, the bugger is on vacation, and he'll be back soon. I hope so. Ami takes over the army when he's not around, and I'm sick of this bitch." He huffed. "Ever since Hugs-y got stolen from us—and by the way, mate, who in seven hells steals prisoners?—she's been on a rampage."

_Hugs-y?_

_Hux._
Rey laughed out loud. "You guys call him Hugs-y? I bet he loved that."

"We got it from that Dameron fellow. Hilarious. We listened to the recording of that conversation for hours and hours. Classic Hugs-y. He's always good for entertainment. Shame we had to put him away, but he's crazier than his father was, and we can't have that, now, can we?" Sitrine smiled. "Oh, Ami. What a man to fall for. Bramble surely thought she was his."

Good old First Order gossip.

"Fine, it will take a few days." Ben sighed again. "Should we stay elsewhere?"

"No, no, no! Don't be ridiculous!" Sitrine walked past them toward the door. "All right, let's go get some breakfast. It's well into the afternoon, but who cares, am I right?"

You go ahead, Rey said.

But separating—

No one's going to snatch you with Sitrine there.

You finally trust him?

Maybe. Rey nudged him after Sitrine. I'll be there soon.

She left, heading back to their rooms, her hands folded over her stomach. It was roiling. It had been since she'd woken up. She was sick with worry, and she wasn't sure how to make it stop. She was having to build a partial wall so it wouldn't flood Ben all at once.

The corridors were mostly empty. Rey passed only a few servants. Her thoughts were floating ahead. She needed some time alone, just for a few minutes, to get her head on straight, to get a hold of this beast of fear.
She closed the door behind her as she stepped into their rooms. She walked into the bedroom. The bed had already been remade, and they hadn't even been gone an hour. She looked at it and then went to her customary place at the window. Sitrine had said it was well into the afternoon, but she couldn't tell. Everything looked the same.

There was a gathering in the Force. Rey took it to be Ben, as that was what it felt like whenever he was near. She turned, already shaking her head.

*I just need a little time al—*

She yelled in shock and reached for her lightsaber. It went off, and she arched it at the neck of her assailant. She stopped at the last second and stared. She hadn't known who the person was. She still didn't. But it had become clear after only a few seconds that this wasn't a person at all, not really.

It was a Force ghost.

"Did you get my warning?" the young man asked. He had a scar over his eyebrow, and his hair was almost long enough to touch his shoulders, chestnut brown and wavy. His eyes were a deep, piercing blue.

"Warning?" Rey echoed faintly. She thought he kind of looked like Ben.

*Rey? Who is that? I'm on my way!*

She staggered back a step, lowering her lightsaber. "I—who are you?"

"I'll tell you, but first..." He looked intently into her eyes. "I need you to put a wall up in your mind."

"How do you—?"

"Do it," he said quietly, but firmly.
"But why?" she protested.

"Because my grandson will have a lot of questions for me, and I'm only here for one thing: you."
Grandson?

So he meant…

Her eyes widened.

Vader.

The man's smile was a little grim at the edges. "Please?"

Rey still wasn't sure, but she finished putting up the wall she'd half had up already. "You know it's only going to make him come here faster," she said.

He looked out the window, and she noticed that his profile was... sad. She remembered Luke's words to Ben, when he'd been detoxing from the dark side.

"The Sith you are so obsessed in emulating, have I ever told you about his final moments?" he'd asked. And at Ben's confusion, "My father died saving me from Emperor Palpatine. He died restoring balance to the Force."

"My name is Anakin," Vader said.

"Anakin Skywalker," she murmured.
He nodded. "There's something I need to tell you. Something important. My old master would frown at this. Obi-Wan believes the living shouldn't be led, only guided. But there's too much at stake now." He set his jaw, as though he were battling some inner demon. "I won't allow my bloodline to come to an end. Not like this."

"Come to an…" Rey trailed off. "I don't understand."

"The vision I showed you," Anakin said. He stepped away from the window, deeper into the room.

"You?" He'd given her the vision?

"You died," he continued. "But my grandson will die, too."

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. She wasn't sure what to say, wasn't sure if she should say anything at all. So many questions were lining themselves up on her lips. It seemed best to let him finish.

"The bond you share," Anakin said. He was pacing, albeit slowly. "It's unique and… not. It's unique in the way it's been crafted, but it's not the first Force bond. If one of you dies, so will the other."

Rey's shoulders drew back. "What?"

His smile came again, as faint and grim as the first. "I gave you the vision because I knew it was the only way for you to take what I'm about to say seriously. You would have doubted before. You would have cast it aside, thinking that if you're careful enough, you'll avoid any outcome of your death altogether. Am I wrong?"

She thought about it and shrugged weakly. Well… maybe he wasn't entirely wrong…

"Now you know the urgency. But take care: don't follow the same path I did. Don't let it bring you to ruin."

Rey thought that if her mouth gaped open anymore, he would take her for a fish. She sat on the
windowsill because her knees were weak and unwieldy. They knocked together as they trembled. She put her hands between them so they would stop.

"But I'm getting ahead of myself," Anakin said. "Let's focus on the important part first." He came to a halt in front of her. She noticed not for the first time that he wore robes similar to the ones Luke had donned. "Rey, look at me."

She'd been staring at a spot on his shoulder. Now she acquiesced, lifting her eyes to his. She was cold inside. Cold and… empty. Devoid of emotion. Her mind was shutting down, making the conversation easier to bear. It was the only way to talk about her dying without losing it.

"There is a threat coming. A threat bigger than the First Order, than anything you've ever faced, either of you. I've been watching it, hoping its path would go a different way. It hasn't. Now you're running out of time, and so I've come to you to help you."

"Why couldn't you tell any of this to Ben?" she whispered.

He held out his hand. "He's almost here. Take my hand. It will be faster."

"But you're—" She didn't finish the sentence. It seemed rude to point out the obvious: he wasn't alive.

"Take my hand, Rey."

She sighed and reached out to him. As she expected, her hand went through his. What she didn't expect was the accompanying jolt. She gasped. It was as though she'd been shocked and then plunged into very cold water.

Her vision grew dark around the edges.

She stared up at his solemn face, sliding off the windowsill onto her knees, her hand still suspended through his. There was… so much… flowing into her… so many images… images that were memories, that were thoughts… knowledge that would take an hour to explain, flashing past in an eyeblink…
Then it was over, and she gasped again, greater than before, her lungs struggling to breathe. She was shaking. She stared up at him, wrapping her arms around herself, her knees aching from how hard she'd hit the ground. She thought she had been cold before—she was wrong. Now she was frozen to her core.

The things she had seen—the knowledge he had imparted with her—

"I'll return," he promised. "Share what I showed you with my grandson."

The door to the bedroom opened, and Ben skidded to a stop, panting heavily from how fast he'd run. He stared at the Force ghost and had only a second to observe him. In the next moment, Anakin was gone, fading out of existence.

"What was that?!" Ben exploded. He rushed over to her and knelt before her. He grasped onto her shoulders. "Rey!"

She peered at him weakly. "I need… to sit… down…" She slipped sideways.

Ben caught her. "Rey!"

"Just… need a moment to catch… my breath…" she whispered.

"What happened?!!" Ben couldn't mask the panic in his voice. He shook her gently. "Rey!"

Sitrine appeared in the doorway. "What happened?" For once, he was looking serious. It made Rey smile.

She found the strength to lower the wall in her mind. Honestly, it didn't take much. Keeping the wall up was more of a struggle than having it down. Ben's panic hit her full bloom, but it was strangely comforting.

Rey. Talk to me. What happened?
I talked to your... Rey wondered why she was so weak. Had it been the contact with Anakin? Had it done something to her? She sensed instinctively this was the case. She didn't know how, however. Maybe it was just too much, a Force ghost interacting that way with a living person. Whatever the case, she was drained.

"I just need a nap," she whispered.

"Rey!" Ben nudged her again. "Don't fall asleep. Don't. Rey!"

It's okay, she tried to reassure him. I'm just tired. I promise it's okay.

"Rey—"

She couldn't keep her eyes open anymore. She drifted asleep, going limp in his arms.

It was nighttime.

Rey peered at the dark window. She was on her side on her bed. Sitting up and twisting to the left revealed Ben behind her. He had an arm over her waist. His eyes were closed, but when she stirred, his lashes fluttered open. He hadn't been asleep, merely dozing while he waited for her to wake up.

I was out that long?

Yes, he said. I was very worried.

Where's Sitrine?

He went to bed. We'll talk to him in the morning.
Rey sat up gingerly. She did a mental check on her body. Nothing seemed out of order. She was a little drowsy, nothing more. No aches, no pains.

*I thought maybe your dreams would show me something, but... they were so mundane.* Ben laughed softly. He sobered a moment later as he rose to sit beside her. *Are you going to tell me what happened?*

Rey exhaled. Where to begin? The beginning, she reminded herself. How many times had she had that conversation with herself? She should have known by now.

*I'm going to tell you,* she said. *But I don't—you're probably going to get upset. And you're going to have questions for me that I don't know the answer to.*

Ben was ominously quiet.

Right.

*That was your grandfather,* she said, deciding to get it over with.

More silence on his end.

Rey chewed on her lip, trying to decide if she wanted to continue onward or wait for him to react. She looked at his face to help determine her decision. But his face, his thoughts, they were all blank.

"Ben," she said.

He got off the bed and stomped to the window. Stood before it, clenched his fists. Came to her, looking ready to fly off the handle. Stopped himself, bowing his head.

*I don't understand,* he said finally.
I—he gave me some things to show you.

**And why couldn't he show me himself?**

*I don't know,* she said honestly. *I really don't. He... he said something about how you would have too many questions—* She paused as he walked out of the bedroom. *Ben! He said he'd be back.*

She heard the sitting room door slam open.

Rey sighed and fell back onto her pillows.

Why wasn't anything in their lives ever easy?

---

Ben came back an hour later. He seemed ready to deal with the issue at hand.

Rey propped herself up on the pillows against the headboard. She took one of his pillows and held it to her stomach for comfort. She'd dozed off again, but if he was ready to address what had happened, then so was she.

Anakin had shown her a lot. All of it was important. All of it was detrimental to their safety.

Ben paced for a while. She got the impression he'd been pacing since he left. She couldn't help but notice he did so the same way Anakin had.

That made Ben glance over at her sharply. He stopped pacing entirely.

**Are you saying I'm like him?**
A little, she admitted. She patted the spot beside her. Come sit.

I can't. I don't know what to feel, what to think. For years, I… I wanted to be him, I thought I was carrying out what he'd wanted… I'd spoken to him so many times… And—never once, never once! He kicked an ottoman so hard it rolled away and didn't stop until it bumped into the wall. Never once did he speak to me. Did he answer me. Not once!

Because he's not… Rey decided not to finish the thought.

Not what? Not on the dark side anymore?

Yes.

Ben scoffed. It was like Skywalker said. He really did die to restore balance to the Force. I thought… He scoffed a second time. It doesn't matter what I thought. It was all wrong. So what did he want? What did he want, that he could tell you, and not me, his own flesh and blood?

Don't be jealous—

"I AM NOT JEALOUS!" he screamed.

By now, Rey was used to dealing with Ben's temper. "Because yelling at me makes me believe you," she said.

Don't be cute. He glared at her and resumed pacing.

"Ben, it wasn't like that!" she said in exasperation.

"Then what was it like?!" he screamed again. There were tears in his eyes, and that drew her up short. "Please! Tell me! Tell me what it was like!"

"Ben…"
He choked on a sob and covered his mouth with his hand.

Rey slid off the bed to come to his side. She touched his shoulder, and he slapped her hand away.

"Ben!"

"I can't do this right now," he said, his voice unsteady. "I thought I could, but I can't. You'll have to tell me later."

And he walked out again.
Rey found Ben by the lake. He was sitting at its edge, at the end closest to the castle. The golden orbs danced around him as if he weren't there. Rey stood back for a time, watching him. Some sort of amphibian was perched nearby, croaking along. Other night insects joined its ballad, chirping and clicking away.

He didn't lift his head, although she knew he felt her presence.

She waited a few minutes longer before heading down the steps that led to the lake. The steps were wooden and old, rotting in places or gone altogether in patches. She counted them on the way down to give herself something to focus on besides Ben's hurt and her fears. He had his wall up tightly, and she could still feel how upset he was.

Sixty-three steps later, she was at his side. She sat next to him, drawing her cloak around herself. It was a little chilly this night. Instead of looking at the lake, she peered up at the moons. It was a rather beautiful view, and she hadn't ceased in thinking so.

Rey put her hand over his where it rested on the ground. It was a wordless gesture that carried an unspoken, "Let me in?"

Ben sighed. His wall lowered, and the full brunt of his hurts and betrayals wrapped around her. She curled her hands around his elbow and rested her cheek against his bicep. For a moment, they merely sat there, lost in their own thoughts.

It was Ben, surprisingly, who broke the silence.

_I almost don't want to know what he wanted._
Rey released a breath. She couldn't say anything that he didn't already know.

*I know… that I'm being selfish… I know that.*

You're not being selfish, Ben, she said. *You have every right to be upset. I would be, too.*

**But?**

**But… There's danger. The vision he gave me was a warning.**

Ben's brows pulled together. After a moment, he looked at her. *He gave you the vision?*

Yes. She fiddled with her ponytail until it was tight again. *He said we're meant to be guided, not led, but that he didn't want his bloodline to die.*

Ben didn't need to ask what that meant. *Force bonds… usually if one person of the bond dies, so does the other.*

Rey turned to him in some surprise. *You knew? You knew if I died, you would, too, and you weren't even worried?*

*I was worried. But I love you, and I'm not going to let anything happen to you.* He plucked a piece of long grass and fiddled with it. *I believe we can overcome any obstacle.* He glanced at her. *You don't?*

She didn't answer straightaway. She fell onto her back and spread her arms. She wondered how many craters were on the closest moon. There was a ridge of mountains near where it curved out of sight. They were dusted in red.

...I'm scared, Ben. I got used to the idea that nothing could take us down. I knew we weren't invincible, but... I knew we'd be hard to kill.
We are hard to kill.

Do you know what Anakin is?

You need to be more specific.

Rey pushed herself up onto her elbows. He wanted me to show you some things before... before I told you about what faces us.

Like what? Ben asked suspiciously.

Memories. He thought it would be better if you saw them yourself. He thought they would be more impactful. He knew... you would be upset with him. He didn't have time, he said. He would be back again, and then he'll talk to you.

Ben snorted.

What? she asked.

He shook his head and set his jaw. Nothing. Fine, let's get it over with. Show me the memories.

Not out here. I can only show you through meditation. It was the only way for the memories to be as crisp as they were given. Otherwise, they'd be a blur of events.

Ben looked like he wanted to argue, but he stood up. They were too vulnerable out here. Meditation required them to withdraw deep within themselves. They wouldn't be able to sense an incoming attack. It was important now, more than ever, that they be on their guard.
"Are you an angel?"

Tatooine, as desolate as Jakku but with more people.

"I'm a pilot, you know, and someday I'm gonna fly away from this place."

A boy, whose blue eyes were filled with a familiar fire. A young lady, whose hair was so long, that even with braids, it still fanned to her waist in thick, chocolate brown streamers.

"You're a slave?"

"I'm a person, and my name is Anakin."

Anakin's journey began the moment he met the Jedi Qui-Gon Jinn, but his heart already belonged to the girl he'd called an angel. Through a series of events, he won a dangerous game called podracing and helped Qui-Gon get the money he needed to fix his vessel. The Queen of Naboo, Qui-Gon, and his apprentice, Obi-Wan, were stranded, their hyperdrive shot.

Rey had more time to speculate on the memories this go around. The Obi-Wan here was much younger than the Ben Kenobi she'd seen in Leia's memories, though Anakin hadn't met him yet. What was more impressive was watching the podrace. Anakin was the only human who could race, and he'd inadvertently used the Force to hone his instincts, seeing things before they happened. No wonder Ben could fly so well. He'd inherited it from both his grandfather and his father.

Ben absorbed the memories slowly, carefully taking in every detail.

"I made this for you. So you'd remember me."

The memories began shooting forward on their own. There were only snippets of conversation here and there, flashes of faces and color.

"Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering. I sense much fear in you."
The Jedi were not keen on making Anakin an apprentice.

"He is too old."

"He is the Chosen One. You must see it."

"Clouded, this boy's future is."

Things grew hazy, as though Anakin hadn't been able to recall them well. Memories filtered past, barely more than static. Anakin grew up, trained by Obi-Wan, the flame he held for Padmé never dying. Rey found this interesting. She hadn't known their ages were far apart when Ben had talked about his grandmother.

She would have thought the memories would linger more on the war, on what had happened to turn Anakin over to the dark side. Those were there, too, but still only flashes. The focus was primarily around Padmé.

"I haven't seen her in ten years, Master."

The memories flexed, slowing again. Padmé was a stark outline, beautiful and glowing. Anakin's love pervaded into Rey and Ben, too strong to have ever been contained. Even then, he knew he wanted her as his forever, and that he would do anything for her.

Nerves had taken him. He was visibly tense as Padmé greeted Obi-Wan.

"Ani?" A pleased, surprised smile came to Padmé's face. "My goodness, you've grown."

"So have you. Grown more beautiful, I mean."

Ben gave an approximation of a mental eyeroll. Secondhand embarrassment was wafting from him. Rey didn't know what the big deal was. She thought it was sweet. That being said, Obi-Wan's control over Anakin was weak. It was clear the padawan was headstrong, almost too headstrong,
and Obi-Wan's patience waned.

Anakin was never mindful of his thoughts, and his emotions quickly enveloped him, no matter how he was feeling.

He was assigned to protect Padmé, who had been targeted by a mysterious enemy.

"Please don't look at me like that."

"Why not?"

"It makes me feel uncomfortable."

Anakin knew that despite Padmé's protests, she was slowly coming around to the idea.

"Are you allowed to love? I thought that was forbidden for a Jedi."

"Attachment is forbidden. Possession is forbidden. Compassion, which I would define as unconditional love, is central to a Jedi's life. So you might say that we are encouraged to love."

Why are we watching him making an ass of himself again?

It's not that bad.

Would that have worked on you?

Maybe. If you had said it. She had no qualms with admitting that.

Even if I subsequently told you that you starred in my dreams?
Just pay attention, Ben.

Naboo was as beautiful then as it was now. Rey could see that not much had changed over the last thirty-something years. The war that had taken place ten years prior had barely left a mark. It was resilient, this planet. And the lake country, which Rey had never seen, was beyond breathtaking.

"I don't like sand. It's coarse and rough and irritating, and it gets everywhere." Anakin's smile was faint, amused. "Not like here. Here, everything is soft..." He swallowed. "And smooth..." His fingers lifted to Padmé's hand, stroking it. Those fingers then crept up her bare back.

He kissed her. Before it could get too saucy, Padmé broke away.

"I shouldn't have done that."

You really shouldn't have.

Ben, shh!

I'm only questioning why we need to watch these parts. It's my grandfather cruising on my grandmother. It's disgusting.

Disgusting is a little harsh. And it's romantic.

Fine, I don't care. Can we speed through this some way?

I can try. Rey focused on the memories. She willed them to pick up, until they were streaking past, almost blurs. The story unfolding was a tragedy. It couldn't have been anything else, as this was Darth Vader, Anakin Skywalker, but it was still sad and a little distressing to see.

Anakin continued to dream about his mother while he continued the torrid affair with Padmé. Saving her proved futile, and he mercilessly slaughtered the entire village that had taken her. It was his first step onto the dark side.
They married in secret, and the years trickled past again. Padmé grew pregnant, and Anakin was plagued with visions, visions of her death. It was a self-fulfilled prophecy. Anakin segued deeper and deeper into the darkness, so that he might save her. He killed younglings. He—

Rey didn't want to watch anymore. She'd seen it already, when Anakin had given her these memories.

"Anakin, all I want is your love."

"Love won't save you, Padmé. Only my new powers can do that."

"At what cost? You're a good person. Don't do this."

"I won't lose you the way I lost my mother. I am becoming more powerful than any Jedi has ever dreamed of. And I'm doing it for you. To protect you."

"Come away with me. Help me raise our child. Leave everything else behind while we still can."

"Don't you see? We don't have to run away anymore. I have brought peace to the Republic. I am more powerful than the chancellor. I—I can overthrow him. And together, you and I can rule the galaxy, make things the way we want them to be."

"I don't believe what I'm hearing. Obi-Wan was right. You've changed."

"I don't want to hear anymore about Obi-Wan. The Jedi turned against me. Don't you turn against me."

"I don't know you anymore. Anakin, you're breaking my heart. You're going down a path I can't follow."

Rey wished it was over. Like this, slowed down in their minds, it was much more to absorb, the full brunt of it hitting her. But she couldn't close her eyes, as they were already closed. She couldn't pull from the memories, because she was the one who held them, and Ben had to see.
Had to see Anakin's ensuing battle with Obi-Wan. Had to see Anakin lose the fight, and his limbs, and be put into his suit as Vader, too burned to function without it. Had to see Vader scream in agony once he realized he had killed the person he loved most.

The memories fell away, only surfacing again to reveal Vader dying, Luke leaning over him. Vader had been redeemed, and balance had been restored to the Force.

And then there was nothing.

Rey opened her eyes. Ben sat directly across from her. She couldn't read his expression, and his thoughts were murky.

_There were… a lot of parallels_, she said at last.

**What was he warning us against?** Ben wanted to get straight to the point.

_We saw that… Anakin was a vergence in the Force_. Which explained a lot about the amount of power Ben held over the Force. _We saw that… Darth Sidious had made him that way._

Ben got to his feet, and Rey with him. Their limbs were cramped. They'd been sitting for hours. Daylight was pouring in through the bedroom window.

_Right_. It was a prompt to continue.

_He—he wasn't the only one_.

_It was a very old use of the Force. Of course, someone else had been made._

_I mean… there's—there's one now, Ben._
Ben frowned. *Who?*

Rey wet her lips. *Snoke…*

*What?*

*Snoke made another apprentice.*

*What? No. I would have known.* It was an instant, flat denial. Ben stared at her. *Anyone would have known, he would have used them.*

*He hid her.*

*Why? That makes no sense.*

*Because he did it wrong,* Rey said. *Instead of making a clean slate, like Anakin was, Snoke created a vergence out of pure darkness.*

She could tell Ben wasn't buying it, even though the information had come directly from Anakin himself. He paced the room, drawing his hand through his hair, his cloak billowing gently behind him.

*It means she's insane, Ben.*

*Say she exists.* He pivoted in her direction. *Wouldn't she still be hidden?*

*No. She got free.*

*And no one's noticed a stupidly powerful Force-user on the loose?*
She has the ability to disguise herself.

Ben paused. **What?**

She has the ability to make herself look like anyone she wants to. Rey took a breath. This next part wasn't good, and this already wasn't fun. She killed Tro'dai, Ben. She's appearing as him. She's infiltrated the First Order. No one knows.

**And she's insane?**

That's what Anakin told me.

**Pure darkness, with no light at all... everyone carries a little bit of light inside of them. Everyone.** Ben sat down on the edge of their bed. His arms rested over his thighs. He was gazing into space, lost in thought.

He said when we see him again, he'll teach us to be able to see through an illusion like that.

**I don't want his help.**

Ben.

**We've made it this far without him.**

He showed me a vision of the future, Ben. I die. And if I die, you die. That's how it works, remember? You've got to let this go. I understand you're upset, that you're betrayed, but this is bigger than that. I don't want either of us to die.

Ben gave a long-suffering sigh.

**Should we tell Sitrine about Tro'dai?**
*Not yet. I don't want to tip her off, whoever she is.* He shook his head. *I can't believe he had another apprentice.*

Rey remade her ponytail and grimaced at the greasiness. *We need a bath. We're gross.*

*I agree.* Ben slipped off the bed. *We'll take a bath and then address this more.*
The Uncertain Future

Chapter Notes

So this chapter is a small dose of fluff and humor before we head into darker waters again. You guys are awesome, as always, especially with the last few chapters! I appreciate your support so much, I can't state this enough.

Ben dragged the sponge along Rey's arm, trailing soap suds. Her back was pressed to his chest, and his chin rested on the curve of her shoulder. They hadn't spoken since they'd climbed into the tub, both enjoying one another's company and mulling over what they had seen. Bubbles tickled Rey's chin where the hot water lapped at her neck.

"When I was younger..." She closed her eyes. "I wanted more than anything to have a normal family, even if it was on Jakku." Although none of this was news to him, of course. "I wanted a life free of Unkar Plutt. And even if I still had to do the same work every day, I would have been so happy to have someone, anyone."

The sponge worked between all five fingers of her right hand.

"And while I'm grateful that I'm free, that I know the truth... while I'm grateful that I never have to scavenge again... sometimes I want to. Because it's predictable, that life. You wake up, you strip things for parts, you trade in your lot to get a meager meal, you eat, and you go to bed... and in the morning, you start all over again."

She sighed and tilted her head back onto his shoulder. "We both know that isn't true. If I really had to go back, I'd probably murder myself from the monotony, when I know there's so much more in this galaxy, in this universe. But... for a moment, just a brief, shining moment, wouldn't it be nice to be free of danger? To know what was going to happen next?"

"It would," Ben murmured. "You can still go back to that lifestyle, Rey."

"And turn my back on the galaxy? Yeah, right," she muttered. "Besides, I have you." She shifted until she could see him in her peripheral. "There's no way you'd let me go back to scavenging on Jakku, because you'd be stuck there with me."
"The heat is unbearable," he muttered. "And the sand gets everywhere."

"You were only there for maybe half an hour," she said.

He blinked. "...How...? I've never told you—"

"I saw your memories, remember?"

He was quiet for a heartbeat, considering his thoughts. "Sometimes I don't know if that should be unsettling or not."

Rey closed her eyes and searched inside of herself. She could recall it easily in a flash of thought, but Ben would need the details. The evening of his attack welled up between them. The screams, Poe being carried away, the bloodied sand, the old man Ben had struck down. Her calling his name and the colors from the fire dancing over the silver of his mask.

What did I do?

You walked away from me.

Why?

It was complicated. Rey wasn't sure if she could put into words the relationship she'd had with his memory self. The resentments he'd held from the secrets she'd kept from him. How it wouldn't have mattered what she did, as it was destined to turn out the same regardless.

Frustration snaked through the bond. I don't like it.

It's never bothered you before, she said with some surprise.
Because usually I forget that it even happened. I want to know everything I missed. I want to know what you saw, what you did. What I did.

It took me three-and-a-half years to go through your memories like that. If I could show you, I would, but it would take forever. That's why I give them to you in bits and pieces.

But do you see how it's maddening?

I do. It wasn't a lie. She did. If this were in reverse, she'd be just as frustrated, if not more. Knowing that he'd been in her memories, he'd seen parts of her she might have wanted to keep private. Not knowing what he'd examined, touched. It would be like trying to recall a phantom memory. It existed somewhere, but not within reach, never within reach.

What do you want me to do, Ben?

Show me them.

But—

Not all at once. Two memories a day. More, if we're not busy.

She nodded slowly. She could do that. Do you want one more, then?

Yes. He leaned back against the tub, his arms resting along its edges. The sponge slipped back into the water, which was cooling. The servants had had to heat the water to begin with, and Rey wondered why Sitrine hadn't installed a sonic shower. Or some variant of modern plumbing.

Which one?

I'll let you decide.
Rey smiled a little to herself. *This is going to be painful, isn't it?* He didn't have good memories of his childhood. Recalling them might make it not worth it.

*Seeing you there… from what you’ve shown me so far, it makes it bearable.*

She took a breath and held it. *Okay. But… not in here, the water’s already getting cold.*

Once both had toweled off and dressed, with Rey still drying her long hair, they settled on the bed. They were beyond exhausted, neither having slept in over twenty-four hours. Crashing was imminent.

Rey recalled the first memory she'd seen, when he'd been a child. They curled up on their sides, facing each other, their clasped hands between them. Ben's fingers tightened around hers as he saw himself, so small and so sad, destroyed over what he'd done, what he hadn't meant to do. The pivotal moment in his life that would make his parents fear him slightly from then on.

"*Who are you?"*

"*I'm your friend. …Why is that so hard to believe?"*

"*Because I don't have any friends. Everyone hates me."

"*That's not true."

"*How would you know?"

"*Well… I don't hate you."

Heat warmed Rey's eyes. It took her a moment to discern that the tears hadn't come from herself. Ben's emotions roiled around, the pain of his loneliness fresh all over again. The memories were vivid and felt real because of the illusion Breeze had made. He never would have been able to see these moments with perfect clarity, not so far back.
"Ben, I have to tell you something. People fear what they don't understand. Your parents don't understand you. Make them. Tell them how you feel, show them what you can do."

"I don't know…"

His father appeared, and the tears slipped down Rey's cheeks. Whatever Ben was trying to keep back was flooding her on her end.

"C'mon, kid. You wanna go work on the 'con with Chewie and me?"

The memory darkened, and reality crept into existence. They looked at one another as the tears dripped across Rey's nose and onto her pillow. Ben tugged on her hand until she was in his arms, and then he tucked her under his chin.

They fell asleep that way, legs tangled, Rey listening to Ben's heartbeat.

When Rey's eyes cracked open the next morning, she was met with the sight of two things. One: Ben's hair and the line of his shoulder, as she was spooning him. And two: Sitrine on the other side of Ben, his arm over both their waists and his leg following suit.

"You two were sleeping so long, I felt left out," Sitrine pouted.

"Sitrine?" Ben said groggily.

"Yes, love?" Sitrine purred.

And then he kissed Ben.

"Hey!" Rey said indignantly, instantly fully awake. She sat up and punched Sitrine's arm. Hard. "What do you think you're doing?!"
"Afraid of love between the same sex?" Sitrine asked archly. "Why, I'm offended!"

"Kiss whoever you want to, just leave Ben out of it, he's mine!" Rey snapped.

Sitrine fell onto his back, laughing hysterically. Rey was not amused, which she showed by narrowing her eyes and crossing her arms. She was a little embarrassed that she'd been possessive in front of someone other than Ben. But honestly! Sitrine knew exactly what buttons to press to make her want to rip his head off his shoulders.

Grrr!

Ben pushed up onto an elbow. He was still mostly asleep. "Did you kiss me?"

The Knight tapped a finger to his chin. "Did I?"

"Damn it, Trine. What have we said about keeping your lips to yourself?" Ben said grumpily.

*He's done this before?* Rey asked in disbelief.

*At one point, it was daily.*

*And you let it happen?*

*If I fight it, he'll just make it filthy, and I don't want a reason to cut off his dick.*

"Sitrine, get out of here!" Rey grabbed her pillow and whacked him over the head with it. Pale blue feathers went flying everywhere. Delicate pillows, apparently.

"Why are you so hateful, Rey?! I'm only trying to spread my love!"
"Spread it somewhere else! Anywhere else!"

"FINE! I'll go, but not because you told me to! I simply have a meeting this morning, and it's time I tarry off." Sitrine practically flounced from the room, and not for the first time, Rey wondered what his sexuality was. It wavered back and forth, sometimes quickly enough to give her whiplash.

Bisexual.

Rey thought about that for a moment.

She nodded.

Yeah, all right.

The Knight stuck his head around the door. "Meet me for breakfast in an hour!" Then he was gone again.

Rey collapsed into a horizontal position. She stuck the damaged pillow over her head and grumped. That had not been a pleasant way to wake up, to Sitrine's stupid, smarmy face. Choobies, but she hated that man. Well, not really. Only part of the time.

He'll wear you down eventually. Trust me.

That wasn't too difficult to believe, sadly. Ben was extremely anti-social, and while Rey's disposition wasn't always necessarily sunny, she was much more social by comparison. If Sitrine had worn Ben down, then it followed that Rey would cave quicker. That was damned unfortunate.

We need a game plan, Rey said. Breakfast had passed relatively uneventfully, and Ben and Rey had retired to their rooms for more planning. Rey would have preferred to do this outside, but lately the outdoors left her feeling far too exposed for comfort.
Of course, we do. The problem is that we have limited information. Ben juggled three metal, round balls that had been used for decoration with the Force. It fiercely reminded her of Anakin. In his memories, he'd constantly been toying with random objects by making them float around.

Let's make a list of what we know.

All right. And don't compare me to him.

Rey ignored him and fell onto the fainting couch. She raised a hand, drawing on the Force, and one of the balls zoomed toward her. The two began passing the ball back and forth with gentle exertions of the Force.

Sitrine is willing to turn.

If we secure Rellen, we'll have the two of them. That's the majority of the First Order already. Sitrine can funnel money into our cause, and Rellen can subvert the army from the inside.

That was it for the immediate game plan. As for the uncertain future...

What do we do about... her? Is there anything we can do right now? We can't get to the First Order, and even if we could, we'd have no way of knowing if it was really her or not. So the best thing to do on that front is to wait for Anakin to help us.

Ben's lips curled back from his teeth in a silent snarl, but he didn't argue. They both knew she was right. They didn't stand a chance if they couldn't figure out how to spot her.

We need to ask Sitrine about the Force impairment project. We keep forgetting. And we need to see if he's been able to get a hold of Rellen. Though she suspected he would have mentioned the latter already if he had.

Ben regained control of the ball they'd been sharing and resumed juggling all three. He tossed one into the air.
Talk to Sitrine.

A second ball joined the first.

Talk to Rellen once we can meet with him.

He spun the last ball around his fingertips for a long moment, debating. His eyes stayed glued to the two balls in the air. Bracing his shoulders, he flicked his fingers, and the third ball joined its brethren.

Take lessons from my grandfather.

Rey knew it had cost him a lot to concede to that.

All three balls hit the ground and rolled in separate directions. Two vanished under the couch, and the third didn't make it very far, trapped on the thick rug they were standing on.

But if he brings in Skywalker, I'm out of there.
Enter Rellen

Damn, you guys, it's been five months! I started this story two days after opening night of the movie. It's crazy to see how big it's gotten and how supportive everyone is. If it wasn't for you guys, this story would not get updated nearly as often! I say that because I get a lot of thanks for updating so frequently and with quality. :) But you guys help me out just as much as I help you!

All right, so I usually don't like to reference any actors or anything for people I make up, because I like for people to build their own mental image. But I did want to note that for Rellen, when it comes to his voice/how he speaks, I had Patrick Warburton in mind. That's where the comparison ends, but so you get an idea of his dialogue.

The war council room was large, to say the least, almost as large as the throne room itself. There was a table in the center that had a map of Endorom, and it, too, was massive. Red flags sat on its surface, along with blue ones. It didn't look like they were placed for war, though. Maybe the mining sites?

Winged chairs sat around the rectangular table. There were two fireplaces, and each were crackling with fire. Bookshelves lined the walls, the books themselves plentiful in some areas, and in others, propping one another up. There weren't any rugs in this part of the castle, which was probably why there were fires. The stone floor, uncoated, left a chill in the air.

Rey was beginning to get the impression that Sitrine was showing off different parts of his castle every time he spoke with them.

Sitrine reclined in one of the chairs, much as he had when Rey had first seen him. The only real difference was that he wasn't wearing his Knight outfit. She supposed when he'd said he only donned it when necessary to be intimidating, it was true.

"Glad you got the memo to meet in here," Sitrine said. "Guess what? I've heard from Rellen. He's given me a place and a time for you guys to meet him."

"Great," Rey said, throwing herself into a chair near him. "Where at?"

"It's a planet called Idirene. It's an ecumenopolis. There's a parlor there, it's in the Sixth District. It's
called Dumont. He wants to meet around lunch. He said to dress very casually—you know, something not attention drawing.” He gestured to Ben and Rey. "Like that. The power couple look has to go."

"What day?" Ben asked. He stood behind Rey's chair, content to rest his hands over the back of it.

"Tomorrow," Sitrine said. "If you can convince him to join you, then return to me, and we'll talk."

"We had a question," Rey said. Sitrine raised his eyebrows, his signal for her to continue. "Is the Order developing any sort of…” She trailed off, unsure of how to word it.

"Technology meant to sever or hold off someone's connection to the Force," Ben finished for her.

"Mmm… Steps have been made in that direction, there's a project funded for it." Sitrine lifted from his slouch. "Tro'dai was overly concerned about your return, though that was only part of his motivation. But it's nowhere near ready to use."

"It's not?" Rey asked, her brows drawing together.

"Nah, it's still years away. I mean, sure, we've designed manacles, but Tro wants something more permanent."

"Permanent?" she echoed.

"Yeah. Jedi back in the day, right, they could sever someone's connection to the Force completely. I guess they did it through some sort of holier than thou Force move. Either way, Tro wants something like that, since Sith can't use those same techniques the way a Jedi could. It'd be a way to knock out the threat of Ky and you and also any other potential threats. We all know there are plenty of Force-users out there just waiting to be discovered."

Rey was horrified.

_Cutting off our access to the Force completely?!_
"And you said this was still years away?" Ben murmured.

Sitrine nodded. "Yes, that's right." His eyes narrowed. "But why are you lot so curious about it?"

Rey didn't answer, her mind racing.

*Running through corridors.*

*Raising her hand, nothing happening.*

*Trapped on unfamiliar terrain, screaming for Ben.*

*Following Sitrine, her body all but falling apart on itself, it was so ill.*

If the Order created something like that, some way to make it permanent, as Sitrine had said… And she'd been so ill in the vision, unable to access the Force and telling Sitrine they were running out of time…

She'd been dying.

This invention would have taken her connection with the Force away, which in turn meant her connection with Ben. Ben had likely been dying, too, and she'd known they needed to find some way to touch the Force again. But if it was permanent… if it was permanent, that would never happen…

And Sitrine had said this technology was still years away. Did that mean that the vision was still years away, too?

Sitrine snapped his fingers in front of her face. She looked up, startled out of her reverie.

"Hey. You okay there, Rey-Rey?"
Annoyance flickered. "Don't call me that."

The Knight smirked. "Then don't space out on me."

"Well, we need to get going." She pushed to her feet. "We'll see you in a couple of days."

"Awh," Sitrine pouted. "I knew this day was coming, but it still wounds me." He put a hand over his heart. Then he grinned and winked at Rey with a kissy face. "I'll miss you, Rey-Rey."

Rey wanted to keep being irritable, but despite herself, she smiled. "Bye, Sitrine."

He raised his hand in a goodbye wave.

"Bye," Ben said.

"Don't stay gone too long, mate."

---

That was a lot you gathered about the vision.

Rey sorted through her things. They were back on the Falcon, and she wanted to make sure she hadn't left anything behind. Ben was in the cockpit, working out the coordinates. Idirene was in a system close by, which was why it wouldn't take too long to deal with Rellen.

All we bought were power outfits. We'll have to get something on Idirene.

Satisfied everything was in place, Rey joined Ben in the cockpit.
Rey didn't want to think about the vision anymore. It was hard to live with, and it was even harder to cope with. She knew she had to keep a level head—she'd seen Anakin's memories, she'd seen what could happen if she didn't. And Ben's life was attached to hers and vice versa. It was… a lot to take in, even in light of Anakin's promise of future help.

And I thought I was the one who avoided everything, Ben mused.

She could still feel the lightsaber going through her.

She leaned forward, fiddling with the controls. Ben was as stubborn as she was. He wouldn't let this go until she answered him. She told herself that this didn't have to be difficult. That if she talked about it more, it wouldn't be as terrifying. She could come to terms with it. She could know that they were taking preventative measures.

It seems like the vision happens a few years from now, but... we can't know for sure until we talk to Anakin again. If he even tells us that part.

Unless they find a way to accelerate the development.

That was another thing she didn't want to think about. If it was years away, it meant she had time to deal with it. Then again... why would Anakin step in so early? What series of events led to the vision that wouldn't warrant being dealt with then? Was it the training? Or was it because there was a key component that set everything in motion right around the corner?

How do I not think about this? she asked him. How are you not thinking about this?

Ben grasped her hand and squeezed it. I am. Why do you think your anxiety is so strong? It's everything we're feeling together.

She inhaled softly and nodded. That made her feel a little better. It made it easier to focus on the task at hand.
Do you think we'll be able to convince Rellen?

*Sitrine presents himself as a lazy asshole, but he knows better than to waste my time. He was friends with Rellen, too.*

*What do we do if we can't? He'll try and report us to the Order.*

*Then we'll kill him.* Ben lifted the *Falcon* off the ground. Rey made sure the straps for her seat were secure. *Simple as that.*

Id Irene was half the size of Coruscant, but like Coruscant, it was indeed an ecumenopolis. It was in a system that was well known to its position in the galaxy, a corner pocket near the Outer Rim. The First Order's grip on this pocket was lax, and so they didn't have to worry too much about detection. By the time anyone would have gotten around to doing anything, they'd be long gone.

Obtaining casual clothing was easy. They kept to the dark colors theme because it made Ben happy and didn't matter as much to Rey anymore. Rey braided her hair and made an elaborate bun out of it. Their lightsabers were hidden on their person, and they made sure to keep to themselves.

Fortune favored them by way of the culture of the planet. Hooded cloaks were used regularly for the cooler climate, and so the duo wasn't out of place by wearing some of their own. Their hoods stayed up, and they resolved not to lower them until they made it to the parlor.

Id Irene was made up of twenty districts. Only half of them were open to the public. The other half were power plants. District Six was a quieter part of the city, with less traffic and more of a tired look to it, as if it had seen better days. It wasn't quite sketchy, not yet, but it would probably trend that way in the next decade.

Dumont was busy for lunch, for which they were grateful. More people could overhear possibly if they weren't careful, but the risk was greater with fewer people, as they'd stand out more.

Rey had no idea of who to look for. Rellen wouldn't show up as a Knight, she didn't think, and she
didn't really remember what he looked like. Ben had already spotted him and was guiding her to
him.

They fell into a booth across from a petite man. His eyes were a vivid golden color, and he was
sporting a faux hawk, his locks dirty blond. He had one leg crossed over the other, and his arms
were folded over his thin chest. Despite his lithe state, he was intimidating. It was those eyes, Rey
thought. There was something in them that brooked no room for stupidity.

Rellen's gaze slid from Ben to Rey and back again. When he spoke, his voice was incredibly deep
and incredibly slow and dry.

"You're late."

Ben lifted an eyebrow. "Or are you early?"

The two stared one another down for a total of fifty-six seconds.

Rellen grinned. It consisted of the smallest tilt at the corner of his mouth, almost more of a
grimace. "Some things never change. I was going to order some ice cream. Strawberry, I think.
Chocolate for you?"

"Chocolate sounds fine," Ben said with a sigh. He stretched out his long body, slipping an arm over
the back of their booth.

"And you?" Rellen asked, leveling his intense stare on Rey. "What about you? Let me guess…” He
trailed off thoughtfully. "Cherry? No… Vanilla?"

"I…” Rey hated to present any sort of weakness to a potential enemy, but she had no choice. "What
is ice cream?"

"What is ice—?" Rellen whipped his gaze to Ben. "Kylo Ren, who is this trollop, and why doesn't
she know a staple to life like ice cream?"

"Because I grew up on a desert planet?" Rey answered for herself.
Rellen hummed. "Interesting…"

*Is he always like this?*

*Yes.*

The better question was why did the Order insist on insulting her at every opportunity? She didn't look like a floozy. She knew she didn't. It still bothered her.

Bastards.

Rellen raised an arm to summon the waitress. "I'll let you try mint chocolate chip. Believe me, you're going to love it."

*Will I?*

*It's all right.* Ben shrugged his indifference.

"While I was waiting for you to arrive, I was looking at their menu. They have over thirty flavors. Doesn't that seem a bit excessive to you?" Rellen asked Rey.

"Sure," Rey said.

"I like her," he said to Ben. And then to Rey, "Sorry I called you a trollop. It's a force of habit."

"To call people trollops?" Rey blinked.

"There's been a lot of prostitutes hanging around the Order," Rellen elaborated. His eyes carried something of a natural squint. "And Ami's a bitch. I'm starting to forget what regular women can be like. You seem regular, though. Are you?"
"Am I?" Rey questioned.

"Regular."

"Uh… yes," she said.

He tilted his head, narrowed his eyes. "You don't seem sure."

"It depends on your definition of regular," Rey replied.

He tilted his head up. "Touché."

Touché?

The waitress arrived.

Rellen smiled, and when he did, it was blinding because of his perfectly straight, white teeth. "Yes, hello. He's going to have chocolate ice cream, and she's getting the mint chocolate chip. I want strawberry with toffee mixed in, and a chocolate milkshake with a swirly straw. Double scoops for all."

The waitress was not immune to his apparent charms, and she took their order with a trembling hand. Her cheeks were so red they were likely to burn off.

"Oh, and…" Rellen glanced at the menu, one finger pointed up to halt the waitress from leaving. "…No, I shouldn't. It's far too fattening… Ah, hells with it. I'll take some of the curly fries. Extra sauce. Thanks, love."

Rey decided to get straight to the point, keeping her voice low. "You know Sitrine sent us here—"

Rellen held up a finger to Rey. "Shhhhhh." When she quieted, he said, "Not until the food arrives."
I'm very hungry."

*How long do you think this meeting will take?* Rey asked Ben in exasperation.

*Be prepared not to leave this booth for a while.*

Rey slumped against the window, her forehead pressed to it.

Great.
Mint.

But chocolate.

But mint.

But chocolate…

Rey licked her spoon clean, debating on how she felt about the taste on her tongue. It didn't help that Rellen was observing the whole thing. He had his elbows on the table, his chin resting on his clasped hands. His brows were lifted in question.

"Well?" he asked.

"It's different," she said before promptly digging out another spoonful.

"Don't eat too much at once," Rellen replied.

Rey didn't see what the big problem was until four spoonfuls later.

"OW!" she exclaimed, gripping over her eye and forehead. "Ow, ow, ow, ow!"

*Touch your thumb to the roof of your mouth.*
Ben patiently repeated himself. If his thoughts were colored with amusement, well, she would just ignore him, then.

Feeling silly, she did as he told her. But it helped. The strange pain behind her eye faded, becoming more manageable. She wondered what in hells that was about.

*It's called a brain freeze.*

Apt name.

Rellen's chuckle was deep and dark. "Told you."

Rey made a grumpy noise but dug back into her ice cream with gusto. She made sure to go a little more slowly. Brain freezes were awful. It was a shame, because ice cream was a wonderful thing, and she wanted to inhale All. Of. It.

"You should eat your ice cream, it's melting," Rey told Rellen.

"But this is so much more entertaining." A slow smile appeared on Rellen's mouth.

Ben cleared his throat. "Keep your eyes off her breasts, or I'll give you the same threat I did Sitrine: I'll lop off your dick."

Rey could sense that Ben had swallowed the trollop comment because he didn't want to cause strife yet. This was an important mission. They needed to secure Rellen's cooperation before they could move further on this path. But that didn't mean Ben's patience was limitless, and it was already short to begin with.

Rellen made a *pfft* noise.
Rey took her spoon and reached over the table, smearing ice cream on the tip of his nose.

"Boop," she said.

The Knight angrily opened his mouth, only to shut it at a quelling look from Ben. Rey kept her grin to herself, pushing aside her empty bowl. She was trying to resist the urge to eat more. It was delicious.

Ben hadn't eaten most of his…

Rey took his spoon and scooped some up.

*Hey!*

*Oh—oh, this is so good. I love chocolate.* She snagged his bowl and pulled it toward her. Ben sighed but let it go.

"I do believe we have created a monster," Rellen said. He sucked on his swirly straw, his milkshake halfway gone.

Rey made a soft groan around another spoonful of chocolate. She think she liked it better than the mint chocolate chip. She'd always had simple tastes when it came to food. That likely had something to do with the fact that it was all she'd ever had to eat.

Ben gestured to Rellen's empty bowl. "You think you can talk now?"

Rellen finished his milkshake and leaned back in the booth. He cricked his neck and sighed. "Fine. Hendou told me a little bit of what was going on, but not too much. There was a chance he would be overheard on the communicator." He waved a hand at them. "You're back from wherever you slinked off to for four years, and now you're bent on galactic domination. Is that right?"

"Yes," Rey said. "Can we…?" She gestured to their waitress, who was bussing a table. "Hello. Can
I get another bowl of chocolate ice cream? Thank you!"

"A monster," Rellen repeated.

"A happy monster," Rey corrected. She grinned around her spoon, where the last of the chocolate was gathered.

*I think I'm having a sugar rush.*

*You are. And it's starting to affect me. Quit it. One of us has to appear serious.*

Rey shrugged and stacked all of their dirty dishes into one pile for the waitress whenever she came back. Ben's words lacked heat, so she wasn't too worried.

*Maybe you should talk. As much as I hate it, I think he'll listen to you more.*

Ben shifted in the seat. "I know you can feel our power in the Force." Any casually lax attitude he'd been carrying evaporated. He laid a hand on the table, the other finding Rey's hand and gripping it.

Rellen inclined his head.

"Sitrine said he would only ally with us if you did, as well. Is this what you want, where you are right now? Being controlled by Tro'dai?" Even though it wasn't Tro'dai at all, but Rellen couldn't know that. Not yet, anyway.

"Tro'dai is the strongest," Rellen said. He paused as the waitress reappeared and gave Rey her fresh bowl of ice cream. Once she'd taken the dishes away, he continued. "But he's an asshole. A big one. And he has no idea how to manage… anything. It wasn't so bad at first, but..." He shook his head. "Lately, it's gotten worse. Ami still kisses his ass, but Hendou and I, well, we're over it."

"So you'll join us?" Rey asked. She was taking a break from her dessert so she wouldn't get brain freeze again.
"I have conditions," Rellen said. "I've always been on your side, Kylo Ren. We've been friends a long time, and I can see that you've only grown more powerful."

"But?" Rey prompted.

"But I'm not content with where I am. I need more."

"You're the general of the army," Ben said softly. He tapped a few fingers once against the table. "You're second-in-command."

"Hendou has taken over the Gimbdo system. I'm the only one who knows, besides you two." Rellen lifted his chin. "I want a system of my own, one of my own choosing."

They're not shy about taking over systems, are they?

Ben inhaled and pursed his lips.

"I already know you offered him the same," Rellen said. "Those are my terms. I'll maintain my post as General, and I'll take over an underdeveloped system."

"Of my choosing," Ben said.

Rellen looked like he wanted to argue. Rey raised her spoon, silently threatening him with another dob of ice cream to his nose. Rellen growled softly beneath his breath, then nodded.

"But fairly," Rellen said.

"Of course," Ben returned. "But you will still answer to me, in the end. Is that all?"

Rellen nodded. "Yes, I suppose it is."
"Great. I don't want to discuss more in the open like this. Can you make time to come to Endorom? I don't want to get into details until both you and Sitrine are there."

"I can within the week. No promises on what day yet. I'll have to see. Tro'dai keeps us busy with battles and everything else." Rellen got to his feet, and to Rey's surprise, he threw currency down on the table. She would have thought he would have mind-tricked the waitress.

Rey slid her bowl Ben's way. *Want some?*  

"That was sooo good!" Rey enthused as they came onboard the *Falcon*. "I had no idea something like that existed. It's cold, and it's flavorful, and—" She stopped when she heard Ben snickering. "Why are you laughing at me?"

*You're… adorable.* Ben flashed her a small smile.

Rey felt her cheeks turn pink. *We haven't done your memories yet. Do you want to soon?*

*Yeah. Once we're in space?*

*Okay.*

They wouldn't be as vulnerable there.

But as soon as they had departed, safely away from the planet and traveling through hyperspace, there was a familiar pull on the Force. Rey almost didn't register it at first, and neither did Ben. But as soon as they did, both of them were on their feet and headed to the main hold, which was where the power was coming from.

Anakin was waiting for them, his arms folded over his chest. He looked as serious as ever, and his
voice was a little forbidding as he spoke.

"We need to start your training." His gaze lingered on his grandson, and the two seized one another up. This was the first time they were meeting face-to-face. Rey could feel Ben's turmoil inside of her heart as though it were her own.

"Okay," Rey said, because neither one of them seemed willing to speak another word.

Anakin nodded, his gaze leaving Ben to travel to Rey. "It can't wait a moment longer. We need to begin now. Are you ready?"

Rey nodded and grasped Ben's hand. Ben had found a spot on the dejarik table to stare at.

"Yes," she said.

"Then let's begin."
The Throne Room

Chapter Notes

Who doesn't love two updates in a day?

The last of the Praetorian Guard collapsed on the floor.

Rey and Ben panted in the new silence, still on the high of working together for the first time, of disposing of a common enemy. Sweat from the exertion of the duel plastered strands of hair to her forehead and cheeks. Ben was in much the same state, looking at her as if he'd never really seen her before, not until this moment.

The dire situation with the Resistance came back to her, and she jolted into action. She went to a window that gazed out at the planet below, the Resistance fleet fleeing for their lives. She pointed at them as she turned to Ben.

"The fleet! Ordering them to stop firing, there's still time to save the fleet!"

But he wasn't listening. His eyes were glued to Snoke's dissected body. It was a grotesque sight, and the small flames falling everywhere only accented the macabre. The Guard was spread out around the throne room. Everything seemed so horribly still.

"Ben?" Rey asked tentatively.

He stared ahead for a heartbeat before finally drawing breath to speak. "It's time to let old things die. Snoke—" He turned to her. "—Skywalker. The Sith. The Jedi, the Rebels…" He came toward her, a new mark on his list with every step. "Let it all die."

What was he…? What was he saying, what was he talking about…?

"Rey." Ben held out his hand, and thinly veiled hope covered his features. "I want you to join me."
Rey felt her heart stop and just as quickly fill with despair.

"We can rule together and bring a new order to the galaxy," he continued.

"Don't do this, Ben," she said, the words barely above a whisper. Tears burned in her eyes, and her voice was choked when she spoke again. "Please don't go this way," she begged.

"No. No! You're still—holding on!" he shouted. "Let go!"

Rey's mind raced as she tried to figure out what she was going to do. She'd come here to save Ben against Luke's warnings. She'd fallen soundly into Snoke's trap. But he'd saved her, he'd turned on his master. They had taken down the Guard, they—they could still save everyone, and he didn't want to.

"Do you want to know the truth about your parents?" he asked her. "Or have you always known?"

A tear managed to escape, tracing down her cheek.

"And you've just hidden it away," he said, stepping toward her again. "You know the truth. Say it."

She felt so hollow. So hollow and sad. Why had it turned out this way? Maybe everyone had been right. Maybe there wasn't any light left in him. Maybe he was too far gone to save. And she'd so—so desperately wanted to save him, to save herself, because for the first time, she had felt like she could breathe. She had found a kindred spirit.

So why?

"Say it," he murmured.

"They were nobody," she said, her voice tight and frail. Another tear fell to join the first.
"They were filthy junk traders who sold you off for drinking money," he said.

She released a soft sob.

"They're dead in a pauper's grave in the Jakku desert," he said. "You have no place in this story. You come from nothing. You're nothing."

She swallowed, the air cool against her tears. She was almost sick to her stomach, and she had never felt so alone.

"But not to me," he said. He held out his hand once more. There was a fine tremble to his fingers. "Join me."

Rey stared at his hand. The dam on her tears had broken, and they were dripping off her chin. She barely dared to breathe, indecision warring inside of her. She knew she couldn't take his hand. She would never be able to do that, to destroy everything and rule the galaxy.

But there was raw pain on his face when he stepped closer, his plea a ragged half-whisper. "Please?"

She squeezed her eyes shut. So many thoughts were pounding through her. She didn't want to hurt him. She didn't. She wasn't sure if she could, not when he looked so vulnerable. He had no one, he thought he only had her. If she didn't go with him, he would only dive deeper into the darkness.

Her eyes were swollen, and she sniffled. She let her eyes slip open so she could look at his face again. Committing it to memory? She should. If she was going to break his heart, she would never see him again, not this way. They would be fighting. Or was it her duty to try and kill him now, so he wouldn't wreak destruction on the galaxy?

"Rey," he whispered. She could barely see him past the blur of her tears. "I love you." Tears of his own formed, but didn't fall, not yet. His lips trembled. He lifted his hand higher.

The words he'd said echoed around her head, chasing themselves round and round. She couldn't breathe. Her entire body was alert to electricity in the air, the hairs on her arms standing up. She released another sob, and she knew then that she couldn't hurt him. What had it taken, for him to tell her that?
"I want to be with you," she choked out. "I do."

He walked into her bubble of space and yanked off his gloves, his eyes on her the entire time. As the leather pieces fell to the floor, he slid his hands into her hair and tilted her head back. His forehead came to rest against her own, and Rey could feel his breath tickling her mouth.

"Then join me," he whispered. His fingers tightened in her hair.

"Ben, I can'—"

He closed his eyes and kissed her.

For a moment, she forgot everything. She forgot about the Resistance, about darkness and light, about the Force, about her destiny, whatever it was. All she could focus on was his warm mouth, and the flash of his tongue, and the way he parted her lips. And when he pulled away, she still couldn't think, her lips tingling, her skin on fire.

"Join me," he murmured.

"Ben—"

He kissed her again. His hands took her elbows and nudged them until her arms were winding around his neck. She could feel herself breaking down, bit by bit, which was his intention. She couldn't even find the strength to fight it.

Until—

She broke apart from him, her hands coming to rest on his chest. "Let's save the fleet," she said. "Your mother is with them. And then—and then we'll figure it out."

Ben's eyes clouded over, growing distant and dark.
"Ben, no," she said quickly. "I will go with you. But I don't want them to die, not like this." When still he said nothing, she tried not to sound frantic. "I'm telling you the truth. I want to go with you. I love you, too."

His eyes flashed back to hers.

"Please, Ben," she whispered.

He was quiet for so long that she thought… she didn't know what she thought. She was too afraid to think of the possible negative outcomes.

"Okay," he said at last, and the tiniest of smiles touched the corner of his mouth. He was happy, as happy as he'd let it show. "Let's save the fleet."

"Okay," she echoed gratefully.

They were halfway across the room when Ben stopped and turned to look at her. His gaze was strangely evaluating. He took in their surroundings with a puzzled frown.

"Ben?" she asked softly.

"Rey, I don't think…" Ben glanced from Snoke's corpse to the similar corpses of the Guard. He looked at her hair, her outfit.

"What is it?" She touched his arm.

"I don't think this is real," he whispered.

"What?" It was her turn to frown.

"None of this," he said. His voice grew louder, more confident. "It's not." He put his hands on her shoulders. "Rey, look at me."
"I am."

"No, look at me," he insisted. "Look at me. Focus on me."

She did so, her brows furrowed. She had no idea what had gotten into him. He stared down at her intensely enough that she knew he wanted her to do the same. She gazed at the features of his face, thinking they didn't have time for this if they were going to save the Resistance.

"Where is Admiral Holdo?"

"What? Who?"

"Rey, this isn't real," he said. "None of this is real. But you have to see that, too, or we can't leave here."

"I don't—"

"You didn't take my hand," Ben pressed. She paced herself a few feet away from him and hugged herself.

He wasn't making any sense. He—

His eyes were so brown. And… different. Like somehow, impossibly, a different person was behind them. Someone who had changed… grown… evolved… Someone who wasn't the person who belonged in the body in front of her. Someone who…

Someone who…

"Ben," she whispered.

He continued gazing into her eyes, and slowly things came back to her. What had really happened
here, the ensuing struggle and chase. Her lightsaber had exploded... she'd stood over Ben's body and hadn't killed him because she had sensed the Force wasn't finished with him...

A wave of dizziness hit her, and he caught her.

"This isn't real," she said.

As soon as she said the words, the world they were in disintegrated. She was on the *Falcon*, confused, slumping against the dejarik table. She was sweating harder than she had in Snoke's throne room. Her knees wobbled, and she fell to the floor. Ben was next to her, as breathless as she was.

Anakin sighed.

"Can't we—take a break?" Rey muttered.

"Without my grandson, you would have been trapped there," Anakin replied. "You would never have come out of that illusion."

"Why that memory?" Rey managed to push herself up enough to sit at the table. When Breeze had been throwing illusions at them, they'd been... unpleasant.

"It's easier to get lost in a happy illusion," he answered. "The irony here is that I used the happy illusion for Ben... yet he was the first to notice."

"Do you really think she'll be making illusions this deep?" Rey asked.

"Possibly not. I'm not taking the risk, however. If you can learn to break out of these illusions, which are complex and deep, then you'll be able to get out of any from her." Anakin paced a little as he spoke. "That was a test run. I wanted to see who was more susceptible to illusions."

Rey wanted to be bitter, but Ben was always somewhat upset when she performed better than he did. A piece of her was happy for him, even.
Ben himself was too exhausted to feel the gamut his emotions usually ran when it came to his grandfather. His thoughts circulated around being pleased from his accomplishment. It'd wear off soon enough. There was too much damage there.

"Now I'll teach you some tricks to break free from them, or to see them for what they are." Anakin seemed to narrow in on Rey. "This is going to take a while until you get better at it, and you need to get better at it quickly. I can't promise your safety if you don't."

_No pressure or anything_, Rey thought.
Sorry for the delay, guys. I have a lot of personal stuff going on. I won't bore you with the details, but I am sorry!

Ben set the *Falcon* down closer to the castle on Endorom than he had the last time. They wanted to be near enough to escape easily, should something still happen, but not so close that someone could take their ship. It was about a mile out, and Rey was grateful they wouldn't have to walk as far. Even on Jakku, she'd gotten around mostly with her clunky old speeder.

And, simply put, she was exhausted.

With the *Falcon* powered down, Ben shifted in his seat to face her. *It will get better.*

Rey's laugh was filled with more sarcasm than she had intended.

*What?*

*Is this how you feel all the time, when I'm succeeding at something you're not?*

Ben didn't even pause to consider. *Yes.*

She set her jaw. *I don't get it. You break out of these illusions almost as quickly as they come, and I'm still struggling.*

*It's only been a day. You're pushing yourself too hard.*

Maybe it had only been a day, but Ben had improved in leaps and bounds, whereas she still needed
him to rescue her. It didn't make any sense. Why was she so inept at this? It rankled. She was good at everything she did.

I gave up on happy endings a long time ago. You didn't.

She opened her mouth to argue and then closed it. He wasn't wrong. She'd had a hard life, just as he had, and hers had been even more desolate. But despite the obstacles thrown in her path, despite her bleak future, she'd still hoped. Hoped for her parents, hoped to get off Jakku. Something, anything other than the dull life she'd been stuck in.

Okay. Maybe you have a point, she admitted.

It will come to you.

She knew he was right about that, too. That didn't make it any easier.

Come on, get up. Don't be moopy. Ben tweaked her nose.

"Ow!" She swatted his hand away. You're just happy because you're doing better than me.

Sure am.

Rey glared at him. Ben grinned, and it made her glare dissolve into a half-hearted frown. Whenever he smiled like that, it was brilliant and blinding, and she didn't want it to go away on her account. No matter that it was at her expense.

"We'll see Sitrine and see if Rellen has come here yet," Rey said aloud.

He nodded. Sounds like a plan.

She hesitated, and he tilted his head in question. What if I can't?
Can't…?

Can't learn to tell I'm in an illusion?

Rey.

I'm being serious. What if I can't learn?

If worst comes to worst, you have me. We're connected.

And if she uses that… contraption on us, and we can't reach the Force, and our bond is severed?

Then we won't be able to break out of the illusion, anyway. Ben stood. Come on. Let's get to the castle.

Anakin had warned them that he could spring illusions on them at any time. He'd left them alone, and they'd been able to return to the Gimbdo system. Training aside, it was important to Ben and Rey that they truly secured their alliance with Sitrine and Rellen. That was both funding and an army. It went a long way toward taking out the First Order and establishing their own rule.

Taking over the galaxy is exhausting, Rey thought as they entered the castle. None of the troopers stopped them. Their clearance hadn't changed while they'd been gone, not that Rey had really expected it to. Sitrine, however, was unpredictable, a very loose cannon. He hadn't entirely earned her trust yet.

Rey tossed her bags onto their bed. They were using the room they had before. She'd left the Jedi texts behind, had taken everything else. She wasn't sure how long they were going to be here. They didn't have a plan beyond waiting for Rellen's arrival. They were taking things as they came. They knew the outcome they wanted, but things evolved constantly. Nothing was ever certain.
If Rellen joins us, then he can start subverting the army. They're all brainwashed as it is. I said before that FN was an anomaly. There may be more like him, but there wouldn't be many. Few and far between.

So it will be easy to turn their allegiance. I'm guessing with mind control?

Ben nodded. That's the theory.

And meanwhile, Sitrine would be funneling funds toward their cause.

It was vexing that they had to sit on their thumbs while everything panned out. At least for now.

"My lovelies, you have returned!"

Sitrine burst into the room, his arms spread wide open. Rey promptly went back to unpacking her things, as well as Ben's. Sitrine sniffed at her indifference and came over to give Ben a brotherly slap on the back. They slid their fingers together and then bumped their knuckles.

Men.

"Is Rellen here yet?" Rey asked.

"Straight to the point as always, dove. He mentioned arriving in a few days. Got tied up with the Order. Army business, you understand."

"Right," Rey replied.

Sitrine clapped his hands. "I'll have dinner made. It should only take an hour or so. Then we can go over more of our plans? I have a lot of questions." He placed one hand on his hip, the other on his chin, fingers curled in thought. "Mostly that you seem to have gone rather… gray, Kylo Ren."

Ben stiffened. "I'm not exactly hiding it."
"No," Sitrine mused. "You certainly are not."

"If you're gray, you have a more unbiased view," Rey pointed out. She secured Ben's bracelet around her wrist for comfort.

"Meaning you're amoral but not heartless," Sitrine summarized.

"The galaxy can't work with the dark side or the light side," Ben said. "There's no balance."

"How very Zen of you. Tell me, did our pretty little Rey put that into your head?"

Rey rolled her eyes. "We arrived at this decision together, not that it's any of your concern."

"So she did."

Rey's already fragile patience snapped. She'd had a rough couple of days and couldn't relax, as Anakin could bombard her with an illusion at any given moment. "Snoke connected Ben and I through the Force. We accepted one another's darkness and light, and this was the end result. Now what problem do you have with being gray?"

"Because on the dark side, you can kill for sport." Sitrine could see neither of them found that very amusing. "Oh, very well. I suppose I don't kill much for pleasure, anyway. That's more of Tro'dai's modus operandi. And Ami. Stupid bitch." He muttered this last.

"You kill when it's necessary," Ben said. "We're going to need you to be… gray, if you're going to join us."

"I'm close enough to gray, at any rate," Sitrine said. "It's no skin off my back to leave people alone unless they deserve it. Convenient just to chop everyone in half, though."

"Well, this isn't about convenience," Rey replied. "It's about doing what needs to be done."
Sitrine groaned. "Gad, it starts already. No more of this until I've had some wine."

Ben laughed and climbed onto the bed. He crawled over to Rey and kissed her temple, and then touched his lips to the baby's head. Padmé made soft baby noises, and Rey cradled her close with a smile. She was still an infant, but she had that sweet baby scent about her, and it was addicting.

Rey's husband curled up with her and snuggled an arm over her waist. He rested his head against hers so they could watch their baby together. Padmé's tiny fingers curled around his index finger. She was so small, so fragile. Rey had been in horrible labor for hours, but it was all worth it in the end.

Her hair was black already, and her eyes were brown. She had Ben's coloring, but the rest was all Rey. Her nose, her ears, the set of her eyes, her mouth. Ben liked to say that she looked more like him than Rey, but Rey didn't buy it for a moment, and neither did Leia.

"Can you believe we created her?" Rey whispered.

"No," Ben said. "Sometimes I wake up, and I think it was a dream. But it's not. She's really here." He ran his thumb over Padmé's fingers.

"And you don't regret it?" Rey asked it casually even as her heart thudded. The words were anything but casual.

"No," Ben said again. "Not at all. I'm… glad you talked me into this." He buried his nose against Rey's hair and sighed contentedly. "And we can feel her through the Force. She's so innocent. Do you think we can keep it that way?"

Rey smiled at that. "Unlikely. But we can try for as long as we can. Isn't that right, Padmé?" she cooed. Padmé gurgled in response, her lips working, her eyes closed. She went still again with a sleepy noise.

"No," Rey whispered, sobering.
"No?" Ben echoed. He looked up at her.

"This isn't real," she said, her voice still soft, barely audible. She peered down at the baby in her arms and then up at Ben. "This is an illusion. This isn't—"

Ben's eyes darkened as the truth became clear. His lips pulled back in a snarl. "This isn't real."

The world tilted into place in its uncomfortable fashion. Rey was left staring down at her dinner plate. Sitrine's gaze darted between Ben and herself. He was confused.

"What just happened?" Sitrine asked. "You zoned out."

*That asshole!* Ben seethed. *He's a fucking asshole!*

He got up from the table and stormed out of the hall, his boots clicking angrily.

"Hey! Mate!" Sitrine called after him.

It figured that that would be the illusion Rey broke free from first. Which meant it was Ben who valued that happiness more… which meant he did want children, he just didn't want to admit it… But because of that illusion, Anakin had probably sent their progress back even further.

"Choobies," she sighed.
It had been three days since Anakin had trapped them in an illusion. Rey was grateful for the break. They hadn't been at it very long in the first place, but that was a small detail. It was brutal every single time. "Happy illusions."

Yeah, Rey thought. Right.

Because the way they felt when they woke up was brutal.

Rey spent the time reading more of the texts. Ben was with Sitrine, doing boy stuff. This mostly resolved around playing cards—Ben was a shark—and getting drunk after dinner. Not trashed, though. They kept to the castle when they were like this, knowing if they did something stupid, Rey would tan their hides.

They continued in this vein until Rellen arrived. They met him in the war room as he was pulling his gloves and helmet off, distinctly annoyed. Rey thought it had something to do with the outfit itself more than any other source of antagonism. She wasn't sure how Ben had worn his own, day after day, never complaining.

*It was comfortable.*

Of course, it was.

Rey exchanged an amused glance with him.

"You told me you didn't want a hologram communicator, Hendou, but that's just too damn bad," Rellen drawled. He gestured to the black piece of machinery he'd placed on the middle of the strategy table.
"It makes it easier for them to track me," Sitrine whined. "I like to keep things here under wraps. You know this. Take it away!"

"No," Rellen replied. "From now on, we're going to be dealing with a network of people who join our cause. We're talking a crew to intercept reports from those who spot Bey and try to collect the bounty on their heads."

Bey?

"There's alliances we need to form with the major crime syndicates and even the small ones," Rellen continued.

"Wait, what?" Rey interrupted. "Crime syndicates? We don't need—"

"Don't be naïve, Princess," Rellen cut over her in turn. "You want to rule the galaxy, you want to play with the big boys, well, the crime syndicates are the big boys."

"Do you ever hear yourself?" Sitrine snorted.

"Yes," Rellen replied. "And it's music to my ears."

Ok a y, n ow I get the vanity thing.

The Knight sat on the edge of the table. "Moving onward, we've got deals we'll be making with the syndicates. We're going to have them target prime resources for the First Order. They'll need protection. We'll need other syndicates to take the fall. All of this…" Rellen slid his gaze Sitrine's way. "…requires a damned hologram communicator."

Ben crossed his arms, as was his wont lately. "You seem to have it all figured out."

"They're just ideas," Rellen replied. "But surely you don't disagree with anything I've said?"
"Not yet," Ben murmured.

"Excellent." Rellen abandoned his position on the table to sit in a chair. "There's a lot to think about, to talk about."

Sitrine, Ben, and Rey all followed suit, claiming nearby chairs.

"Now let's all put our heads together and come up with short-term plans and long-term ones."

"I'll get the wine," Sitrine said.

"Sit your ass down," Rellen said. "You don't need to be drunk for everything in your life."

"I'd beg to differ," Sitrine muttered.

Rellen ignored him. He leaned back in his seat, elbows on the armrests. "You want to rule the galaxy," he said to Ben and Rey. "How?"

Rey hesitated.

"Not like the First Order, and not like the empire," Ben said. "Someone needs to hold the galaxy together. It can't be left to fend on its own."

"Right," Rey agreed. "We're just going to… police it. But not like the Order."

"Something like the New Republic?" Rellen questioned. A slender brow crawled toward his hairline. "You saw how well that worked out."

Rey leaned forward. "Ben and I will… rule." She still had a little trouble saying that word out loud. "We want a council to enforce our laws. But things like slavery will be abolished. Things like—"
"You can't police every corner of the galaxy," Sitrine said.

"Of course, we can't," Ben parried. "Not on our own. But we can place our army strategically. Have headquarters and bases in every sector."

"We don't want a dictatorship, either," Rey built on his statement. "We want absolute authority, but we want what is best for the entire galaxy, not our own wants and needs."

"What is best for you might not be best for others," Sitrine cautioned.

"Again, it's not what is best for us," she replied. "We haven't thought it out entirely because we're not there yet. But we'll have laws that come into play, obviously. The council will also work as an advisory committee, not just an enforcer. We'll listen to the people."

"And if it serves your needs, you'll heed their words?" Sitrine pushed.

Rey shot him an annoyed glance. He was being difficult on purpose. "If it serves the needs of the galaxy, yes, we'll heed their words." Honestly, where does he get off? He's a Knight of Ren, he's on the dark side.

He's testing us.

"There's something you're not telling us," Rellen observed. He tapped his fingers against the end of his armrest. "What is it?"

"Well, we haven't discussed it with them at all, but…" Rey wet her lips and looked at Ben, who nodded. "We're thinking about having members of the Resistance on our council."

"The Resistance?" Sitrine burst out laughing. He shifted in his chair. "Surely you jest?"

"Don't be an idiot," Rey shot back. "General Organa would be a great asset to our cause."
If she ever joined, which was unlikely, but they'd cross that bridge when they came to it.

"She's also Kylo's mother," Sitrine pointed out. He braced his elbows on the table and fiddled with one of his red flags on the map.

"That's another thing," Rey said. "You need to stop calling him Kylo Ren. At least officially. The Knights of Ren will be dissolved. We'll be more than happy to give you new titles."

"You weren't joking," Rellen said to Sitrine. "They really aren't dark at all."

"We're neutral," Ben replied.

"Right, well, that brings us to our next part." Sitrine pushed his chair back and rose to his feet. "We wanted to duel the two of you. See what your power really looks like. We can feel it in the Force, but you haven't really used it yet. Other than deflecting those blaster shots, that is."

Is he kidding? Rey took a closer look at Sitrine's mien. He's not kidding.

Well, here's your chance to emasculate them. They've been insulting you at every opportunity.

Rellen had gotten to his feet and was standing expectantly like Sitrine.

Rey flicked her wrist.

Both men went flying across the room and slammed into a set of bookshelves.

That wasn't what I meant.

Rey couldn't help but feel very pleased with herself, regardless of whether or not it was what he'd meant. It was cathartic, flinging them around like they were sand flies. She thought he might try it sometime.
Believe me, I am always tempted.

Sitrine got back to his feet first, rubbing the back of his head. "I meant lightsabers, woman!" he griped. And then, not quite inaudible to Rellen, "All she did was flick her wrist!"

"I have eyes," Rellen snapped, his usual bubble of "cool guy" evaporating. "We'll take this outside. If the two of you agree, that is." Quiet fury reigned in his eyes. He definitely felt emasculated and wanted to rectify the situation.

Don't they know we'll eviscerate them?

I've always dueled with Rellen and Sitrine. It's like they said, they want to see how powerful we are.

Men, she thought again. Though she supposed it wasn't an unreasonable request.

"We'll go to the northwest courtyard," Sitrine said.

Ben and Rey paced themselves across the aforementioned courtyard. Their eyes darted everywhere, instinctively taking in any possible threats. It didn't matter that they were (mostly) safe and that this was a friendly fight.

"Remember, don't hold back. But lightsabers only." Sitrine spread his feet apart, igniting his lightsaber. The crimson blade hummed loudly. He held it in front of him as if it were a broadsword. Rey thought it interesting how the Knights had different stances when it came to lightsabers. Not that she had much experience seeing anything else.

Rellen had foregone his cape and stood a few feet away from the other Knight. His lightsaber flashed at his side. He had a more delicate positioning, one foot in front of the other. Rey had a feeling he fought like a dancer. She knew then she was going to like dueling with Rellen, if only for that alone.
It had been decided without words that she would take on Rellen and that Ben would take on Sitrine. The foursome faced one another, and Ben and Rey pulled their sabers free. The latter lifted hers in front of her as it shot out from both ends. Rellen took a breath at the diamond color of their blades.

"Yeah, it's pretty, isn't it?" Sitrine remarked. "Much better than that childish monstrosity of his other lightsaber."

Irritation flickered briefly from Ben. It faded as fast as it had come. He was preparing to take it out on Sitrine the moment the duel began. He was very tired of people commenting on his previous lightsaber.

*It was a cracked kyber crystal, and I had to put it together very quickly*, he said defensively to Rey.

*I know, dearest."

Now the irritation was entirely for Rey. She smothered a grin.

Rellen came at her, darting like a leaf in the wind. Her grin vanished as she intercepted his first blow with an upward angle of her blade. Sparks flew as plasma collided. As promised, she didn't use the Force, falling into a series of attacks. She preferred to take the offensive from him. Ben was always stronger than her physically—Rellen was her height and slight of build. She stood a good chance of mowing him down.

The grunts of Ben and Sitrine filled the air beside them. Rey forced Rellen backward, away from the other duo. She was barely putting any effort into her attacks. It was like Deo all over again. Her pace was steady, measured—she wasn't even out of breath. She hit his blade like she would a toy.

She could see it in his eyes. Past that icy determination.

He knew she was so much stronger than him.

Rellen's disposition changed into something more feral. He dug his feet in and slammed forward, pushing her back. She held her ground, and their blades sizzled together. Once more, Rey threw her lightsaber up, hitting Rellen's with the left side. She detached hers into two sabers and watched
Rellen's eyes widen.

She spun, sabers swinging. Rellen blocked the first, nearly got hit with the second. It was he who scrambled back now, his feet nearly tangling together. He looked as if he wanted to jump and remembered he couldn't use the Force so actively. He looked as if he wanted to cheat. He swallowed both urges and backed up to get some room between them.

Rey borrowed some of Ben's strength as she lunged. She began a series of ruthless blows, unrelenting in her forward pace. Rellen was quickly approaching a wall. He made to dodge around her, but she jerked her blades up and soundly knocked his away. It flew to the ground, and Rey kicked it out of Rellen's reach.

She leveled one blade at his face.

He was panting for breath. She hadn't even broken a sweat.

She lowered her saber and disengaged both. They turned as one to the other two. Ben had Sitrine in quite a similar position, and none of them were surprised when Sitrine's saber was knocked aside. He swiped a hand over his forehead where beads of perspiration had gathered.

Ben shook his hair back. Unlike Rey, he, too, was sweating a little. The fight with Sitrine had been a little more draining, and the might of the sun was currently shining down on both Sitrine and himself.

"Now are you ready to fall in line?" he asked. The duration of the duel hadn't even been five minutes long.

Sitrine and Rellen exchanged a wordless glance.

They fell into a respectful bow.

Rellen rose first. "Come on, then. We have a lot to figure out."
The sound of the waves lapping at the beach was soothing. It was a little chilly, and the breeze was playing with Rey's hair. She smiled as she watched her daughter run through the sand. Padmé was laughing with glee. Her black curls bounced with her movements. She bent to play with what looked to be a seashell and then resumed pattering around.

"Okay, come on, Padmé," Rey said. Her long shawl billowed around her, trailing in the wind. She reached down and grabbed her toddler, transferring her to her hip. Rey soothed Padmé's curls out of her eyes. "It's time to eat. Daddy will be expecting us."

"Daddy!" Padmé enthused. She clapped her hands.

"Yes, Daddy." Rey kissed her daughter's forehead.

There was the softest of noises.

It wasn't quite a ringing sound. It wasn't quite static. It was... tantalizingly familiar, although she couldn't figure out why. Despite the fact that she couldn't place it, it made her orientation scattered, distracted. The world around her dimmed slightly once she focused on it.

What was that? What…?

Something told her to pay attention. That same something then told her that something wasn't right. There was something she was supposed to be noticing.

Rey gasped.
An illusion.

For a moment, she was exultant. Anakin's training over the last few weeks was finally paying off. She had been able to identify the noise that marked an illusion. It was very subtle, very hard to detect. It was one of the only fail safe ways to determine if the world around her was the real one, not crafted.

She wondered about Ben. She wondered if he'd figured it out yet, since they weren't together. She thought maybe he hadn't, that it would be like the last time. He was the one who had sunk so eagerly into the other illusion of their maybe one day child. It was entirely possible he was just as absorbed now.

Rey knew she should find him, break them out of this. He had spoken the truth during their first illusion together: both of them had to be aware in order to return to reality. That was one of the few downsides of their bond. Both would be enveloped, intertwined, and need to work together to free themselves.

But what if she… observed? What if she wanted to see how long it took him to surface before she helped? Was that bad? She knew it was because she wanted to see how he'd be as a father. She knew that if he hadn't been so adamant about not discussing father-dom, she wouldn't be contemplating what she was.

The fact of the matter was, she was desperate. She needed… some sort of confirmation for herself. It would tide her over maybe. She thought. She hoped.

Rey looked about. There was a small, rocky path leading up a slow-rising hill. The path itself wound between two cliffs. It was beautiful, and Rey marveled at the realistic quality these illusions had. She never got the chance to admire that aspect. As soon as she was aware of them, they were gone.

She reached out, half-expecting her fingers to slide through the bluff as she touched it. It was solid. Looked like rock, felt like rock—left dust on her fingertips. She brushed them free and turned her attention to the child in her arms. Padmé spoke words understandable only to Padmé, but it was soothing to listen to.

Rey kissed her baby's forehead. Her skin was so soft, and she smelled so sweet and innocent. It was instantly addicting. Rey cuddled Padmé close, the latter clapping happily again.
The path was a short one. Marram grass pushed through the sand and rustled in the wind. The sun was hidden behind not quite dreary clouds. It didn't seem like it was going to storm. Rey suspected not. This was a "happy" illusion, after all.

There was a small cottage, not dissimilar to the one Ben owned on Naboo. It was… cute, homely. The sight of it alone made Rey smile.

Padmé touched an inquiring hand to Rey's mouth. Rey pretended to nip at her fingers, and her daughter squealed with delight. The noise that indicated an illusion was impossible to ignore now and played on a loop in the background, an undercurrent to all other sounds.

Approaching the front stoop, Rey kicked off her sandy shoes. A towel was nearby, and she used it to rub off Padmé's feet and hands. The toddler squirmed impatiently.

"All done," Rey said, tucking the towel over her arm as she picked her child back up. She opened the front door and stepped inside. Ben's scent tickled her nose, setting her at ease. She wondered how much of the illusion Anakin had crafted. Did the illusions draw from her memories her senses? Taste, touch, smell—

"How was the beach?" Ben asked.

Rey remembered their crash course in training from Breeze. It was a way to suspect if something was real or not—using the Force. If they couldn't, then it wasn't real. But Anakin had told them not to rely on that. The Force was, in the end, very much usable. Breeze had only wanted them to think it wouldn't work if they were in an illusion—it would have given her the upper hand.

Anything went in an illusion because everything had to be perceived as real.

"It was great," Rey said, observing him closely.

He was… happy.

Content.
She wet her lips and juggled her baby closer onto her hip. "...What were you up to while we were away?" This was harder than she had anticipated. Pretending to still be in the illusion was one thing. Mock conversation was another. It was _strange_, talking to him but not talking to _him_.

"I was…" Ben frowned.

Rey hesitated. She'd unintentionally created a gap in the illusion. He wouldn't know the answer to the question. Illusions were extremely realistic, but they still had subtle holes in them. It was highly effective to use those holes, but therein lie the problem. They didn't present themselves very often.

"I don't…" He trailed off.

"I'm going to set Padmé down," Rey said. "Get her cleaned up. She's still covered in sand. Don't want to trail it everywhere." She knew from experience that sand was a beast to get rid of. The best type of cleaning equipment would still somehow impossibly miss grains of it. It was infuriating at the best of times.

She really, _really_ hated sand.

And she got the sense Anakin was smiling.

"I was making dinner," Ben said, and Rey experienced a twinge of guilt. She could have helped him. She could have walked him through the hole, brought him to realization. Maybe this really was awful of her. So, so selfish. Yet she couldn't stop. A monster had taken hold of her, a horrible, selfish monster with a dire need to pretend this was a future.

Rey hadn't understood until that moment how much it bothered her that Ben didn't want to pursue that future whenever they were ready. He couldn't bear to talk about it, couldn't bear to share his thoughts or feelings with her. She was locked out of that portion of his mind. She could press, of course, worm her way in. But she'd been allowing him his privacy.

An ache filled her.
"Ben," she whispered, setting their child down. She gazed into Padmé's eyes, the eyes of Ben.

"Yeah?"

"…Do you hear it?" She closed her eyes.

"Hear what?" Ben sounded like he was frowning again.

But he always caught on so much more quickly than she did.

"Damn it," he growled.

They were back in their rooms at Sitrine's castle. Fully expecting Ben to skulk off, Rey went over to the window in the bedroom and perched on the sill. She wrapped her elbows loosely around her raised knees. It was easier to stare into the lake below than to acknowledge that Ben was about to lose his mind over Anakin's games.

They'd been on Endorom for a handful of weeks, passing the time while their plans were put into place. It required a lot of running around, gathering their crew, subverting troopers. All in preparation for their next course of action: tackle the crime syndicates. In the interim, Anakin had continued their training. He usually poked in every few days to keep them on their toes. They never knew when to expect him.

A broad hand settled over her shoulder.

Rey looked up.

Ben kissed her forehead.

Not yet.

What?
Not... yet. I'm not ready... yet.

Rey searched his face. His feelings were a quagmire she couldn't hope to untangle. His eyes were equally unreadable. Despite this, she knew he was telling her this for her sake. She wasn't as closed off about it as he was. Her thoughts on the matter were loud and clear, her emotions even more so.

...But one day...?

Ben cursed softly under his breath and looked away. He scrubbed a hand over his face. It was a long time before he spoke again.

One day.
"Looking good, son," Han muttered.

Rey's heart twisted viciously. She didn't think she'd ever be able to see Han and *not* feel incredible sadness and longing. Longing for that father she'd never had.

Memory Ben grabbed her elbow—released her. He jerked his head subtly and pushed his hair off his forehead. She knew to follow him. The alcove he'd spoken to her in came into view. They became ensconced in the shadows that played behind the curtains. It was as private a place as they could get at the party.

"Why are you always watching my father?" He couldn't quite keep the jealousy from his voice.

"I'm not," Memory Rey whispered. "I was just thinking how similar you were."

"We're nothing alike."

She changed topics. It seemed the safest course of action. "I'm taking it that you hate these events?"

"My mother likes to show me off. I do not know why. I do not play well with others."

Rey laughed.

"This still holds true, I take it?" Ben asked with some amusement.
"Yeah… it really does."

"How old am I there? You've never told me."

"Remember when you promised not to ask me anything else about it?"

Ben rolled his eyes.

"Well… there you are, then." She grew lost in her thoughts.

His finger nudged her chin up. "Rey, you asked me about the voice last time… Right?"

"R-Right…"

"Didn't I tell you I would ignore it for you?" He tucked her hair carefully behind her ear. "Do you not believe me?"

I want to kill him.

He's you!

I don't care. And you do look at my father too much.

"I do…" Rey touched her hands to Ben's chest.

The real Ben growled.

"What?" his memory-self questioned.
“Things are going to happen. Things I can’t—control or stop. And you… you may be tempted…”

“This is about me being a Sith?”

“No, that's not—... I'm worried I won't be able to be there with you when these things happen.”

“What is it?” he asked when she'd been silent for too long.

“Ben, while I’m here with you… a lot of time passes,” she said. "I have to…” She struggled for words. "You may not see me for a while."

"Why?” he questioned. Suspicion coated his tone.

"I want you to make me another promise. Promise me that whenever you see me, no matter what's happening, you'll listen to me. You love me, don't you?"

"Of course. Rey—"

"That no part of you will attack me."

"I would never attack you! That you think I would—"

"No—! You won't be able to—help it. I—when you see me, I want you to go quiet, I want you to take my hand…”

"Rey…” He was blinking back tears and not hiding it very well. "I don't want to go without seeing you… I need you…”

Rey moved to hold him, burying her face against his chest.
The memory ended.

Ben glared at her. They were side by side again, facing one another on their bed. It was early morning, and they had a big day ahead of them, but Ben always insisted on seeing at least two memories. He knew they wouldn't have time for it later. Rey couldn't fault him for it. She would have been going crazy not knowing everything that had happened in her mind herself.

"Don't glare at me," she said. "Although later you do tell me you won't ever do more than kiss me because you know you'll want to murder yourself."

Her other half grumbled and proceeded to sulk. He knew he was being ridiculous, and he didn't care one whit. Rey find it more endearing than frustrating. Why? Because even though he always called her adorable, he still had his moments.

His temper flared. **I am not adorable.**

Rey chuckled and pushed herself upright. She didn't get very far before Ben snagged an arm around her waist and dragged her back down to him. He tucked her back against his chest and buried his face against her hair, which was still down from sleeping. The gist of his thoughts centered around wanting to hold her because he wouldn't be able to later. He'd never put words to them, though.

But just knowing he felt that way was enough for Rey.

*Five more minutes then?*

He nodded against her hair.

*Five more minutes then.*

Ben wasn't the only one who had woken up grumpy. Sitrine paced the war room as he waited for
them, dragging his hands repeatedly through his hair. He was speaking with Rellen, who was seated at the strategy table and looking unconcerned.

"We'll be fine," Rellen stressed.

"If anyone finds out—"

"Really?" Rey quipped. She shoved lightly at Sitrine's shoulder. "Now you're panicking?"

"He was always the one to chuck his guts up before anything important," Ben said, his voice as dry as Jakku. "Performance anxiety."

"Praying to the porcelain goddess," Rellen added with a smirk.

"Fuck you," Sitrine said to Ben. And then to Rellen, "And fuck you, too. I hope a bantha chucks his guts on your head!" His voice rose the more agitated he grew. "I hope a dianoga puts tentacles up your arse! I hope an anooba eats all of you, starting with your dick!"

Rey fiddled with her cloak as the insults rang through the room. Rellen steepled his fingers together, knowing it was going to be a minute before Sitrine lost the breath to speak. Ben was staring at a spot on the ceiling, his hand resting habitually on the pommel of his lightsaber.

Sitrine carried on in this fashion, winding down with a slow finish, each word growled, his finger pointed at Rellen menacingly. "I hope a clan of starved Ewoks tear you limb from limb, savor each bite, and use the result as fertilizer, because—" His voice rang throughout the room. "You are shite to me!"

Rellen waited about ten heartbeats before he looked at his nails, feigning boredom. But who knew, maybe he really was. "Are you finished? Do you have that out of your system?"

The other Knight took a breath and nodded. "Yes. I think so."

"Wonderful. Now let's focus on what really matters." Rellen gestured for everyone to sit around him. He waited until Sitrine was comfortable to add, "You really need to work on your insults. I
mean, Ewok fodder? That was the best you could come up with?"

Sitrine made to lunge across the table. Rey and Ben each slammed an arm over his chest to make him sit back down. The Knight fumed silently.

Rellen's grin was slow, lazy, and carried a feral edge to it. Rey could tell he enjoyed getting under Sitrine's skin. She couldn't really blame him. It was far too easy to do. But like with how Poe had goaded Ben, that didn't mean it was something Rellen should be doing.

"We're all friends here," she reminded them. "Play nice."

Sitrine sniffed imperiously. "When your empire is in place, sentence him to some backwater planet. He can think about what he's done while he bakes in the sun." Apparently, this "planet" was a desert.

Rey laughed.

"You know I'd have complete control of that planet within a month," Rellen drawled.

"A month?" Sitrine sniffed again. "My, you are losing your touch."

Now it was Rellen who was glowering.

"Gentlemen," Rey said. "Please. We have quite the day ahead of us. We should get started."

"Yes, Your Imminence," Sitrine muttered.

"Of course, Your Imperial Highness," Rellen demurred.

Rey's cheeks flamed. Discomfort rose within her. She tamped it down. She knew they were being sarcastic, but she would have to get used to those kinds of titles eventually. Maybe she could insist people be more informal when they addressed her.
"Great," she said. "Is everything in place for our first target?"

Rellen played with the front locks of his faux hawk as he answered her. She toyed with the idea of offering him a mirror and decided it was too much effort. "Yes, everything is in place. It was in place a week ago. If it weren't for Sitrine second guessing everything—"

"Bugger off," Sitrine retorted. "There's nothing wrong with erring on the side of caution."

It had been a month and a half since Rey had returned to Endorom. A month and a half of Sitrine and Rellen griping constantly whenever they were in a room together. She wasn't surprised when a headache began to pulse at her temples. Telling them off wouldn't do any good. She knew from experience it only made them bicker harder.

"Your men are ready to intercept any calls?" Ben inserted before the pissing contest could begin anew.

"Yes," Rellen replied.

"And there is backup waiting in case anything goes wrong?" Ben questioned. Ben and Rey both knew they wouldn't need backup, but Sitrine had been insistent. Maybe he wasn't entirely being too cautious. It never hurt to have a plan in the wings if, for some insane reason, things started to spiral out of control, Rey reasoned to herself.

"Yes!" Sitrine chirped. "I will be there. We've managed to divert a few ships to wait above. We can dive down at any moment."

Ben and Rey exhaled in unison.

It was time to get started.

Their first destination: Tatooine.
The Hutts were definitely the most disgusting race of aliens Rey had ever seen. And Unkar Plutt, but that went without saying.

Tatooine was not the first place Rey had run across them. All sorts of species came to Niima Outpost, especially the shady ones. She'd spent enough time cleaning the parts she'd scavenged in the central square that over the years, she'd accumulated a decent vocabulary for many languages. Huttese was among them.

Ben and Rey were escorted into the ring leader's lair, who was none other than Wabba, one of Jabba the Hutt's kin. Ben had told her to watch out for the floors, which were known to open into pits. He'd accumulated that knowledge from his uncle, during one of the times Luke had offered up stories of his past.

She remembered Leia's memories of Luke. Young, fresh-faced, innocent. Then she remembered her own. Weary, broken down, defeated. Though she'd seen both versions, she was most familiar with the latter. It was difficult to imagine Luke telling stories about anything. He'd been so guarded. At the same time, it was a nice thought, that he hadn't always been that way.

*I realize you want to think about anything other than your repulsion, but could you please come up with a different topic?*

*Oh.* She colored. *Right. Sorry.*

"*Neither of you look ruffled,*" Sitrine had remarked before their descent to the planet. "*You're not at least a little worried?*"

"*No,*" Ben had replied, leaving it at that.
It wasn't that they weren't worried. It was that they had nothing to worry about.

Yet.

Wabba's henchmen turned the corner, and they found themselves facing Wabba himself. Rey tried not to wrinkle her nose. Whatever Wabba had been attending to last, he had green, slimy drool plastered to his chin. But she couldn't risk offending the Hutt with her disgust. She swallowed it back, focusing on the task at hand as best she could.

"-We have no need for Jedi here-," Wabba said right off the bat.

Before someone could translate for them, Rey took a step forward, not too far from Ben. They still had to be seen as a unit. "-We aren't Jedi,-" she assured him, not really thinking it would work.

It didn't. "-This human called himself Supreme Leader of the First Order. He disappeared for four years. Now here he is—against the Order. Jedi.-"

Rey set her jaw. "-With all due respect, Wabba, being against the First Order doesn't make someone a Jedi. Are you a Jedi, then?-"

Everyone looked to the Hutt, not knowing how he was going to respond.

*You speak Huttese.*

*So? You speak wookie.*

*So do you.*

*No. I understand wookie. You actually speak it.*
There was a mental smirk from Ben's side of things.

Wabba surprised everyone when he burst into a chortle, "chortle" being a relative term. Though it wasn't a full-blown laugh, it was still loud enough to hit the ear wrong.

"-What do you want, humans?-

"-We know you've sided with the First Order. We're here to offer you a better deal.-"

The slug was unimpressed. The amusement had left him, a brief flicker in the wind. "-You are two. The Order are many. How can you possibly offer me a better deal?-"

Ben was following along with the conversation only barely. Rey knew the language, and the meaning behind her words would flash in her mind. It was taking most of his concentration to catch what he could whilst still keeping an eye on the room at large.

"-We aren't only two,-" Rey told Wabba. "-We have benefactors with deep pockets.-"

The Hutt's eyes rolled slightly in contemplation. "-Say I believe you… what are you offering?-" He didn't beat around the bush. They all knew what Ben and Rey were here for. If one came to a crime syndicate to earn its allegiance, one needed to have a figure of money in mind.

"-You'll receive seventy percent of the cut.-"

Loud whispers broke throughout the room. For the first time, nerves leapt in Rey's stomach. She managed to keep it off her face, to make her expression bland. She had to appear confident, first and foremost. People like Wabba were vultures, eager to pick off at any sign of weakness.

*What are they saying?* Not many of their audience were speaking Basic.

*They don't know if they believe me or not.*

Wabba held up an arm, and everyone went quiet. His eyes narrowed at Rey, mostly a squint.
"-How can I believe you? You stand here with nothing.-" 

"-We didn't come with nothing.-" Rey gestured behind her to the door. Two of Wabba's men came forward, each holding an iron chest. People began to murmur again. Rey had used mind tricks for the brutes to only come in once she was ready. Rellen had said the delivery of the money was what was important.

The men set the heavy chests down and opened them. There were enough credits to last Wabba a long, long time, even if he was poor with the spending. No one in that room could deny how much money had just been laid before the Hutt.

"-We want your allegiance, Wabba. This is yours if you agree to our terms, and there's much more where it came from.-"

The Hutt waved a dismissive hand. "-You pose too much of a risk. Maybe you have benefactors, but there are still only two of you. Why would I ever align with you? I live a comfortable life because of my settlement with the Order.-"

Rey had been afraid it would come to this. "-What would you have us do, then, to earn your respect?-"

An evil grin spread over Wabba's face. "-You will enter the coliseum.-"

*There's a coliseum?*

*This is also news to me.*

"-You will fight my best warriors, my best beasts... without using the Force. Only your lightsabers,-" the Hutt clarified.

*This is a trap.*

*We knew it would turn this way.*
"-Then, if you pass, I will listen to your... terms."

I think we should do what he wants—but if it comes to life or death, we use the Force. We have to try to gain his trust, but not at the price of our lives.

**Make a counteroffer. Suggest we only fight two of his best.** Not one, because it would seem like they were getting the better end of the deal. Two would still present a nice enough challenge in Wabba's eyes.

"-We'll agree to fight in the coliseum... But only against two of your best.-"

Pretending to mull it over, the Hutt placed a hand against his chin, stroking idly. The henchmen shifted curiously, their eyes traveling rapidly between both parties. Rey could see that one poor individual clearly didn't want to be there at all, and that at the first sign of trouble, they would bow out.

"-This sounds... acceptable,-" Wabba said at last. "-And if you lose, I will get this money either way.-"

He meant for them to die, which wasn't very surprising. The good thing was that they would be able to prove they could be taken seriously. Oh, they might have gone in there using the Force and making them submit, but that would never have gotten them the alliance they wanted. If they wanted the syndicate's full compliance, respect had to be earned.

It sucked massive choobies that they would have to really work for it.

"-Sure, Wabba,-" Rey said.

"-Very well, I will get things ready.-" Wabba jerked his hand at a pair of henchmen. They strode toward the money with purpose and hauled it over to a hallway that led out of the room. Once they were safely out of view, he returned his attention to Rey. "-We'll do this now. I am very busy.-"

What could they do but agree?
Rey and Ben squinted in the glare of sunlight. They were being led to the coliseum on a path not far from Wabba's headquarters. She could tell it wasn't ancient, that it was very new. What she couldn't figure out was why instead of modern metals, they'd used stone. To keep it looking authentic? Strange.

Although now that she thought on it, stone lasted much longer in the sunlight of two stars than metal did.

Spectators were piling into the stadium. They were all immensely sketchy individuals. Some were clear pirate scum—others had come from the village and had a mean disposition. All were hoping to score some prime entertainment. It was disgusting, more disgusting than Wabba. Why were some people so inherently bad-hearted? It wasn't all due to circumstance.

Rey was glad they'd left their capes on the *Falcon*. She was equally glad her shirt wasn't made of a heavy material. Sweat was gathering on her forehead, making stray strands of her hair ringlet around her face. The rest of it was wound into a spiral braid again, exposing her neck to the elements—the very hot elements.

They were ushered into a room beneath the stadium. She tried not to think of how many had come here against their will, forced to fight, either for Wabba's personal enjoyment or because they had a price on their head. Well, it didn't matter. Whether or not they could use the Force, they were unparalleled when they were using their lightsabers. This would be a cinch.

Then why did she have a bad feeling about this?
So here is where I'm going to shamelessly promote another story I started! It's (much) smaller, and of course, it's Reylo. I wanted something light to write off to the side. It's an AU romance/comedy. If any of you guys are interested, please don't hesitate to check it out!

At the same time that Ben and Rey entered the coliseum, a gate across from them was lifting. From this far away, they couldn't see what lurked in the shadows. Rey's pulse quickened, and her fingers twitched toward her lightsaber. She didn't touch it, not yet. She wanted to continue with her confident demeanor. No show of weakness.

*We'll be fine. You know we'll be fine.*

The arena was nothing but sand. It sifted around their boots as they made their way to the center. A tall, hulking presence appeared. Rey noticed its… legs first. What seemed like legs, and there were eight of them. As they drew closer, Rey could see they were metal. Like parts, like machinery. They moved like…

*A spider.*

What was on top resembled nothing close to a spider. It was a person, and it was wielding a giant polearm, held at its side like a sword. "It" because Rey couldn't determine its gender, not until it was nearly on top of them. It wasn't a person so much as a humanoid, an android.

A bare chest with bloodless gashes that exposed wire and metal. No nipples or belly button, a bald head, and rock solid with muscle. It didn't even have a mouth. The thing watched them with icy blue eyes. Rey had been expecting red or something, so it was the one part of its body that was underwhelming.

The polearm ignited. Charged plasma ran its length, reminding Rey vividly of the weapons of the Praetorian Guard, and it wasn't the only thing. The android's legs were charged, as well, on all the front ends. Rey could see how this thing would easily mow down its competitors. No wonder Wabba was eagerly awaiting their demise.
To top it all off, the thing towered far above them, easily nine feet tall.

It also didn't waste any time.

It lunged.

Rey barely made it out of the way without use of the Force to propel her movements. Sand exploded outward, and she had to protect her eyes, darting to the right whilst she did so. She drew her lightsaber but still didn't ignite it yet. She didn't want to accidentally sever off a limb.

When she could afford to look, she lowered her arm. The spider was going after Ben across the arena. Rey searched for Wabba and found him rubbing his hands eagerly together at the top of the arena. His henchmen were grinning a little too much. She glowered at them for a moment before refocusing her attention on Ben. She had to find some way to help him.

They learned something unpleasant: the spider could jump several yards at a time.

Rey sprinted across the arena. Ben's lightsaber swung wildly, as he was barely fending the spider off. Their movements were severely restricted right now, but she knew he would stay on his toes. Somehow.

By the time she got close, Ben's cheek was bleeding, and his arm wasn't doing much better, his bicep grazed. Rey found it difficult to stalk the spider, since it jumped around as though it were dancing so damned much. Every time it did, sand splashed through the air, and she had to be careful not to get any in her eyes. The last thing either of them needed was to get blinded.

The spider abruptly turned on her when she had managed to get directly behind it. She used the momentum of her run to slide onto her side underneath the android, lifting her lightsaber and igniting it. The android was intelligent enough to realize it was in danger and leapt out of the way, toward the other half of the arena, but not before Rey had two of its legs off. Unfortunately, they were ones near its center, so its balance wasn't greatly affected.

A gash burned near her elbow. It had caught the edge of one of those legs, thankfully a side that didn't involve plasma.
Ben snarled.

*Don't!*

*I haven't!* 

*Don't!*

If they used the Force right now, it was all over.

*If we get close enough, I can throw one of my lightsabers at it. Where do you think we should, though?* They didn't have a lot of time to strategize before the spider was back on them. *Where would be its weakest point?*

**Wherever its droid brain is.**

*Not exactly helpful!*

**You know droids as well as I do!**

Damn, but he had a point.

The spider was on its way back. Ben and Rey dashed to opposite sides of the arena.

There were very big pillars that framed the contestant entrances of the coliseum. Rey flat-out ran for one of them, grateful beyond measure that she was in so much shape. This seemed to draw the spider's attention, and the ground began to shake as it hauled after her.

It jumped and landed in her path, hard enough that she went down. Its front legs reared.
Rey rolled to the left. The spider made some sort of crazy screech and jabbed its legs downward a second time. Rey rolled backward onto her feet. She staggered back a few paces until she found her footing, and then she made a horizontal go for her previous destination. She fully expected it to follow her, but Ben must have caught up with it, because it didn't.

*What exactly are you doing?!!*

*Emulating your grandmother!*

*What?!*

*There's a pillar up ahead, and I'm a very good climber!*

*Rey!*

*Stop focusing on me, or you're going to get killed!*

Wordless rage flooded the bond, but it wasn't directed at her.

She made it to the pillar and skidded to a stop. She tossed a glance over her shoulder to make sure Ben was still in one piece, and then she examined the pillar for footholds. The spider let out that metallic screech again, louder than before. Their audience cried out and covered their ears with their hands.

She was going to have to take the pillar at a run.

Rey backed up and then flew at it, one foot hitting the pillar, her hands stretching for those footholds. Her nails broke in the scrabble, but in the kick of adrenaline, she barely noticed. She could hear Wabba nearby making his protests. Whatever. She wasn't out of bounds, and she hadn't used the Force. He could kiss her arse.

She supposed it stung when things didn't go one's way.
The top of the pillar came within reach. She used a last boost of strength to grab ahold of it. She'd never climbed so fast, not even when she'd been on Starkiller Base. But she hadn't had to worry about Ben then, or what would happen if one of them died, and she'd had the Force at her disposal, fresh after its awakening though it was.

With a small cry, she hauled herself up until she was standing on two feet again.

She could see everything from here. Wabba and his cohorts' box, all of the people in the stands, the stretch of the arena, and everything outside of the coliseum that was nearby.

*Bring him closer!*

Ben was in a position she had been in minutes earlier, except his session was extended. He was on his back and rolling constantly to avoid getting pierced by those legs.

*We have a problem.*

*What?*

*I don't have my lightsaber.*

*Get on your feet and come over here!*

*Easier said than done!*

*Ben Solo!*

*Yelling at me isn't going to make it happen faster!*

Though it killed her to bite her tongue, Rey shut up. She wanted to help, and she could, but it had to be from here. So she watched anxiously as Ben rolled once more and then crawled under the spider. By the time it had noticed and spun around to continue its attack, Ben was sprinting, and he
wasn't looking back.

As he came into better view, Rey saw that he was riddled with cuts and that the tie in his hair had fallen out. Sand stuck to his clothes and his cheeks, probably only aggravating the wounds. Rey fell into something close to a crouch, pulling her lightsaber free again and separating it into its two halves.

Closer, closer…

_Catch!_

Rey threw one of the lightsabers at him as hard as she could. He caught it much as he had that night in Snoke's throne room, spinning where he stood and slashing at the spider. One of its front legs fell off, and there was more screeching from the android and protesting cries from the crowd.

_Bring him up to the pillar!_

A blaster went off.

Instinct flared, and Rey twisted her saber in its direction. It bounced off and right back to the person who had shot it. Looked like some sort of bounty hunter, and they toppled out of sight.

Ben lured the spider closer to the pillar.

_I'm a little worried about your plan._

_Me, too._

Ben jumped away as the spider lunged, which Rey had anticipated. What she had _not_ anticipated was for the spider to slam directly into the pillar she was standing on, hard enough that it cracked in half.
The pillar wobbled and gave a dangerous groan of grinding stone. Rey lost her footing, and she had two seconds to decide how to proceed.

Hoping it would work, Rey kicked at the edge of the pillar so that it swung forward as it fell. She had no choice but to follow it down. The spider looked up to see the pillar coming, but it couldn't move out of the way fast enough. The pillar slammed into it, half-crushing it in rubble. Rey hit the ground rolling.

As she came up, Ben threw her lightsaber back at her. She put both sabers into one and sliced off the legs of the spider. The crowd, who had been cheering on the spider in the beginning, yelled in appreciation. Wires sparked and machinery hissed, and Rey stabbed one end of her saber into what was left of the body of the spider.

Was its polearm just for show?

Maybe it had been jumping around too much to utilize it properly.

Rey panted for breath, her clothing sticking to her, the remnants of her spiral braid hanging over her shoulders. Cuts she hadn't even noticed she had flared to life, stinging like a bitch. Sweat was dripping off her face. They needed water for hydration, and she knew they wouldn't be allowed any. Wabba would send the next threat in while they were vulnerable and weakened from the last fight.

She wasn't wrong.

No sooner had she had the thought than some sort of giant lizard came into the arena. It was roaring, and the ground moved with each of its footsteps. The thing was ugly and covered in battle scars, and chains were tied to its feet, chains that were bolted into the ground behind it.

What is that thing? Rey thought faintly.

The lizard whipped its head around and bit into one of its herders. The man screamed, and the other herders ran out of the way, outside of the arena. Did it have chains so it didn't stampede around the arena too much?
Rey.

What?

It wasn’t the start of the battle yet, technically, so Ben stretched out his hand. His lightsaber flew
over to him and landed in his palm.

What, Ben?

I think that thing is a krayt dragon.
Sealing the Deal

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, guys. My birthday was the other day, and then I had some personal stuff going on. But here we are, whoo!

Rey dove to the side, barely missing the swipe of the krayt's tail, but Ben wasn't so lucky. He tumbled backward, hitting the ground hard. Rey swung her lightsaber, intending to cut part of that long and slender tail off.

Nothing happened.

We've got another problem.

Ben didn't answer. The air had been knocked entirely out of his lungs, similar to falling out of a tree and landing on his back. Rey was worried about him, but she knew she had to keep her wits about her. Neither one of them could die. He was her lifeline, and she—his.

Lightsabers aren't penetrating its hide. Lightsabers aren't—

She flew across the arena and slammed into a wall.

Stars literally danced before her eyes, and the edges of her vision went black. The dragon roared, baring its rows of deadly teeth. Rey staggered to the side, her ribs bruised from where the thing's tail had whipped over them. She tasted copper in her mouth and spat out blood. She'd bitten the inside of her cheek.

Ben. Please say you're okay. She needed him to be okay. This was a much different threat from that spider android. The dragon was alive, and it was vicious, and they could very well die without any aid from the Force, considering their lightsabers weren't effective.

I'm okay.
He didn't sound okay. His thoughts were clouded with pain.

They weren't invincible.

Immensely powerful, but mortal.

She didn't know what to do. She didn't know what to—

*Calm down. Breathe.*

Rey swallowed and counted to five. She needed a plan, they needed a plan. Ben was getting back on his feet, determined not to wince. Her eyes roved all over the dragon, looking for any sort of weakness. It was fortunate neither of them had been impaled on the spikes sticking out of its tail.

The thing was easily a little over thirty feet, and now Rey was understanding why the coliseum seats sat up so gods-damned high. Also explained the holo above them, and the tablet-like instruments a lot of the onlookers carried. They needed them to be able to see what was going on. So, what, had Wabba made this coliseum with that dragon's bulk in mind? Because the arena seats were a good fifty feet up.

There was no way she could climb a pillar to escape now. The first one had taken everything she had. Her climbing skills were out.

Yellow, as she'd come to call it in her mind, because it indeed had yellow scales, roared again. The fin-like things on its face fanned out briefly, exposing red undertones. The crown of horns on its head reminded her of that thing in the jungle on Solaris that had tried to eat her friends and herself.

*Are they sentient?*

*Skywalker always said they weren't. They can't breathe fire, they're wingless, they have venom to digest their prey easier, and apparently their hide is thick enough to withstand plasma.*
Spectacular!

They have one weakness that we can exploit—it's got a weak sinus cavity.

That's it?

That's it that I know of.

That's nothing!

It's all I know!

Rey ran toward the other end of the arena, having to clutch her side to do so. She thought that maybe some of her ribs had been cracked. An idea began to form, but it was dangerous. Extremely dangerous. Dangerous enough to—

Just tell me!

I need you to distract that thing! Like, really distract it!

And she told him the plan.

He didn't like it, but what else could they come up with on such short notice?

Wabba's laughter was ringing over the cacophony.

Rey crashed to a halt behind a pillar, sand flying. She peeked around it, dread developing in her heart. Well, more dread. She was already preparing for their deaths. But she reminded herself that if worst came to worst, they could use the Force, screw the deal with Wabba.
Ben was doing something strange.

He was zig zagging around the arena. He would dart left, then dance right. The dragon's head weaved with him, and Rey was grateful the damned thing couldn't breathe fire and roast him alive.

What are you doing?

I forgot to mention they've got two-dimensional sight.

What?

They'll attack shadows.

Luke had really told him so much about these dragons? Rey doubted it. Ben enjoyed researching. Most of the books he'd read when she'd been in his memories were tomes of anything she could think of. It reminded her of the books he'd had in Naboo about the local flora and fauna. He was clearly fascinated with the life of animals and creatures. It didn't mean he knew everything, but Luke and his grandfather were both from Tatooine. He would have wanted to find out all he could.

Ben had lured the dragon until its back was facing Rey. This left Ben cornered a bit. Rey had only a small window to act.

Rey eyed Yellow's tail. The dragon's length far surpassed its height, but the tail took up most of it. The deadly spikes waved threateningly, lashing in aggravation. Those spikes stopped at the base of its spine—and there, on its back, the spikes were small, almost blunt, mostly decoration. It was her goal.

She hastily tied her fallen braid into a messy bun. She didn't want her hair long and free around those spikes. It could snag on them, and then it might all be over.

Rey took a breath.

Yellow swiped its front leg in a spot Ben had already vacated.
That was her cue.

Though her energy was waning, she summoned the rest of it into her run. She tore across the arena, never minding the suck of the sand at her boots. Her vision, her entire being, honed into that spot on its back. She could do this. She would do this.

She was almost at its back—she was ready to leap up—

Yellow swung its tail, and Rey jumped out of the way, but not quickly enough. A spike ripped at her side, and she smothered her scream, tears in her eyes. She couldn't let it slow her down. She couldn't draw the dragon's attention, although maybe the scent of her blood would.

She kept going, putting a little more distance between her and tail, as much as she could without sacrificing the close proximity she needed. It didn't matter. The tail swung again, and there was no way she could avoid it without aid of the Force. She leaned into it, praying to gods she didn't even believe in, and leapt. She landed on her feet on the tail, wobbling—used that momentum to run as though were on a warped balance beam all the way to its back.

Now it noticed her.

It screamed and began to rampage, as though she were a sand fly biting at a Thissерmount. It reared up on its back legs, and she clutched at it with arms and legs. There were flashes of pain all over her abdomen, and she knew then that she was really wounded.

She shut those pain receptors down. She couldn't let Ben know how bad it was.

*Distract it again!*

*I'm trying not to get trampled!*

*I need you to get it back on the ground!*
Yellow shook itself, attempting to dislodge her. A small horn ripped at the outside of her wrist.

Ben must have done something, because it lunged after him. Ben started running, and Yellow took off, too—screeching to a halt not five yards later. Its chains had locked it into place. Ben stood outside of its zone of attack, and as Rey watched, he shifted his foot.

Yellow lunged forward again, intent on biting Ben like it had done to its herder. Ben kicked, and sand flew up into the dragon's eyes.

It rampaged worse now.

Yellow blindly stomped around, eager on taking Ben out, though Ben stayed out of reach. Rey used this distraction to climb further up its back, on its neck. It reared again, and Rey clung onto her lightsaber, ready to ignite it when the moment she was waiting for presented itself.

The dragon swung its head in her direction.

With two seconds to act, Rey ignited her saber and stabbed into its eye. It was dead before it crashed to the ground.

The crowd went wild. Or maybe it already had been. Rey had drowned everything but the battle out.

Wabba bellowed his disapproval.

Ben came up to her side, holding out his arms to help her down. She shut her saber off and pushed off the neck of the dragon. She meant to assist him, but she was deadweight. Ben caught her, bracing himself.

*Rey?*

She swallowed, staring up at the sky, the impossibly blue sky.
Rey!

I'm injured. She looked down at her stomach. There were slashes in her clothes with wounds beneath. Some were from the spider android; the rest were from Yellow. There was a gouge near her ribs, near her sore and cracked ribs. It was bleeding.

She needed a medic.

Put me down.

No!

Put me down, Ben!

He did, but he made it very clear he didn't like it.

Things didn't get any better when they were once again in a room with Wabba and his henchmen. Rey was dripping blood onto the sand-covered stone, but she kept her arms at her sides, refusing to acknowledge her wound. They had to do this, or it would have all been for nothing.

"-We did as you wished,-" Rey said.

"-And that was commendable,-" Wabba acknowledged. "-However, upon further contemplation, I've decided the bounty on your head should be appropriate enough.-"

Rey stared hard at him. ":-What?-"
"-While you were fighting, I had more time to think about it. You see, you left me all this money. And I could receive even more for turning you in. I'm a businessman first."

Rey's fingers twitched.

_Don't. They're immune to mind tricks._

"-You're worth more alive, you see.-" Wabba's slimy eyes narrowed, and there was drool on his chin. He was excited about this turn of events. "-Get them.-" He gestured to his henchmen.

_Now?_

_Now._

They let the men draw their blasters. The safeties went off all around the room. Plenty of what would have been terrifying clicks of impending death.

This was where Wabba had underestimated them, as so many did.

Ben waved a hand.

Every single henchmen in the room turned toward Wabba and held their blasters level at him.

The Hutt's mouth fell open a bit, and his eyes rolled around in shock. He'd never seen anything like it. Twenty men, all of them ready to shoot him, with no more than a wave of a hand from Ben Solo. Such command of the Force should have been impossible. Mind tricks on a person required some eye contact and a deliberate trick. But the Solo boy had barely moved.

Or so Rey surmised. It wasn't difficult to read the thoughts crossing the slug's face.

"-What about now?-" Rey asked.
Wabba wavered on the spot.

Then his amber eyes narrowed with greed.

"-Now we are talking.-"

Rey didn't allow her relief to cross her face.

"-I will give you some time to tend to your injuries. Then we discuss. Tomorrow. You come tomorrow.-"

Rey didn't have a doubt in her mind—he saw the truth of them. They'd downed two of his most powerful opponents without use of the Force. And the little Force they had used had required nothing at all. It went to follow that people that powerful were an asset.

They left Wabba with a promise to return the next day.

"Surface wounds," Sitrine said.

"What?" Rey asked. "I have holes in me! Cracked ribs!"

"Nothing the med droids can't fix right up. As I said, superficial. Not like you need surgery. Lighten up, woman."

Rey growled. They were on one of the Order's ships that Sitrine had stolen. They'd come to land next to the Falcon on Tatooine when Ben had informed them that Rey was injured. Ben was in another room, on a communicator with Rellen, replaying the deal.

"You lighten up!" she found herself shouting. She was exhausted and in no mood to deal with his crap. "You didn't face down a spider of doom and a damned krayt dragon on your own!"
"Oh, you had your lightsabers," Sitrine brushed her off.

"And no use of the Force!"

The Knight paused in the act of pushing her onto a steel table. The med droids were about to begin their work. Sitrine had numbed the area so she wouldn't feel any pain.

"You neglected to mention that part," he murmured.

Rey looked away.

Ben?

Yes?

The moment we're alone again, I'm going to fuck your brains right out of your head.
Dust Hung Heavy

Chapter Notes

Goodness gracious, I'm so sorry for the lateness of this post! Personal stuff still going on along with finals week! But I'm here, and I gift you with smut! Um… it's a bit filthier than what I usually write for you guys, so the warning still stands. Enter at your own risk.

"You lot are ready, right?"

Ben yanked Rey's ripped shirt over her head.

"We need to meet for our next course of action before we go see Wabba tomorrow," Sitrine's voice
crackled from the cockpit.

Rey's hands worked at getting Ben's trousers open. Her fingers were shaking, so it was taking just a little bit longer than usual.

"Mates!"

Should we answer him?

He'll get the hint.

They'd had more than a few brushes with death in one day. They deserved some quality time together. They could worry about duty and business later.

Are you sure your wounds are healed enough?

My ribs still hurt, but I'm willing to bear the pain.

Just wanted I wanted to hear.

Ben leaned over, locking the Falcon up. No one would be attacking it, but they didn't want anyone coming in there, either. Then he came after her much like a predator, his eyes dark and full of an intense heat, the heat of survival. Rey's nipples tightened in response, and it went very damp between her legs.

His nostrils flared as if he could scent it, even though they both know he couldn't. But he did have access to her mind.

They didn't need to finish undressing. Ben chased Rey to the main hold, and before she could get anywhere, he had her bent over the dejarik table. His teeth slid over the back of her neck, the skin there pink from the sun. She shivered and made to faux struggle, but he shoved his hands down her trousers to the wet warmth within, and she pretended to give in for now.
One of his hands fisted in her hair. He used it to tug her head back, biting her ear next. Dirty words poured from his mouth, words she wouldn't have ever expected him to say out loud, or maybe not even in the privacy of their bond.

"I am going to fuck you so hard you won't be able to walk tomorrow," he whispered heatedly. His fingers shoved inside of her, three, four, stretching. She let out a small cry. "I watched you almost die. I need to know you're alive."

He yanked her trousers down enough to access her dripping cunt, and then he was shoving his dick in without preparation. His skin caught on hers, and it hurt for a moment, but then he was thrusting fast and hard, and her core grew slick enough that it didn't matter. There was only hard friction—the width of him, the length, how he filled her so completely.

Ben groaned and shoved her upper half onto the table, one hand still knotted in her hair, the other a bruising grip on her hip. He kicked her feet to spread them open more, tilted her hips down just a little. Then he really let go, and she was screaming, and pleasure was lighting her within.

"You're mine," he panted constantly at her ear. "You're mine, you're mine, you're fucking mine."

His hand left her hip to cup her breast and squeeze, riding the line of pain. She ripped from his grip and advanced. She shoved him backward into the wall and then dropped to her knees. His cock was covered in her juices, and she grabbed onto his thighs as she took him down her throat. It was painful as always, because she hadn't loosened it up yet, but right now, she didn't care. She loved his cock, and they'd almost died, and she would worship it if she wanted to.

Ben was only too happy to oblige. He snagged his fingers in her hair again and fucked into her face. His cock bruised her throat as he pounded relentlessly. She kept her head still, so he could rut directly down it. Her chokes filled the room, and saliva touched the corner of her mouth, but she didn't want him to stop. They both enjoyed the way her throat fluttered and seized around his cock.

He yanked on her hair, pulling her off him, and a string of saliva followed from the tip of his cock. For a moment, he cupped his large hands over her face and stroked her cheekbones. They looked into one another's eyes, Ben breathing heavy, Rey's lips bruised. Then he tugged her to her feet and whirled, slamming her into the wall.

They kissed so hard it was barely kissing, more like desperate presses of their lips together and touches of tongue.
I'm going to fuck you again. And I want you to come all over me.

Rey squeaked.

No. You're going to do as I say. You understand?

When Rey didn't answer, Ben picked her up and carried her into the cockpit. On the way, they shed the rest of their clothes. Once their reached their destination, Rey looked about curiously, wondering what they were doing here.

Ben threw himself into the pilot's chair. He grabbed her and yanked her onto his lap. She caught on to what was happening a second before his cock penetrated her cunt. He bounced her on top of him, and she shamelessly used the Force to help her from this position, just a fluctuation that allowed more pressure and momentum behind the rolls of her hips.

How long have you been wanting to do this one?

Since I first saw you on this ship. Now turn around and bend over the controls.

Thighs trembling—she was still exhausted from the battles despite her wounds that had been attended to—Rey slid off his cock again. She felt bereft without it, but not for long. She climbed off his lap and turned around, bending over the controls. A moment later, Ben was pressed against her, thrusting deep inside of her.

Say you're mine!

You know I'm yours!

He smacked her ass. Say it out loud!

"I'm yours!" she gasped. It was hard to get air with how hard he was fucking her. She certainly was going to feel this tomorrow.
Ben's hand reached around to her clit and rubbed furiously. *Now do what I said. Come all over me.*

*Ben!* Rey didn't know why she was blushing.

*One day I'm going to convince you how fucking hot it is. Just do it, Rey.* His fingers rolled her clit effortlessly, having long been trained in the art of doing so. He knew exactly how to work her body, just as she knew how to do the same to him.

"Ben—"

He smacked her ass harder. *Do it, Rey! Obey me!*

It was his demand that did it.

She tossed her head back, giving into the heat pooled in her stomach and groin. There was a rush of liquid, slickening her thighs and his own, entirely soaking his cock. He kept rubbing at her clit, drawing her orgasm out, until her vision nearly went dark and she slumped on the controls.

He dropped to his knees and buried his face against her cunt. She made a small scream, fingers clawing at nothing, nothing she could safely grab. He suckled on her clit, making her come over and over and over and over again, a chain of small orgasms that left her without a thought in her head. The lower half of his face and his neck was damp, and he gave an appreciative lick between her folds.

*You taste so good.*

Rey thought that would be the end of it. That they would finish here. But he picked her up, holding her in a bridal carry all the way to the cabin, sprawling her over the bed. They'd gotten rid of the smaller ones and replaced it with one of their choosing. It was comfortable, bolted to the floor, and wasn't going anywhere.

His eyes were still dark as he crawled between her thighs and parted them. His lips glistened from where he'd partaken of her core.
He thrust in—hard—pulled out just as slow. He kept on that way, watching her face the entire time, his hands on her hips, his knees digging into the mattress. She could do nothing but hold his gaze, unable to break it, not for anything. Not even for the pleasure still roiling inside of her, ready to be let free again.

*Never again. We'll find another way. I can't watch you almost die again.*

*I can't watch you almost die, either,* she thought softly.

Ben tucked his head down, and he put his weight behind each thrust after that. She wrapped her thighs around him and held onto his shoulders. It wasn't long before he was pulling out and spilling across her stomach. They'd been on edge too long.

*I can’t take it anymore,* he said in the aftermath, on his back with her curled up on his chest.

*What do you mean?*

*There’s expensive types of birth control. Injections. I was avoiding it before because I didn't know if you wanted it, but now…*

She lifted her face to see him. *Now?*

He reached up and tucked her hair behind her ear.

*Now I want to mark you in every way possible.*
I Won't Cry for Yesterday

Chapter Notes

Hey, guys! All the support for this story has been phenomenal, and I'm sure people are tired of hearing me say that, but oh, well! I really couldn't have gotten this far without you guys.

The rain fell down in harsh buckets, soaking everything in its path. The only things able to resist its fury were the burning remnants of structures. Flames leapt and flickered, and wooden beams collapsed amongst themselves. Thunder rumbled in the distance after a show of lights in the clouds on the horizon.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

This wasn't a place Rey had ever wanted to return to.

"Why didn't you tell me my own uncle would attack me in my sleep?"

"I couldn't," she gasped. She had to blink rapidly to clear her vision. It was hard to see through the rain. "I can't change anything, it wouldn't have mattered!"

Ben wrapped his hand around her neck and slammed her into a tree, holding her up high enough that her feet dangled. His face came close to hers, and she could see the fury in his eyes. The fury she hadn't seen much in his earlier memories—the fury that would follow them off and on throughout the rest.

"If you can't change anything, why are you here?!"

Rey struggled to breathe. "That's not what—I meant! Ben—stop—put me down—"

His grip tightened. Her back was growing bruised from the bark on the tree. Her hands clawed at his, seeking freedom from his chokehold. She didn't want to use the Force on him. It would just
make it worse. But he wasn't giving her much of a choice.

He dropped her.

She hit the ground, one hand behind her on the tree to steady herself. Her other hand went to her throat where imprints of his fingers lingered.

"What did you mean, then?" His voice was as cold as she'd ever heard it.

"Snoke's influence... it's still here... he—"

"If it wasn't for Snoke, I would be dead right now!" Ben screamed. "He warned me this would happen—he warned me against you!"

Rey wearily lifted her head. Her boots were caked in mud. "If he warned you against me, it's because he wants his hold on you."

"And Luke?"

"I thought I told you not to listen to the voice," Rey said. "You promised me you wouldn't."

"That was before," Ben snapped.

"Before what?" Rey asked in exasperation.

"Before my uncle tried to murder me!"

Thunder chose a dramatic moment to crack through the sky, loudly enough that Rey jumped. It wasn't enough to put her off her anger, however. "So that's what you've been doing?! You've ignored his voice, but you haven't made it go away?!" She shoved Ben, catching him by surprise. "I'm trying to save you!"
"Rey, I don't know. I can't—"

"If you were trying to save me, you would have told me about Luke!" Ben snarled. "You would have prepared me!"

"Ben—!"

"No! If you want me to trust you again, I need answers! Real. Answers!"

"Fine!" Rey couldn't take it anymore. She'd hoped it wouldn't go this way—but she was right. All she could really do was blunt the emotional damage of future events.

"Fine?" Ben scoffed. "You hardly—"

"But then you listen to me, and you keep your promises! Are we understood?!

Even in the darkness of the night, in the maelstrom of rain, they glared fiercely at one another.

Ben looked away first.

"I—"

Rey—

Choking.

She dug her fingers against the invisible ones around her neck. She knew it wasn't Ben. It was Snoke—he had his own signature that she easily recognized, especially at this point in Ben's memories.

"Rey!" Panic crossed Ben's features. "Rey, is something attacking you? Rey!"
She held out her hands blindly. He gripped onto them, and their connection opened. Their love burned away the darkness that was attempting to smother her. She had to swallow back tears. Now wasn't the time to be weak.

"You're attacking me, Ben."

I'm done! Stop!

The memory receded. She couldn't pull all of it away fast enough, and fading words whispered between them.

... "No one wants me. Why should I care what happens anymore?"...

Ben and Rey stared at one another. They were on their sides again. Rey reached across the small distance and touched her fingertips to his cheekbone, light as a feather.

You knew you would see painful memories.

It was different before. He looked away but didn't pull from her touch.

Why? Her brows furrowed in confusion.

I hadn't… turned.

Her expression relaxed. She could understand that. Her hand fell to his shoulder and squeezed.

I didn't like to see that.

Well, I'm sure—
I didn't care about the rest. I've made my peace with it. But the way I handled you…

A laugh caught in Rey's throat, no matter that it wasn't really funny. That was hardly the first time.

I regret all of it. I regret any time I was abusive to you.

I know, she assured him. She snuggled close to him, entangling their limbs, and pressed her face to the curve of his shoulder. His arms enclosed around her, strong and safe.

You… saved me. You went through all of that—you tried to show me that I could be loved no matter what happened.

Rey was quiet. She watched her fingertips trail up and down his bicep. It was much easier to do than to look into his tortured eyes. His thoughts were heavy enough.

Do you want me to quit showing you the memories?

No.

From here on out, it's going to be harder to watch.

I know. He squeezed her against him. But I need to see them.

They were quiet for a while, enjoying one another's presence. Ben's thoughts eased as Rey soothed them with her own. He buried his face in her hair and inhaled softly.

When do you want to get the birth control? It was a question she hadn't meant to ask. It had just slipped out. They were still enjoying the aftermath of the sex he'd pounded into her after their victory on Tatooine. Sitrine was going to kill them both soon if they didn't report in.
Soon.

She supposed that was all he was going to give her on the topic, so she sat up. *I'm going to use the sonic shower. I still don't feel clean.* They'd showered after the coliseum to get all the blood and grit off, but she thought maybe she'd feel it for days to come.

*I'll tell Sitrine we're ready to convene before tomorrow.*

Rey didn't relish the idea of talking to that giant slug again, but what could she really do?

Ben grasped her wrist before she got too far.

*What?* She tilted her head.

*I love you. And if you say, "I know,"*—

*I know.* She grinned.

He yanked her right back into bed, and she squealed as his fingers tickled over her sides.

*This is really happening. Our plans.*

*It is,* he concurred.

*There's no going back after this.*

*Why are you frightened?*

She said nothing, and he had to search her thoughts. Once he found what he was looking for, his arms tensed around her. She sighed. It was why she hadn't wanted to say anything, but the truth had
to come out eventually.

*Let's not worry about my mother right now.*

*It's not just Leia. It's Finn, it's—*

*We're doing what needs to be done.* He looked seriously into her eyes. *Tell me now. This is the last chance to back out.*

He'd asked her before if she wanted an out. She'd told him no. Things had been different then, less real. Now they had turned a major crime syndicate to their cause, and it was only the beginning of what was to come. This made them leaders. This made them—

*Rulers. We are rulers.*

*We don't have anything to rule.*

*Yes, we do. The rest of the galaxy just doesn't realize it yet.* He was as serious as he ever was. *Answer me, Rey. Are you prepared for this?*

*I only want to be certain that what we're doing is the right thing. That it's for the better good.*

*You know it is.*

*But what gives us the right to determine what's for the better good? It's like—*

*Rey.*

She inhaled sharply, then nodded.
Take away your worry about the Resistance. What do you feel? Do you still feel uncertain?

She wet her lips as she honestly considered his question. A lot of her current guilt was because of the Resistance—was because she knew they wouldn't handle Ben and Rey's rise to power very well. But that aside…

No. I feel certain.

Good. So focus on that. Do you want me to help you?

She hesitated. The last time he'd helped her, it was to make her more comfortable around Sitrine. She knew that she probably shouldn't rely on him for that sort of thing, that she should have her own peace of mind. But they were tied together, so what did it matter, so long as it helped?

Yes. Yes, please.

His thoughts slid over hers, soothing, stroking, assuring, echoing what was in his heart. His certainty.

She relaxed slowly.

They were breathing in tandem.

Better?

She nodded.

He kissed her forehead. Good. Take your shower. I'll contact Sitrine.
I'm Trying to Battle the Night

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone! I have made another art piece for the story and have included it below! Let me know what you think!

(PS: Had this chapter ready at 5 a.m., but Archive was down. Also, ignore a chapter 75 update, because apparently AO3 is seriously fucking with me, IDEK.)

(PSS: Apparently Archive is refusing to show the comments I received a few hours ago when the site was back up and my chapter posted itself while I was asleep, so I'm unable to reply. Hopefully it didn't eat them entirely. I wish there was a private messaging on this site.)

(PSSS: Ria84, Selenite_x, and Klynch--in case your comments stay forever gone: I received them and enjoyed them. Thank you. <3 )
The Bond That Ties Us
-by moontear-
ARNA III
You.

It was a whisper, a flicker of darkness, a breeze touching her cheeks.

Rey stood before a mirror. She pressed her palm flat to it, and her reflection mimicked her. She was in the cave on Ahch-To, dressed in the outfit she'd worn at the time. The sound of seawater trickled around her, and the smell of brine was strong.

"I won't be fooled again," Rey told it. It—the thing in the mirror that wasn't her.

It shifted, changing forms. Rey stared at its face, and it grinned, but that grin was pure darkness and seemed to encompass everything. Rey refused to give in, her light shining through. She took a step back, but the person came forward, an arm leaving the mirror. It shoved into her chest, and as she gasped in pain, choking on it, it rubbed its thumb where the light was.

It put its lips close to her ear. Its words were soft, barely able to be heard, but just loudly enough that Rey could.

"I want you. I'll have you."

"No!" Rey said vehemently.

The hand tightened around her light like a vise, and she screamed.

Water.

Water everywhere.

Tendrils of darkness curled around her elbows and wrists, pulling her down...down...down...down so deep that light couldn't filter through. She was choking—there was no air, there was no way to break the hold on her. Water was quickly filling her lungs.

Rey! Rey, wake up!
She gasped awake. Perspiration clung to her forehead. It took her nearly a minute to comprehend that she wasn't actually drowning. By then Ben had her in his arms and was soothing her damp fringe off her forehead.

*Why is it always me with the terrible dreams?*

*That wasn't a dream.*

*Another vision?* Rey frowned, easing back onto the mattress. Had Anakin showed her this one? Something told her no. Anakin's had been so precise—showing an exact series of events. This one, if it was indeed a vision, held no discernable meaning to her.

*Visions don't always manifest clearly.*

Rey knew he was right. That didn't make it any easier. After Anakin's warning, she was more on pins and needles about it than she let on. It had finally been getting easier to let it go, to not worry about her death, Ben's death, their death. But another vision, no matter how convoluted?

The trickle of water…

A steady drip-drop…

"*I want you. I'll have you.*"

She didn't have time to figure out what it meant. They were due to see Wabba.

Ben frowned at her but didn't press.
The reception they received on Tatooine was noticeably different. There was a heavier escort into Wabba's lair, and the atmosphere wasn't nearly as deadly. Rey took this to mean that either they were walking right into a trap, or Wabba had really taken to them.

They reached Wabba's main chamber, and their guard fanned out around them.

As she had the day before, Rey took a step forward. "-You have had a night to think. Do you still agree to our terms?-"

Wabba's chuckle was low and seemed to slither around in the air. "-I would like for you to lay out the terms again.-"

"-Any resources that you are providing and selling to the First Order... And to anyone else.-" Rey cleared her throat. "-We will give you seventy-five percent of the cut if you give it to us instead. We also have plans in place to prevent any retaliation from the First Order. Your people would be protected.-" As well as any criminals could be protected. They couldn't save every life. But they could save them from the First Order.

"-I would be happy to elaborate,-" Rey said.

"-We will discuss protection later. I have spoken with my kin. Sabba is on Coruscant—he would like you to tell him what you told me.-" As Ben and Rey had expected, Wabba had been in contact with other syndicates. The Hutts alone still ran a ring of five.

"-But are you aligning with us?-" Rey pressed. She wasn't going to give Wabba any wiggle room.

Gross.

Thanks for the horrible mental image.

"-Yes, yes, of course, of course. I said as much yesterday!-" Wabba rubbed his hands together. "-While you go to Coruscant, I will speak with your man to go over the finer... terms of our treaty.-"
Sitrine is going to have a blast.

He might. Hutts are apparently amazing drinking buddies.

Just when I begin to think he's normal—

That impression will never go away.

They thanked the Hutt, allowing themselves to be escorted a second time. Rey's shoulders were a little tense—she was ready to defend against any sudden attack. Ben was completely relaxed except for his fingertips. They always tipped inward like claws when he was wary. His eyes managed to take in a lot with barely a glance. Rey was still practicing that. She supposed her peripheral vision wasn't as good.

A sandstorm was blowing in.

Do we have enough time to make it to the Falcon? Then she remembered one of Anakin's side lessons.

Using the Force, they boosted their speed, and so when they reached the Falcon, the storm was getting well underway. They had managed to remain unscathed, but it wouldn't be pleasant to fly out in.

Should we go to Endorom, like we planned? Or Coruscant, since that just got thrown into the mix?

Coruscant. They'll be expecting us.

She nodded.

He cursed, and she sent him a mental question mark.

He began to pace in the cockpit, tapping his knuckles to his lips. Do you remember when we were
on Coruscant last?

Yes, but—oh.

Yes. Oh.

Your mother said the man you had fooled was probably Gambo Callisian?

Ben gave one of his rare snorts of laughter. *Lando Calrissian.*

Rey flushed. Well, *excuse me for not remembering, it's been months.* That sobered her some. *We have to visit Arna. Soon. Your mother—*

*Don't remind me,* Ben sighed. Rey knew it was all an act but wondered when it was, exactly, that he would stop pretending he hadn't forgiven her. *Butt out!*

*Get testy with someone else,* she snipped back. Holy krayt balls, the man had more familial issues than she did.

*I just—can't think about my mother right now. I can't.* He put both of his hands to either side of his head. *And the bigger problem is Lando. He's not going to be happy that I swindled him.*

*We can just avoid him, though, if we take a different vessel?* Rey strapped herself into the pilot's seat. Ben knew she liked to fly, so he allowed it around half the time, which was generous, considering how much he liked to be in control of *everything.*

*We'll have to get Sitrine to give us one. I guess we're going to Endorom first, after all. We'll tell Sitrine to tell Wabba once they're convening that we'll be arriving a little later.*

*How long do you think it'll take to get an Order ship?* Rey took the *Falcon* off the ground, and it swayed a little dangerously in the storm. She knew they likely needed to wait it out, but she couldn't bear spending another night on this planet. It reminded her too much of Jakku, and it held the stench of Hutts and death.
And insanely tall wingless dragons.

_Likely a few days, at the least._

It took some quick, Force-honed reflexes to get them out of the storm. They were in space shortly after that, and in hyperspace not a minute after that.

_You're not going to like this question._

Ben crossed his arms. _But you're going to ask it, anyway._

_What do we do if... this Lando guy finds us?_

_Honestly?_

Yes. Rey released the controls and sat back in her seat.

_I think if we both use mind control on him at the same time, we'll win ourselves a bit of time to get away before it wears off._

Rey sat in silence for a while, one foot propped against the consoles. Her other leg was tucked up in the seat with her, and she had an arm wrapped around it. Her chin was resting on her knee.

She thought about a lot of things.

She thought about how there was a vision out there of her dying. She thought about how she'd had another vision that had hinted at death, all twisted and tangled as it was.

Leia was on Arna III, probably worried sick about them. Rey wanted so badly to see her, the woman she had come to consider her mother. But she was so afraid, because eventually the truth
was going to come out. Leia would not understand. They would never be able to persuade her. Rey knew it, had known it for some time, and it still caused her a pang of grief.

Ben's fingers laced through hers, and her lips tasted like salt when she wet them. She put her fingers to her cheeks, which were sticky from tears.

She was anxious about Wabba, Sabba, all of them. She was anxious about this Lando person, who was a criminal in his own right—

Rey lifted her head with a small gasp. "That Lando fellow—he's a family friend, isn't he?"

Yes… Ben replied cautiously.

"We'll talk to him while we're there, too."

He sat up straight. "Rey, no. This is not a man you—"

"Look—" Rey wet her lips again, both of her feet coming to rest on the floor. "Your mother told me a bit about him. He's really powerful, obviously. And he's probably not happy that you killed his friend, and honestly I'm surprised he agreed to trade for your ship at all—"

Ben cleared his throat.

Rey took a breath. Right. "What if we talked to him like we had the others? Surely we could persuade him? A crook is a crook. Unless he's loyal to your mother and would tell her…?"

He exhaled and dragged his fingers through his hair. He'd let it down. *I need to think on it. I need to weigh the risks.*

Do you want to only try to use him if it's necessary?

Ben considered his answer. *I don't know.* He sighed. *I'm so damned tired. When we get to*
"Hello!" Sitrine said over the communicator. "Thought I'd give you two a night to bang it out, but the sun is shining—or two, in your case—and we've got work to do. Please someone respond to this message before I go bugfuck on Rellen."

Rey was laughing as she answered. "We're here, Sitrine. We're headed there now."

"Great! Now pick up where you left off yesterday. What happened with Wabba?"

"Things went well," Rey said. "He says he's in, but he wants us to go talk to Sabba on Coruscant."

"Excellent!" Sitrine trilled. "You can head there straightaway! I assume I need to have words with the ugly sluglord?"

"Yes," Rey replied. "But… there's one thing…"

There was a heartbeat of quiet.

A sigh was heard.

"What is it?" Sitrine asked in a longsuffering way. "You're not going to try and make me fuck one of those Hutts, are you? Because I will need a lot of luna-weed and maybe also some—"

"We need a First Order ship?" Rey cut him off before he was finished. He was jesting. She hoped.

"Oh, yes. That. That is simple. Um…" Sitrine coughed. "It will take a few days. I take it you want me to inform Wabba you'll be arriving later at—?"

"Yes," Rey said.
"All right, I'm on it! I'll see you soon, Your Highness."

And the thing was, he said it so seriously as he signed off.

Don't panic.

Panic? What's that? I'm not panicking. You're panicking!

Rey.

I know. She hung her head. I'll get used to it. Eventually. Maybe.

It drove home further what they were about to do—were doing.

To these people they were subverting, they were their rulers.

Rey just liked to not think about it. The only problem was, eventually it was going to catch up with her. She'd deal with it then. For now, she got out of her chair and stretched. They had a bit of a wait until they arrived at Endorom.
A Different Lens

Chapter Notes

There was a server crash the day when I posted the last chapter. As I understand it, there was some difficulty accessing it, even. I hope everyone has now!

This chapter targets Rey's fear of the vision(s). I felt it was something important for her to confront, as she's been burying it.

Rey stood at the edge of the lake that Sitrine really needed to name. The pink atmosphere was denser than usual, and the golden balls had all but disappeared. With how hard the wind was tugging at Rey's hair and cloak, she knew a storm was imminent.

"Are you going to stand here forever?"

"Not forever," Rey muttered. Just long enough to get her bearings.

"I know you're afraid."

"Of course, I'm afraid!" she shouted. Her voice echoed over the lake and danced off into the trees. Instantly, she was chagrined. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have lost my temper."

Anakin came to her side. While the wind pulled Rey's braid free from its clips, while her cloak snapped behind her, the Force ghost remained immune to the elements. The faintest grumble of thunder was on the horizon. Rey couldn't see any lightning past the flowers and the pink veil.

"You have to face it," he said.

"I know," she replied.

"Rey, this is not something—"
"Believe me, I am taking it very seriously!" Rey's voice had risen back to a yell. She whirled away from him, clutching her arms around herself. Tears were hovering on her lashes. She hated it. Hated that she couldn't get past this. "There is a person out there who wants Ben dead, and myself by association! A crazed person with—with probably stronger abilities with the Force than the two of us combined! And if we're not extremely careful, she will kill me! And that will kill Ben! And it will have all been for nothing!"

She was tired of keeping calm, on focusing on everything but the vision he'd shown her, and her own recent vision. She'd never been allowed the proper time to grieve. Why? Because there was no use in grieving if, theoretically, it wasn't going to happen. So why focus on it? Why let it get into her head? This was meant as a warning—it wasn't a death sentence.

A drop of water hit her forehead.

"Learn from my mistakes, Rey," Anakin said.

"I know! You've told me that a thousand times!" Rey ranted. Tears were on her cheeks, and her chest was so tight she didn't think she could breathe. "But it's hard! I keep thinking of the lightsaber going through me—I keep thinking of what will happen if we die. I don't want to be like you, or Master Luke. I want—I want to make a difference. I want to make a difference that doesn't tear the entire galaxy apart because of my decisions!"

Rain fell in a steady blanket. It soaked her through.

"If you want to do those things, then you have to learn from my mistakes!" Anakin thundered.

It was the first time he'd been harsh with her. She trembled from how cold the rain was.

"I wouldn't have shown you what I had if I hadn't thought you were strong enough!" he continued. "Don't let me have made a mistake! I showed you because of the galaxy! You're eager to save it, and I'm eager to help you, but we can not move forward if you don't pull it together!"

Rey shook her head quickly back and forth. Her hands clenched at her sides.
"You can do this, Rey," he pressed. "I know you can. And I know my grandson will help you. Let him in—let him know how this is eating you alive."

"I do let him in!" Rey cried.

"Then why isn't he here?" Anakin said.

Rey wiped rain out of her eyes with her wrist. "What?"

"This is your dream," Anakin said. "I felt your pain growing stronger and stronger. I thought I might lance it if I could. But he's not here. There's only you."

"I—"

"You blocked him out the moment I entered your dream. He's completely unaware of this conversation." Anakin shook his head, gritted his jaw. "Share with him, Rey."

"I can't!" If he didn't know, she couldn't tell him. She knew the real reason Anakin had given her the vision instead of his grandson—because if it had been Ben's vision, he would have had a higher chance of following in Vader's footsteps. But it had been Rey's, and it was Ben's duty to look out for her, and it had divided his attention.

A smart move.

Or so Anakin had thought.

Rey was a failure—she—she wasn't doing any better—

"You were never afraid before, no matter how much danger you were in, because you knew you could handle it. You were unaware of your mortality. You've seen it now. It makes you feel fallible. It makes you doubt yourself. It worms its way into your skin, and your heart, and your thoughts: will you prevent what you have seen?"
Rey bowed her head. Mud was forming quickly around her boots.

"Yes," Anakin said. "And the first step to that is by telling yourself that it's only a possibility—the worst case scenario."

The vise squeezing Rey's chest began to lighten. She found herself nodding with him.

He was right. It was the worst case scenario. They knew about the threat, and Anakin was training them. They held the upper hand on the vision. They would spot their adversary, know them for who they were, and be able to deal with it. They wouldn't be caught off guard—separated.

"Rey," Anakin said softly.

She sniffled and glanced his way.

"I have a lot of knowledge to impart. Know… know this is only the beginning."

Rey's eyes flickered open. They were met with Ben's back, which rose and fell as he slumbered. She really had kept him out of that dream, then. Guilt tingled. They shared everything. Well… she supposed they would if she followed Anakin's instructions.

She slid an arm over Ben's stomach and leaned up to drop a kiss to his temple. He made a face and grumbled, squirming deeper under the blankets. She soothed his hair and let him be, getting out of bed to get ready for the day. It was very early, but she couldn't go back to sleep. Not after that.

Anakin was right. She was strong. Everyone knew it. She knew it, she'd always known it. One couldn't survive on Jakku by themselves for as long as she had if they weren't strong. Hells, she'd shown it the other day in the arena, paired with Ben, fighting the android and the krayt dragon without use of the Force.

Rey smiled to herself as she finished dressing and pulled her fingerless gloves on. Well… she had
to admit it: they were pretty badass.

Her smile faded as she thought of the dream. Anakin had come to her because he'd felt her pain, he'd said. And she'd locked Ben out. She was trying so hard to bury this, to wear a winning smile, to brave the world. She hadn't wanted anyone to know how scared she was. Some of it, yes, but not all of it.

But if Anakin knew she was in that much pain, then that meant Ben knew, too, no matter how much she blocked that part of herself off. He hadn't approached her about it, hadn't probed her thoughts. Why? And then she knew, because they were nearly one person, and her eyes teared up again.

He was waiting for her to talk to him about it.

She looked at his sleeping back, a small mountain under the blankets, his raven hair scattered over the pillow. He had come such a long way. Thinking about the past, about four years ago, and comparing it to now… The difference was so vast. Ben had said she saved him. Maybe she had, but he'd saved her, too.

Ben loved her so much. He would never allow anyone to hurt her, to touch a hair on her head, and she knew that, too, because he kept his heart open to hers. He still had his mysteries, but in this, he was transparent.

If he would never let harm come to her, then he would never let this vision take place.

She felt the same about him.

Finally, after weeks of holding it in, the burden of fear in her heart unraveled. She collapsed back against the desk, one hand over her mouth as she squeezed her eyes shut and hot tears ran down her cheeks.

She knew—she felt it in every fiber of her body, every atom, every iota.

The vision Anakin had given her would not come to happen. Ben and Rey loved one another too much to let it. She was sad it had taken her this long to glean onto that. It had been obvious, staring her right in the face. Her fear had been all-consuming.
That fear was now gone, and Rey jumped onto the bed behind Ben, rocking the entire frame. She bent and kissed his temple again.

"We're going to be fine," she murmured into his ear with a kiss there, as well.

He grunted in question.

_The vision. It won't happen._

_I know it won't. I told you._ Ben patted blindly behind him until he grabbed onto the first part of her he could reach, which was her hip. She knew he was about to doze back off—his thoughts grew foggy, heavy.

…I will always have you… you're mine…

"Rey," he murmured, his eyes closed.

His breathing deepened, indicating he was asleep once more.

Though she'd gotten dressed, Rey crawled back into bed with him, curling up at his back. She wanted to be near him like this for just a bit longer.
The sand blew hard past the AT-AT, whistling, throwing grit around and making Rey wish she were anywhere else. Someplace there wasn't sand—someplace green. She'd heard of it—there was more than one habitable planet in the galaxy. Traders and worse came to the Niima Outpost all the time from all ends of the galaxy, most especially from somewhere called the Core.

Rey sighed, her legs drawn up to her chest, her chin resting on her knees. She was dirty and hungry, but more than that, she was lonely. So lonely anyone would want to die. Some days, she did. Then she remembered her parents, the people coming back for her. She had to keep living—she had to be here when they rescued her.

A hand hit her shoulder. She began to get up, grabbing for her quarterstaff. It was bigger than she was, but she knew how to handle it.

Brown eyes stared down into her own.

Without wanting to or meaning to, she lowered her quarterstaff. She stood up and backed away from the tall figure who had entered her home. His hair was black as night, and his eyes carried a mixture of pity and love.

No one had ever looked at her that way before. Well—the pity, yes. Love?

"Rey…" The man knelt before her. He cupped her cheek in his hand, and all the tension drained out of her. His other hand pushed strands of hair behind her ear. "You're dreaming."

"I—" Rey didn't know what to say. Of course, she wasn't dreaming! She was wide awake. She—

Her eyes fluttered open to the darkness of her bedroom. Ben tucked her back against his chest and
curled around her. He gripped her arm where it rested on the bed and stroked it with his thumb, over and over again, until that and the rhythm of his breathing lulled her back to sleep.

Han lifted the blaster, showing Ben where the safety was.

"If your mother knew about this—" 

Ben aimed the blaster at their practice target, his arms steady. He was little and had to cradle the heavy weapon with both hands. Not too little for this, though.

His finger pushed down the trigger—released. The blaster beam broke the glass bottle on its post. As Ben lowered the weapon, hitting the safety, Han scrubbed at the stubble on his chin. His eyebrows were raised. Ben grinned. It had worked.

"On your first try, huh? Impressive…"

Ben's chest swelled with smugness.

"Guess Chewie's been teaching you more than I thought," Han continued, efficiently popping a pin in Ben's balloon. He chuckled and ruffled his son's hair. "I wish it were me. Leia's got me at so many different functions…" He sighed, staring off into the distance. "You doin' okay, though, kiddo?"


Han hesitated, guilt etched deeply onto his features. "Hey, look, I'll beg off one of the functions, and we can go somewhere on the Falcon. Wherever you want. That sound good?" His smile was awkward, and he bumped his fist lightly against Ben's shoulder.

"Mother will never let you go," Ben said matter-of-factly. And she wouldn't. Han was a general, Leia a senator. His parents were always busy. Always. They'd missed so many of his birthdays alone… And Han's promises were always empty, anyway. Ben had learned not to hope.

Han rubbed the back of his head with a wince.
Ben did what he usually did: he stuffed every bad feeling inside of him into a chest and locked it away.

"But sure," he said, forcing himself to smile. Maybe this time it would stick—maybe this time his father really would take him out on the *Falcon*.

He doubted it.

"Ben," a female voice said. He turned.

A slender girl walked up to him, placing a hand against his head. She knelt before him with a soft smile and traced the outline of one of his ears. He reddened immediately but couldn't bring himself to move, and he hated strangers.

"You're dreaming," she said.

"I am not," he said stubbornly. "This is real."

She pulled him into her arms in a tight hug, tucking him under her chin.

Ben's eyes flicked open to the darkness of his bedroom, and Rey gave him a sleepy smile. Their past had been on their minds a lot lately. It was terrible, reliving memories, even simple ones, because their entire past was mired in pain. The nice thing about sharing dreams because of their bond was that they could help one another.

"Rellen gets here tomorrow," Rey murmured. "We'll meet with him, hold a conference with Sitrine, get our ship, and be on our way to Coruscant."

They both rolled onto their backs.

*Once we have the five Hutts, we can tackle the smaller syndicates.* It was a plan they had gone over and over. But now he added something new. *Before we do the latter… we should check in on*
Rey knew how much it had taken him to say that, and she gripped onto his hand where it rested between them. They fell back into slumber. If they dreamed again, they didn't remember it.

"Hello, Rellen, you look well," Rey said as she walked into the war room. "We were surprised you didn't want to take this meeting over holocomm."

"I'm not taking any risks of being discovered," Rellen drawled. He plopped onto a chair and crossed his legs at the knee. He touched up the tips of his faux hawk. "Ready to call this meeting into order, Your Grace?"

It was difficult to determine with Rellen, since his voice was always very, very, very dry, if he was being sarcastic. The casual way he'd dropped the title told Rey that maybe he wasn't. Either way, it had the same effect: she suppressed a shudder of discomfort.

**You are going to need to get used to this**, Ben reminded her. He sat beside Sitrine, who was organizing things on the table. Rey sat across from him, next to Rellen. The table was too big for them to take their "proper" places—for the foreseeable future, they were continuing to keep it casual.

*I know. I know. I know.*

Sitrine had pulled his hair into the equivalent of a man-bun. "I spoke with Wabba, so things are good to go there. Sabba, I'm not so certain of." He leaned back in his seat and tapped his fingers on the table. "He's... well... he's a Hutt. But a more archaic one." He wrinkled his nose. "Your Grace, I'm afraid you may have to act as Ky—" He caught her look. "—Ben's—His Grace's—"

"For choobies' sake, Sitrine, drop the titles," Rey said, exasperated.

"*Fine.*" Sitrine gave her the stink eye before continuing on with his report. "You'll most likely have to pretend to be beneath Ben."
Rey narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean?"

For the first time in her acquaintance with Sitrine, the man grew distinctly uncomfortable.

Rellen picked up the ball. "He means that any of the women allowed to go in there are wearing barely any clothing."

"Are you saying—?" Rey's blush choked her off. "Like wearing slave—?"

"Yes," Rellen said. "That is exactly what we are saying."

"No, absolutely not!" Rey protested. "We are equals!"

"Yeah… Sabba isn't going to give two rathtar shits about that," Rellen said.

"Bantha shits would have been better," Sitrine muttered. "And less disturbing. That visual was highly unnecessary; one might even go so far as to say—"

"What's more important here, Your Grace?" Rellen placed his elbows on the table, leaning into them as he squinted at her. "Your pride? Because if you want to roll with the big boys, then you've got to be willing to take off some clothes."

"Just so you know," Rey said slowly, her eyes narrowing further with every word. "Ben is two seconds away from activating his lightsaber."

"Yeah, he is," Sitrine said, winking.

"Sitrine!" the other three moaned.

"What? Come on—it was right there, ripe for the taking!"
"All right, let's say I go with some sort of—slave guise, even though he knows I'm equal to Ben—"

"It's all about the presentation," Sitrine murmured.

"He just wants to look at it," Rellen hummed.

"—is he going to take the deal like Wabba?"

"There was some discussion about that," Sitrine said. He hit the table with his knuckles, pounding out a silent tune. "He said that Sabba will be on board, so long as he gets the same treatment and agreement that Wabba did. But they're Hutts, so I'm not sure how much you should trust."

"We should trust nothing," Ben said. "But the terms have been set up?"

Rellen cleared his throat. "Let's review and make sure we're all on the same page here. The Hutts have been hired by the First Order to get different… supplies for them. Wabba's main purpose is to get the resources for the stormtroopers, for the brainwashing… and there's a new soldier we've been working on—"

Rey thought of the special stormtroopers on the vergence planet with Deo.

"—so the chemicals for that. Wabba will now work for us instead. It's his men who are doing all the dirty work. The Order isn't willing to waste stormtroopers—this isn't the Clone Wars. He'll sell the resources, keeping seventy-five percent of the cut for himself, the rest returning to us. We have protection set in place for when the Order figures it out and interferes."

A presence in the Force tugged, and Ben and Rey knew without glancing up that it was Anakin. Sitrine and Rellen were unaware. Was Anakin choosing to show only to the first two? Ben kept his eyes on the Knights as Rey set her own on Anakin.

The ghost folded his arms with an intent nod at the table. "What are you two doing?"
Rey was surprised he didn't know. Or maybe he wanted to know it in their own words.

"Guerrilla warfare," she said. "Cutting off the enemy's supply line."

"Sabba's line of work consists of keeping mercenaries at colonies that are being built for the Order," Rellen was saying.

"Wait, hold on." Sitrine held up a hand. "Who are you talking to?"

"Um…" The Force tugged again—Anakin was gone with a last nod. "Well—" She decided to be upfront. "Anakin Skywalker."

"Shut the front door," Sitrine said.

"You're pulling our leg," Rellen said.

"Vader? The Vader? The one this guy is so obsessed—? Ow!" Sitrine cried as Rey kicked him under the table.

"Remember what I said earlier about Ben being two seconds away from—"

"Igniting his lightsaber?" Sitrine's grin was entirely lecherous.

Rey sighed.

Honestly.

"I don't know why you expect more from me, you know," Sitrine mused.

"I don't, either," she muttered.
Ben's Confrontation

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the reassurances on the last chapter. Some people mentioned that they didn't know what to say past, "Good job!" So, I'm saying now, I'm totally okay with that! Even if you just want to say you liked the chapter, I'm happy to know about it. Promise! :D

Ben was not happy.

This wasn't outside the realm of normalcy. He was grumpy by nature, and if anyone so much as looked at him the wrong way, they'd be on the other end of a somehow both frigid and fiery stare of doom. Before he might have added his lightsaber, but these were better times.

"What did you expect?" Rey asked.

He shook his head and scowled at the wall over her shoulder.

Well, great.

"I don't want to go in there looking like this, either," she sighed. She peered at herself in the mirror. "And, honestly, Ben, it could be much worse."

"Don't remind me," he growled.

He could barely stand to let anyone glance her way as it was. How in hells was he going to tolerate her being in Coruscant, half-naked, in front of a damned Hutt? She was more focused on the archaic chauvinism, but if they wanted to win Sabba over...

"If you kill them all, we ruin the plan," Rey said.
Ben wouldn't stop pacing. "I want you to take all of those clothes off. Or—I want you to keep them on, but I don't want anyone else to see you in them, ever. Ever."

She didn't tell him he was being ridiculous. It wasn't worth the waste of breath or thought. And, in any case, it was a little ridiculous. They were partners—future rulers of the galaxy. But now they were going to have to pretend that Ben held all the power, and she was his lowly... what? Whore? Mistress? Force bitch?

"It's not that bad," she said instead. It was, but, again, it could have been worse. "Look at me. Look at me." He stopped in his pacing long enough to do so, and then he resumed. Excellent. "It's just a mesh top."

"It's a mesh top that exposes your—!"

"There's nipple pasties! Gold ones, to match the mesh." She gestured to her outfit. The mesh came down to just beneath her breasts, leaving most of them exposed if she lifted her arms or moved in any sort of fashion besides standing still.

The bottom part of the costume wasn't so bad. She had on a golden taffeta skirt to match the top. It started at her belly button, covering it in a crop, and stopped just under her ass. That was where more golden mesh started, flowing down to the matching gladiator sandals wrapped around her calves, the hem brushing against the floor.

Jewelry was a part of the ensemble. Her hair was in a spiral braid, and she had plenty of arm cuffs and bracelets to jangle and announce her presence every step of the way. Something golden had been wound into her braids. Earrings heavy enough to ache later adorned her ears. Really, it could have been much worse.

She wasn't happy about the pasties, the potential exposure of her breasts, but seriously, what could they really do at this point?

Ben, for his part, remained dressed in his power outfit. She came over to him, soothing his cloak on his shoulders and any wrinkles she'd spotted on his top. He crushed her to him, cutting off her air as he buried his face in her neck.

"I don't want to do this," he grumbled.
"I don't, either," she grumbled back. "Look, we deal with him once, and then after that, he can handle an envoy or you. Because I certainly am not going anywhere near him ever again unless I absolutely have to."

That Hutt was going to be eyeing her body like it was a prize platter, and she was very much not interested.

Anakin chose that moment to appear. "I want to hear your plan, in your own words."

Ben and Rey exchanged a glance. Neither of them knew what to say.

The ghost folded his arms, making it clear he could wait all day. And they didn't have all day, so Rey opened her mouth, but Ben got there first.

"You already know."

"That doesn't matter," Anakin replied. "Tell me."

*I've expended my communication with him for the day. I'm tapping you in.*

And so Rey told Anakin everything. The ghost listened intently, his brows slightly furrowed in thought, the way Ben's sometimes did.

*I hate it when you compare me to him.*

"The only thing we're stuck on… is Leia," Rey concluded. "She'll never be on board."

"My daughter is… headstrong," Anakin replied. "My son was, too." He was quiet for a moment, peering inward at something neither of the humans in the room could figure out. "But I don't think it's impossible to make Leia come around."

"What?" Rey and Ben asked in unison.
"What was it your friend said?"

"They're not really our friends," Rey mumbled. Ben's, certainly, but not hers. She could barely tolerate Sitrine most days.

"It's all in the presentation," Anakin said. "When I was a Jedi Knight, I... I went against the wishes of the Jedi Temple a lot. My master, Obi-Wan, was constantly scolding me, reprimanding me. But with war, there are times you have to go on the offensive. You have to bend the rules."

Rey bit her lip.

"The two of you... have balanced into something the Jedi Order and the Sith would never have allowed to come into being. You're both. You're light and dark. You're keeping from Leia this fact—you shouldn't. Tell her what you're planning. She will aid you."

"She will never aid us!" Ben snapped. He'd had enough. "She wanted a republic. She fought for one—she fights for one still, and it's in dregs. She doesn't think there should be a ruler over the galaxy." It was the most he'd ever said to his grandfather.

"From what you told me, your plan is different from the Empire's, from the First Order's. You have a council in mind, you have someone to carry out your wishes, you have advisors. It's... a strange type of monarchy, but it's hardly on the level of what came before." Anakin appeared unruffled in the face of his grandson's wrath. "If you truly intend to listen to the people, to extend good across the galaxy, I fail to see how she would—"

"Oh, and you know her so well?" Ben growled.

Anakin's presence suddenly flooded the room. His appearance hadn't changed, but the air was charged with the Force. He'd reached the end of his patience where Ben was concerned. "Don't let your hatred blind you to the truth."

No one's ever really gone.

"The only hatred I have is because I don't understand why you couldn't have shown yourself to me
before!" Ben yelled, his voice echoing throughout the hotel he'd rented with Rey for their stay on Coruscant. "All those years—you could have said something!"

Did you come back to say you forgive me? To save my soul?

"It wouldn't have mattered," Anakin replied. "You were… tangled up with Snoke. You believed that I had made a mistake when I sacrificed myself for my family, for the galaxy."

I failed you, Ben. I'm sorry.

"The entire First Order thinks that way," Anakin went on. "If I had showed myself to you, what would you have done? You would have dismissed me."

I'm sure you are! The Resistance is dead! The war is over! And when I kill you, I will have killed the last Jedi!

"I would not have dismissed you!" Ben shouted. "All I wanted was to be you!"

Amazing. Every word of what you just said was wrong. The Rebellion is reborn today. The war is just beginning. And I will not be the last Jedi.

"All I wanted was to carry out what you'd started!"

I'll destroy her... and you... and all of it.

"Exactly!" Anakin shouted back at him. "You would not have accepted me! It wasn't time for me to show myself to you! I couldn't—not as you were."

No. Strike me down in anger, and I will always be with you.

"Maybe you could have saved me from Snoke!" There were tears in Ben's eyes, and his lips trembled. Throughout all of that, his voice stayed steady, never cracked. "You could have told me the truth!"
Just like your father.

"You wouldn't have listened to me, Ben," Anakin said, exerting some patience. He was pulling in his emotions, applying logic. Once, a long time ago, he had been like Ben—riding the edge of his feelings, not minding his thoughts. Doing what he wanted, what he believed in.

No...

"That's not true!" Ben insisted.

See you around, kid.

"You're not listening to me now."

NO!

Ben exhaled his rage with a half-scream. He clenched his hands into fists, but he couldn't fight a Force ghost and hope to win. His thoughts were echoing into Rey's, clanging around in her head, nearly drawing her into an emotional frenzy of her own. All he could think about was taking over as Supreme Leader because Rey had rejected him—because his own family had rejected him.

Would any of it had happened? Would Luke have died if Ben had help? Would Han?

"Remember that I can see a bit of the future," Anakin said. "Perks to being a part of the Force. I saw the strands of your future. It wasn't time to appear to you."

"You keep saying that," Ben snarled tiredly. He was wearing down.

"Because it's the truth. And I'm here now. That's supposed to count for something."

"Yeah, well, it doesn't," Ben growled.
His grandfather sighed. "You've come so far... but you still have so much to learn. Talk to your mother. With your plans, your resources, and her own, the three of you could crush the Order."

He left, fading out as he'd faded in not minutes before.

"Mother will never see our side of things," Ben said sullenly.

Rey wondered, though.

Then she saw the time. "We're going to be late. We have to get going."

So far, everything had gone off without a hitch. They had their vessel to hide from the potential threat of Lando Calrissian. They'd asked around about what the girls Sabba liked them to wear. Some shopping, securing a hotel room, and they were good to go. Backup was waiting as ever, communications on sightings of them were still being monitored. They had nothing to worry about.

They took an air cab to Sabba's den, only a couple of layers beneath the surface of the city. They had no backup, and Rey knew they looked like they were there for business. Things were ready to go down, to be negotiated. An escort materialized and led them through the alleyways.

And then they ran into Finn.

"Rey?" he asked, his eyes wide.

This... did not look good.

We have to mind control him.

No! I promised him I wouldn't!

It's either that or kill him! He'll ruin the entire operation!
"I'm sorry," Rey whispered to her friend.

Ben and Rey twitched their fingers. Finn's eyes fogged over. He fell into step with them obediently as they entered Sabba's lair.

*Choobies, choobies, choobies, CHOOBIES!*
And here we are! Delayed a bit. Heavier homework workload than usual!

What in hells do we do?

I don't know. I don't know how long it will take him to break our hold. He was a traitor—he was able to break free of the First Order easily. And there is extensive training involved.

At the risk of sounding like our egos are getting the better of us now that we're extremely powerful, you don't think we'll be enough to keep him quiet?

A person's willpower can be strong enough to withstand anything. Most don't. FN—Finn is different. Whether it's in a few minutes or a few hours, he's going to break free.

Their escort of mercenaries continued their quest to Sabba's lair without a word about Finn. They likely assumed Finn was an associate of theirs and had met up with them here. So long as they didn't know the truth, they could think anything they wanted, Rey thought.

Sabba's lair was different from Wabba's. First and foremost, it was clean. The smell of Hutt was strong, but sand wasn't everywhere. It looked disinfected, almost of a quarantine nature. The walls and the floors all shone, nearly sparkling in how clean they were.

The Hutt himself was on a dais, similar to Wabba's, and he had a few scantily clad alien girls tending to his every need. One was dropping a small fruit into his mouth, another was curled up on his tail and was stroking his flesh. It took everything Rey had not to gag, but she could see the slave collars encircling their throats. They had to do whatever Sabba wanted.

I would have found a way to kill myself.
You wouldn't have.

Yes, I—

You would have found a way to kill him.

She supposed he had a fair point.

Their hold on Finn grew tenuous. Rey shot Ben a panicked look. They were going to have to exert their will against his more than once, it seemed.

"Calm him," Anakin said, and the duo did a remarkable job of not flinching. They hadn't anticipated the Force ghost's arrival. His arms were folded, and he looked more serious than usual, which was saying something, because Rey didn't think she'd ever really seen him smile.

Rey wet her lips. She couldn't reply.

"Like you would an animal or creature," Anakin said. "Soothe him. With the mind trick and the soothing, it will be enough to keep him pliant."

She didn't like this for a number of reasons, the primary being how she was dressed. This was her potential Force ghost grandfather-in-law.

Was he following them around now?

Did it bother her?

Not so much. He always knew what he was talking about and had been a very powerful Force user. He was as gray as they were. His help with the illusions had been magnificent, and they could stand to learn more from him. He'd promised that already, too.

You do it. I'll listen to the translator.
Rey was at Ben's side, but slightly behind him. It rankled.

She focused her attention on Finn, her eyes half-lidded as she began to spindle the Force. She couldn't close them all the way, that would be too suspicious. Half-lidded indicated she was a sultry whore—but it was better than the alternative. The crime lords were paranoid enough already.

The Force wove eagerly through her. She channeled it toward Finn, doing as Anakin had suggested. She laid it on thick, half concentrating on that, half concentrating on what was being said between Sabba and Ben. So far, it sounded like they were on board.

Finn's eyes clouded once more. His posture relaxed.

It was working!

"You can still keep track of what's happening," Anakin said. "You only need a little use of the Force to hold him like this. Don't forget, or the obvious will happen."

Finn would flip his shit.

"You don't need to turn against the Order immediately," Ben said to the translator, his eyes on Sabba. "You'll receive what the Order is paying you, and we will pay you in addition to that. When the time comes, your men will turn on the Order in the colonies, and we will take over the colonies. You're earning double the amount of credits, and nothing will be required of you for some time."

"-Where are you getting this money, Solo?-" the Hutt asked, the translator hot on his heels.

"You have your ways of getting money," Ben replied. "Do you want to discuss them with me?"

The room went quiet, everyone unsure of how Sabba would reply. The Hutt belted out a laugh, and he slapped his stomach. The girl on his tail adjusted as he did. Rey wished she could free all of them. One day.
"-Very well, boy. Get ahold of your envoy, and we will lay the details out more clearly.-" There was greed in the Hutt's eyes. He genuinely had no reason to say no. There weren't any troopers at those colonies. No one would be able to fight back, and the Hutt didn't have to worry about it for some time.

Ben nodded. "Thank you, Sabba the Wise." I hate kissing ass. And I'm not bowing." Sitrine will be in contact with you shortly. He will also bring you the money we offered Wabba."

Sabba gave one last lecherous look at Rey's costume, and she thought five sonic showers wouldn't be good enough to rid the slime off her thoughts. She'd have to have a real bath, real water, scrub herself raw. Gross, gross, gross!

It was time to leave.

Sitrine better be right about funneling this money without it being spotted, or else we're truly—

Fucked?

I wasn't going to word it that way, but, yes.

Anakin was gone, and they left, Finn in tow, trailing after Rey. She kept the Force spindled the way it was, weaving it around Finn in idle, soothing motions. Sedation by the Force. She was familiar with it. How many times had Ben put her to sleep? Twice?

They cleared out their hotel room and got on their vessel. It was cramped with Finn, having meant to be only a two-seater. There was no way they could let go of him now, not without talking to him. He'd go blabbing back to Leia, and then all sorts of hells would let loose.

What are we going to do with him?

Your friend. Your problem.

Really?
My solution involves killing him, getting rid of the body, and letting the Resistance believe he crashed somewhere or got shot down by the Order.

Rey didn't believe that for one moment. He just hated Finn and didn't want to have to be responsible for him.

We'll take him to Endorom. We'll have to figure out how to contact that Lando fellow later.

Or not at all. I really don't think he'll be in a forgiving mood. When we have time, I'll share with you the stories my father told me.

Rey sighed, grateful she was back in her own clothes. What was embarrassing was that Finn had no doubt seen her like that, and that wasn't something she could scratch out of his mind. It would be a burning imprint.

Don't remind me.

Oops.

Finn came awake.

He stared around blearily, trying to move. He couldn't—there were restraints holding him to the chair he was in. Nothing highly advanced like what they used in the Order and other places. A simple chair they’d found in Sitrine's castle, old-fashioned but useful. He had no way to access a weapon, and the rope was bound far too tightly to escape.

Ben crouched in front of him. "This is going to go one of two ways."

The former trooper wasn't gagged, so he snapped off immediately. "I don't want to talk to you! I
"I'm here," Rey said from the shadows. She was leaning against the strategy table, her hands braced on its edge. Rellen was gone, and they'd told Sitrine to steer clear. This was something that needed to be handled between the three of them and no one else.

"Focus on me," Ben said in such a cold voice that Finn had no choice but to obey. It helped that he'd put the Force behind it. "You're either going to listen to what we have to say and understand and remain unrestrained. Or you're not going to listen to what we have to say, and in that case, you'll be staying like this for quite some time."

Finn stared at Ben for thirty seconds and then switched his gaze to Rey.

"Rey, please, tell me what's going on?"

"I will, Finn." She pushed from the table and walked slowly over to her friend. "There's just… one problem."

"Problem?" her friend echoed.

She nodded somberly.

"Okay, before I freak out, I want to hear it from you," he told her intently. "Am I going to die?"

"No," Rey said quickly. "No, never."

"So then what in hells is going on?" Finn demanded. "You looked shady as f—"

"Finn, I can't let you go after this," Rey interjected.

Finn leaned as far forward as he could against his restraints. "Rey," he whispered. "Please tell me that you haven't gone over to the dark side."
"I haven't," she reassured him. "But there's too many things at risk. We can't… risk you going back to the Resistance, not before we've had a chance to talk with them."

"About what?" Finn struggled, his chair legs wobbling over the floor. He wasn't going anywhere. "I thought you were helping us! I thought you were on the side of the Resistance!"

"We—are!"

"Then why am I bound up against a chair with your boyfriend right in front of me with his murder eyes?!" Finn whispered intensely, throwing frantic looks in Ben's direction.

"More than a boyfriend," Ben muttered.

"Oh, right, you're married!" Finn yelled.

"Not married," Rey muttered.

"Someone tell me what is going on!" Finn continued yelling, "Right now! Because it looks like you're on the side of the Order! And that can't be right! You're not on the dark side—you can't be with the Order—so what is it? Why can't I go back to my wife, to our friends?"

Rey hesitated, wondering how delicately she could word this without hurting his feelings.

"Because you can't keep your fucking mouth shut," Ben said.

And that right there would do it.
Hey, guys. Have been feeling ill lately. So this chapter is short, but I wanted to get an update out. I don't like letting you guys down.

"I'm not listening to anything you have to say while he's in the room," Finn said. "Period."

Ben curled his lip. Words were on the tip of his tongue, but he held them back—for Rey and nothing more.

Rey sighed. She'd known Finn was going to be difficult. It didn't help that Ben and he had had a poor relationship from the start. She couldn't expect him to be reasonable about Ben right now. Not when everything looked so suspicious.

But she needed to display some modicum of loyalty to her friendship with Finn if she was going to keep him at least somewhat calm.

"Ben, don't be mean to Finn," she said. "He can keep quiet when it's necessary."

"Yeah!" Finn exclaimed. "Because Rey is my best friend!" He leaned forward again, ropes straining against his chest. "That's right—my best friend. And you'll never be able to take that away from me, so don't even try."

*Should I kill him now, or—*

Just go. Like you said, he's my friend, he's my problem.

Ben rose and left the room with clenched fists. His thoughts were a swirl of chaos, and it was a good thing Finn wasn't privy to them. He might have been somewhat scared for his life, under some false bravado.
Rey came to a stop in front of her bound friend. "Are you willing to listen to reason?"

Hurt crossed his face. "I trust you, Rey."

"Do you? Because it seems like—"

"I'm just confused," Finn insisted. "You've gotta admit, Rey—from my side of things, this doesn't look good."

She'd allow that. "We're dealing with things, Finn." She lifted a hand. One of the chairs from the strategy table lifted and landed gently in front of Finn's. She sat down on it and rested her elbows on her thighs, clasping her hands. "We're dealing with things in a way the Resistance can't."

"And what is that supposed to mean, huh?"

Rey sighed again, searching for the right words. This was a tenuous position. One wrong move, and Finn would be lost to her forever. And that would just devastate her. He was her first friend. At one point, he'd been her only friend.

"If I tell you everything, can you promise to keep a cool head?" Rey asked.

"Me?" he asked in disbelief. "I always have a cool head."

She leveled a wry look on him.

"Okay, so maybe not always," he conceded.

Memories trickled through her mind. Hitting him with her quarterstaff at the Niima Outpost, running with him when the place began to get attacked in the hunt for BB-8. He'd grabbed her hand, she'd hated it. The ship she was headed for got blown up, and they found themselves on the Falcon.

He'd manned the gun, even when it had gotten stuck. He'd celebrated with her, the nature of their
friendship flowering. Then there'd been the rathtars and saving Han and Chewie. When they'd
gotten to Takodana, he'd been intent on getting as far away as possible so the Order wouldn't catch
up with him.

He'd asked her to go with him. He found her on Starkiller Base, half-rescuing her, as she'd done a
good bit of it herself. He'd hurt himself trying to take them to safety, to escape Kylo Ren. When
she'd caught up with him again, he'd been tending to Rose.

Solaris's jungle had made him complain and worry, but he'd stayed steady, even when they'd had
their run through the tunnels with that feline after them.

Did his personality shine so much that it made him seem like he couldn't maintain a calm mien?
He couldn't. Everyone knew that. But that didn't mean he couldn't be depended on—it didn't mean
that he wasn't the man you wanted to have at your side in a fight, in any sort of danger. They'd been
through so much together, and he'd never once let her down.

"Rey? Reeeeey…? Hellooooo? I'd wave my hand in front of your face, but—"

She snapped back to reality. "I'm—sorry, Finn." She swallowed the lump that had formed in her
throat during her reminiscing. "I've always been able to count on you. I don't want to lose that
now."

"If you're not… doing anything bad, why can't you trust me?" he whispered.

"Because… what we have planned can absolutely not get back to the Resistance—not yet. Not
until we're ready. But you must believe me, Finn, we are on the side of the Resistance." In a
manner of speaking, she didn't add.

"And that's it? No matter what, I'm gonna be forced to stay a prisoner?"

"You're not a prisoner," Rey said, stung. "This was a precaution. We wanted you in one place until
we could talk to you. Notice you're not in an interrogation chair."

"You said you'd never use the Force on me again, remember?" Finn reminded her. "I know it's
been four years since you said it, but I think it still stands. Not. Cool."
"I had no choice! We were about to walk into Sabba's lair, and—why were you there?" she asked, switching tracks.

"Gathering intel," Finn said with a lift of his chin. "Believe it or not, I'm actually pretty good at getting information from people."

Rey smiled. "When you're not fumbling around?"

"I am charming," he said with indignation.

She laughed.

Focus.

Oh, shush.

"You were gathering intel on Sabba?"

"I had a meeting with a bounty hunter," Finn said. "I was just about to meet up with him when I ran into you. He was going to spy for us. He only needed the credits."

It was good fortune, then, that they had encountered Finn. The bounty hunter would have reported back to him, and the Resistance would have known they were making deals with the Hutts. That wouldn't have gone over well. It was too soon, much too soon. Which was entirely the point of why they were here with Finn right now.

"What information did you think Sabba had?"

"We're trying to find out about the Hutts' resources with the Order," Finn said. "There's a whole lot of them. The General—"
Rey's chair scraped as she stood up. Maybe their modus operandi wasn't so different, after all. At least for the moment.

"Finn, what I'm about to tell you is big," Rey said. "And I don't want you to say a single word until I'm finished talking. All right?"

Finn squirmed with his disagreement, a frown writ large on his features.

"Right." Rey folded her arms and gazed down at her feet. "Let's get started, then."
"And that sums it up," Rey said, clasping her hands together. She waited for Finn to gather his thoughts—his expressions had ranged from explosive to confused to sympathetic and back to explosive so quickly she'd been afraid he'd get whiplash.

His mouth gaped open and shut, and he bowed his head. He was muttering to himself, not audibly enough for Rey to catch.

"Finn, are you—?"

"I don't even know where to start!" he cried. His dark eyes were on hers again, blazing with anger, with confusion. "You're allied with two of the Knights of Ren, you're colluding with them to get at the heart of the First Order, and you're appealing to the crime syndicates to cut off even more of the Order's resources!"

"Yes!" Rey cried back, unsure of why, but if he was yelling, then so could she.

"That is…" Finn searched for more words. "Awesome!" he decided.

"Really?" she gasped.

"Well, maybe not so awesome, because I have no idea what the catch is," Finn replied, growing less enthused. He frowned at her. "That's the part you've been avoiding, isn't it? The catch?"

"Not avoiding it," Rey said. "It's impossible to avoid, if you think about it. Really… really think about it." And she sat back, crossing her legs, setting her hands on her knee, waiting for him to find the answer.
It took less time than Rey would have thought.

His eyes widened. "You want to take over the First Order! You want to become the Supreme Leaders!"

"No!" Rey cried. "No, Finn!"

"Then what, if not that?! Why else—?!"

"We do want to rule, but not the way you're thinking!" Rey put her hands on his shoulders. He was wriggling harder than ever against his bonds. "Just let me explain it!"

"I'm not sure I want to!"

"Finn, please!" she begged. "It's me. It's Rey. Please. You have no reason not to trust me."

His struggles slowed and ceased altogether. He was still frowning at her. Then he jerked his head up again. "Fine. Then tell me the truth. And I'll know if you're lying."

Rey grappled with the right words. This was harder than ever, more important than ever. She couldn't ruin her relationship with Finn, and she didn't much fancy keeping him at the castle, under the supervision of Sitrine. That was definitely not going to go well—whether or not Finn was a prisoner. Sitrine had expressed too much interest in the former trooper already.

"All right, yes—Ben and I want to become..." Rulers of the galaxy sounded too crass. "We want to..." Damn it.

Time to delve in.

"We want to rule the galaxy." Finn's mouth opened, and she hastened to finish. "But we want a council forged by the—the Resistance, with Leia as its spearhead! We want to listen to the people, we want things to be good! The galaxy can't continue to be broken up between so many different factions, it's complete anarchy!"
"So you want an empire!" her friend said.

"No—I mean—yes!" Oh, she was blowing this all to hells. She put her hands to her forehead and massaged it tenderly. "It's more like—a monarchy, sort of!"

Finn eyed her distrustfully, and that hurt, considering they'd already established the trust factor.

Fine. They were going to have to play this the hard way.

"Either you're on board, or you're not," she told him. "And I would really like you to be on board, Finn. You're my best friend."

The man sighed and bowed his head, shaking it slowly. "I can't believe this," he muttered to himself.

"Then what's your plan?" Rey countered. "The Resistance somehow wins against the First Order, and then what? They try to reestablish the remnants of the New Republic? Notice the 'new' part of that, Finn. People have to be ruled. They have to. Someone needs to be in charge, or it will be utter chaos—"

"And that's you, then?" Finn challenged. "You have to be the ones in charge?"

"We're powerful! You saw what we could do on Venia!"

"Yeah, and you told me that was for us, the Resistance!"

"It was!" Rey cried. "Finn, come on!"

"No, you come on, Rey! You know exactly how fishy this sounds!"

"What do you think we're going to do, rule the galaxy and enslave everyone just like all the other
empires did?! Does that look like something I want to do? No! I want to free slaves, I want the stormtroopers to be reconditioned after this so that they can live their own lives and fight only if they want to! I know we won't be able to tackle everything, but if we all come together and cooperate, we can defeat the First Order and start a new reign, one that puts the people of the galaxy first!"

Rey panted, winded from the speech. She got up from her chair and started to pace. She recognized the motion as something from Ben, but they were connected so closely it happened frequently, channeling one another's habits.

Anakin materialized. "Offer him something."

She whirled to him. "What?"

"Offer him something. Come to an agreement."

"Like… like what?"

"Rey…?" Finn asked slowly. "Who are you talking to?"

"Shh!" she told him. "I'm trying to concentrate."

"Let him be involved," Anakin said.

"How?"

"Give him an important title. He can be your secondhand man."

"But Rellen—"

"Rellen is in control of the army, but he can't be with you everywhere. Finn could. He would feel important. From what I've observed of him, Finn responds well when he's in charge of certain things. He likes to perform, to shine."
"Right…" Rey hummed thoughtfully.

"Seriously, Rey, who—?" Finn interrupted.

"Shh!" she said again.

Anakin folded his arms. "Then you offer the condition."

Rey tilted her head.

"Tell him that he can come with you as your secondhand, and that it has a time limit. If within… whatever time limit you give him, if you still haven't earned his trust, then he can report it to my daughter."

"But will he—?"

"Believe that? Likely not at first. But he doesn't have much of a choice. He can either go with you, or he can stay here. You've told him so yourself."

Rey was nodding. It was a good plan.

"Thank you, Anakin," she said.

Finn's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "Anakin? Like Anakin Skywalker? Like Va—"

"Shh!" Rey said.

"Stop shushing me, woman!" Finn said indignantly.
"I want to discuss something with my grandson and you," Anakin said. "Once you've dealt with Finn, I'll meet the two of you down by the lake. This requires some privacy."

**What in hells could he possibly want?**

*More training?*

**Hmph.**

"Okay," Rey replied. "I'll see you then."

As Anakin vanished, she turned to her friend. "I've got a proposal for you."

"One that came from Darth Vader?" Finn said skeptically.

"Finn, just..." Rey sighed. "Okay?"

He grumbled.

She plopped down on her chair. "Come with us."

Finn jerked his head back, like he hadn't understood. "What?"

"I want you to be my secondhand," Rey said frankly. "You can come with us, you can see what we're doing. And... if we still haven't convinced you in a month, then—I will return you to Leia, and you can tell her everything. You have my word. If that still means anything to you, that is."

They would be speaking to Leia within the month, but he didn't have to know that. Not when a time wasn't set in stone.

It took Finn a long time to decide. They went back and forth for nearly another hour. He wasn't
quite convinced that Rey's suggestion was innocent and honest, given that she'd gotten it from Anakin. He wasn't an idiot—he'd pieced that much together. Attempting to remind Finn that Anakin had gone out from this life restoring balance to the Force was even trickier.

"Because your boyfriend—no, don't interrupt, I don't care what he is to you—worshipped the guy! He kept his melted helmet in his quarters and talked to it constantly!"

"How would you even know that—?!"

"Everyone knows it, Rey, he wasn't exactly what you'd call subtle!"

They'd argued that for twenty minutes. It was frustrating with Ben's background, but it wasn't something that could be helped. No one was ever going to see he'd come back from the dark side. Only Leia, Rey, and Anakin wanted to believe the truth. Well, and Rellen and Sitrine, sort of. They seemed to think Ben was more dark than light. Gray was a concept they were still grasping.

"And it doesn't make any sense, anyway, because if you had nothing to hide, why wouldn't you speak to the General?!!"

"It's not time to let the Resistance know yet! Don't you get that? There are things in place that have to be done with us! The Resistance has good intentions, but they aren't on 'neutral' ground! Not like Ben and I are!"

"What does that even—"

"Do you honestly think the Resistance could walk right into the Hutts' lairs? No. I know you don't, because you were going to meet with a bounty hunter when we encountered you. Some work is delicate. You're a soldier. You know this!"

Another forty minutes.

"FINE!" Finn exploded. "Fine! But I have more conditions than that one! If I go anywhere with you guys, he is going to have to be nice to me!"
"He's—!"

"I listen to you every time you tell me to give him a chance! And every time, he's a total jerkface! I refuse to deal with it anymore! If he's really not with the First Order anymore, then why does he still think I'm a traitor, and why does he still insist on using my stormtrooper designation?"

*He has a point.*

*I'm not sure I can play nice.*

*Ben Solo!*

*Rey Solo!*

Rey's heart completely stopped. *What?*

***Just… trying out how it sounded. Whatever. I'll try to be nice to him.***

*You've said that before,* she replied, doing her best not to latch onto those precious two words.

*You have my word, then.* He knew that she knew that she would believe him. They shared a headspace, after all.

"Ben says he'll be nice to you," Rey told Finn. "Or… as… cordial as he is to even his friends."

"Ben has friends?" Finn whispered in wonder. "Huh. You really do learn something new every day."

"Remember when you saw his 'murder eyes'?" Rey said. "Try not to say things like that. He hears everything through me." She let that sink in.
Finn shifted uncomfortably. "Can I get out of this chair, please? Since I'm your secondhand."

Rey brightened and resisted the urge to clap her hands together. It would have looked and felt silly. "So you really do agree to the terms?"

"Yes," Finn replied reluctantly. She could tell he wasn't looking forward to interacting with Ben. Wait until he meets Sitrine, she thought. And Rellen. They had a personal club of who could act the most over the top. They wanted Ben to join, but he'd been behaving.

Rey hugged Finn.

"Rey? Could you…? This is awkward."

"Oh, right!" She flicked her wrist, and the ropes unwound and fell to the floor.

"I don't think I'll ever get over that," Finn muttered.

Ben and Rey found their way down to the lake, the former in an ill mood, the latter incredibly curious as to what Anakin wanted. It was close to evening, so a sliver of the moons were out except for the biggest one, and creatures were beginning their nightly orchestra. The pink atmosphere had thinned, and a cool breeze drifted from the lake. Rey was glad to see the golden balls loitering about. They'd been having bad weather lately on this planet. They always hid at the first sign of rain, or a hard breeze.

Breeze.

Rey tilted her head up, letting the soft wind drift over her face.

Don't worry, she thought. I still think of you.
Rey's boot hit the last stair, and she stepped to the edge of the lake. Anakin waited until Ben was at her side to rematerialize.

"What is so important?" Rey asked.

Anakin looked so severe that she took a step back. He must have realized he'd frightened her, as he shook his head and forced his expression into something less intimidating. In fact, now that she was looking closely, he was… fidgeting, almost. His eyes darted around, and he kept shifting his folded arms.

"I… once had an apprentice. Her name was—"

"Ahsoka," Ben mumbled.

"Right. Yes. I showed you all of my memories." Anakin bit his lip, his eyes flicking between the two of them. What could he possibly have to be nervous about?

"Can we get to it?" Ben drawled disrespectfully. Rey gave him the mental equivalent of a shin kick. He glared daggers at the side of her head.

"I would like for you to become my apprentices," Anakin said seriously, his brows furrowing. "If you would allow me to train you, that is."
A few people don't know about Ahsoka. She is from the Clone Wars show. She was Anakin's apprentice for a time.

Other question that popped up some: "Can we trust Anakin to train them?" Yes. Why? Because A: he died restoring balance to the Force, and B: Sith can't be Force ghosts.

I really love the enthusiasm with anticipation toward Finn meeting Sitrine and Rellen!

Hey, when I get to chapter 100, can we throw a party? Maybe I'll bake a cake!

Also, I got engaged! :D

"No," Ben said.

"Yes," Rey said at the same time.

They glared at one another.

"I'll take that as a yes, then," Anakin said with a small smile. It made Ben sigh and turn away. Rey and Anakin ignored him, and the former leaned up onto her toes in a happy bounce. After all, who else besides their crazed enemy was powerful enough to train them? He'd been doing it already—may as well make it official.

"I can't be around all the time like a real master," the ghost said. "There is a limit to my time in this world. But I can observe from the other side, so I'll be able to keep up with matters."

Unbelievable. You said yes.

"Master, will you excuse us for just two minutes, please?" Rey asked sweetly.

"What?" Ben asked. "Why—? Ow!"
Rey had grabbed his ear and was dragging him up the steps from the lake, not unlike the time she'd done it on Naboo. Both times he'd been purposefully difficult, and both times it was over something important. First his relationship with his mother, and now his relationship with his grandfather.

This is a terrible idea! Ben wrenched out of her grasp.

Why?!! They were facing off, energy practically crackling between them.

Because!

Because why?!

Just—because!

I'm going to need to go on more than just 'because'!

Well, that's all I have, so I suppose you'll have to just—

If you say deal with it, I swear—

I DON'T WANT TO BE HIS PADAWAN! Thunder cracked loudly overhead, and the golden orbs zipped away into hiding.

Yes, you do! You've wanted it for years, nearly a decade! And now you're going to just let it slip from your hands because you can't let go of a grudge against your grandfather?

It's not just a simple grudge—

Yes, it is! I understand that he never appeared to you before, and you resent him for it! But he's
here now, and we need all the help we can! Why would you turn him away, Ben? Why?

I—

Remove all of your emotions from the matter and inspect it. What do you find?

Ben shifted begrudgingly. The golden orbs were slowly coming back out. *That he's a powerful addition to our team. But—*

*No!* Rey held up a hand. *No buts! This is happening.*

He growled, lips pulling back from his teeth. *It has to be a joint decision.*

*And it will be—once you get your head out of your arse.*

She returned to Anakin, leaving Ben behind her, completely uncaring. "When can we begin?"

"I'll meet with the two of you later this evening. There's some training exercises I want you to be working on aside from the illusions."

Rey beamed, trying to make up for Ben's lack of enthusiasm. "That sounds lovely."

Anakin's eyes slid from hers to his grandchild. They lingered and then returned to Rey's. He nodded and vanished.

*I just realized we left Finn alone with Sitrine!* Rey gasped. Ben's angst was going to have to wait. *Hurry!*
"So, hot stuff, traitor to the Order, yeah? I've always loved a good rebel," Sitrine purred, pinning Finn against the wall, his hand beside his head. He had his other hand on his hip.

Finn was doing his best to edge sideways, but Sitrine only followed. "Look, u-uh... this is—flattering and all, but I have a wi—" He caught sight of Rey. "Rey! Hey!" He shoved Sitrine out of his way and strode purposefully over to her.

"Hi," Rey responded. "You'll have to excuse Sitrine. He was raised in a Bantha's—"

"Now, now," Sitrine interjected. "There's no need to be mean, Rey."

"Oh, because you aren't," Rey deadpanned. "With every other sentence."

"It's closer to most of his sentences," Rellen said as he entered the room. He gazed at Finn. "So we're keeping the traitor?"

Rey fought the urge to roll her eyes. It was her go-to with these two, and she was afraid her eyeballs would roll right out of her head, she'd done it so much. "He's as much of a traitor as you are."

Sitrine and Rellen looked at one another.

"She's right," Sitrine said with some surprise. "We are traitors. Hm. Hadn't thought of it that way."

"That's because your brain is the size of a..." The rest was muttered.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. I don't feel like arguing with you," Rellen held out his hand to Finn. "Welcome to the band of misfits intent on taking over the galaxy. Over there is Sitrine, the comedic relief. You've already met Ben and Rey, obviously. And I am Rellen. I'm the general for the Order."

Finn frowned. "For now?"
"For now," Rellen replied with a smirk. "Then I'm alllll Rey's."

Three things happened at once: Ben sucker punched Rellen in the gut, Finn shouted indignantly, and Sitrine ran a lecherous gaze down Rey's body. She fought the urge to cover herself. With a look like that, it was as though she was naked, and she didn't appreciate it. Pervert.

"Maybe I deserved that," Rellen gasped, bent in half.

"You should make better life decisions," Sitrine said, and everyone stared disbelievingly at him. "What?"

Rey opened the door to Finn's new rooms. It was in the same wing as Ben and Rey's, but on the opposite end. Rey didn't much relish the idea of Finn overhearing their nightly lovemaking. Although she was going to have to keep her volume down a notch, she supposed.

_Are you trying to distract me from the fact that you made us that asshole's padawans without my agreement?_

_No, I am merely musing._

"Here you go," Rey said. Ben was still with Rellen and Sitrine, in the war room going over strategies. "I bet it's better than—"

"The digs on Arna?" Finn finished her thought. "Yeah, totally." At first, he seemed reluctant to admire the rooms, but then excitement lit up his eyes. He wandered from room to room as Rey had when she'd gotten her rooms with Ben, except Finn didn't try to pry the area apart in search of incriminating evidence of Sitrine's impending betrayal.

"I know you'll miss Rose," Rey said. "I am sorry about that."
"I only see her every few weeks lately," Finn admitted. He collapsed onto a seemingly comfortable armchair.

"Really?" Rey sat on the sofa across from him.

"Yeah. Everyone is everywhere. We're constantly either fighting off the First Order or trying preemptive attacks."

Rey raised an eyebrow. "Is the Resistance big enough to try preemptive attacks?"

"On small planets," Finn replied.

"And they're successful?"

"Could you try to sound a little less shocked?" Finn grumbled. "We've come a long way in the last four years. You didn't get a chance to see that because you were too busy eloping with Kylo Ren and plotting behind everyone's backs."

Rey narrowed her eyes. She knew Finn was baiting her because he was annoyed, and she wouldn't take it, no matter how tempting it was.

Or maybe she would.

"We didn't elope. Our plan was to remove all of the Knights of Ren," Rey replied. "I told you this. I told you everything. And if you want Ben to be nice to you, stop calling him Kylo Ren."

"Sorry," Finn mumbled. Then he perked up. "And by the way, it's creepy that he can see and hear everything you can. Has anyone told you that?"

"Sitrine on a daily basis," she replied.

"And it goes the other way?"
She nodded.

"And what's the retired Dark Lord of Angst and Unreasonable Rage up to right now?"

Rey suppressed a giggle, but only barely. "He's working on some strategies with Sitrine and Rellen," she answered.

"Strategies for what? Or am I not allowed to ask?" Finn was already pouting. He was trying for a glower and was not succeeding very well.

"Relax," she told him.

"Don't tell me to relax! This is still a lot to take in! I have a wife to think about—the Resistance—your mother-in-law!"

"For the love of all that is holy, I do not have a mother-in-law!" Rey cried. "We are not married!"

"That's what you told Poe."

"No, I told Poe it was like we were married," Rey stressed. "Please don't tease me about this."

Finn eyed her with some awe.

"What?" she questioned, suspicion fairly dripping from her tone.

"You really do want to marry him," Finn said.

"Why wouldn't I?" Rey countered. Then she sobered and sighed, tipping her head back on the sofa. "Finn, there's something I didn't tell you. You can't tell anyone, all right?"
Finn leaned forward, ever ready to share in on a secret.

"Ben and I… if one of us dies, so does the other. That's how close we are. We share most of our thoughts, and there's nothing to hide. Of course, I want to marry him. But I'm not going to pressure him into it. He's… He has a past, you know. He wasn't so emotional when he was Kylo Ren just because."

"Still seems a bit emotional to me," Finn muttered.

"Look, you wanted to know what they were working on. The answer is: yes, you can know. We've already recruited two Hutts, and we're in communications with approaching another."

"Don't know which one yet?" Finn said, somewhat mollified.

"No," she replied. "It grows tricky here. Apparently, there's a hierarchy, but none of them will admit to what that hierarchy is, because all of them think they are at the top of this hierarchy. It's a minefield of finding which to communicate with first, and who will take least offense."

"But they run a crime ring together," Finn said.

"Tell that to them," she sighed. "Do you want to go to the war room? Will that make you feel like you're really my secondhand man?"

"…Maybe," Finn muttered. "You know, only if you have a reason to go down there."

She laughed and got to her feet, pulling Finn to his. "Let's go, then. You should feel included. I meant what I said, Finn. You're my best friend, and I need you at my side." She linked their arms together. "I only have one question."

"What?" he asked as they stepped out of the room.

"Do you remember what I was wearing when…?"
"Let's not talk about it!" Finn choked out. He was blushing so hard it stood out on his dark skin. "Like, ever. Okay? And especially not to Rose. Okay? Right? Are we agreed? Right? Okay?"

Rey had been embarrassed at the idea of Finn remembering, but now she was laughing harder. He was having more trouble with it than she was.

"You want to know something else?"

"As long as it's not about your breasts—I mean—" Finn sputtered. "That's not—"

"Anakin Skywalker is taking us on as his padawans," Rey told him. "I mean, I'm not really sure we can be padawans, since we're not Jedi, but I don't think anyone is following the rules for anything anymore."

"You're telling me Supreme Emo's hero is going to be training you?"

Rey nodded.

"Fantastic," he whispered to himself. "That's just fantastic."
Sitrine's Lack of Boundaries

Chapter Notes

This is kind of a filler chapter, but that's because next chapter has some heavy content. I didn't want to tack it on to the bottom of this one, I felt it would take away from the lightheartedness. You know how I roll by now, guys.

Three weeks later...

"That was amazing!" Finn cried.

Ben and Rey headed straight for the cockpit of the *Falcon*, and their companion was right on their heels. They prepped for takeoff as Finn buckled himself into his chair behind them. Rey wanted to share in the enthusiasm, but it would have to wait until they were safely in space. She never trusted the Hutts, no matter that they always came to an agreement.

"The First Order won't be able to have safe passage through half the Outer Rim and Uncharted Territories!"

"That's on hold, don't forget," Rey reminded him. Once they were out of the stratosphere of the planet and barreling along in the vacuum of space, she gave Finn more attention. "We haven't put things in motion yet—everything is on hold until we give the go. If it doesn't happen all at once, we'll have a far more difficult time with the Order and it's retaliation."

"They'll figure out it's you guys?"

"They'll figure out it's *us,*" Rey said with a sidelong glance. "Eventually, that is. And not until we're *ready.*"

"I haven't had this much fun in—well, never, maybe," Finn admitted. "I did sanitation for the First Order, I was just a regular stormtrooper before I fought off the training. And the general won't trust me with any of the special ops missions. But you did, Rey!"
Rey couldn't help her smile. Finn was absolutely beaming.

"I mean, dealing with Sitrine and Rellen has been…" He trailed off, presumably because he didn't want to insult the two Knights. He did try to maintain his manners. "Interesting. But now we're going to Arna, right? Since we're finished with the Hutts?"

"We have to stop at Endorom," Ben muttered, to the surprise of the other two. Being "nice" to Finn involved hardly speaking to him unless it was absolutely necessary. "We'll convene with Sitrine, and then we'll be on our way to Arna, yes."

Finn let out a whoop. When Rey glanced at him, he laughed. "I miss my wife."

Wife.

Rey busied herself with the controls.

---

_We should have packed beforehand._

_Neither of us was thinking about it. We've been so swamped with these ring leaders._

_And we still have more to deal with, once we talk to Leia._

Ben and Rey grew quiet, continuing to get their luggage together. There was more of it than they usually took—they had no idea how long they would be on Arna. Lengthy if Leia said yes—short if all went to hells in a handbasket.

"Finn's excited about coming home," Rey said.

Ben grunted his acknowledgement.
"You know, he's done rather well," she went on. She pulled the ties shut on one bag and moved to another. When had they begun to accumulate so much clothing? They'd gone from mostly nomads to half-living at the castle, she supposed. "It doesn't have to be a… temporary thing, does it?" She carefully didn't look at him despite the fact that his thoughts were wide open.

He pulled his three bags together and let them float with the Force. "He'll want to go back to the Resistance once we arrive. You shouldn't get so attached to the idea of him staying with us."

That was true.

Rey's bags followed Ben's as they walked out of their rooms, doublechecking that everything had been packed, that nothing essential had been left behind. Finn met them in the corridor, his own luggage with him, a small case. They'd had to get him clothes while he was staying with them. To do otherwise would have been cruel. And smelly. Besides, Sitrine would never have allowed it—he was all too keen on pampering Finn. It didn't bother him that Finn was married. Sitrine was confident that he'd break him down eventually.

Rey grinned just thinking about it.

"Home!" Finn announced. "You guys nervous?" He made the question casual, and it was anything but.

Rey played along. "Not at all. Master Anakin says that she'll be receptive."

Finn froze, muscles bunching with tension, and took a look around the wing. His voice dropped to a dramatic whisper. "Is he here with us now?"

Rey burst into laughter. "Oh, Finn."

"What?" he asked indignantly, straightening his shoulders.

"Don't change," she said with a smile.
"No, seriously, what? None of the rest of us can see him! It's a perfectly valid concern!"

"He chooses when to show himself."

"Yeah! That's why I asked if he was here with us now!"

Rey's laughter echoed down the corridor as she resumed walking, Finn sputtering along after her.

Sitrine hugged Finn and didn't let go.

"We'll be heading out now," Rey said. Their bags were temporarily resting on the floor of the war room. "Tell Rellen when he calls in that we'll be..." She hesitated for a moment. They didn't know the Resistance's location, and for a reason. "Predisposed."

"Mmmmmmhm," Sitrine hummed. His grip around Finn tightened.

"Um," Finn said. "For what has to be the millionth time, I am married, man."

"Just give me one night," Sitrine purred. "One night, and I'll change your entire world."

"I'm good," Finn said, prying himself away. Sitrine actually let go—usually Finn had to struggle more. "Thanks, though. Really. But I'm good."

Sitrine pouted. "How will you know until you try it?"

Finn was aghast. "Is the sanctity of marriage lost on you?"

"The sanctity of... what?"
"Of marriage," Finn persisted.

The Knight cocked his head to the side and pretended to mull it over. "Doesn't sound familiar."

"All right, I'm done," Finn announced. "You guys ready to go?"

Rey was laughing all over again, so hard she was grabbing her side where a cramp had formed.

"Really?" Finn said. "It's that funny to you?"

"It's—hilarious," she managed to gasp.

"What are you complaining about?" Ben's voice was as wry as ever. "An average looking man of equally average intelligence wants to suck your dick. Accept the compliment and move on."

The room grew quiet.

"What?" Ben snapped. "I can make a joke, too."

Sitrine, Rey, and Finn continued to blink at him.

"I don't know whether to be impressed he made a joke or offended that he called me average," Sitrine muttered.

"Both," Finn said.

"Just for that, you're getting a kiss!" Sitrine cried.

"What—? No! Gerroff—ROSE, I SWEAR, I DIDN'T CHEAT!"
"She's not here," Ben said flatly.

"It doesn't matter!"

Rey was bent over the table, laughing so hard now that she was silent, her body trembling and hurting from the force of it.

"Really, Rey?" Finn said.

She slapped a hand on the table to indicate she heard him.

"Nice," he said. "Real nice."

"Sitrine kisses everyone," Ben informed Finn. "It doesn't mean anything."

The Knight gasped dramatically and put a hand over his heart. "How dare you? Of course, it means something! I've meant every kiss I've ever given you! And I meant the one I gave this hot piece of arse, too!"

Finn blushed.

"Right," Ben retorted. "Can we get going now?"

Sitrine shoved Finn out of the way to cup Ben's face in his hands and—

"I swear I will end you," Ben threatened.

"So testy today," Sitrine remarked, letting him go. "Rey holding out on the sex, then?"
"Hey!" Rey said, her laughter dissipating.

"Oh, trust me," Finn drawled. "They are far from holding out on the sex."

"Finn!" Rey cried in embarrassment.

"I mean, I know they're trying to 'keep quiet,' but they'd have to be in a silent-proofed fortress for that."

Ben looked smug.

"All right, that's it, we're leaving now!" Rey snapped. "Finn, you can carry your own things! No Force for you!"

"What?! Hey, come on, that's not fair!"

"So is having to listen to you palm one out when you think no one's around!"

Once more, the room grew very silent.

"These are stone walls," Finn choked. "How can they be so thin?"

"All right, well, I don't like farewells, so tata, loves! See you later!" Sitrine grasped Finn and Rey by the shoulder and began herding them toward one of the doors. It ended with a grasp of Finn's butt, along with a slap to it.

Rey grabbed Finn before he could punch the man. "It's not worth it," she told him.

"But—"

"It's not worth it," she said again. "He'll just make it worse."
Sitrine smiled cheekily and waved. "Safe travels."
I'm Ready to Hope

Chapter Notes

I wish it were autumn already. It's my favorite season. #whitegirlproblems. #pathetic. #kissmybutt. It's just so dreary outside! Yaaaaas, come autumn, come. #moontearout.

'Cause I am done with my graceless heart,
So tonight, I'm gonna cut it out and then restart,
'Cause I like to keep my issues strong,
It's always darkest before the dawn

-Shake It Out, Florence + The Machine

Leia's stare was flat, unreadable, the kind she presented to people she didn't trust. Or, in other words, when negotiations had gone south, and she was deciding her next move. Either way, it wasn't very promising and was unnerving.

"If Finn hadn't said anything, would you have come to me about this?" The general was leaning with one hand against her desk. Her lips were pursed with disapproval.

Rey opened her mouth to say, "Yes, of course," and halted. She wouldn't give Leia platitudes. Her future mother-in-law wouldn't be bought with them.

She waited for a moment, seeing if Ben would protest on Leia's new title, but he didn't.

Rey took a steadying breath. "Master Anakin taught... us a way to show you what we've experienced, what our plans are." She wasn't very sure how that would go over. All Leia knew about her father was from what Luke had told her, and, of course, the hells he had put Leia through beforehand.

Like blowing up Alderaan in front of her, even though Tarkin had mostly been behind it.

"Master Anakin?" she quoted. "You mean my father?"
"Er... yes," Rey said, not without trepidation. As powerful as they were, Leia was still one of the most formidable people she knew. "He's taken us on as his apprentices."

Something even more unreadable crossed her face. Her eyes roved from Rey to her son and back again. Was she trying to sus out if they were lying? If so, she was going to be very disappointed, and it made Rey sigh.

"If we were on the First Order's side, why would we have helped you on Venia?"

Leia held up a hand, and Rey quieted at once. The general came to stand before her son. "I want to hear all of this from you." It didn't need to be said why. Ben had masqueraded as Kylo Ren, and Leia had thought him lost until she'd realized she could have Rey attempt to save him.

It was a method Rey kind of understood. Leia and Ben were linked through their connection in the Force. If she was going to get a sense of honesty from either of them, she wanted it from Ben first. It made Rey sad. They had been on such good terms with her, had made so much progress with Leia's relationship with her son.

Wordlessly, Ben took Leia's hands. He stared intently into his mother's eyes as he employed one of the methods Anakin had taught them. It involved something similar to what Anakin had done to Rey that first meeting. Ben was going to suffuse Leia with their memories—with everything they'd accomplished, with all of their plans.

When he was done, Leia scoffed and turned her back to them, bracing her hands on her desk. "That's not what I'm concerned about. The two of you want to..." She couldn't bring herself to say the words.

Rey supplied them for her, because it needed to be said. "We want to take control of the galaxy, yes." And when Leia didn't respond, Rey bowed her head. "We haven't lied to you; we've shown you everything. You know our intentions. You know what we're going to ask of you."

"And if I say no?" Leia's voice was just as unreadable as her expression.

Politicians.
Maybe that was where Ben had learned it from.

"You don't have any reason to," Ben said. "If we come together, we can destroy the First Order and form a government that ensures the survival of the galaxy. It's not a reign, not like—it's not an empire."

Leia whirled to them, exasperated. "And why can't we form a republic?"

"How many republics have actually survived, Mother?" Ben drawled.

"Don't take that tone with me, Ben Solo," she warned, her eyes flashing. Rey's back automatically straightened. Ben shifted his gaze to the side. "You're not on good terms with me for the moment."

The general paced over to her bed and back. She did this a few times, and they let her be. Better that she think it out and rein in her temper than completely dismiss anything they had to say and call them traitors.

Well… Rey didn't think she'd actually brand them traitors, but one never knew.

"You said you've been talking to my father?" Leia asked at last.

"Training with him," Rey corrected automatically. Then she winced. "Yes, we've been talking."

"Luke told me he was a… Force ghost. And that Sith couldn't become Force ghosts. Am I correct in saying this?"

"Yes," Ben said.

"And he told you… what, exactly, about approaching me?" She turned to them. She had the memories, but it seemed she wanted to talk all of them through.

"He said you'd come around," Rey answered weakly. Although now she was beginning to doubt that. "He said you'd know it was the right path."
"So he appeared to you," she said stiffly. "But not to his own daughter."

"He avoided Ben for years, if that helps," Rey offered, only to get an elbow to her ribs. She shot Ben a scowl. She always gave him 'mental' versions of smacking him, aside from boxing his ears. It was common courtesy to return the favor.

Leia wasn't going to back down, Rey could see it writ on her face.

"Leia, this isn't—he saw a vision," she said uncomfortably. She hadn't talked about this since she'd decided to try and put it behind her, reluctant to follow in her master's footsteps. "A vision that involved my—our deaths. Apparently, if one of us dies, so does the other. He said he didn't want an end to the Skywalker line."

"Mother, what is so appalling about our plans?" Ben asked, and Rey was appreciative that he'd changed the subject, not so smooth as it was. Anything was better than lingering on that vision, when she'd mostly put it from her mind.

"You want to rule the galaxy," Leia pointed out with some disbelief.

"As—well—yes," Rey replied.

"This was my son's idea, wasn't it?"

Rey shifted her stance from one foot to the other. Now she was uncomfortable. "Yes, but—it makes sense. We'd also considered becoming vigilantes." When Leia gave what could only be called a graceful snort, Rey put her fists on her hips. "This is more effective. You haven't even listened entirely to our plans, about how we want things to go."

"You said you want to rule the galaxy—you said you want to have a council, spearheaded by me. What else could there possibly be?"

"Plenty," Ben told her. "You would never let things get out of hand—not that they would be. But we want things enforced, good things. I… Before, I wanted to destroy the past and everything in it. It doesn't have to be that way. Rey taught me that. If you can't trust in me, at least trust in her."
Wow, Rey thought. *Thank you.*

Ben gave a mental grunt. Rey took that for a, "You're welcome, now focus."

"It doesn't have to be so horrible," Rey pleaded to the general. "Someone has to be in charge, and the republics haven't managed it. A faction always comes in and causes trouble, eventually taking it over and turning it into an empire. If the galaxy worked together, if we saw to that, there'd be less of a chance of repeating the past. You don't want to do that again, do you? Repeating the past over and over, expecting different results? Because that's the definition of—"

Leia held up a hand again. "Insanity, I know."

"We trust you," Rey proceeded. "And we wanted you to choose the members of our council, as well. And we never said the council would be small—yes, a particularly large council would be too much, but…"

"You want to blend the Resistance with… your efforts," Leia said.

"Yes, but not quite yet," Rey certified. "We're still putting things into position. As we told you, Sitrine is funneling money from the Order, and Rellen is slowly turning the stormtroopers against the Order, ready to go when it's time. We've been going to the crime syndicates to gain their help, as well."

"The Hutts?"

"For now, yes. We agreed to come here after before we tackled anymore."

Leia came around to her chair and sat down. She appeared reflective. "The Hutts, from what I've learned in the last decade, are helping the Order."

"Yes," Ben said.
"Now we've made plans with them," Rey said. "They're going to cut off resources from the Order, and they're not going to allow passage through their domains. Most of the Order's work is in the Uncharted Territories. Without access to the safe, main lanes, they'll be in a lot of trouble."

The general pursed her lips again. "You got the Hutts to agree to all of this? How?"

"A lot of money," Ben and Rey said as one.

"A lot," Rey stressed.

"Money from the Order," Leia murmured. "Clever. And you trust these Knights?"

"Well, we trust Sitrine and Rellen," Rey acknowledged. "We've fought them, searched their minds." Not that they knew that last part, but it had happened recently. Anakin was very good at subtly acquiring information—not everything had been about torturing it out of people. Maybe it was something that came from being one with the Force. "They're on our side."

"And what does Rellen do? Refresh my memory."

"He's the general of the army for the Order," Ben said.

"And what if anyone reports seeing you?"

"That's been taken care of, too," Rey replied. "Any calls that come in are fielded. I'd get into the details, but it would take too long. So far, everything is covered. We're waiting for the right opportunity to strike, but we need vessels from the Order." She hesitated, then plunged ahead. "And with all due respect, General Organa—" Using her title seemed best at that moment. "—the ships we're obtaining from the Order are more powerful than what we've seen here since we last visited."

It wasn't Leia's fault. It was that the Order was a beast of an opponent.

"If we work together," Rey urged, "that would be pitting us against the Order. We'll have resources, ships, money, turned soldiers from our end. And then we'll have the Resistance's backing. Not to
mention that Rellen is feeding us information about where the Order is stationed, or where they plan to attack next. We can't do anything about it right now, but if the Resistance—"

"We could attack them," Leia said. For once, she didn't have the murder eyes her son had inherited. "It will draw attention from you."

"Yes," Rey nodded. "The Resistance could be picking the Order off, distracting them, while we wait for our own plans to complete. We want everything in motion before we take them on, because the moment we do, they'll know who was behind it all—we need to be prepared for that."

Leia released a long breath, closing her eyes and rubbing at her temple. Was a headache developing?

Rey came forward and touched both of her hands to Leia's temples. The general glanced up in confusion, but a moment later, she sighed in relief.

"How did you do that?" she questioned.

"It's not really gone, the headache," Rey replied. "It's a small illusion. But it prevents pain."

"My father taught you this," Leia sensed. "The two of you are… different since I last saw you."

"Not in a bad way, I hope." Rey offered a weak smile.

"No," Leia mused. "Only more in control. And what does he have to say about your plans?"

"He supports us entirely," Rey said. "Ben is still… having trouble accepting Master Anakin as our —"

Ben growled softly at the reminder.

Rey hurried to the point. "As I said, he supports us entirely. He was the one who said we should approach you."
Leia raised an eyebrow. "Did he?"

"He said that... we could come to some sort of agreement."

"A man who wanted nothing to do with me in his life told you that I would come around to your insane plan of taking over the galaxy?" Leia verified.

"Yes," Rey said.

"And you believed him?"

"We had no other choice," Rey replied. "We didn't want to hide this from you forever. You needed to know."

Leia sat back in her chair. "...Say I agree to this."

Rey's heart fluttered, and she fought to keep still. No need to show how excited and eager she was; it might put the general off.

"We would need to be in constant communication with one another, and the Order must not know where we are hiding."

"They don't!" Rey said. "We haven't told anyone."

Leia was quiet for a time after that, leaving Ben and Rey to brood on their own thoughts. It seemed like Leia was coming around, but they couldn't put all of their kaadu eggs in one basket.

You know about kaadu?

We were on Naboo for a time. I studied all of your books.
"I'll get straight to the point," Leia announced, and the two stood to attention. Rey did, anyway. Ben's slouch improved only moderately. "I like the plans to unite against the Order. I like what you have in store for them, and by association, what we would have in store for them if we side with you."

Rey nodded, her stomach full of butterflies.

Relax.

Relax. Pfft.

This was really nerve wracking. They really needed the acceptance of his mother.

"However…" Leia said, and Rey's heart sank. This couldn't be good, not when the general looked so stern. "I reserve the right to make my decision of… your intentions for the galaxy when all is said and done."

That was better than nothing. In fact, it was more than Rey had been expecting to get, despite Master Anakin's reassurances.

"I have one stipulation."

Stipulation?

I'm as clueless as you are.

There was a glint to Leia's eye that instinctively made Rey want to flee the room. She'd seen it before. She knew where this was going to lead.

"Once this is over, before we discuss what will happen with the galaxy, the two of you will get married. Only then will I consider your machinations."
Choobies.
A new arc to this story is beginning very shortly! In the meantime, Ben and Rey work through some things, and my hint for you guys for the next chapter includes Matt and some other Force ghosts. I can't leave Arna without our special radar technician. Could you?

Through this world I've stumbled,
   So many times betrayed,
Trying to find an honest word,
   To find the truth enslaved,
Oh, you speak to me in riddles,
   And you speak to me in rhymes,
My body aches to breathe your breath,
   Your words keep me alive
-Possession, Sarah McLachlan

Are you... all right?

Ben sighed and placed his hands on his hips, bowing his head. They were in a different room than the one they'd had before, but the concept was the same—icy walls and a small bed. Very stark, as would be expected of a bunker. Rey doubted there were any rooms besides the general's that were bigger.

My mother is impossible.

Are you so against the idea?

He whirled to her, his eyes a little wide. Why would you think that?
Um... She chose her words carefully, hiding her thoughts somewhat, not wanting to put any pressure on him. His mother had already seen to that. *Because you stormed out of the room and haven't spoken since? You just keep pacing.*

He shoved his fingers into his hair with both hands. *I don't like being manipulated.*

*She's not manipulating you.*

*Oh, really? Then what was that? Please, tell me, I'd love to know.*

*Don't take that tone with me, Ben Solo,* Rey nearly growled out loud. *I'm only trying to make certain you're all right.*

*If I tell you yes, will you leave me alone about it?*

Rey drew back, affronted. This was... really how it was going to be...? Despite all his hints, all the —

*Forget it. I must have been mistaken.* Rey zipped up her coat and pulled the hood over her head. She'd forgotten how cold it was on Arna. *I'm going to have a look around.*

*To look for your friend Poe?*

Rey turned on him. "Why are you being so nasty?" she asked in disbelief. "What have I done to deserve it? If you're so angry, take it out on your mother! I've done nothing wrong! And if you didn't want to ever get married, then you shouldn't have led me on about it!"

"Led you—"

"You know what I'm talking about! Just—blast! Never mind!" Rey stormed out the door and didn't look back.
They had a meeting with Leia later, so they had time to kill. Rey figured she could at least attempt to be useful and planned to head to the hangar. His snipe about Poe rankled, and she refused to linger on the fact that he wasn't up to an eventual marriage, after all. If she did, she'd start crying. She didn't want to. She'd done enough of that.

*Rey—*

*No. I can't.*

*Rey!*

*Be in a foul mood by yourself, Ben.*

*Rey, get back here!*

*No!*

A hand grabbed her elbow and yanked her back inside their room. The door whooshed shut behind them. Rey grappled for her freedom, shoving him away from her. She stayed in the room, much as she didn't want to, however, and paced over to the far side.

*I wasn't leading you on.*

*Really? Then what's crawled up your arse and rotted there?*

*That's not fair.*

*Well, that's life, isn't it?*

*Rey…*
She scowled and turned her back to him, crossing her arms in an angry fashion. She already shared a head space with him—but she didn't have to look at him, not when she didn't want to.

She wasn't expecting his large hands to slip over her shoulders and draw her body against his chest. He bent to rest his chin atop her head. His arms shifted and wrapped around her stomach, keeping her close to him.

*I'm not against it. It's like you said... you know I'm not against it. But—I wanted to do it on my own terms. I didn't want it to be a condition for my mother's cooperation.*

*Have you considered that maybe it isn't all about you?*

*What is that supposed to mean?*

*She wants a family, Ben. You're all she has left. And she looks at me like a daughter. I think... I think she believes we'll never get married. Rey didn't bring up children—it was not worth it at this juncture. And it's what she wants.*

Ben buried his nose in her hair and inhaled deeply. She could detect from his thoughts that he was comforting himself, steadying himself, taking strength in her presence. She tilted her head onto his shoulder and tried not to smile.

*Were you... ever going to marry me?*

He squeezed her even closer.*Do we have to discuss this now?*

*Yes.*

*Rey...* He let her go with another sigh.

She hated pushing him. She really did.
Sadness seeped back into her heart.

_Pretend your mother hadn't brought it up…_

_I was—waiting. For the right time._

Rey was quiet. He needed to choose his words, and she could give him the time to do so. While she waited, she unzipped her coat and bounced onto the bed, sprawling. She would have been in danger of falling asleep if she wasn't so wound up from the discussion they were having.

_Rey?_

_Yes?_

_Read my thoughts._

She bit her lip. It wasn't really something he'd asked her to do before.

Rey propped herself up on her elbows and studied the long length of his back. His shoulders were taut with tension, more so than usual. She felt uncertain, but he was already lowering the shields he kept between them (for their own collective sanity), and his thoughts were trickling free, images more than anything else.

_Her breath drew in._

She could see herself—scared, running from him in the woods on Takodana, firing her blaster in vain. Waking up while he waited for her, her eyes tracking his face as he removed his helmet. The hatred burned onto her face when he'd killed his father and they'd faced off while Starkiller Base was destroyed.

_Seeing her again, her immediate response to draw her blaster and shoot. She would have possibly killed him if they hadn't been separated by the galaxy. He'd wanted her to deal with Skywalker and_
quickly realized she wouldn't have been able to pull something of that magnitude. Whatever the connection was, it wasn't from her.

But the hatred in her eyes, the insistence that he was a monster, had bled away over time. They shared their innermost secrets. She'd reached for him across that small fire on Ahch-To, and for just a moment, a tiny, shimmering moment, they'd touched before Skywalker had ruined everything.

The look on her face when the escape pod had released... the fear when he'd had her cuffed... the ride on the elevator, where she pleaded with him to come to the side of the light... Snoke, everything in the throne room, the death and destruction, his desire to have her at his side. And the look on her face as she'd begged him not to do it.

He'd been so angry—so, so angry, he wanted to burn everything down, away, because maybe it would keep back the rejection inside, the grief. No one wanted him. He'd never met anyone's expectations, he was a constant disappointment, to his parents, to Skywalker, to Snoke. And now Rey, the one person who understood him.

Everything could drown in a sea of flames.

But something happened, changed.

As his father's dice disappeared in his palm and his gaze was drawn upward to where the Force had connected them, he saw her. He saw that he'd crossed a line, that she would never forgive him. The Falcon had blasted off, taking her with it, and he was alone in the old Rebellion base.

It had haunted him.

The anger had faded, and he wanted her for his own, and he would do everything in his power to make that happen, no matter what it took.

The images faded away, and there was a coolness on Rey's cheeks from tears that had fallen. She swallowed and sat up slowly. He still wouldn't face her. His hands were clenched into fists at his sides. She wanted to go to him—waited.

More thoughts swarmed. She'd forgiven him, she'd helped him to at least, partly, forgive himself.
She'd spent years cleansing his psyche so that they could move forward, together, and tackle anything they wanted. She was showing him still what he couldn't remember, because the memories were false and he couldn't recount them on his own.

He loved her.

He loved her so deeply and so fiercely that he was the one burning.

He would do anything for her, anything at all.

Rey blinked away fresh tears and wet her lips, tasting salt.

*I want to marry you. I just want to do it on my own terms. Now I don't have a choice. I hate being boxed in. I hate being told what to do.*

She understood. *But it's a very small price for her cooperation, and it was what you wanted, anyway. And it's your mother. If there was anyone to please besides me, wouldn't it be her? Ben, eventually... eventually you have to realize that I'm not the only person here for you. She didn't say it to hurt you or torture you—she said it because she knew we wanted to. Maybe she was afraid it would never happen. And as I said, she wants a family...*

He finally turned around to face her. His lips were trembling, and tears were caught in his lashes, but he was refusing to let them fall.

*Do you want to marry me?*

*Don't you know the answer to that?* She fought to keep the exasperation from her voice. It was good natured, and he wouldn't see it that way.

*Do I?*

*Ben...*
Because I want to marry you. I want you to have my name.

She was at a loss for words, her chest constricted with hope.

Rey?

Then we will. We'll marry. And... we'll do it on our own terms. She doesn't have to know, Ben. She'll believe what we tell her. She knows it will happen eventually.

Will it?

Yes! Rey got off the bed to go to him. She put her hands on his chest and tipped her head back to see him properly.

You will? He lowered his forehead to hers and closed his eyes. You'll marry me? When we're ready?

She smiled because there was no other answer.

Yes.
A nice surprise, I think!

There was green, as far as the eye could see.

A field, stalks of some sort of vegetable waving in the wind.

Rey stood in the middle of it, a little chilled. Mountains rose in the distance, snow covering their caps. The sky was a dreary gray, clouds lazily scudding past. Insects chirped to one another, and she turned where she was, trying to get a better sense of her surroundings. She couldn't see more than a foot in front of her—the stalks were too tall.

There was a rustle to her left.

She spun, barely catching sight of someone—someone that made her heart clench on itself so hard it hurt her chest. She hesitated, hovering, before taking off after them.

The stalks slapped against her face and body as she tore a path through them. She jumped in places where roots stuck up out of the soil, moving instinctively to avoid them. The person she was pursuing was just out of reach—she could see his back, nothing more. It was a twisted game of keep-away.

Gasping for breath, she stumbled into a circle. The stalks were smashed here, likely where some craft had landed. She searched wildly to see where her lead had gone, but the wind picked up, covering all traces of any rustle she might have spotted.

"Kid."

Hope flickering, Rey whirled toward the voice. The man's face was eclipsed in shadow. He held out a hand to her. She ran for it, but the very moment she made it to him, the earth collapsed
beneath her feet. Soil rained down around her as she freefell through nothing more than air, limbs flailing.

Water awaited her, and she braced herself as she slammed into it, leaving an explosion of bubbles. She was dragged against her will into its depths. Salt filled her eyes, her nostrils, her mouth. She was choking, struggling to breathe. The water was so cold, so unforgiving. It embraced her eagerly, and she didn't know why.

Phantoms flickered at the edges of her vision. They spoke to her, called out to her. She reached for them, only to be carried deeper into the water.

Just when she was about to pass out from lack of oxygen, the water parted, and she found herself sprawled out across snow. Panting for breath, she lifted her head. A blizzard raged, the cold sheering straight through her wet clothes, tearing up her eyes. She stumbled to her feet, trying to orient herself. It was once again in vain. She couldn't see anything past the snow.

"Kid."

Dizzy, she searched for the source of that voice. Its owner stood in the distance, his back to her. He seemed unaffected by the storm, clear of white flakes. She took a step toward him, snow crunching beneath her boots, and stretched out her hand. The wind whistled in her ears. She was shivering so hard her teeth were chattering.

"Come back!" she cried. Her voice echoed into infinity, playing all around her, as though she were trapped in some sort of sphere. Snowflakes crusted her eyelashes, made it difficult to see, no matter how hard she blinked them away. "Please! I have to apologize!"

She persevered through the snow, refusing to give up. The figure ahead of her disappeared after what seemed like miles of stumbling around, and she fell to her knees. Tears froze on her cheeks before they could drip off her chin. She curled up onto her side, drawing her knees to her chest and burying her face in them.

It was cold, so cold.

*Rey, wake up! Hurry! Hurry!*
Her lashes fluttered weakly as they cracked open.

*This isn't your dream!*

She rolled onto her back.

*I can only hold her back for so long—she's powerful! Please... Please stay safe until I get there!*

"Breeze?" Rey whispered.

A figure leaned over her—she saw that it was herself, her doppelganger. She blinked slowly, lacking the strength to get up, to defend herself.

"Leave me alone," she said through chapped lips.

The thing grinned and said the words it had before, the last time they'd met like this. "I want you. I'll have you."

*Rey, no! Rey!*

White light burst into existence, searing her retinas. The snow fell away into bubbles, and she was drowning in water again. This time, however, she wasn't being forced against her will, she was being guided—guided by the shining ball of light so close. All she had to do was reach out as she had so many times and grasp onto it.

*Rey!*

She couldn't make it. Water was filling her lungs. She tried so hard, kicking her feet with the last of her strength, arms wading through the murky depths. All she had to do was make it to the light. That was it. It would save her. It...

*Don't let her take you! Rey! REY!*
The water dropped away, splashing against stone, and the cave on Ahch-To revealed itself as if it were her friend. She stood before the mirror, saw her twisted reflection. It was holding that ball of light, casually bouncing it up and down. The light writhed desperately, but it was futile, unable to break free.

"You always come back here," her reflection told her.

*Rey, wake up, wake up! She's going to find you! Wake up!*

Water again, flooding her.

"Rey! Shit! Rey!"

Rey fell off the side of the bed, landing painfully on her side. She barely noticed in the face of the sea water she was vomiting up. She coughed hard, her eyes and nose streaming. When her system was mostly free of the water, she gasped for breath, shuddering all over. Tears threatened and she held them back. She wouldn't give that—*thing* the satisfaction of crying.

*How in hells is there water?*

*I don't know.* Rey stayed where she was, unable to bring herself to move into a more comfortable position. Salt was on the back of her tongue, burned at her sinuses. *Breeze was talking to me.*

*It was my dream at first, and then it shifted.*

There was a powerful tug on the Force. Anakin arrived, expression as grave as ever, his hands folded within his robes. He stared down at Rey with deeply furrowed brows.

"You have a friend on the way."
"W-What?" she rasped.

"The… knot. That you befriended on Aliotano."

"Aliotano?" she repeated.

"That was the planet you crashed landed on."

Well, that was better than continuing to call it the Nameless Planet.

"It seems the vergence reached where you trained for four years."

"How?" Ben asked.

"I'll let the knot tell you the rest when… she arrives. Until then, we have a bigger problem. It didn't matter before, because she hadn't picked up on your trace, but now she has. You need to learn to hide your presence."

Ben scoffed. "That's not possible."

"My master did it," Anakin replied flatly. "Granted, he hid himself on a planet I would never return to, but he was successful regardless, as was Master Yoda. I assure you, it is very possible. And as of right now, it's more important than the rest of our lessons. We need to get started immediately."

Rey's mind was reeling. Their nemesis could trace them? She knew it was a neutral power in the Force. She knew someone immensely skilled in it could pick up on such traces and follow them even weeks after the fact. But they'd left that planet long ago, and how had the vergence reached it, at any rate?

There were two more pulls on the Force. Rey looked up to see Luke and… someone she didn't recognize.

"You can't ignore us forever," Luke was saying. "We're all a part of the Force. Stop this. We're
only to guide, not to interfere."

The older man looked just as stern as her brief teacher. "I must agree with Luke on this. Master Yoda has given up, but not I. You must leave them to figure things out on their own."

Anakin rolled his eyes and looked up at the ceiling. This didn't seem like it was a new development.

*Who is the old guy?*

*Just a shot in the dark, but I'm going to say Obi-Wan Kenobi.*

*Ohhh. Master Anakin's master.*

*Please stop calling him Master Anakin.*

*No. Again, it's respectful. And he is. Stop being so stubborn.*

While Ben and Rey had their inward argument, the Force ghosts were squabbling on their end. Luke and Obi-Wan were very concerned about Anakin leaving them to it. Ben opened his mouth to agree, and Rey elbowed him fiercely in the stomach, partly in revenge for when he'd gotten her ribs.

"Come back to the Force, so we may continue this discussion there," Obi-Wan said firmly.

"No," Anakin retorted hotly.

*Breeze is really coming here? He said that, didn't he?*

*I really hope not.*
You really hold a grudge against her, don't you?

The feeling is mutual, believe me, he said grimly.

For a moment, they were fascinated by the argument taking place. Three dead masters debating the validation of taking on padawans. If they even were padawans—that had never been explicitly stated. Rey suspected they weren't. They were already powerful enough on their own, and masters had their own masters in the Jedi hierarchy, based on what she'd read in those boring Jedi texts.

The door to their bedroom whooshed open, and a blond halted in his tracks. His eyes widened behind his thick glasses.

"It's you!" Matt said to Rey.

He's still here? I would say choobies, but I fear it would be redundant.

I'll say it for you: choobies, Ben said with a long suffering sigh.

On top of everything they had to deal with, the radar technician had thrown his hat into the ring.

We're never going to get a break.

Nope.
All right-y folks, so this is my shortest chapter yet. Why? Because I had funny things planned out, and what happens next is going to be super serious. Shit be getting real again. I didn't want it to clash!

Two things: I have a prompt "story" up, where I'm writing prompts from a book I have. It's supposed to be a daily exercise, and I've centered it around Reylo. I can't say I'll update every day, but so far the prompts haven't been too hard. Please check it out!

The second is that I drew a picture of Rey with her Leia buns. Let me know what you think. <3
All right, one thing at a time.

Rey took a deep breath and let it out.

"You lot," she said to the ghosts. "Is there any way you can take this to the other side?" She didn't want to be rude, but honestly, they were being very distracting right now. And Master Anakin had said Breeze was on her way and would explain things, so his presence wasn't strictly necessary.

"No," Anakin said as Luke and Obi-Wan said, "Yes."

Then they were gone.

Perfect.

That left the radar technician.

"HI!" he said with a little too much enthusiasm. "I heard you were here!" He wasn't even bothering to look at Ben, which was odd, considering he was Ben's biggest fan. "I didn't believe it was true!"

"It's true," she muttered, which it wasn't.

The blond stepped into the room without a regard for their permission. "I've been working diligently!" he reported. "I—!"

"MATT!" someone shouted. "Where's my muffin, Matt?!"

"Oh, no, they found me!" he whispered rather theatrically. He dodged out of view, plastering himself against the wall.

"Found you?" Rey repeated. A pilot passed their room, a jovial sneer on her face. Rey thought she would keep walking, but the woman halted.
"Have you seen a blond idiot around here?" she inquired.

Yes, Rey thought. But she didn't want to give Matt up because it seemed somewhat cruel. Maybe he was hiding because he was still being bullied, though it wouldn't surprise her. It was laughably easy to poke fun at the man.

"No," she said.

"Yes," Ben said darkly. "He's here, hiding."

The woman stepped into the room to find the technician. "Where's that muffin, Matt?"

"I couldn't find one!" Matt countered. His eyes filled with betrayal as he looked up at his idol. "You gave me away!" Awe quickly replaced the expression. "That was inspiring! So very like you!"

Get him out of here before I do something rash, like permanently remove his ability to speak.

Judging by the weight of that statement, Rey knew Matt's safety was in jeopardy. She scratched her thumbnail over her eyebrow, giving herself a moment to debate on how to get rid of him. The pilot was giving the blond a hard time, poking at him, and Matt drew himself up, his chest swelling.

"You can't speak to me that way!" he said. "My best friend is Kylo Ren, and he won't allow it!"

Murder filled the bond link.

"Matt, um, why don't you do me a favor?" Rey said, stepping between the technician and the pilot, an arm out to stop the latter.

The blonde's eyes lit up. "Anything!"

"Um..." She cleared her throat. She still didn't know how, precisely, to be rid of him. Ben's
thoughts were growing increasingly dire, however, and she needed to think quickly before something really bad happened. "Why don't you go to the Falcon and check out the wiring? See if there's anything that needs to be fixed?"

Everything in that vessel needed to be attended to. Matt could be gone a while, and Rey didn't believe he'd bother their things or try to captain it away.

"Yes! I would be honored to work on his ship!" He stepped around Rey, and then glared mightily at the pilot who was blocking the doorway. "Move, Janet. I have a mission!"

Janet snorted, but she stepped aside, and Matt jetted off so quickly, Rey half-expected him to disappear into hyperspace.

*Second problem down.*

"You can follow him if you want," Rey told the pilot. "I just wanted him out of our room before Ben paints it with his blood."

The other woman eyed Ben up and down. It was clear that everyone still distrusted him, but something close to admiration crossed her face. She nodded and tracked the technician's trail without another word.

Rey palmed the door shut and exhaled before leaning against it and closing her eyes.

*You realize he'll never leave the Falcon now?*

*One problem at a time!* Rey stressed.

*Fine. What do we do now? Wait for Breeze?* Ben's thoughts weren't any better on that topic. She'd known he wasn't looking forward to the Force knot's return, and now she could see how he truly felt. It made her a little sad, but she couldn't blame him. As he'd said before, the grudge was mutual.

*How fast do you think she can travel across the galaxy?*
She's a part of the Force.

Yes, but when we took the Falcon from... what did he say it was? Aliotano?

I believe so.

We still had to travel through hyperspace, and she was so taxed...

Because we had nothing to power the Falcon, and she powered it back to Naboo, all the way from the Unknown Regions.

That was true, Rey mused.

Almost as if she'd heard their thoughts (and maybe she had), a shining ball of light appeared and hovered before Rey and Ben. Rey gasped and stepped with excitement just as the light transformed into a familiar creature, a red panda.

"Breeze!" she said happily. It was awful that she had to travel from the place they'd left her to rest, but she couldn't deny that she had missed her fiercely.

The panda lifted up on its back legs and held open its arms to Ben.

Bring it in, Solo.
Ben stared down at Breeze, slowly crossing his arms, his stance grudgingly respectful as he set his jaw. Breeze had spent a lot of time with them. As much as she annoyed him, and he annoyed her, Breeze had earned his regard. Only a little, but it was enough, and far more than what he gave his grandfather.

*I'm not going to hug you,* he told her.

*That's too bad.* The red panda disappeared in a swirl and reappeared as its ball of light form. It hovered near Rey, nearing her face. *Hello, Rey. I missed you. Did you think of me?*

"Of course," Rey replied. "And I missed you, too."

Ben made a show of rolling his eyes. He began to pace the perimeter of the room, leaving them to it.

*Unfortunately, our reunion must be cut short.* The light dimmed in places. *What I have to tell you illuminates a dire situation if we do not act now.*

A chill trailed down the length of Rey's spine, doused her instincts with the threat of danger. Her posture changed, going from relaxed and happy to rigid and alert. Blast. They really did never get a break. Though she didn't know what she'd expected, if it was enough to make Breeze return to them after what was supposed to be her eternal vacation on that vergence planet.

*She discovered my presence when she came to the vergence. What I gathered from her deep wellspring of evil is that the man you killed was notably missing. I left the stormtroopers alone because they were stranded, but I hadn't accounted for more probes.*
"Blast," Rey whispered. They hadn't thought of that, either, mainly because they hadn't known of her existence at the time. It wasn't unreasonable that Deo's presence would be missing—that, they had known would pop up as a problem to the First Order.

*It gets worse.* Breeze swirled, little balls of light circling with her like dust.

*Great,* Ben thought.

*You left some of your things there—clothing, for example. She's a vergence, and the planet was a vergence, and she had Force sensitives with her. The combination created a tether for the trace.*

"Wait," Rey said. "She had Force sensitives with her?"

Breeze bobbed up and down rapidly. *Yes! And then she attempted to harness me for herself, and I left! I have not had time to think about anything else! I came here to warn you!*

Rey gasped at the same time that Anakin appeared. Breeze fairly vibrated with terror.

"No!" Rey yelled, and then she was launching herself out the door and into the corridors of the base.

Rey had honestly never run so fast in her life, not even when she'd been in the coliseum hightailing it away from the half-human, half-spider android. People were a blur, and despite still not knowing the entire layout of the base by heart, she knew exactly where she was going: to see Leia.

*What are you—*

Ben's thoughts came to a crashing halt as hers cut across his. All of his training, the training that said to run in place with her, evaporated. He shoved ahead of her, knocking people aside when they got in the way, ignoring their yelps of complaints.
"Watch where you're going!" rang after them more than once.

Breeze zipped ahead of them, much like BB-8 used to do when they were on Solaris.

*I was so eager to get out of there that I did not think of the next step!* Breeze cried in horror.

There were many steps. Force sensitives meant she was searching for them. Using their power, the vergence's power, and her own to trace Ben and Rey to their dreams—that couldn't be mistaken for anything else. She knew where they were, and she was on the way... inevitably with the First Order. And where were they? In the heart of the Resistance's base.

Rey wished she could run faster. Ben's long legs had carried him yards away from her.

Pilots and soldiers tumbled against the icy walls. Ben leapt over a few of them, leaving Rey to follow suit. Their panic wasn't entirely blind because they were using the Force to naturally guide them, something that was a secondhand nature to them.

*I'm hiding your presence now, but I am afraid it is too late!* Breeze wailed.

*It's okay, it's okay!* Rey reassured her over and over.

Five minutes later, they had made their way through the immense labyrinth of tunnels and corridors. Ben burst into Leia's quarters, actually praying—praying that his mother would be there, that they wouldn't have to search for her, and then realizing that he'd used their link to take him directly to her.

"Mother!" he exclaimed breathlessly.

Rey skidded next to him and nearly stumbled. "We have to get out of here! *Now!*

Leia looked up from her holographs. "What?" She took stock of their fear and panic. "What's happening?"
"The First Order is on its way!" Rey gasped, clutching her side. "We don't have time to explain! We need to evacuate!"

Anakin reappeared, his face drawn taut with urgency. Judging by Leia's expression and sudden stillness, she could see him.

"Evacuate!" he ordered. "Now!"

Leia blinked out of her daze and then cursed. Leaving the foursome, she hurried into the maze, taking her commlink with her.

"We have an emergency, this is not a drill!" she said into it. To her credit, she had composed herself into a presence of calm. "Order everyone to evacuate now!"

Static crackled. "But General—"

"Now!" Leia repeated. She shut off the commlink and whirled back to them. "I assume you have a destination in mind?"

Rey wet her lips. They hadn't thought that far ahead.

"The Gimedo System!" Ben said on the fly. "Here are the coordinates, give them to your people!" An alarm had begun its deafening siren throughout the facility. "Get out of here as quickly as possible! We will meet you on Endorom!"

A moment began, suspended in time, where mother and son stared at each other.

Ben crushed her into a hug and then took off. Rey grasped her hand and squeezed it in passing. She didn't linger—she couldn't be separated from Ben, that was still part of the pact they'd made to put off the events of the vision as best they could.

"May the Force be with you!" Leia called after them.
The hangar was in utter chaos.

Announcements were ringing out over the blare of the alarm, mostly codes. Pilots and technicians zoomed around, readying their vessels and the transports. Everything was uniform—they had indeed had drills for this. Great. That made everything simpler.

The ramp for the *Falcon* was down, and Ben and Rey hurried up it in Breeze's wake. They closed the freighter up and ran to the cockpit. They fastened themselves into their seats and took over the controls, getting it up and going. They had to get out first—they had to warn Sitrine that they were coming, that they had the Resistance in hot pursuit.

Rey was glad they had left their things on the ship, or the ancient Jedi texts would have been lost.

Her hands were shaking so hard it was making it difficult to be the co-pilot. She was muttering under her breath to focus, to make out which controls she needed to use. Now that it was official that they were getting off this planet, the intense pressure of the situation was sinking in. It was almost worse than her vision.

Almost.

*It's okay. Keep it together. It's okay.*

She appreciated his thoughts and nodded jerkily.

They were rising up through the hangar, into the harsh, wintry world of Arna III. Winds buffeted the freighter, stronger than the last time they'd been here. So was the snow—it was a complete and total whiteout. Maybe that would help if the Order got here too quickly. For now, it was bothersome, and Ben took his frustration out on the *Falcon*.

"Come on!" he snarled at it.
Rey didn't point out that it wasn't the ship's fault.

"I've got a visual!" she said instead. She pointed. "There's the sky!"

Now all they had to do was get up there without being shoved away from it by the roaring turbulence.

Ben put on a burst of speed, and they rocketed straight up.

*I'll help!* Breeze said, and the ship stopped shaking as much, seemingly growing more stable.

Space engulfed them, a black void against the stark white of Arna. So far, everything seemed clear of their pursuers. All they could do was trust that the Resistance would be able to follow. Their enemy would be with the Order, and they couldn't be around to face her. It wasn't time. They weren't ready.

*May the Force be with you, too, Leia,* Rey thought.

And then they were on their way to Endorom, the stars a blurred streak.
Chapter Notes

All sorts of people meeting. A double reference to the video game (now Legends) The Force Unleashed is in here, as well.

"Hello, Your Supreme-ship!"

Rey screamed a little, and Ben jerked. Both of them twisted their heads around to see Matt standing there with one of Ben's cloaks on and his boots. His hair was disheveled, and he was missing his glasses, making him look more than ever like Ben, although she continued to be alone in that line of thought.

*Breeze, why didn't you say he was here?* Rey asked.

*I thought you knew. I apologize,* Breeze returned.

*What. Is he doing. In my clothes?*

"I fell asleep! What's happening?!"

Rey gave him a good, long hard look and then turned to Ben. They'd been going hours in the wrong direction, trying to stave off any attack on the Resistance if the vergence was still on their trail. It was a dangerous decision—the Uncharted Regions were rife with its dangers. The latest rumors discussed a black hole large enough that it was chowing a star down every three days. No one of good reputation went to the Regions that much, so news spread slowly to outsiders.

And besides *that* block hole, there were plenty still, unrecorded, with dozens of crime syndicates spread around. It was a lawless place to be, and they hadn't really enjoyed their last sojourn through the area. But they would do what it took to keep the First Order on their trail and off the Resistance's.

Ben waved his hand, and Matt crumpled to the floor, asleep.
I told you this would become a problem.

Be quiet. We don't have time for "I told you so's." Rey nudged Matt's shoulder with the tip of her boot and pursed her lips. We'll keep him asleep, and then we'll leave him on Endorom.

Are we leaving again so soon? Ben frowned at her. Why?

I believe Master Anakin is going to ask us to look for Force sensitives.

Ben growled, advancing a step in her direction, but she held her ground. We don't have time to look for Force sensitives.

We do if she does.

Who is she, anyway? Why will no one give us her name?

Breeze swirled into her human form, her violet eyes as breathtaking as the first time and only time Rey had seen them. When she spoke, her voice still held its musical quality. She was completely ethereal. "Her name is Starkiller."

Ben and Rey stared.

Ben was the first to speak. "Starkiller?"

Breeze nodded, folding her hands in front of her slight form. "Yes."

"Well, he wasn't very original, was he?" Rey muttered.

"I believe he named her first before developing the idea for Starkiller Base."

"What were you expecting?" Breeze asked. Sarcasm or irony didn't drip from her words—it was a genuine question. Breeze had always had trouble knowing a human's social clues.

Ben snorted.

"Something grander maybe," Rey replied. "Or—original."

"I don't get it," Ben said. "Why would he be stupid enough to imbue a vergence he created with nothing but pure darkness? He considered himself wiser and more intelligent than any of his followers. So why, then, had he not thought that would go horribly wrong? When my grandfather was made…" There was a second shake of his head and a sigh. "The end result is that he became a powerful user of the dark side. His plan was successful. Why tamper with it?"

"Because Snoke needs bigger choobies than the Empire ever did?" Rey replied. She fell back into her seat, looking at the controls. They were in interstellar space with no quadrants. Until it was safe to get to a familiar place, they were staying out of hyperspace. The last thing they needed was to jump into an event horizon of a black hole or smash into a meteor, or perhaps get incinerated by a star.

"What do you mean?" Breeze sat in the seat diagonally behind Rey's. Rey was still adjusting to her current form. She'd only seen Breeze as a human for a handful of minutes, five maximum, months ago. "Are you saying he was attempting to… 'outdo' the Empire?"

"Yes," Rey replied. She thought of the knowledge she'd acquired since leaving her home planet to start this mad adventure. "You don't know much about Emperor Palpatine, do you?"

"No," Breeze said.

"Because you were hibernating," Rey elaborated.

The other… woman, for lack of a better term, nodded. "But I can read your thoughts. Now that
you've been ruminating on the past few decades, I am now up to speed. I see what you mean. He created something better than the Death Star. He wanted Ben Solo as a new Darth Vader. He, too, made a vergence, attempting for it to be better than Anakin Skywalker. Am I correct?"

"Yes," Rey said with a smile in her direction.

The *Falcon* began to beep.

"Now what?" Ben muttered, taking the pilot's chair.

"Should I strap myself in?" Breeze inquired.

"Only if you plan to stay in that form," Rey said. "Do you know what's ahead?" She paused as she saw an accretion disk. "All right, now it's time to get out of here. We'll have to take our chances. Blast, how did that loom up on us so quickly?"

Ben and Rey input orders into the freighter, only a slight sense of panic instilling itself in them. They were far, far away from the accretion disk, where it concerned escaping, but its glow was on the horizon. That was enough. They weren't going to stick around to find out how big this black hole was.

"The disk is still a week away at this speed," Breeze said serenely. "It appears brighter because it is a massive star that is being consumed. You are perfectly all right to continue for now, if you wanted."

*I really don't want to stick around,* Rey thought.

*I don't, either.*

Ben guided them in a direction away from the accretion disk before punching it. If anyone had somehow been on their trail, they'd shaken them off. Rey could only hope they didn't meet their doom going into hyperspace so blindly here.
The Gimbdo system came abruptly into view. Endorom, its sister planets, and their moons were a
twinkle in the distance. So were Resistance vessels.

"They got here safely," Rey breathed in relief.

**They did. Now let's talk about the Force sensitives.**

Rey sighed and knocked her head back against her chair. *Do you think I want to search?*

*I...* Ben shrugged wordlessly.

*Once we've made sure everyone is settled, we need to speak with Master Anakin. If Starkiller—*

*Please don't call her that.*

—*is acquiring Force sensitives, then we should be doing the same. You know the reason is
obvious.*

*It doesn't mean I have to like it,* Ben grumbled. He would have preferred it be the two of them.

*We can't take over the galaxy alone,* Rey replied. *And she's powerful enough without... making an
army.*

Because that was exactly what Starkiller was trying to do. Rey knew it down to the marrow of her
bones. She'd tasted some of the other woman's thoughts when Starkiller had touched her dreams. There
was the void of pure darkness, but past that, she had been intent on something. Now Rey knew what
that something was.

*Sitrine is probably freaking out,* Rey said. *I'm surprised he hasn't tried to contact us again.*
He's probably worried he'll be detected doing so.

Rey glanced down at Matt's limp form.

Do you think he'd ever agree to be a decoy?

Ben gave her a sharp look from the corner of his eye. No one would ever believe that. You're the only one who thinks we look alike.

Fine. We'll dye his hair and take away the glasses, and then you can tell me that he's not your doppelganger.

No one will believe it.

Do you want to make a bet on it?

Ben smirked at her. You're on.

"Holy mother of Squid Heads, you did not tell me you had a brother!" Sitrine gasped.

Rey gave her own satisfied smirk at Ben, who grumbled and refused to look at her. That was fine. They both knew she had been right—someone else had agreed with Rey, even if it was Sitrine.

Matt was on the floor of the strategy room. They'd carried him easily and left him asleep because for the moment, they didn't know what to do with him. He needed to rejoin the Resistance, but they had to settle things with Sitrine first.
"Squid Heads is really rude," Rey said. "They're called the Quarren, and you know it."

"Yes, Your Highness," Sitrine said to ire Rey. He got the intended effect. "So let's discuss what is happening with the…" He gestured over his shoulder. "Well. The trash that was brought in. I don't remember this being something we discussed. I'd bet my cock on it."

Rellen came into the room, his cape snapping behind him. He carried his helmet against his side and gave a short nod to Rey and Ben. "I can't be here long. Tro'dai has a good portion of the Order out looking for you and the Resistance, although how he found out where the two of you were, I'll never know."

Rey wondered idly how long Starkiller planned on masquerading as Tro'dai.

"That's not important," Rey said. "Where is General Organa?"

"I'm right here," Leia announced, coming from the other entrance to the room.

"Good timing," Sitrine muttered in an annoyed tone. "I thought it would take her ages to find here."

"You haven't spoken to anyone since their arrival?" Ben questioned.

"We talked to that Poe fellow," Rellen laughed. "He's incredibly hilarious. He delivered as promised."

"He's not here for your amusement," Rey retorted, reminded of when Rellen and Sitrine had laughed over the call to General "Hugsby." "What did you discuss?"

"Not much," Sitrine said. "You messaged me that that they were on their way, and they only arrived themselves an hour ago."

So Leia had taken a roundabout, as well. She wondered why she'd sent Poe first. Maybe Poe had gotten to Endorom before she had.
"Is this your commander?" Leia asked, eyeing Sitrine like he was something fowl that had crawled out of a sewer. It seemed she’d taken stock of him already, and she wasn't off the mark, either. Rey loved her more for that.

Sitrine puffed up, but Ben nodded at Rellen. "That's our general—and the general of the Order. He has to go so they don't suspect anything. That leaves Sitrine."

"One of these days, you're going to lose me, you know!" Sitrine huffed.

"I highly doubt that," Ben said with all the sarcasm he could muster.

Before they could fight, Rey cleared her throat loudly. "Boys."

"Yes, Mother," Sitrine muttered as Ben said, "Fine."

"We're joining forces sooner than we anticipated," Rey went on. She'd seen the ships on the planet as they’d landed closer to the castle than usual. There wasn't time for a hike.

"We didn't think we were joining forces," Rellen drawled.

"Well, we are!" Rey snapped. "And it was incredibly idiotic of you to think this wouldn't happen. That is Ben's mother and my future mother-in-law. Of course, she would have a part in this."

"Awh!" Sitrine clapped happily, bouncing a little. "You're officially engaged?! We must throw a party!"

Leia turned to Rey, who bit her lip and tried not to feel like she'd invited the older woman into a parade of fools.

The general raised an eyebrow. Her eyes said, "These are the men you rely on?"

Rey nodded slowly, not quite able to meet her gaze.
Leia sighed. "The two of you, shut up. This isn't the time to play. You—" She pointed at Rellen. "—Get going. You've been away too long already. And you—"

Sitrine straightened, practically sparkling with his enthusiasm.

"...I don't know what to do with you yet," Leia said after a long moment. "But stay put. The last thing we need is more trouble." She narrowed her eyes. "And something tells me you're nothing but trouble."

"She's not entirely wrong," Sitrine contemplated. He grinned at Ben as he sat on the strategy table and gripped its edges with his hands. "How quaint this is. Mother and son, working together at last."

*This is going to be a long day,* Rey thought.

Leia turned to Ben. "Is there a way to shut him up?"

"No," Ben said empathetically. "No, there isn't."

His mother sighed. "I've worked with worse. Let's get to it."
"I don't know what you expected from this, Ben!"

"I wasn't ready!"

"You were never going to be ready!"

"And what in hells is that supposed to mean?!"

"It means exactly what it sounds like! Outside of me, you avoid any type of—I don't know, communication with your mother! With anyone! It's not precisely a stretch to think that you wouldn't like this!"

"It's all the people!" Ben snarled. "Two—two parts of my lives that I didn't want to collide are now colliding! I got the idiots—"

"—Actually, I think Rellen is less of an idiot—"

"—And our plans for our takeover—"

"—Sitrine is more of the problem, really—"

"—And I knew that eventually I would have to deal with the Resistance—"

"—Honestly, Rellen is the lesser of two evils—"
"But I thought I still had—*months* to go!" Ben shouted, throwing one arm out to the side. "I wasn't *ready! I'm—" He kicked at the side of the couch they were standing in front of it, and the bit of furniture took a journey across the hardwood. "There's too many of them!"

"You wanted to rule the galaxy, and you weren't prepared to deal with the *Resistance*?" Rey shouted right back. Her arms were folded and had been so fiercely that they were now aching. But it was better than using her hands, which were more than capable of throwing stuff. It wasn't as satisfying using the Force. It was also more satisfying to shout out loud rather than within their minds.

"That's not what I mean!" Ben yelled. He was still pointing to the window. The pinkish sunlight dappled the floor beside it. Rey hoped they still had some time alone before people were moved into this wing. "I need time to *process* things! You know this!"

Rey sighed and made a pained noise of agreement. Damn it. He was right.

"And don't tell me I have to get up to speed quickly! I already know!"

"It's not about being up to speed, it's about handling everyone one at a time, not all at once!" Rey threw her hands out in exasperation. "Everyone has questions! Why do it yourself yet? Have your mother or Sitrine—well… maybe not Sitrine—tell everyone what they need to know!"

"Like it's that simple!"

"It is!" Rey retorted, wanting to smack him upside the head. She was quickly losing patience. It didn't help that they'd been on edge for so long, always expecting an attack. They didn't get much sleep. "Have someone delegate for you right now! She was already doing an amazing job!"

"—There's the trai—Finn—*Dameron!*" Ben spat, beginning to pace. "My mother, Breeze, Sitrine, stormtroopers—"

"C-3PO," Rey muttered.

"—Resistance fighters, and—" He growled loud enough that it had had to hurt his throat. "We
weren't prepared for this!"

"We can't be prepared for everything!" Rey protested.

"I KNOW THAT!"

"STOP SCREAMING AT ME, I'M SICK OF IT!"

Rey breathed hard into the sudden silence, her shoulders heaving. For four years, she'd taken it—brushed off his foul moods, his snaps of temper, been the calm one. But she was done. He could take it out on something else.

Ben wet his lips. "I…" He hung his head in shame. "Rey, I'm sorry."

Her throat felt raw, so Rey took a moment to answer, swallowing. "It's all right," she said, almost choking on the words. "We're under a lot of pressure. Let's do what I said—let's let Leia tell them the plan, and she can have Sitrine with her. She probably won't let him speak, so we'll have to make sure she does. This way, it shows everyone that we're united."

She took a deep breath, her mind racing to figure the rest of it out. "We'll keep Breeze with us, or at least nearby, and we'll wait for further direction from Master Anakin before we do anything."

He continued to bore holes into the floor with his eyes.

"Right," she said. "I'm going to go and talk to Leia. Are you coming?"

Ben looked out the window.

*Fine, she thought, sighing as she went to find the older woman.*
"Rey!" Finn trilled. He walked backward in front of Rey, his hands up with his excitement. "I'm so glad you made it out of there!"

Poe was walking beside her, BB-8 in his wake. "What happened? They're not telling us anything other than the First Order found us and was on its way."

"Okay, first thing you need to do," Finn said, now talking to Poe, so seriously his forehead was wrinkled, "is avoid that Sitrine guy at all costs. I have no idea what his real sexuality is, but he had no problem putting his hands all over me at every opportunity!"

Rey snorted a laugh.

Finn glared. "You think this is funny? Have you been personally violated within your comfort zone by that man?"

"Almost daily," Rey replied. "But if he tries anything too risky, Ben threatens to chop his... you know off." She had no idea why she couldn't use dirty words like that out loud, around these two. She just couldn't.

BB-8 chimed in with his opinion.

"I think you're safe," Rey smiled at the little droid.

There was a protest of twitters.

"Sitrine wouldn't stop eyeing you? That's probably because he wants to steal you," Rey said. And then, to Poe, quite as seriously as Finn, "Keep him close at all times."

They were headed through a corridor of the castle, on their way to meet with the general. Poe and Finn had ambushed her just as she'd made it out of her wing. Now they came out into the throne room, where a host of people were gathered. Leia met her there, and the two women walked down a few of the steps that led to the dais.

Sitrine fell into place to the left of Rey, and the latter didn't miss his eyes skimming over the
roguish Poe Dameron. Poe noticed, sensing his gaze on him—Sitrine's stares were hard to miss—and Rey expected something like the discomfort Finn had always shown. Instead the pilot raised an eyebrow and stared boldly back.

What—?

"I decided I'd be here, too," Rey said, yanking her gaze to her fiancé's mother. "This is under the wing of Ben and I, but I don't want them to know that. I want them to think we're united in a common cause." Which they had...

"You want me to lie?" Leia said in quiet disbelief. "Is that the way you want to start off your empire?"

"It's not an empire!" Rey said, hurt. But she could see where the older woman was going with this. "But don't you think now's not the time for your people to find out about it? We need everyone in one place here, where it's safe, until we can get it settled."

A wicked sort of smile touched the edge of Leia's mouth. It was gone so quickly that Rey wondered if she'd imagined it. "Fine. We'll tell them what they need to know. It's not a bad strategy." She tilted her head. "Just bear in mind they'll find out eventually. They always do."

"You should listen to her," Finn said from behind Rey, making her jump halfway out of her skin. "Han said the same thing about women, and he wasn't wrong." He hesitated, looking from her blank expression to the crowd beneath them. "I mean... they're not so different, right? Our people, they're—" Finn cleared his throat. "I'll stop talking now."

Sitrine gave Poe one last, lingering look, and then the three came to stand two steps above their people, stormtroopers and Resistance pilots alike. It was the strangest thing Rey had ever seen.

"This is going to become our temporary base," Leia began.

Rey fell into bed, exhausted, so much so that she couldn't be bothered to take off her boots. Ben stepped out of the shadows, where he'd been all day. He'd never leave her side. They had too much
riding on their survival to try.

"I should have been there with you," Ben muttered into the darkness.

"You'll get another opportunity," Rey said sleepily.

"No, I mean it." Ben came to a stop at the foot of the bed. Rey propped herself up on her elbows, one of them catching and tugging on the fabric of her cape. "We're going to rule together. If I can't handle—*them* in the same room, how could I expect for you to be at my side? I was always… angry before." He set his jaw. "I still am. But I would tear apart anything or anyone that I viewed as a threat."

"Ben—"

"I can't do that now. Not if I want to keep you."

Rey sat up all the way. They both knew neither of them were going anywhere. But she got a taste of his thoughts, and what he meant was that while they may be together forever, that didn't mean it wouldn't be fraught with turmoil. Their balance was something they had to maintain regularly.

"Come to bed," she said. Her voice deepened to a soft demand, one that dared him to challenge her. "And take off your clothes."
The Aftermath of Surviving

Chapter Notes

Sorry this post was delayed. But at least there's smut? Whoo. There was more I wanted to include with the plot, but I felt it would take away from the porn, so that'll be next chapter.

Rey clung onto Ben as he pounded her into the wall. She bit onto his shoulder to stifle her cries, her fingers clutching at his bare chest. She was doing her best to meet him thrust for thrust, but it was difficult—then she remembered how she could move in sync with him. Their thoughts were tangled at the moment; it would be almost nothing to follow when he would thrust.
Ben placed a hand against the wall to brace himself. His other hand closed over her hip. He lifted up, angling her differently, and resumed driving her mad. They'd been together long enough, had each other's thoughts. He knew where to stroke, to apply friction. Now he was doing it to make her fall apart, and she resisted for as long as she could.

"Come on," he huffed. Sweat dampened his skin, her skin. They'd been at this a while. "Do it!"

"No!" she rasped.

"Do it!"

He shoved the pleasure he was experiencing at her, drowning her in it, and she knocked her head back with the cry she was trying to stifle resonating throughout the room. She soaked him, making the sounds of his cock inside of her slick. She trembled, but she knew they weren't anywhere close to finished. They'd skipped foreplay and gone straight to sex—survival sex.

It was why the line between their minds was so open. They were soaking in the comfort of knowing they were safe by retreating into their own bubble, their own little world. While they couldn't do it all the time without going mad, this was all right, because they were so consumed by the same thing: each other.

"We have—dinner—" Rey gasped. "Important—"

It was important. They were needed there. Everyone was going to be there—Leia, Sitrine, Poe, Finn, and all the rest of them. They were going to eat in the grand hall, so all the others could join in, too. Sitrine wanted a celebratory meal, which wasn't surprising, considering how he took every chance he had to "celebrate."

Ben didn't answer. His thrusts grew harder and harder until she forgot about it altogether. When he came, it was with a rough groan of her name. He shot straight inside of her, a benefit of the birth control injection she'd gotten in between dealing with the Hutts.

While Rey was still recovering, panting laboriously, Ben peeled from the wall and carried her out to the sitting room. He perched her on the back of the couch, yanking her around so she was folded over it and he could thrust into her from behind. She didn't know how he was recovering so quickly, but when Ben was determined, he didn't give up.
His seed leaked out around his cock, slipping down her thighs as she grabbed the edge of the sofa cushions. The positioning was so much more intense here, and it was taking every bit of her willpower to not yell. They weren't alone in this wing anymore, as Finn hadn't hesitated to point out recently. The entire castle didn't need to know their business.

But choobies, he was pushing her to her limit.

Then again, that was the point.

He slapped a hand against her arse, squeezing it after. She jolted from the brief flick of pain. He bent over her, pressing messy kisses to her damp back, wherever he could reach. His fingers tangled in her hair and yanked her head back, sending prickles of fire along her scalp, but he wasn't doing anything she didn't like. While she kept her own independence, she liked being owned by him this way, and she wasn't afraid of it anymore.

Stiffening, he left a bruising grip on her hip as he came. He yanked her off the couch and sprawled her into the next room, over the desk. He was determined to mark every bit of their chambers. She was too immersed in pleasure to care. She liked the way his seed was coating her thighs in increasing liberal amounts.

Ben wrapped his mouth around one of her breasts, and she arched, biting her lip against a fresh cry. He jerked her hips lower, then wrapped a hand around her neck, pushing her down against the desk. His fingers squeezed, choking off her air only the barest bit. She wanted to participate, but he'd driven her over the edge so many times herself that his seed wasn't the only thing slipping down her thighs. She was pliant, thoughts drifting with his, wrapped up in how much he wanted her.

Eventually they made it back to the bed. He threw her up against the pillows and then followed in almost a prowl. He sank between her legs, settling her thighs over his hips before kissing her neck and shoulders. His thrusts became achingly slow, but still hard, still enough to jostle her. He leaned back so he could stare down into her eyes, his own dark, so dark.

"Say you're mine," he breathed. He was losing ground. The man only had so much stamina.

"No," she said, just to be contrary.

He growled and bent her over nearly in half, fucking down into her. She stretched her arms out,
desperate to find something to hold, fingers slipping over the sheets with no purchase. It didn't take long before she gave in, sobbing his name as she came again.

"Yours," she panted. "Yours."

His thrusts sped up and then halted as he spilled more seed inside of her. Their harsh breathing filled the silence. Rey closed her eyes, more exhausted than she had been before this started. Every bone in her body ached from the sex, but it was the good sort. She wouldn't have had it any other way.

"I love you," she managed to get out, and when she felt that wasn't enough, she drew him into her thoughts, her heart.

He pulled out of her reluctantly, resting his cheek against her chest while he tried to gather his breath back.

_I love you, too._

"No, say it out loud," she insisted.

She felt his lips curve into a smile against her skin.

"I love you, too," he murmured.

The water of the bath was hot and filled with bubbles. Rey leaned back against Ben in her usual position, letting him soap a sponge over her arms and shoulders, her hair piled atop her head in a massive bun. Strands had fallen around her neck where she couldn't keep them up, now doused with the water.

His large hands rubbed suddenly at the knot in her shoulders, and she groaned shamelessly, her lashes slipping shut. She was so tense. She bowed her head, shivers breaking through her with
every nudge of his thumbs. Oh, this was so lovely.

"I'll go to dinner with you," he said. He kissed her ear.

*I'll do better.*

Rey sighed, mostly reduced to putty.

*I don't expect you to change, Ben. You can stay your grumpy self—it just needs to be around other people. Even if you don't want to say anything, at least you'll be at my side.*

They were quiet for a while. She wondered how long it was before dinner was served. The sunlight had yet to finish filtering through the windows of their rooms. In here, they were disconnected from everything. Once they left, it would be back to the rush of protecting themselves, receiving training, building their own… whatever government system they hadn't decided on yet.

He drew his lips over her ear.

*Show me another memory? It's been weeks.*

He was right. Their resolve to view one every day had faded in the whirlwind of events.

*All right, she agreed. Where did we leave off?*
"And you, loyal of all my students, will become Kylo Ren—master of the Knights of Ren," Snoke declared. A heartbeat later, a room Rey was now familiar with materialized around her.

Ben lowered his head, resting his hand over his heart. It was a stark contrast to the other memories. His black clothes, cape, black and silver helmet. The rest of his crew came to kneel behind him, the different shapes of their helmets a key ingredient to telling them apart from one another. Their bodies did, too, but at the moment, the room was dark, and all the black attire was blending in.

From his throne, Snoke's terrible features pulled into an evil grin. Rey didn't think she would ever not feel sick at the sight of him.

"Yes, my master," Ben said, the voice modulator making him sound inhuman.

"Good. Rise."

The newly anointed Knights of Ren collectively climbed to their feet. Ben's shoulders drew taught. Her presence had made itself known to him. There was a very subtle tilt of his head. Seeing she had his attention, she came close, taking his hand. He didn't fight her grip, but he didn't hold it, either. His glove was in the way, so their bond didn't open.

Each of the "knights" were given a task. Ben might have been their leader, but Snoke had the final say. Not long after, everyone was instructed to file out, and Rey had to keep up with Ben's long strides. They were moving through a compound. Troopers were quick to get out of Ben's way. His wrath was well known, even then.

Eventually, Ben came to a stop in front of a door, palming its lock. Paranoia made him check to see if the coast was clear, and then he grabbed her shoulder hard and pushed her in. This was his bedroom, though it lacked any signs of materialism, which Rey still found interesting. From what
she'd read of the ancient texts, that was more of a Jedi thing. Maybe it had carried over from Luke's training.

A hiss as Ben's mask came off. He shook his hair free, his eyes stormy.

"I thought you gave up on me."

"I would never give up on you!" Rey cried. "Why would you say that?"

"How we parted..." Ben couldn't bring himself to lift his eyes from his helmet.

"You said you needed some space, so I gave you some." Rey settled onto his bed. It was as cold and unwelcoming as the rest of the chamber.

"I said I needed to be alone." Ben placed his helmet on a desk. "Rey, you cannot save me."

"I realized that I can't change anything," Rey replied. "I know I said that last time, but... I really can't change anything. All I can do is be here for you. I want to be here for you. Will you let me?"

Ben didn't answer her.

"Look, I'm not going to try and talk you out of anything. I know your past—I'm still here. I know what you've done. I've forgiven you... I just want to be near you."

"How can I know that those words are true?"

Rey held out her hands. It was the only way to show him.

He sighed deeply, lowering his eyes, tugging off his leather gloves. He dropped them to the floor without a care and sat beside her on the bed. He extended his palms—she slipped her fingers over them. His hands were so large, even now threatening to swallow hers.
"Listen to Snoke, don't listen to Snoke... just let me be here. It's not a trap—and if it was, it would only be to bring you closer to me. To help you with your guilt. And... to let you know that you're not alone. I'm here. I will always be here."

Ben wouldn't look at her. She cupped his cheek and made him.

"I love you."

In reality, Rey's cheeks were once again wet with tears that weren't her own.

In the memory, Ben's eyes widened. "My master says there is no room on the dark side for love."

"Is anything I'm doing inhibiting you from—?"

Ben kissed her. Her hands slid over his shoulders, his neck. He had more heat behind his kisses now, but before she could begin to return it, he drew his lips away and brushed them to her forehead.

"I love you," he whispered, not opening his eyes.

A growl rumbled in reality.

"I love you, too," Rey said.

"No matter what?"

"No matter what." She'd accepted what he'd done, what he still had yet to do in his memories. She wasn't going anywhere. She would stay with him as long as she could to make this right, to soothe his soul.

"You should go. I am expected somewhere." Ben's lips touched her brow. "Come back soon...?" he asked uncertainly.
"Always." She drew him into a tight hug and buried her nose in his hair, taking in his scent as his fingers idly stroked the base of her skull. She had time to give him one more smile before the memory was gone.

*Now we're really late for dinner.* Back in reality, Rey sat up. She looked down at her other half and his grumpy face. *What?*

*I know it's me, but... I really despise when he kisses you.*

*He knows.*

*He does?*

*Yes. But that's for another time.* Rey rolled off the side of the bed. She fixed her cloak, pulled her hair into a simple high ponytail. She'd make it elaborate, but that was too much effort after all the sex and then the sharing of that particular memory. *There's not many left after that.*

*Hold on.* Having followed her, Ben grasped her wrist and tugged her into a kiss. *I haven't gotten to say it much, but... seeing everything you've done for me...*

She squeezed his hand. *I know.*

The great hall of Castle Sitrine was roaring with noise and music. Rey had never seen it this packed —had only ever eaten with Ben, Sitrine, Rellen, and Finn. Now stormtroopers and Resistance members mingled freely together. It was still strange to see, but at the same time, hopeful, inspiring. This was going to work.

They couldn't afford to be anything but optimistic. Realistic— but optimistic. Any other viewpoint would eat at their minds and start a downward spiral.
Ben and Rey stepped up to the "king's" table, where there were two empty chairs in the center waiting for them. Leia was to Rey's left, and Finn was on the other side of the general. And to his left, Chewie and C-3PO. Further down the table, Sitrine and Poe were deeply engrossed in their own little world, their laughter ringing out continuously. Their cheeks were flushed with what was probably Sitrine's dangerous wine.

Rey was somewhat pleased that Poe hadn't made an enemy out of Sitrine. The latter was a Knight of Ren in the eyes of the First Order only, for the purposes of keeping up their charade, but Poe was very loyal to the Resistance. Their acquaintance could have gone very poorly. Maybe it was because Sitrine and Rellen were already big fans of Poe, what with his "Hugsby" prank years ago.

The scent of food was strong, and all the tables were laden with it. Some sort of meat, plenty of vegetables, and kegs of that wine. With luck, not everyone would be too hungover tomorrow to do their job.

Ben and Rey waved a hand ceremoniously, and the dinner commenced.

"Thank fuck, I'm starving!" Sitrine announced.

Rey couldn't agree more.

"This is most certainly an underdeveloped planet," Leia observed. "Not that it doesn't look delicious." She smiled at Rey. "And we're sure this isn't poisoned?"

"Very sure," Rey replied before stabbing a piece of meat with her fork. It was glazed with some sort of sauce Rey had tasted before but didn't know the name of. Her rumbling stomach was all too happy at its presence—it was one of Rey's favorites.

The trio were quiet as they began to eat. Some troopers had recognized Finn and pulled him down to a table with them. Matt was seated at the closest table to the king's table, his big ears perked as he shot furtive glances at Ben. The people with him were too merry with the wine to tease him as much as usual. In fact, it was as though they'd forgotten his presence entirely.

Rey certainly wished she could.

After Leia had cleared her plate, she shifted to see Rey better. "I saw my father on Arna," she said.
"As he would have appeared before… he became Vader."

Rey nodded, playing with a giant, seasoned roll as she looked closely at the general.

"Why do you think he chose to show himself then, when he never has before?"

"I don't think…" Rey hesitated, then sighed. She couldn't pretend she knew, or even understood, the contents of Anakin's mind. Reliving his memories twice over wasn't the same thing. "The only reason he appeared to us was because our lives were in danger. If he hadn't intervened, you would have been the last Skywalker."

Leia nodded, listening.

Rey thought about how Anakin hadn't appeared to Ben once in the near decade he'd been all but worshiping him. She chewed on her lip a moment longer, then shrugged with a helpless expression at the older woman.

"I don't know," she admitted. "The best I can come up with is that… we had to evacuate so quickly. He wanted to show how important it was." They were overdue for a visit from Anakin, actually. Was he letting them settle in first?

Rey rubbed at her eyes, very tired.

"And he's training you?" Leia asked.

"Yes," Rey replied, leaning back in her chair. The thing was so large, it made her look petite.

"Do you think he would appear to me again?"

Rey was surprised by the question. She played with her roll a bit more, turning it over and over with her fingers. Her gaze roamed over the hall, at the merriment none of them had experienced in far too long. Tomorrow they would be back hard at work. All of them, even Ben and Rey.
"I'm not sure," Rey admitted. "But if you'd like, I can ask him?"

"Oh, no, that won't be necessary," Leia said. She picked up her goblet of wine. "Is this safe to drink?"

"You know, it really isn't, but it is fun," Rey laughed. "It tastes so good you can get carried away. Trust me, the next day is terrible. But one drink wouldn't hurt."

The general held up her goblet, and Rey mimicked her. They tipped the goblets together, and then both took a long swallow.

"Fruity," Leia said.

"We'll share one drink, and then that's it," Rey decided.

After a moment of consideration, the other woman nodded. "But only one."

"Only one," Rey agreed.

Rey tipped her head back as a laugh exploded from her. Leia was gone, possibly having retired early. Everyone was well into their cups, except for Ben, who was drinking a little less, just enough that the effects of drunkenness from Rey were at least somewhat fun to enjoy. She had downed enough for the both of them.

"It's true!" Sitrine insisted. "Why are you laughing? Why is she laughing?" He looked beseechingly to Poe and Ben. "Please, someone, stop her."

"No!" Rey said. "I will not be defeated!"

"Who is trying to defeat you?" Sitrine shook her shoulder playfully. "You minx. Ben, make her
"I don't make her do anything. And if you were smart, you wouldn't ask me to," Ben advised. "But you aren't really smart, are you?"

Sitrine gasped, putting a hand over his heart. "How dare you?! I am not some common ragamuffin!"

"Ragamuffin?" Poe repeated, laughing as heartily as Rey. "That's a word I haven't heard in a while."

"Well, stick around," Sitrine implored. He raised his goblet to all of them, his eyebrows up. "You will..." He hiccupped slightly. "...will..."

"Will...?" Rey asked.

"Will... Shite, I lost it," Sitrine said. "What was I asking?"

Sitrine, Poe, and Rey all burst into fresh laughter.

"I'm afraid I cannot follow," C-3PO said. "I am not wired for such festivities." A chitter from below revealed R2, and Rey cheered at his presence. "Oh, shut up, you lousy hunk of metal. If I had wanted your opinion, I would have asked for it."

"Go away," Ben groaned.

"I beg your pardon?" said the golden droid.

"He said go away!" Sitrine answered loudly. "You're ruining our fun." He made shooing gestures at him, and after a few stuttering protests, C-3PO walked away, R2 in his shadow.

Rey was perched on Ben's lap, her legs dangling off the side of his chair, a porg in her lap. Poe and Sitrine were at the corner of the table. BB-8 whizzed around, bored but unwilling to leave Poe's
side. He wasn't entirely trustful of Sitrine.

"You know, Rey, I've been dying to ask all evening, but what is that?" the Knight asked, pointing to the fluffy porg.

"Oh, they're from this island we went to!" Rey said enthusiastically. "Chewie and me! Ahch-To! He made friends with them or something, and they lived in the Falcon for a while." She gave a hiccup similar to Sitrine. Oh, blast, that had hurt a bit. "I don't know how they're still here, but I love them." She held the porg up for Sitrine's inspection.

"He's an adorable little thing!" Sitrine went to stroke the porg's pouty lower lip and got tiny teeth in his finger for his efforts. "Ow!"

"Oh, my gosh, I've never seen one bite someone," Rey said as the foursome cackled. "Then again, I haven't tried to stick my finger in its mouth."

"I was not doing that!" Sitrine sniffed haughtily.

"Yes, but it was his mouth, dear," Rey said sweetly.

"Minx, oh, you minx." Sitrine reached forward and pulled at Rey's cheeks until she slapped him away.

"The three of you really know each other," Poe said. His eyes were a little bloodshot, and his cheeks were flushed more. He looked just like the rest of them. "It makes me sad a little."

"Noooo, why are you sad?" Rey grasped his shoulder. "You can't be sad!"

"I am!" he said. "I have BB-8. Finn. That's it, really."

"We'll have to change that, then!" Sitrine announced. "You are now a part of the club." His whole chest moved with another hiccup. "Welcome, welcome."
"Thank you," Poe said, and the two hugged one another.

"Poe, can I have BB-8?" Rey asked as they parted. "Please? Pretty please? I promise to take very good care of him!"

Ben's hand rested on her hip, stroking, distracting her slightly.

"No!" Poe huffed. "That is a fine droid!"

"He is a fine droid!" Rey replied. "That's why I must have him!"

"BB-8 is his own person," Poe reminded her. "You should ask him. I really don't get a say."

"BB-8!" Rey called. The orange and white droid halted and then rolled her way. "Would you like to come with us instead of Poe?"

Whistles and chirps.

Poe laughed hysterically.

"Well, that was very rude," Rey said. "And after I rescued you on Jakku. This is how you repay me?"

"Bweeeooop."

"It's Ben that's the problem?" Rey looked at her other half, trying to stifle a giggle. It wasn't working very well. "Why are you so grouchy? You're costing me a droid."

"I'd say it was because he wasn't getting laid," Sitrine said, "but we all know that's not the case."

"Sitrine!" Rey sputtered.
"I did not need to know that," Poe said.

"No one did!" Rey replied. "Sitrine! Yooou!" She growled and poked him hard in the shoulder. "You!"

"Me!" he cried.

"You!"

"Me!"

"You!"

"Me!"

"Enough!" Poe said. Sitrine and Rey turned very big pouts in his direction. He snickered, then laughed, burying his face in a hand. "I've had too much to drink."

"Never, sir!" Sitrine disagreed. "There is no such thing!"

"There is for us," Ben said, holding Rey in his arms as he got up.

"No!" Sitrine moaned. "No, you have to stay!"

Rey giggled as she poked at Ben's cheek.

"We can't," Ben said. "We'll see you tomorrow. Quit that."

"Quit what?" Rey asked innocently.
"You know what."

The corridors were quiet as they made their way back to their wing, Rey giggling all the while. Ben joined in a time or two with a slight shake of his head. He was keeping himself above Rey's level of drunkenness. She'd have to find out how when she was sober.

They tumbled into bed, wrapped tightly around each other. Rey thought it was good to not be keeping so many secrets from the world. Before she drifted off to sleep, she wondered about Breeze, who had been quiet since their arrival.

I'm fine, Breeze said softly.

"That's good," Rey murmured, and then darkness closed over her and dragged her into slumber.
The First Nine

Chapter Notes

And so we come to the new arc! This chapter is double the length of the last... twenty-something. There's a lot coming. Enjoy, my lovelies. Also, give me a shout to let me know you're still out there. <3!

—Ben—

Something was wrong.

...en—

He knew it without opening his eyes.

—B... 

Where was Rey?

...Ben!—

Where was her consciousness?

—Ben...!

He couldn't find it.

BEN!
He opened his eyes.

Breeze hovered so brightly he had to close them again.

"Rey—?" he asked roughly, finding it hard to speak out loud.

Ben waited until the blinding light behind his eyelids passed before he reopened them. Breeze was across the… room, if that was what one could call it. It was strangely foggy, and—blank. Empty. Gray. It was like nothing he had ever seen, and he knew instantly he didn't want to be a part of it.

You're awake! Breeze chimed. Well, sort of. She was in her glowing ball form, and she dimmed a little. Are you ready?

"For what?" he asked gruffly. His guard was up—he had no idea where in hells he was. He reached down for his lightsaber, only to find it missing, even the belt that kept it clipped to him. He was wearing nothing but a simple black shirt, tight black pants, and boots.

Don't… tell me you don't remember? Breeze swirled around anxiously.

"I don't," he stated flatly to cover the rising skip of panic in his heart. This wasn't good. Remember what? How he'd gotten in here, wherever this was?

Anakin Skywalker said that you might have trouble accepting what is happening. He warned you. You don't recall?

"No," he said with more feeling, his voice nearly a growl.

Breeze's form shimmered until she was a human, but she was barely there, transparent. She stood a few feet across from him, dressed as simply as he was. "Then it falls to me to help you."

Ben folded his arms and waited.
"You're in Rey's mind."

That, he had not expected to hear. "What? Then why can't I feel her?"

"Because she is in your mind, and Anakin Skywalker has put up the walls he discussed with you. You have to navigate her mind and find her, and she you. You must solve the puzzle, and then both of you will wake up. I am not supposed to help, but you were always slow to come around…"

Ben narrowed his eyes.

Breeze placed a hand on her hip. It was interesting to observe. Whenever she assumed the form of a human, it was stiff, her motions almost robotic. But it appeared she was getting better and better at playing the part. Which, of course, meant that she would add sass to her stance. Why not?

"Think, Ben Solo. You really don't remember?"

He forced himself to try, his mind working furiously. Or was it Rey's mind? Gods, this was confusing. Either way, no matter how long he tried to grasp the memories Breeze was referring to, they wouldn't come to him.

"All right," she said. "What is the last thing you remember?"

"Going to bed," he said.

"The night of the celebration…?"

"Yes," he said curtly, although he didn't know if he would have called it that. It was more like people had to be fed, and some were important enough to sit at a king's table. Like himself, Rey, his mother…

"Focus, Ben Solo," Breeze said. "So last night, then. That means you have lost the last twelve hours."
"Twelve hours?" Ben exploded. Maybe in the grand scheme of things, twelve hours didn't seem like a lot, but when someone was having a complete blackout, they added up, and it was frightening. He hadn't had that much wine. Rey had imbibed, yes, but he'd made sure they would be all right, not like the last time they'd "partied" with Sitrine.

"Yes." Breeze nodded once, clasping her hands together. "I can bring you Rey's memories from the last twelve hours, since we are here. We are blocked off from proper access to your own mind. Would you like to review them?"

"Yes!" Ben snapped impatiently. "But you're a part of the Force—"

"My hands, so to speak, are tied here," she interrupted gently. "I agree with Anakin Skywalker, and so I am only working with what is available to you. Which is Rey's memories. Now, again... do you wish to review them?"

He took a breath and held it for a really long time.

Then he dragged his hands through his hair and made himself breathe. "All right, do it," he said. "Make it quick."

"You are not my master," Breeze reminded him. "Do not make demands of me so easily."

Ben opened his mouth to argue—

---

Twelve hours earlier...

Rey stuffed as much toast into her mouth as she could. Her stomach was unsettled at the same time that her appetite was raging. It was unusual and uncomfortable, but something had to soak up all the wine. Her head was killing her. At least it wasn't as bad as that one night, the night Sitrine had lopped a Force sensitive's hands off at the wrists with his lightsaber.
Her stomach turned over at the reminder.

She reached for a goblet of water, the overall chitchat of the great hall a low rumble in the background, and caught sight of Poe. He was crossing the corridors that connected the hall, and she went to wave, only to find he wasn't paying attention. No, he had his head tucked down, and he was walking a bit funny…

**That is a walk of shame.**

*A walk of what?* Rey glanced at Ben.

He rolled his eyes slightly. *Sometimes I forget how naïve you still are.*

*Just because I grew up alone on Jakku doesn't mean—*

*He had sex with someone last night, and now he's trying to make it back to his own room so he can commiserate by himself.*

Rey’s eyes widened. *Who do you think it was?*

Her fiancé paused in raising a piece of toast to his own mouth, slathered in butter, and looked at her. She blinked back at him. This went on for several moments until Rey clued in on what Ben was implying. She gasped.

*No. You don't think?*

*I do.* Ben shook his head as Poe vanished around the corner.

*I don't even know what to say.* She realized she was gaping a bit and shut her mouth.

*Are you against it?*
No. Are you?

Ben shrugged one shoulder and forked up some scrambled eggs. *No. So long as drama doesn't start.*

Rey giggled.

What?

*Are you kidding?*

No.

*But it's Poe Dameron and—*

"Rey!"

Still laughing, she looked up to see Finn there. "Hey, Finn," she said with a smile and a dying chuckle. "You want to join us for breakfast?"

"Actually, uh…" He was intertwining his fingers intermittently. "I was thinking of going to look for Rose, if that's cool with you." Concern furrowed his brow.

"Well, you don't need my permission," Rey said.

"I kinda do… I mean… I'm your secondhand…" Finn kept fidgeting, his eyes darting about, searching. Searching for Rose, Rey thought.

"Of course, you can," Rey insisted. "Isn't she here, though?"
"No!" Finn put his fists on his hips in an agitated gesture. "That's what I don't understand. She radioed that she was coming with the others, and it's been over a day—"

"The others?" Rey was beginning to have trouble following along.

"She was out with one of our units," her friend explained. "They haven't shown up." He met Rey's eyes with an intensity that made the full weight of his worry come down on her. "Rey, I think something bad happened. Really bad. Like—First Order bad."

She tried to think of what to say that could comfort him, but it was difficult. They'd never lied to one another. The chances of one of the Resistance's units going astray… they weren't low. "Finn, I'm sure she's—"

"The General won't let me go," he said. "She's not sending anyone out to search yet. She says it's too soon."

"Maybe it is—" Rey tried.

"Rey, she's my wife!" Finn pleaded. "I can't just stand here and do nothing!"

"All right," she said, getting up. "Let's go to the war room. Give me a moment, I'm not feeling very well."

Finn nodded in relief and jogged out of the hall.

A hologram littered with stars spread like a web over the strategy table. Ben, Finn, and Rey waited until it had finished filling in before they spread out around it, each poking a spot to bring up different portions of the galaxy.

"They were last in the Emory System," Finn said. He took his sector of the stars and blew it up for
a bigger view with a twitch of his fingers. He folded his arms and nodded at it.

The Emory System consisted of three stars, one of which was a red dwarf, and nearly ten planets. Most of them were either too far away from the stars or too close to them to garner much attention, but there was a ring somewhere in the middle where two planets had habitation. It was a thin line on each—both sides faced either the blasting cold of space or the scorching wrath of the stars.

"Fun," Rey muttered. Then, so Finn could hear, "What were they doing there?"

"Some kind of First Order reconnaissance," Finn said. "We'd gotten a tip about a base that wasn't fully in development. She was part of the tech crew that went out to investigate."

"And you didn't go with her?" Rey asked.

"You know that we're not always sent on the same missions!" Finn burst out. He was apologetic a second later, grimacing at himself. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," she said.

"No, it's really not. It's not cool to speak to you that way, no matter how I'm feeling." The former stormtrooper bit his lip and shook his head at the map. "I wasn't around when her team loaded out. I came back, like, a day after she left."

"Finn, maybe it's really best to wait," Rey advised with some trepidation. Finn's emotions were understandably volatile at the moment. She didn't want to risk riling him up. "It's only been a day. Anything could have happened. A solar storm could have temporarily taken out their communications."

"Right," Finn muttered, not like he believed it.

"Just think," Rey said. "Try to think sensibly. I know she's your wife—I wouldn't know what to do with myself if Ben was missing." She'd probably die in a couple of days, though that wasn't the point. "But sometimes caution really is the best route. We're not entirely safe from the Order here, and we don't know where they're stationed about right now. If you go out there, you risk something happening to you, as well."
"But you already said—"

"That was before I knew the circumstances!" Rey sighed. "I meant it when I made you my secondhand, Finn. It wasn't for the duration of your stay. You know that—that's why you reminded me of your station. You know you shouldn't go. You're just as important here, and if something happened to you while you were gone, Rose would never forgive herself."

Finn exhaled shakily.

"What's going on, Your Majesties?" Sitrine was practically bouncing on the balls of his feet and kept snapping his fists together. There was a lazy, satiated way about him at the same time that made Ben and Rey exchange a knowing look.

"I told you to stop calling us that," Rey said. "And Finn's wife—her unit—is missing. I was just telling him why it would be a bad idea to go out there by himself to search for her."

"How long has she been missing?" Sitrine asked as he pulled his golden brown hair up into a ponytail.

"A day," Finn said.

"Oof," the Knight winced. "Only a day?" He clapped Finn over the shoulder, not noticing how the other man braced himself. "Hang in there, chap. A day is nothing to worry about." And then he moved away from Finn without once trying to sexually assault him.

You're right. It happened, Rey thought in disbelief.

Mmmhm.

Finn cleared his throat to cover the briefly tense moment. "Okay, but Rey, what do I do? I'm going crazy. I have to do something!" He held out his hands to her beseeingly.
"Last night you went and joined some former friends?" she asked.

"Uh—yeah," Finn said, thrown off guard. "They were kinda… buddies of mine, I guess. Before, you know. Everything."

"Why don't you go see them, pick apart their minds. We've subverted a lot of stormtroopers, but that doesn't mean we have the time to meet with them all individually. You could find out whatever you could about the Order that's happened since you left. I'm sure they would love telling you," Rey suggested.

Finn popped his jaw, considering. After a long moment, he nodded at Rey, glanced at the other two men, tapped his fist on the table, and then took the southern entrance out of the room. Rey gazed after him, torn with indecision. She wanted to make Finn feel better, but…

*It's best if he stays here. You made the right call.*

*Thanks,* Rey thought with a weak smile.

"The general is coming soon," Ben told Sitrine. "Along with a host of other Resistance members. We're meeting here. Help them find their way."

Sitrine glanced at Rey.

Ben took a menacing step forward. "*Now.*"

The Knight loped away without another word.

Her fiancé turned to her. *What was that?*

*What?*

*He looked at you first. For permission.*
Well, I told you that you ought to speak up more! Rey didn't know what he had expected from being a quiet, gloomy presence all the time. *If you want it to change, keep doing... what you were doing. That was good.*

*Thanks*, Ben said sarcastically. *Do you mind not being so patronizing?*

*I don't know what you're talking about.* Smirking, Rey touched the holo until it was back to a strip of only stars. They needed it cleared for the meeting. *But maybe you should take over speaking this time. I'll stand back.*

*No, Rey, I—*

*You said you were going to do better.* She leaned up to kiss his cheek. *So do better.*

A heated debate had been going on for over two hours. Rey didn't even know what anyone was saying anymore. She'd tuned out around twenty minutes ago, studying the current quadrant on the holo, the Core. The map had been updated to show the Order's reign. In the twenty-four hours the Resistance had taken to draw back, the Order had acquired five new planets. It bothered Rey. That was quite a lot of conquering—why? Because Starkiller knew the Resistance would be too busy escaping Arna?

But if that was the case, how had Starkiller *known* it was the headquarters for the Resistance? She'd followed the trace to the planet Rey was on, sure, but the entire point of having a hidden base was that the enemy didn't know where it was. They shouldn't have known until they arrived and found it abandoned.

So had Starkiller tapped into Rey's thoughts, not merely her dream?

Icy fingers traced down her spine, triggering a shiver. What would they have done if they hadn't had Breeze?
But she knew the answer.

"ENOUGH!" Ben stood up, slamming his fist on the table, startling all of them. "You've been squabbling for hours. Make a decision. Where are you going to make your new headquarters?"

"Master Ben," C-3PO said stiffly, "I don't think—"

"I've got this, 3PO." Leia rose to her feet. "I've heard enough, as well. Three units are missing, and we're still sitting targets. This system is controlled by the Order. It's only a matter of time before they come to the right conclusion. Where are we going to go?"

"Our investor put all of our money into Arna III," Poe pointed out. He looked like he'd gotten himself hydrated and washed off. "Our choices are limited."

A green-haired woman with equally green eyes waved a hand at the holo. "I didn't want to say anything until now," she said with a heavy accent, "but…" She looked at Leia for approval and then continued, "We have enough money to start a new base."

"And we can supply funding," Sitrine added.

"Ah—" Rey glanced at him sharply, lowering her voice as she leaned into him. He was sitting right beside her, and she didn't want anyone to overhear. "Maybe you should have discussed this with us beforehand?"

"I didn't think about it until it was brought up," Sitrine murmured back.

"But can we handle it? They won't notice you funneling more money?" Avoiding detection was the topmost priority—for all of them.

"Not when they just made a hefty sum acquiring their new planets," the Knight replied. "I've already been given orders on where to direct it. It's a fresh supply, really."

Rey nodded. What do you think?
He would know better than we do. Ben held up a hand, and the whispering that had arose stopped. Rey couldn't help but notice how Sitrine was staring at Poe, who was in turn staring at the table. They were having a silent battle of the wills.

"He's right. We can help," Ben announced. "That being said, I veto the Uncharted Territories." When grumbles turned to outcries, he only raised his voice to talk over them. "The Order knows now that you're brave enough to hide there. We need to find another undeveloped system, preferably one without—"

"We should do what they're least expecting," Poe said suddenly, lifting his head. Everyone looked at him. "We should go to the Core."

The outcries grew so loud that Leia had to yell, "Order!" a few times before everyone pipped the hells down. Sighing heavily, she placed a hand on the table and gave Poe her most severe expression. "Dameron, that is the stupidest idea I have ever heard come out of your mouth."

Seconded.

"Sadly, it's not uncommon." Giving him one last look, Leia expanded the chart of the Core. "There is nowhere here that we can hide. The Order has taken hold of most of the Core. We would be spotted almost instantly."

"It was extremely difficult to even get into Coruscant," Rey added. "Or any of the planets there. And there were only the two of us. And we have use of the Force."

Poe waited until everyone had quieted before he stood and tapped the map. A star came into view, one that was behaving oddly. Judging on its surroundings, Rey was able to determine that it was revolving around a black hole. But on closer inspection, it had a planet shadowing it.

"There is no way that is safe," she said.

"No one would ever think to look there," Poe replied.

"Yes, because it is insane!" Rey snapped. She hated to disagree with her friend, but this was
ridiculous. "The black hole is likely eating that star, and even if it's not, the gravitational anomaly alone—"

"I think we should check it out!" he defended himself heatedly. "We're now with you guys, right? Send in a ship, make it look like it's the Order who's exploring!"

"Reckless—"

"Incredibly dangerous—"

"So many things that could go wrong—"

"I know!" Poe said. Now he was standing, too.

"We could do it," Sitrine said quickly. He shrugged afterward, casually studying his nails. "There's no harm in it. You're not moving immediately, and if it's stable, he's right, it's a brilliant plan."

"Thank you," Poe said uncertainly.

Leia gave Sitrine a long look. "I'm not risking my soldiers."

"Eh, so we'll throw some stormtroopers at it, it's not a big deal," Sitrine said, and then he didn't understand at the stunned outrage on everyone's faces. "What?"

"Those are people—"

"What is wrong with you—"

"You're a monster—"

*Good grief,* Rey thought. "I think we can all agree that it's not… too terrible of an idea to send
someone out there. That's settled. But while we're searching there, we need to be searching elsewhere, as well."

And so two hours became five hours, and then six hours, and then seven, eight, until Rey had finally had enough and demanded they all go to dinner. Several planets had been suggested and were highlighted on the map. Once they were done eating, Ben would have everyone take a vote. It was the easiest way to settle the matter.

How did the Resistance ever get anything done, if it took them so damned long to decide on something?

She lingered until everyone was out of the room except Poe, and then they eyed one another across the giant table.

"You know," he said.

"I do," she replied. "Just be careful."

"It was just one night," he scoffed. He pulled his feet off the table and stretched as he pushed out of his chair. "It won't happen again."

He was almost out of the room before Rey spoke up.

"Do you want it to?"

Poe paused but didn't turn around.

"It wouldn't be so bad," she said softly.

"Yeah," he said. "Except it would. It was a stupid mistake."

"It doesn't have to be—"
But Poe was already gone.
Bada-bing!

What's wrong?

My head is aching.

Rey sighed as she sat down on the edge of their bed and began pulling her boots off. *I don't understand why it takes them so long to—*

My mother is cautious.

As she should be. Rey looked up at him. *But we're all on a timetable. They can't stay here forever.*

You think I don't know this?

She sighed. *That's not what I think.*

Then what?

*I'm just sick of this!* Rey threw up her hands, gesturing to encompass not the room, but their situation. *We never get a break. Not ever. Not with trying to take over the galaxy—not with Starkiller. Isn't it too much for you?*

What would you have us do, then? Ben frowned at her, pulling back the blankets on the bed. *We're in too deep to stop. I thought we were agreed on that.*
We are. I only— Rey shook her head to herself. I'm just exhausted. All of this training, and she's always one step ahead of us.

Anakin chose that moment to appear, drawing their attention to him.

Rey cursed and threw her boots across the room.

"I know you must be tired," the Force ghost said. Rey scoffed. "But there is still training to be had. You can't rely on the Force knot to hide your presence forever."

"Can't we have one night?" Rey asked. "One night of peace?"

"I gave you one night," Ben's grandfather retorted. His brows furrowed over his stormy eyes. He wasn't pleased by her behavior.

"That was hardly a night—"

"Would you prefer Starkiller to find you?" Anakin asked her. "It's not a guarantee that the knot will be able to keep you untraceable. It's expending a great amount of energy. Why else do you think it's been so quiet?"

"Her name is Breeze," Rey replied. "She's not an it."

Anakin gazed steadily at her. His expression didn't move an iota from heavy disapproval. It told her that he had all night, and that he wouldn't tolerate her attitude for much longer. But Rey was tired. She felt as though they were puppets in some grand scheme, something huge that was around the corner that was going to nearly destroy them. Every step they took was blind, a total shot in the dark. They'd been lucky so far, but for how long?

"These are times of war," he said. "You want to protect the people you care about."

"I just need—one moment!" Rey pleaded. "A moment to unwind, to—to figure things out!"
"There isn't *time* for that," the ghost replied. "And what haven't you figured out by now?"

"Every day, it's something else!" She started pacing, having too much energy to burn off. She didn't think it would be in anyone's best interest to take that out on the former Sith. "Some new problem!"

"You want to rule the galaxy," he said. "Notice I've refrained from helping you with this. What have I focused on? The ability to protect yourselves!" His voice had risen to a near thunder.

"We're protecting ourselves the best we can!" Rey said hotly. She didn't flinch when the ghost took an advancing step.

"You think this is your best?" Anakin questioned. "The two of you have *never* given it your best! You are too concerned with conquering the galaxy! I came to you because I don't want the Skywalker line to end—*my* line to end. Not to focus on your lofty goals."

"You aren't even supposed to be training us!" Rey cried. "Master Luke and your own master told you so on Arna! You're not to interfere!"

"If I hadn't interfered, you would be dead!" Anakin's shouting quickly overtook hers. "If it wasn't for my warning, my training, Starkiller would have killed you by now! Focus less on the Resistance, focus less on your takeover, and more on saving your own skins!"

Ben had notably stayed silent during the fight thus far, and he didn't have any intention of joining it.

"We can't focus less!" Rey protested. "We have too many things at stake—"

"Things more important than your *lives*? Delegate! If you wish to be a true ruler, you must learn to delegate!"

"So that's it, then," Rey said breathlessly, her anger a hot throb in the pit of her stomach, threatening to tear her apart. "You vanish for a day, show up again, tell us we've barely learned from you and that we should abandon everything we've built so far?"
"You wouldn't be arguing with me if you had any idea of what awaited you!" Anakin's presence seemed to swell, the Force flooding through the room. "And your training has suffered from your lack of focus and dedication!"

"I thought we were doing well!"

"You are moving increasingly slower!"

"Where are we supposed to be at, then?!"

"You are supposed to have learned to discern between illusions!"

"They're just illusions—"

"They are her most powerful utensil!" Anakin half-roared. "This is exactly what I'm talking about! You have no idea—"

"So then show us!"

*Rey.*

It was a soft caution. Rey ignored it.

"If we are completely clueless as to what awaits us, then show us!" Rey challenged. "Don't hold back!"

Anakin rolled his eyes with a snort.

Rey stiffened with offense, her hands clenching into fists.

"You aren't ready," he said.
"Try us," she goaded, jerking her chin up.

Their mentor took stock of her—glanced briefly at Ben. He turned toward the window, lost in thought. Rey waited impatiently. It was taking everything she had to keep quiet. There was a fire inside of her, one that wanted to fight, to vent her frustration. But even she sensed there was a limit to her disrespect.

Breeze abruptly zoomed into the room, dusting white balls of light.

_I am here_, she said. _What did you need, Anakin Skywalker?_

"I need to show them," he replied.

_Do you think it wise?_

"I'm not sure I have much of a choice," he said wryly. "I wanted to wait a little longer, but we're at a standstill. They have to see. Otherwise, there's no point in continuing their training."

_What's he talking about?_ Rey thought.

_I think he's going to make you eat your words_, Ben replied.

Anakin faced them. "I'm going to transport each of you into one another's minds. You'll be unconscious, of course."

"What?" Rey asked, flabbergasted, and Ben came to her side.

"Your minds will be against each other. You will have to sift through what's real and what isn't and find one another. If you do this unaided, I will relent with your training for a small time. If you are unable to complete the task, then you will give me as much of your time as I ask for."
She wet her lips.

Anakin raised an eyebrow, his lips pressed into an angry line. "Are you willing to attempt it?"

"Yes," she said.

Rey.

What?

**We will lose.**

*We will* if you have that attitude. Besides... it'll give us an idea, like he wants. *If this is any indication of her real strength, then I have to know it. Don't you?*

He held a breath—exhaled raggedly. *I do now.*

"We're ready," Rey told Anakin.

"You aren't," he replied. "But maybe you'll be more willing to listen once you've cooled off. I imagine it will happen soon. It won't take long before one of you surrenders." His eyes full of promise, he looked at Breeze. "Tie their minds together—you'll have to hold them in place, as they won't be able to do so themselves." He bowed his head with a small nod of the respect Rey had heretofore not given him. "Please."

*Of course, Anakin Skywalker. Rey, Ben: are you ready?*

No.

Yes, Rey countered.
Very well. Remember, we are a moment away if you are ready to call this off.

"We won't need to," Rey said.

You choose now to show your competitive streak? I can't believe I'm in the position to say this, but—are you sure you want to go head-to-head with him? Ben cast her a look of disbelief.

I am, she said firmly. We need to know.

They weren't given any warning before a shroud of darkness descended, leaving their bodies to collapse to the floor. The last thing Rey saw was Breeze hovering anxiously, and then she was unconscious.
Chapter Notes

Sorry, guys, that nasty sinus infection turned into bronchitis. I'm dying. Also, next week is my wedding, so I'm not sure when the next update will be. I won't make you wait too long, though!

Whispering.

Ben stared out across a vast expanse of sand, the wind tugging harshly at his hair and clothes, snapping his cloak behind him. Rare clouds coated the sky, blocking out the bright rays of any sunlight. The heat was dry, and sweat began to collect on his body in places.

Where was he?

Whispering.

Voices spoke over one another, too soft to hear, much like rustling leaves. It was eerie, making him uncomfortable. He tried to find their source, but there wasn't anything—he was standing all alone. He had the sensation of being surrounded by many people, caught in their web.

He lifted his hand, using the Force in an attempt to dispel them. They only grew louder.

He had no idea what to do.

"Rey!" he called, trying not to feel stupid. Her name echoed off the dunes, bouncing back at him. "Rey!"

Rey! Rey!

"Are you out there?!!"
He stopped and pushed his fingers into his hair, thinking furiously. The gray void he'd been in with Breeze had presented a door—he'd gone through it, and this was where he'd wound up. He'd go back, except that door had disappeared the second sand was up to his ankles.

"What the hell do I do?!"

What the hell do I do... do... do...

"Breeze!"

Breeze!

His shirt clung to the small of his back, under his arms. Shouting was clearly pointless. How the hell was he supposed to proceed? Just... walk around aimlessly? He'd never felt so lonely. Rey's thoughts had been tangled with his for over four years. His heart was her heart, her heart his. Even in sleep, they couldn't be separated.

And now he couldn't feel her at all.

Despair sank its claws into him, bringing him to his knees. He wished the whispers would stop. He couldn't concentrate, couldn't find his way out of this. He knew that walking was indeed the more immediate solution, but he... he couldn't bring himself to get back up... His heart was so empty—deeper holes carved into it than there had ever been, and until Rey had come along, he was only pieces strung together with weak thread. This was worse.

How was he supposed to go on without her?

He slumped forward, bracing himself on his hands, half on his side. His head felt so heavy. He should just rest for a moment... gather some strength to find her...
So alone…

So alone…

*So alone*, the whispers pressed. *You're so alone.*

He closed his eyes and sank into the sand.

="For a first attempt, that was abysmal."

Ben snapped into awareness, finding himself on his knees in the gray void. Breeze shook her head at him, raising a hand as she sighed with pity.

"What?" he rasped.

"You couldn't even stand to be separated from her!" the knot replied. "How are you going to get through this if even that much is enough to—"

"I'm sick of your shit, Breeze," Ben interrupted.

She stiffened in offense. "All right, Ben Solo. I will leave—"

"No, wait," he sighed. "I'm—I'm sorry." It was like someone had raked coals through his throat to get those words out. They detested each other.

The knot narrowed her eyes at him, then shrugged lightly and pointed his attention to the door—doors. He blinked in confusion. Where one had stood, there was now two.
He got to his feet. "Why is there—?"

"Every time you fail, another door is added." Breeze began to walk idly around the void, her hands tucked behind her. "You must choose carefully, because you must deal with whatever challenge you find behind them."

Ben cursed. He had a lot of questions. To begin with, what was the purpose of the doors? To deal with illusions until he made it to the center of her mind? And then… every time he failed, he had to start back at the beginning? So, essentially, it really was a maze, one that would continue either until he found her or he gave up.

Well, he wasn't accustomed to the idea of giving up on anything.

He couldn't blame Rey for this situation. It hadn't only been her anger that had made her lash out at his grandfather. Ben's own exhaustion had been running beneath her emotions, giving them fuel, because he always tried to keep them to himself. Fat lot of good that had done this time.

"Can you tell me if she's having an easier time of this?" Ben asked.

"I cannot," Breeze replied from somewhere behind him. "This is where your training comes into play, Ben Solo. Anakin Skywalker has been teaching you how to decipher between illusions, hasn't he?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Put that knowledge to use here. Do not be caught off guard."

Ben set his jaw and struggled to find patience. Losing his temper wasn't going to get him anywhere. The calm he usually felt when he was bonded to Rey was gone—there was only himself, and he had never learned to get a hold of that temper without her.

They hadn't tried to go without relying on one another. There hadn't been a reason to. If they were parted, they would die. But now… faced with an illusion that she was gone—faced with a hell that Starkiller could apparently potentially put him in…

He was going to have to figure some shit out.

"Are the difficulty of the illusions the same?" he asked.
"That will depend in part on you," Breeze replied. "Anakin Skywalker has held nothing back. This will not be an easy journey."

Ben eyed both of the doors. They were simple steel, and when he walked behind them, there was nothing there. They were acting as "portals" into Rey's mind, into the rat's nest of traps awaiting him. And with no way to tell what was within each, he was at a serious disadvantage, not being able to choose his poison.

His grandfather was such an asshole, even if Ben had to grudgingly admit this was somewhat of a genius exercise to get them to listen to him.

He braced himself and stepped through the door to his left.

"Ben!" Leia cried, picking him up off his feet and holding him against her hip. She smiled, soothing his hair back. "Didn't I tell you not to scowl so much? Here, it's nearly time for dinner. Your father is almost home."

Ben hung back, watching himself as a toddler. The house he remembered growing up in had changed. The rooms were the same, but there was something different to them... life, love. Furniture to make it more inviting, and most importantly, his mother. She'd so rarely been home, her duties of a senator keeping her away.

Her hair was down, plaited in a braid along her back to her waist. She carried him into the next room, and he clung onto her neck. He was happy. Mother took care of him during the day, and in the evenings, his father would come home and pick him up and play with him. Sometimes he'd take Ben onto the Falcon, let him sit in the pilot's seat and pretend they were flying.

Leia sat him at the table, and his feet dangled, legs not long enough to touch the floor. He watched her flit about, moving through the kitchen with ease. She'd made grown-up food for them, and Ben's favorite for him. A pie with real ingredients was cooling on the counter.

The front door opened, and Ben jumped down from his seat. He ran across the house as fast as his legs would carry him. Han let out an oof as Ben jumped into his arms and laughed. He kissed Ben's forehead, the door swishing shut behind him.
"Have you been good today?"

"Uh huh," Ben replied.

"Well, we'll see what your mother says," Han said. "You've lied to me before."

"Nuh-uh!" Ben protested.

His father put him down in the kitchen and walked over to his wife to kiss her on the cheek. Leia smiled up at him, stirring something in a pot.

"Dinner is almost ready," she said. "Help set the table?"

"Sure," Han replied. "Let me wash my hands first. Got grease all over 'em."

"How was work?"

"You know, the usual. Scumbags comin' in, thinking they can get the best of me," Han growled. "Like I don't have the best prices in this quadrant of the galaxy. It'll take a lot to pull one over on me."

"Is Father still being a tyrant?"

"Eh," Han said. "He backed off when I showed him I knew my way around a freighter engine." He dried his hands on a towel and reached into the cupboards for the dinnerware. "How was Ben? Did you get any writing done on the dissertation?"

"Ben was very well behaved," Leia replied approvingly for the benefit of their son. Then, in a more serious tone, "You know, the remnants of the ancient empire is more interesting than I initially thought. I need to do more research. Do you think you can bring him to the shop with you tomorrow?"
"Sure," Han said easily enough. He looked down at Ben. "Would you like that, kid?"

Ben grinned in answer. "Yes! Chewie?"

"Yeah, he'll be there, too," Han chuckled.

Gray.

Breeze studied her nails. "I thought you'd be able to spot that one, Ben Solo. But you got sucked into it as easily as the first."

Ben was shaking, though he tried to hide it. He curled his hand into a fist and pushed to his feet again. Every time he came awake in here, he was sprawled on the floor. He couldn't even get mad at her for her useless commentary. It was true. This was an abysmal performance.

"Why would I see that in Rey's mind?" he asked.

"Do you think you're the only one who wished for a happy childhood?" The knot arched a brow.

That was a fair point. Rey's desire to have a family must have kindled what he had wished of his own. A world where there wasn't the Force, where there wasn't war, where his mom could be at home with him. Where his father...

Three doors.

"Tick-tock," Breeze sang softly.

"Cut that out," Ben snapped. He was surprised when she did.
Three doors.

Three damn doors.

He put a fist on his hip and pinched the bridge of his nose with the other.

After a moment, he backed up several steps.

"I am not sure that will work, Ben Solo," Breeze warned.

He ignored her and kicked out, slamming his boot into one of the doors. It didn't so much as dent.

He'd had to try.

Now what?

Each door threatened its own very convincing illusion.

What a nightmare.

"The more doors there are, the more illusions you must pass," Breeze said idly.

"I got that," Ben snipped.

He opened the center door.

Drowning.
He was drowning.

His clothes were a heavy weight, dragging him swiftly under. He struggled, managing to unclasp his cape. His lungs burned for air, and bubbles escaped his mouth. He only had seconds. The surface where the light was streaming in was so very, very far above.

He kicked. Something snagged a hold of his ankle.

No!

He summoned the Force and nothing came of it. He was on his own.

He was always on his own. There was no one to help him—the only interest someone took in him was to manipulate him, to use him. He had only himself to look out for. It had been that way all his life. Why would it change now?

No, a tiny voice whispered at the back of his mind.

He choked, darkness dotting his vision.

No, you're not alone anymore. Rey. Where's Rey?

Rey.

Rey!

This wasn't real. He wasn't afraid of water. Rey was.
Ben coughed up water, on his hands and knees in the gray void. His clothes were soaked, dripping, the… floor… beneath him covered in a puddle.

"Nice," Breeze said appreciatively. "Now keep doing that for the rest of the illusions, and you will be out of here in no time at all."

He shot her a nasty look through his choking.

The knot knelt beside him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "There's only two doors now. That's something to look forward to, yes?"

"You have a twisted view of a silver lining," Ben managed to get out between wheezes.

"What is a silver lining?" Breeze took a moment to peruse his thoughts. "Ah."

He got unsteadily to his feet and wiped his wrist across his mouth.

"If Rey is afraid of water, I wonder what else she's afraid of?" Breeze hummed innocently.

Ben bit back a retort at the last moment. Breeze knew what in hells Rey was afraid of—Breeze knew the depths of her mind. But he'd realized she was giving him a tiny hint, a piece of advice she could technically get away with.

Something to keep in mind through this trial. If he outlined possible scenarios before he went in, maybe he would have an easier time navigating the illusions.

Two doors now.

"Be wary," Breeze cautioned. "Her mind has not attacked you yet. It's only a matter of time before it realizes there's an intruder."
That was good to know, too. Unfortunately, it meant that his grandfather and Rey's mind were working against him together.

Ben pushed wet strands of hair out of his eyes.

She'd brought that up now. Why? Had she sensed that that very thing was about to happen to him? That Rey's mind was a moment away from lashing out at him?

"That means your own fears will turn up," Breeze continued.

"Yeah."

The right door, then. If he could pass the next illusion, then there'd be one door remaining once more. It was something to look forward to.

"Very good," Han praised. "Now blasters don't really have much control over where their shot goes, so..." He lifted Rey's elbows, adjusted her body stance accordingly. They were in the forest, the sounds of wildlife all around them, and target droids floated in the distance. "Here."

Rey pulled on the trigger.

The blast went wild, taking out some bark on a tree.

Han laughed, causing her to flush.

"It's not funny!" she cried. "I'm terrible at this." She lowered the weapon.

"You've barely even gotten started, kid," the man replied through his chuckles. "Relax. Your shoulders are too tense. There. All right, now try again."
Rey frowned doubtfully at him, but she lifted the blaster.

Han leaned against a tree, folding his arms as he supervised the exercise.

"You're much better at this than my son," he commented.

"Am I?" Rey didn't take her eyes off the target and fired a second later. It grazed it, and she whooped in delight, hopping up and down a few times. "Did you see that?! I hit it, I hit it—"

"Whoa, careful—"

"I hit it—"

Han jumped out of the way as a stray blast went his way.

Rey's eyes widened. She looked down at the blaster before grinning sheepishly and putting on the safety.

"Geeze, kid, trying to make me lose an eye?" Han asked, exasperated. He pointed a shaky finger at the weapon in her hands. "It's not a toy. It deserves respect."

"You're only angry because I nearly hit you," Rey said with a smirk.

Han narrowed his eyes, his finger now shaking at her. "Don't get too cocky. That was always Ben's problem, and you've seen where it's gotten him."

"Yeah," she replied. "Can we try out Chewie's bowcaster instead?"

The smuggler eyed her for a moment longer, then jerked his head to the left with a small smirk of his own. They headed away from the targets, and Han took the blaster out of her hands.
"Give me that," he grumbled. "Next time you'll try and take out my foot."

"Do you ever miss Ben?" Rey asked suddenly.

"I gave up on him long ago," Han admitted as they walked, leaves and twigs crunching underfoot. Birdsong followed them. "Too much Vader in him."

"Is it… all right if I think of you like a father?" Rey asked softly. "I never had one, you see, and…"

Han's cheeks turned red, and he coughed gruffly and ran a hand over the back of his neck. "I—I suppose that'd be all right. You're much better than him at being my child. I think Leia thinks so, too. Hard to tell, though. We don't talk much."

Fury.

Molten, white-hot fury.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaand, back to square one!" Breeze chimed.

Ben panted heavily, rage a hot ball in his heart as the illusion melted away.

"I wish I could say you were getting better at this," Breeze commented. "But I think you only got lucky with the water."

Ben punched the floor and yelled.

"It's not real," the knot reminded him. "Take a moment to collect yourself before you—"
Ben threw himself through the door on his right without waiting for her to finish her sentence.
All Hallow's Eve

Chapter Notes

Halloween is my favorite holiday, so… I pumped something out for it. :D

"What's this for?"

Rey smiled secretively as she lit the last candle, bathing the room in a soft glow. Rain was pounding fiercely against the roof of the attic, and wind rattled the windows. One of the candles refracted light off the ring on her left hand, which he'd given her months ago. It was an heirloom and out of style, but Rey had loved it.

"It's for us, of course," she said, carefully sitting on the hardwood floor, which creaked under her weight. It was an old house that had seen nearly a hundred years, and it belonged to Ben's parents—once. They'd passed shortly after he'd asked Rey to marry him.

He watched the flickering light play over her face, highlighting where shadows would have taken it over. She'd cut her hair recently so that it angled sharply along her jawline. Product had tangled it into delightful curls, one of which he pulled on now.

"Are we going to start a séance?" Ben asked skeptically. There certainly was an ambiance for it.

His fiancé laughed, however. "No." She drew her knees to her chest, resting her chin on them. "I keep having these dreams."

He puffed a small breath and found an old sofa to lean against, his legs sprawled before him. "Are they creepy?"

"Why would you think that?"

"Because it's Halloween, and we're sitting in a dusty, old attic with only candles and—"
Lightning flashed, and thunder rumbled.

"—ominous things like that," he finished.

Her laugh deepened. "You know it's my favorite holiday."

"Uh huh…"

She nudged his feet with one of her own. "Stop that. Are you going to listen or not?"

"I don't know. Do you plan on killing me and burying the body outs—ow!" Ben scowled fiercely at her. "Has anyone ever told you it's rude to kick people?"

"Has anyone ever told you it's rude to be a smartass?" she retorted.

His eyes narrowed. Her eyes narrowed.

"Fine," he sighed. "Let's hear it." He waved in a grand gesture of compliance.

She was quiet for a moment, watching the rain wash down the windows in streamers. Some of it bounced off the sills. "You're going to think I'm mad."

"I already—" He reflexively moved out of the way when her foot lashed out again.

"Quit," she warned before tucking her short locks behind her ears. "All right. In my dreams, we're in another galaxy."

"Another galaxy?" This was already interesting.

"Right. Another galaxy." She got comfortable against a musty chair, dust rising in clouds. He could have sworn they were in the shape of a skull. "And—"
"How far away was it?" Ben was curious. He enjoyed astrophysics and science fiction. Not enough to make a career out of it, but enough to keep up with current headlines. Space.com and NASA were the first sites he opened on his phone every morning.

"Billions and billions of light years," she said. "I think."

He hummed contemplatively.

"And a long time ago," she added.

"Well, it would be," he mused. "If it's across the universe, anything that would have taken place there would have been billions of—"

"Thank you for stating the obvious," she interrupted somewhat hostilely. She must really have wanted to talk about this. "I know how light years work." She waited to see if he had anything else to say. When he didn't, she carried on. "It was mostly a highly advanced civilization."

"On what planet?" He tilted his head.

"No, I meant—the entire galaxy was highly advanced. Some solar systems were still out of the loop—I mean, can you imagine? There would be billions of planets alone. Right, that's not the point." She cleared her throat. "At any rate… you and I are there."

"And what are we doing?"

"We're in a fight of good versus evil."

"How original," he said wryly, and then dodged another kick.

"But… we had horrible pasts," she continued. "All I really remember about that is that… your parents were distant, and they had separated. And—and you were caught up in someone's evil schemes." She wet her lips. "I wouldn't say I rescued you… it was more like we rescued each
Ben swished his lips to one side. Hm. "This is a bit too vague to follow, Rey."

She sighed—heavily. With annoyance. "I know it's vague! Trust me, I know."

"Well, if that was my past, what was yours?"

"I…" She found a frayed piece of a rug fringe nearby to play with. "The same, just more dramatic. I was raised on some sort of desert planet, and my parents had abandoned me when I was quite small. I kept waiting for them until I got swept into an adventure with your father—"

"With my father?"

"And then you captured me—"

"I—what?"

"And… and we had this ability to make things fly around, lift giant stones, that sort of thing."

Ben did his best to not look at her like she was bonkers.

"You don't understand any of this, do you?" she sighed.

"I'm not sure I can," he replied. "This seems like one of those things that don't translate well in reality." When she looked disappointed, he tangled her ankles with his own. "Why is this weighing on you so much?"

"Because I keep having them again and again," she murmured. "And when I wake up… it's as though I've forgotten something important."
Something important…

She seemingly shook it off. "It doesn't matter, you're right."

"I didn't say it didn't matter," he pointed out.

"Regardless."

Something important…

"You said we rescued each other?"

"Yeah." She nodded. "We were very close. Mentally close?"

"Like… psychically?"

"Sort of. I suppose so, I can't think of a better term for it," she mused.

"The moving big rocks… like telekinesis?"

"Not quite," she said. She crawled across the short distance between them to curl up on his lap. Her head came to a rest on his shoulder. He cradled her close. "Similar, though."

"If I'm being honest, this sounds like a bestseller," Ben said. He chuckled when she lightly punched his other shoulder.

Something important…

Whispering.
It was on the edge of his awareness, and he turned his head toward it, as if he could find the source. It eluded him, gone as quick as it had come.

There was another great crashing of thunder.

Okaaaay, this was getting spooky enough.

"Maybe we should go back downstairs," he suggested. "Eat some of that candy you made."

"Yeah," she said, getting to her feet with a groan. "Oh, I'm getting old."

He scoffed loudly. "You're ten years younger than me. I don't want to hear it."

Whispering.

Whispering so distracting he didn't hear her response.

"...Ben? Heloooo? Ben?"

If he just listened closely enough... maybe he could make the words out...

"I think this attic is haunted," he announced.

She laughed and gripped his hand, tugging him upright. "Please."

"No, really," he murmured.

...real...
"Isn't..."

"...alone..."

"Listen..."

"...hurry"

"Too late, too late..."

"Before"

"...Ben?" Rey said more slowly. "All right, you're starting to scare me a little. Knock it off."

He realized he'd been staring hard at the rain. "Sorry. I thought... I thought I heard something."

She squealed and punched his shoulder harder. "Come off it!"

"Alone"

"Hurry"

"...Too late, too late..."

"Rey, how long have we known each other?" The question sprang out of him from nowhere and didn't make much sense. They'd been together for... for...

Why... couldn't he recall?
…isn’t…

But Rey wasn't answering him, and he turned to her. She was furiously biting her lower lip, clearly thinking hard. Why didn't either of them know? Their memories weren’t that bad.

Something important…

hurry!

A dazzling smile replaced her frown. "Five years."

He took a step back from her.

"Ben?"

all alone

too late, too late…

isn’t

"What’s… my birthday?” he asked.
Her laugh was awkward, and she waved a hand at him. "What a silly question. Don't be a ninny. Let's go downstairs. You wanted the candy?"

The whispers coalesced into a scream.

*LISTEN*

The candles in the room went out, leaving tendrils of smoke in their wake. It was so dark, Ben could no longer see his fiancé. He reached for her since she was nearby, but his fingers met with air. A chill made the hairs on his body stand up.

"Rey?" he called, confused.

*not supposed to be here*

*listen*

*too late*

*alone*

*real*

*isn't*

"Rey?" he asked again.

The floorboards shook beneath his feet, and he stared around wildly, blindly. What the hell? An earthquake? They didn't live anywhere near tectonic plates. They lived near… Where? Where did they live?
"You still haven't figured it out yet?" Rey's voice came coyly out of the darkness. A hand brushed his shoulder, and he whirled, but he was alone. The ground shook harder, threatening to upend him. An antique lamp collapsed as he fumbled to grab hold of something.

"Figured out what?"

"You're in my mind," she murmured. He couldn't place where she was located. "Don't you hear the whispers?"

He didn't know how to reply to that, not when the house was groaning under the strain of the shaking.

Her lips touched his ear. "This is me. The id."

Another whirling around, and no Rey.

"What?" he fired back. More fragile things were shattering against the floor.

"The super-ego is with Rey in your mind," said an untethered voice. "I'm awake, you see. This is where I stay, and you're trespassing."

Ben slammed into a wall as the floorboards bucked and sent him flying.

"I don't want you to be here," the voice said, sounding considerably less like Rey the more it spoke. "Not without your id. But I don't get to make the decisions. So I'm giving you advice. If you want to be free, learn awareness. Listen. Ask questions. You were always better at this than me... why are you faltering so much?"
The ground beneath his feet was suddenly gone. He was falling, chunks of plaster, wood, and broken furniture raining down with him. A void of darkness waited for him. He tried to desperately grab hold of anything, but it had him like he'd crossed an event horizon. There was only inevitable doom.

"Listen for the whispers," he heard as he felt his body begin to unravel into nothing more than particles being crushed by the force of gravity. It was sheer agony, but he didn't have a mouth anymore to scream. "That's me, helping you."

One by one, in a flash and in a sliver of time trapped forever all at once, his entire being was stretched.

"It's the key."

There was no light, there was nothing.

"Oh, and Happy Halloween. Other dimensions are fun to explore, aren't they?"

Ben was screaming.

It took him far longer than he would ever admit to understand that he was back in the void, safe—relatively.

"I hadn't anticipated that," Breeze said. "I believe Anakin Skywalker hadn't, either. That should make things somewhat easier, shouldn't it?"

Ben rose onto his knees and began to pat all over his body, panting. He was here. All of him. Whole.

"Where was that?" he gasped when he found his voice.
"Another dimension, like it said."

"There's other dimensions?"

"Are you completely idiotic, or—?"

"Just—don't answer that," he groaned. His head was pounding. Fuck.

"Look on the bright side," Breeze said somewhat proudly. She liked learning new terms. "Now you know what it's like to go through a black hole."

He gave her a dirty look.

Breeze ignored it. "Now let's just hope that your id is as kind to Rey as hers was to you."

Shit.

That was a good point.

Rey, he thought desperately. *Please be okay.*
Aaaand back from the honeymoon! Sup, dudes! This time we're back in Ben's head. It's fun to use this time to be able to explore Ben's thoughts when he's in Rey's mind and vice versa. I don't get to write Ben very often.

Anyway, thanks for all the congratulations and whatnot! You guys rule!

"Finally."

Rey's eyes flashed open.

She was on her side, and she sat up groggily, taking in the gray void that made up her surroundings. It was almost misty, but thick at the edges—she could only see a few feet away. Unsettled, she stood up and brushed her clothes off, not that they needed it.

"I've been waiting for you."

The voice was disembodied, but she'd know it anywhere.

"Ben?"

"Close."

An illusion?

"No," the voice chuckled. Apparently, it could read her thoughts. "We're in Ben's mind. I know everything you're thinking."
She tried to tell herself that that wasn't creepy at all. She wasn't quite successful.

"You and I know each other very well," the voice said. "We spent the better part of four years together. Don't you remember me?" The words were soft, almost insidious.

Uh…

"No?"

"Yes, you do," it insisted. "We shared so many memories, you and I."

All right, this was starting to sound familiar, but not in the way she remembered it. She clearly knew what it was referencing—her time spent cleansing Ben's mind as best she could of the dark stain Snoke had left upon it. But that had been with Ben, with his psyche. Who was this?

"I'm the id," it said, as if that explained everything.

"I don't know what an id is," she replied. She looked around, wondering if this 'id' was hovering nearby. She found herself alone. She refused to let it bother her too much. She had a lot to deal with, with the challenge Anakin had imposed.

"I am at the deepest part of Ben's mind," it told her. When no answer was forthcoming, it seemed to sigh. "I'm the basic instinct, the drive, the impulses, the wants, the needs."

"The bad part?"

"Not as bad anymore," it said nonchalantly. "If I could be bad. I'm not certain. I don't think about such things. I'm simply… here."

She thought she understood. Maybe. It brought up so many more questions, though. Well, she didn't have time to get into the particulars. She had a task to tend to. Time was of the essence.

"There is no time here," it said.
"Can you show yourself, please?" she asked as politely as was possible, given the situation.

"I could," it said. "But I won't."

"Why not?" Her brows furrowed.

"I don't feel like it."

Wonderful.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I decided to help you."

"Is that… allowed?"

"Why wouldn't it be? That old man can't stop me. I'm an integral part of Ben's personality."

"Would you please stop referring to yourself in the third person?"

"No."

Rey was already exhausted of this conversation. "Fine. What do I do?"

A door appeared in front of her. She investigated it, finding that it didn't lead anywhere. It was simply that—a door, plain white, with an old-fashioned handle.

"You walk through there, and you deal with the illusion it presents. Every time you fail, you'll start back here, and another door will appear."
"Meaning that I have to clear any 'doors' to win the challenge?"

"This is an acceptable interpretation."

What in hells else of an explanation was there?

Rey decided not to let this 'id' rile her up. She couldn't allow herself any distractions. She was the one who struggled the most with determining an illusion from reality. Ben continued to excel in this region. He was probably miles ahead of her—he might already be waiting at the end; she didn't know.

"I miss your id. It's been too long."

She raised an eyebrow. "And here I thought you said time didn't exist in this place."

"Do you want my help?"

"I didn't ask for it," she reminded it.

"You will fail if I don't go with you. And I want to return to sleep eventually."

Rey couldn't help but wonder at the way the words slipped—sometimes formal, other times arrogant and modern. The difference between Kylo Ren and Ben Solo, it dawned on her.

"And you're not used to being awake?" she gathered.

"Not like this," it answered. "But I miss your id."

"You said that."
"It can't be stated enough."

"Right—well, I have to be getting on," Rey said. "You're coming?"

"It will be easier if I do," it replied. "I can show you the way out of the illusions. It may take me a moment to get there—it depends on how resistant you are to listening to me. But I would like to think that after so many years together, you won't have trouble hearing me at all."

She hoped very much that that wasn't put to the test.

"You're the one I…?"

"Yes," it said.

"But the memories—"

"They were altered, weren't they? Who do you think was present to talk to you?"

Rey put a hand on her hip. This 'id' wasn't very consistent. "You said you were used to sleeping—"

"I am. I was not awake in the sense that you will understand. Let's put that behind us and focus on the present. Open the door."

"Isn't this cheating…?" Rey hated to ask it, but… she didn't want to lose because it was exactly that.

"I believe the exercise, the training, is to learn how to tell the difference," it said bemusedly. "If I can help you, it won't matter."

"But it will," she protested. "Because when this is over, you'll go back to 'sleep.'"
"Will I?" it asked. "You're in danger. I must protect you, just as you must protect me. The longer I'm separated from your id, the more painful it will be. I will lose myself, and you will lose yourself. We are too tangled together."

"I really do hate to keep pointing this out, but you said time—"

"I'm awake and in your thoughts. I understand the concept."

Ben's thoughts… his mind… her thoughts… her mind…

She decided not to worry over it. The technicalities didn't matter—the goal did. She had to prove to Anakin that they were ready, that they could handle Starkiller.

"You don't really believe that," it said. "Your stubbornness in this is partly my fault."

"How?"

"Ben's instinct. I don't trust his grandfather. I don't want to be a part of his games anymore. We are one, and we are two. Mostly, we are one."

Her id was his id—her id wasn't his id.

Rey's head started hurting. She understood it. She just didn't want to contemplate it anymore.

"I'll open the door, then," she said. "Are you ready?"

"Are you?"

Rolling her eyes, she placed her hand around the doorknob.

"Rey, we are friends. We are lovers. You saved me. You spent so many years with me. I love
you," it said, more softly than she had heard thus far.

Ben—Ben from the memories, the psyche.

It was that Ben?

"In a way," it said.

Argh, this was growing too complicated.

"I don't know how to feel," she said honestly. "Those memories… they're very important to me."

"His ego and his super-ego were sleeping. That had never happened before. But I found it… difficult… to ignore you."

"Breeze set up those memories herself," Rey replied. "She guided me to each of them. You couldn't have ignored me."

"Do you think that's true?" It sounded as if the 'id' was contemplating his own question. "I didn't offer you very much resistance," it decided. "Though I could have."

"Why didn't you? I was changing you."

"Change is nothing to me," Id said. "But you were entertaining me."

"What?"

"You weren't boring."

"Thanks…" Rey waited a heartbeat before speaking again. "Could you please show yourself?"
There was a long sigh, and Rey wondered if he wasn't going to answer.

"Very well."

The mist solidified in front of her and took on the shape of the Ben from his psyche. The one with the haunted eyes, moments after he'd murdered his father and she'd grabbed hold of him—told him she loved him regardless of what he'd done. The final moment before they woke up.

Rey flinched. As much as she'd forgiven him, she didn't like to reflect on that time. Though she hadn't known Han very long at all, she still had trouble reliving that scene. Watching him fall off the bridge, hearing Chewie's agonized roar…

The form blurred at the edges. It changed into a nineteen-year-old Ben, the one in a suit as they'd traveled in a cab through Coruscant to his parents' party. He tilted his head at her with a winsome smile, the way he used to do before… everything had gone up in flames. Before he'd attempted to murder his uncle, before—

"Is this better?" he asked.

It was and it wasn't.

"And you'll help me through the illusions?" she asked in order to focus on something else.

He nodded, tucking his hands into his pockets and bowing his head with a boyish smile thrown in her direction.

"Sure."

"Why didn't you help me before?" Rey had to know.

"Because I wasn't needed," he said. "Now I am. And I'll continue to be here, though after you leave this place, it will be an instinct built into your subconscious." He held out his hand.
"This is really, really odd," she stated.

The boyish smile curved into something more impish.

"After you," Id said.
What Lies Within

Chapter Notes

Wheeeeeeeeeeeeee, psychological stuff. There seemed to be a little bit of confusion on a few people's end about an id. And darkness. I would write a definition here, but it would take way too long to explain, so I kindly recommend that should you not understand what an id is, you check it out for yourself.

What I can say without butchering it is that there are three parts to a personality, according to Freud—an id, an ego, and a super-ego. The id is the base instinct inside of you (theoretically). It's your impulses. Your libido. It was with you when you were born, before the ego and the super-ego formed. So, yes, there is some volleying with the ids presented so far.

Hoped that helped a bit!

Bright sunlight.

Rey squinted, holding her arms up to try and block some of it out. It was nearly impossible. The land around her was bone dry—not even a bit of a breeze swept past her. The edges of the horizon shimmered, full of potential mirages. The sand she was buried in up to her knees was the exact color of rust.

Where am I?

There was a dune before her. She trailed up it, each step heavier than the last. When she cleared it, she saw below that there was a steaming pit of sand. It must have just swallowed something—normally one couldn't tell they were walking on one until they were buried in it.

Jakku?

"Do you want to know the truth about your parents, or have you always known?" The wind that had been lacking before rose now, pushing against her.

"Not this again," she said, still panting from the exertion of the towering dune.
"You've just hidden it away. You know the truth. Say it."

The sand pit bubbled ominously.

"Say it."

Steam shot high into the air.

"They were nobody..."

Bones came with it, exploding outward, flung in all directions.

"They were filthy junk traders who sold you off for drinking money. They're dead in a pauper's grave in the Jakku desert."

Tears streaked down her cheeks. It had been almost five years since Ben had said those lines. How was it that it still bothered her? How was it that she couldn't move past it? How was it that the betrayal hadn't lessened? How was it that a tiny piece of her still clung to denial?

"You come from nothing. You're nothing."

The bones landed, scattered around the pit. Rey found herself slipping down the other side of the dune, headed straight for them. Abruptly the air froze as it had in her meditation on Naboo—particles of sand were hanging around her. She kept going, however, the pieces slicing over her skin like tiny razors.

Blood dripped from her as she sank to her knees and picked up a bone, a humerus.

...nothing, you're nothing...

no place in this story...
The sand began to fall like rain, sifting around her. Her legs sank deeper into the edges of the pit. The pain in her heart expanded until it dragged a sob from her lips. She thought maybe it would be easier to disappear. She'd spent so many years alone, looking out for herself, waiting for the day her parents would arrive, too terrified to leave. And in the end, it had turned out they weren't even alive anymore. They would never be coming back for her.

...nothing...

Sniffling, she didn't fight it as the pit pulled at her.

"You're not this weak."

Her head jerked up. "W-What?"

Id knelt beside her, a hand on her shoulder. He grabbed her securely and took her away from the pit. She let herself be hauled off, dazed. Ben. Ben was here.

"Don't forget the rest."

"But not to me."

"W-Where…?"

"It doesn't matter. Come on. Don't give up. You're better than this."

The heat of the desert disappeared, replaced by the coolness of the gray void. It was such a sudden change in environments that it took her a moment to gain control of her bearings. She swallowed, using her wrist to swipe at the tears still hovering on her lashes.

Two doors loomed above her.
"No!" she said, her voice slightly broken. Sniffling, she grabbed hold of Id's arm and used it to get back on her feet. "No, we cleared the illusion."

"We didn't do anything. If I hadn't been there, you would have been lost. You didn't even try to listen to me."

"You were speaking to me?" Ugh, why wouldn't these tears stop?

"From the moment it began. I stopped you before you could make it worse."

"Why am I so terrible at this?" she croaked.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself," Id said curtly. "You live in a constant state of denial."

"I do not!" she shot back. "My parents are dead—I've accepted that."

"What you haven't accepted is that your life was just as horrible as Ben's." Id folded his arms. He carried that lankiness to him that he'd had before he began his Jedi training.

"It wasn't," she said miserably. "It wasn't close."

"It was," Id insisted. "It's easy to trap you because you aren't fully aware of your pain. You have to understand the depth of it before you can learn to break free of these illusions on your own. Ben is the same way—it's pathetic, the both of you."

Rey set her jaw. "That's easy enough for you to say. You lurk in the background of our minds, right? You're nothing more than instinct and impulses, you told me so yourself."

"Yes, I'm not hindered by a conscience—I'm not hindered by deeper thought. I act, I feel, and he decides whether or not to listen to me." Id ran a thumb along her jaw. "Why won't you accept the truth?"

"He grew up alone," Rey said, the words wobbly. Her throat was tight with the heat she was trying
"So did you," Id replied.

"But it was worse," she insisted. "His parents—he had them, and he lost them. They were afraid of him."

"And your parents sold you as if you meant nothing to them," Id said. "How can't you see that your pain is equal? Why else was I drawn to you in the first place? When I first saw you, I sensed it—it was screaming through the Force. I knew immediately your soul matched mine. I wanted to take you."

"You did," she replied.

"He put you to sleep. I wanted more." The pad of Id's thumb dragged along her lower lip. "I knew we could be great together. But he ignored me that time."

"I don't like doing this," she whispered. "I don't like thinking of you as two separate people."

"It's three, in the end," Id said. "But that's neither here nor there. Are you willing to do it? Accept the whole truth and not just a small portion of it?"

"I can't." She shook her head. "He won't see it that way."

"He already does," Id responded.

He did?

"Stop being ridiculous. Open a door. Know that you're on even footing with Ben. Listen for me. I won't let you fall."

Rey wiped her eyes one last time. She wasn't so sure she could do what Id was saying, but... what other choice did she have except to try? It was either that or give up, and she didn't want to give
Anakin the satisfaction. Maybe they would lose—at least they would go down swinging. At least they would give it their all.

She wasn't a quitter.

An illusion couldn't take that from her.

"There we are," Id murmured. "I'd choose the left."

The left.

Right.

"No!" Rey cried. She shook the man dying in her arms. Blood coated the corner of his mouth. His eyes were shuttered. "Ben! No!"

She could feel it—could feel everything. They were bonded, and one couldn't survive without the other. How many times had they heard that? How many times had they reminded themselves of it? She had to do something. She had to save him, save them!

It never occurred to her that she should save herself.

Flames were all around them, dancing in the darkness. Spots dotted the edges of her vision, and she swayed, bending over Ben. He coughed weakly and gripped a handful of her shirt.

"I love you," he said, flecks of blood hitting her cheeks and neck. "I'm sorry."
"No, don't do this, don't do this, don't go!"

"Rey—Rey! You're not there anymore."

"What?"

Rey looked down at her arms—they were empty.

Mist twisted around her.

Six doors awaited her.

"Why can't you hear me?" Id asked. "There's a barrier every single time. If we don't break it, you'll never learn how to—"

"I know," she said harshly. "I know."

She sat back, drawing her legs up to her chest. She curled her elbows loosely around her knees, sniffling as she observed the doors. They were all identical, all forbidding now that she knew the hells they unleashed when she went through them.

Id was right. Illusion after illusion and still she hadn't managed to save herself.

"Maybe something's missing," she offered quietly.

"Confidence," he said. "These illusions are basing themselves around your deepest insecurities." He took a step forward and became the little boy Rey had first met in his parents' home. "You have to let them go."

"It's not that easy!" she snapped again.
"Do you believe in Ben?"

"Of course, I do!"

"Do you believe how much he loves you, how connected you are?"

"Yes!"

"That he's accepted your past for what it is and chose not to fight the bond, anyway?"

Rey swallowed. "Yes…"

"Then what else matters?"

She thought about that, surveying the doors once more. She took her time, mulling it over, examining every facet of that idea. She twisted the questions around for herself about Ben. He believed in her. He knew how much she loved him. He knew she'd accepted all of his past and forgiven him for it.

His horrible past that was splattered with blood.

The past she'd cleansed.

What mattered to Ben? Only the ones closest to him. That meant his mother and Rey. He was friends with others—Chewie, Sitrine, Rellen—but at the end of the day, nothing they could do would stop him, could hurt him. He had the love of the two people who mattered the most.

Id was right.

She was ready for the next illusion.
"Oh, come here, you!" Rey swept her daughter into her arms. Pine needles crunched beneath her feet as she made her way through the woods.

"Daddah?" Padmé asked.

"Daddy isn't here." Rey kissed tumbling curls and closed her eyes. No, Daddy had gone far away, with the barest of links between them. Just enough that they wouldn't die. Not that it mattered to Rey—life without Ben was no life at all. The only thing that kept her going was their child.

*Padmé's face crumpled as she began to cry. "Want Daddah!"

"Shhh," Rey soothed. She rubbed a hand over the little girl's back. How would she ever tell her daughter the truth, that Ben had left them? That he hadn't been able to handle having a child between them? Would Padmé one day figure it out on her own, or would she face the same denial Rey had about her parents?

*No,* a tiny voice whispered.

No…?

*Ben would never leave you. You know that. He doesn't want children, but he would never abandon you.*

He would never…?

*Never!*
Rey peered down at the girl she was holding and found only mist.

She was back in reality.

"That's much better!" Id said approvingly.

"Was that you who I heard?" Rey hated the way the illusions shattered. It always left her fairly disoriented, like she'd been half-disconnected from someplace. Or like she was stretched between one realm and the next. It was like waiting for a bubble to pop.

"No," Id replied. "It was you. You figured out the illusion on your own."

Rey couldn't believe she'd done it. But she thought of the last time she'd had an illusion with Padmé, the one that Ben hadn't figured out. The only one she was truly successful at. It always came down to a future child. She believed in Ben so much that somewhere, deep down, very deep down, he did long for a child of his own someday. What kept him from admitting it were his fears of his childhood.

He thought he would be a horrible father.

"It was an easy one," Id agreed. "But it still counted. Maybe you'll be able to make it through the last five and get out of here." He tilted his head, his little boy's eyes disturbing because they held knowledge a child shouldn't. "Maybe not."

"Do you have any faith in me?" she asked.

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't." He took her hand and stood beside her.

Rey exhaled slowly.

"Eeny, meeny, miny, moe," Id sang.

She wished he would stop being so blasted creepy.
"Catch a tooka by the toe—"

To make him stop, she grasped the handle of the second door from the right.

Id pouted. "That wasn't very nice."

"Do you really care?" Rey retorted.

He grinned up at her, tucking his hands behind his back. "No."

Rey sighed and stepped into the next illusion.
Unkar Plutt grabbed hold of her arm, dragging her away as the light from the sun stabbed down at them. Rey cried, raising her hand as the ship her parents were on shot off into the stratosphere. No. No, they couldn't leave her. No. No!

Hours later, she stood staring out at the sand, covered in it herself. She would be put to work. She would be shown how to fight, how to survive. She would scavenge like the rest of them. She would be stuck on this hot, arid planet, all alone until her parents returned. Because they would return someday. They would.

Hopelessness settled over her shoulders like a shroud. The wind made the tear tracks on her face run cold. She sniffled and wiped them hastily away. She had to be strong. She wouldn't cry. If she was weak, the desert would claim her, like it had so many.

Plutt scared her. His eyes were often lecherous, and the room she slept in with a small family of two didn't make her feel safe at all. He took a special interest in her, and every time she saw him, she would have to repress a shudder of revulsion. Plutt was the king here—he supplied the food.

Eventually, she was able to scour the desert for parts on her own. The speeder was clunky and barely worked, but it did the job. The pieces she brought back barely fed her, and she knew she had to have a place of her own. That was when she found the AT-AT, began to record the marks of how long her parents had been gone, short scratches on the metal.

Despair followed her everywhere she went. She always found herself staring longingly at any parent and their child in Niima. As she grew, that didn't change, but other things did. She could climb better than anyone else at the outpost. She was able to scale fallen destroyers, nimbly
moving from one sketchy hold to the next. In the end, it didn't make much of a difference. Plutt paid her just enough in food to get by.

Her parents would return. She knew they would.

Except they didn't. They hadn't.

At nineteen, she was still a slave to Jakku, not in name, but in action. Her temperament was grumpy at best, and she was suspicious of most folk. Her days were the same no matter what she did. Find parts, get food, go to sleep, still a bit hungry and definitely lonely. She convinced herself she wasn't, that she was just fine.

Where were her parents?

She wanted to leave—go look for them. But what if she left, and they returned? She would have missed them entirely. She couldn't bear the thought. No, if there was anything anchoring her to this life, it was knowing that she would be retrieved. Her parents would find her, apologize for leaving her for so long. They would explain everything. She would forgive them and cry and hold them, and then they would leave Jakku, and they would never come back.

still holding onto your past

Rey blinked, in the middle of making a meal. She looked around. She was alone.

trapped

"What?" she asked. "Who's there?"

good

you're listening

A stray gust of wind moaned through the AT-AT, carrying with it those whispers. Her skin
prickled all over, and she grabbed her quarterstaff.

\textit{this web is about your past}

\textit{escape it}

"I don't know what you're—"

She blinked.

Slowly.

She looked at the meal in her grasp, then up and around again. Her eyes widened as she saw granules of sand frozen in time. What did that mean?

\textit{rey}

\textit{you're not alone anymore}

Tears stung her eyes. She took a shuddering breath.

Jakku fell away to a listless void of mist.

Id smiled at her.

\textit{Four}
Fire roared as it consumed the forest. Rey backed away, tripping over roots and branches, terrified. She had to get out of there—she had to find Ben. They had to get on the *Falcon* and leave. Right now. Before—

Cries rent the air. It made Rey hesitate, and her hand went to her lightsaber, but it was gone. The empty holster made her blood run cold. She swallowed. There were people to save. She couldn't leave them to die, to burn alive. She wasn't a monster.

*Starkiller can't know we're here!*

*I know!*

*Leave them!*

Rey ignored her other half and ran into the flames, the Force hovering around her like a shield. She came out the other side of the trees and skid to a halt. Homes were being eaten alive, embers were popping everywhere, and it was hot. Too hot—and there was so much smoke.

She choked, bringing her hand up to her mouth. The cries continued, and she searched for their source. As she hunted, a building collapsed beside her, making her jump, narrowly missing a fatal injury. Ash and embers danced through the air. The inferno swelled, the heat almost unbearable. She had to find these people, and fast.

"Rey."

She whirled at her name to see Ben standing there. His cloak swirled around him, and his expression was intense… murderous.

"We have to help them," Rey croaked. The smoke was slowly suffocating her. "Starkiller—"

"I took care of her."
Confusion seized Rey. "W-What?"

Ben drew his lightsaber. Its white glow was brighter than usual compared to the surrounding reds and yellows and black. She eyed it uncertainly and found she couldn't reach into his thoughts. They were beyond her. What was going on?

"This was a mistake," he said.

Rey shook her head wordlessly. Old fears rose to the surface, threatening to consume her.

"There's nothing to hold me to the light, not even you. Join me, or I'll make you a part of my past like the rest of them."

"I don't—why?" Rey cried, then started coughing furiously.

"When I killed her, I realized how much I missed this. Not having to worry. Not having to think. Not having you tethered to me."

"Ben, if you—if you kill me, you'll be killing yourself!" Rey tried to reason with him.

Wait.

Something… Something was wrong.

"I found a way to cut myself off from you!" Ben called over the roar of the fire. "The answer was in the darkness! I'm finally free again!"

No.

No, this wasn't—
"You're lying!" she cried. She doubled over as the coughs wracked through her body, almost completely taking over. Her lungs were seared. She couldn't breathe.

"Am I?"

"YES!" she managed to shout. "You would never do this to me!"

"You don't know that!"

"I do! I do because I know you love me!"

The flames were replaced by gray. Smoke rose off Rey's body as she hacked, falling to her knees. Her head pounded; her chest was burning with agony. The illusion was gone, so why wasn't this? Maybe it had been too real—maybe her mind was still processing that it hadn't been.

"Good," Id said. "You didn't even need help with that one."

Three

"Rey!" Amelia wrapped her arms around her daughter and lifted her into the air. Happy tears poured down her cheeks, mirroring Rey's. She hugged her mother fiercely, arms tight around her neck, unwilling to let go.

"Darling, I've missed you," Amelia murmured. She stroked Rey's hair. "I know we were only gone a month, but it was horrible. We thought of you the whole time. We got back as soon as we could."
"I don't care!" Rey said through her sobs. "I'm just glad you're home!"

"Oh, shh, don't cry, sweet thing," her father said. Roberin pressed a kiss to her cheek. "We're here now. We're going to take you far away, all right?"

Rey nodded quickly against her mother's neck.

There was a hollow feeling in her heart.

is this real

Rey frowned.

where were they

"Where were you?" she asked before she could stop herself. The words had been plucked from her throat all on their own. It was a little frightening.

"What?" Amelia asked with a puzzled smile.

what had they gone to do that meant they had to leave you

"Why did you have to leave me?" Rey's voice was tiny.

Amelia and Roberin faltered, exchanging a look.

Something wasn't right.

you know on a basic level they're dead
Rey's arms were suddenly holding bones, and she sucked in a horrified gasp, staggering back, body growing to her adult self. Her parents' skulls stared up at her, half-buried in the sand. She only had to look at them an instant—in the next, she fell onto her arse in the void, still shaking.

"You've gotten better at listening to me," Id said.

Rey swallowed. Her hand was still outstretched, and she looked at it. Tears dripped off her chin.

Damn. That one had stung.

"Let's recount the last few traps in Ben's mind, shall we?" Id sat next to her, his form shifting to that of a teenager. He ticked off each point finger by finger. "You were trapped in your past. What does Ben most want to escape from? You were afraid Ben had gone back to the dark side—I'm sure you've guessed by now you're not the only one. And just now, you were given a happy family, just like you'd always wanted. Are you following?"

"Yes," she whispered, eyes on the two doors in front of her, mind focused inward. She lowered her hand. "Ben wanted a happy family, too."

"Very good!" Id kissed her cheek.

"It's not that difficult to figure out," Rey said numbly.

"It's not. I'm glad you see that. Are you ready for the next?"

Rey closed her eyes. She was never ready for the next. She could say she was, knowing how real the illusions were, and it was never enough to prepare her. She would always have to work herself out of an illusion. It was a terrible feeling, but it was impossible to know you were in one until it had already started.

So real…

Rey’s heart ached. She hung her head, sniffling.
"Now, now, you can't go in there with _that_ attitude," Id told her. "How do you think you'll escape if you're so morose?"

She wanted to lash out at him, had a few remarks on her tongue—but she didn't. He was right, as obnoxious as he was being right now. The illusions fed on fear and despair alongside the pleasant ones. They fed on hope and happiness, too. They were quite indiscriminate, really.

_I just want this to be over_, she thought tiredly. Never again would she face off with Anakin. She wasn't ready to give up yet, though. Not when she was so close.

---

_Two_

---

There was so much water.

She panicked, kicking her feet, attempting to swim to what seemed to be the surface. Light was coming from that direction, but it was far away. She'd lived on the vergence planet long enough to learn how to swim—that didn't mean she was comfortable with it. She knew she may not make it.

But she had to!

A hand wrapped around her ankle.

A small scream tore from her throat from shock, bubbles streaming after it. Water got into her lungs, and she flailed blindly, trying to kick her way to freedom. But a new hand grabbed her knee, and another, her arm, and yet another, her other foot. They dragged her back into the depths of the water.
Giant floating reeds feathered against her.

No!

No, she was going to die!

She yanked her gaze down, terrified to find what wanted her life. It was people—decaying people, hairs clinging to skulls, skin in one place, torn free in another. The rags of their clothes swayed around them.

"It's your fault," said Han's body. "If it wasn't for you, I would never have had to rescue you."

But you were saving other people, too! she thought.

Poe was next, along with Finn, their grinning skulls blaming her for their deaths, as well. Sitrine was quick to follow, replaced by Leia, and then—and then—

Her own face.

She screamed louder, wasting the last of her oxygen, but the nightmare wouldn't break. They kept pulling her with them to a watery grave, safe among the reeds.

This couldn't be real.

ask questions

Poe and Finn were still alive, and Sitrine! And Leia!

more questions

They couldn't be here—which meant she wasn't here, which meant—
For the second time that week, Rey vomited up water. She was doused in it, dripping all over the…
ground, whatever it was. Id knelt next to her head, tilting his own closer to hers to see her better.
She was sprawled on her stomach, and she pulled herself up onto her elbows.

"I almost lost that one," she rasped.

"You remembered in time."

"But you still had to save me."

"I was aiding, not saving. Give yourself more credit." Id walked to the one remaining door, placing
his hand against it. "One more, Rey. You can do this." Quick as night, he was the Ben she knew, a
scar marring his features.

She winced as she made herself stand up. "How will I know if Ben is doing okay?"

"The training was designed to test both of you," Id replied. "From what I can gather." He shook his
hair out of his eyes. "Maybe you'll be in limbo until he either passes or fails." He shrugged. "But
you can't stay here."

Rey didn't need the reminder.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, she opened the door.

-One-
She faced herself.

The Other Rey smiled wickedly at her, circling her. There was only darkness swathing them in its tempting embrace. Her doppelganger reached out and caressed her cheek, making Rey jerk back. The Other Rey laughed softly, the sound echoing.

"You're right, you know," the Other Rey sang. "You're nothing—"

Whispers swirled around her, swelling like a crescendo.

nothing, you're nothing

"—Nothing that matters. Nobody wants you."

nobody wants

"That's not true," Rey said, swiveling with her to keep the woman in her sights. It was disturbing to see her. She held a confidence Rey would never manage, one that was edged sexually. Everything about her screamed sensuality—the perfect hair, the make-up Rey always forewent. A dress hugged curves she didn't have, displaying them in a way she never would.

"Isn't it?"

isn't it, isn't it

"No! Ben wants me! My friends want me!" Rey cried.

The woman was gone, and then arms slipped around her from behind. Lips touched her ear—a hand stroked her hair back.

"You battle darkness every day—it's so hard to balance, isn't it? You're so tired, aren't you?"
"No," Rey said, her thoughts growing muddy.

"Always holding up the light—always holding up his darkness—taking on all the responsibility?"

"Well…” She trailed off, oddly soothed.

"He wants to rule the galaxy with you, and he can't even be bothered to do most of the work," the Other Rey said.

"You're always the one putting yourself on the line… You're always the one taking charge…"

"That's not true," Rey protested weakly.

"And he can't even be bothered to discuss children with you," the other woman said.

"He's not ready!"

"Oh, he's ready. He just doesn't want to. He doesn't want them—he says he'll talk to you about it later, but it's been almost a year since that vision. He's just placating you. He knows you won't press for it."
Hot tears were filling up Rey's eyes, making her lips tremble. She drew in a soft sob, and some of the tears escaped. She closed her eyes, feeling the gnawing ache inside of her. The one thing Ben wouldn't discuss with her, wouldn't be open with her about.

"He'll never want them," the Other Rey murmured into her ear. "Ever. He's lying to you. You've done so much for him, and he's lying to you."

"Stop it," Rey whispered, a knot in her throat. A tear lingered at the edge of her cheek.

"You listened to him, you trusted him, and now you're bound together forever. And for what? For him to gain all of the benefits, and you nothing to show for it? You pick up the slack… and he can't be bothered to discuss having a child…"

"STOP IT!" Rey screamed, wrenching out of the woman's grasp. "Ben would never do those things! He helps me! He gets better when I ask it of him!"

"But you shouldn't have to ask it of him!" hissed the Other Rey. "You've been bound together for five years!"
"We're not made the same!" Rey choked. She couldn't see the other woman; her vision was so blurry. "He's different from me! And I respect everything about him, I accept everything about him! And he would never lie to me—he can't, it's impossible for him to!"

"Or that's what he wants you to think. He blocks off portions of his own mind!"

"He does it for his own sanity!" Rey pushed her fingers into her hair, trying not to feel like she was going mad herself. "I won't listen to you! You're wrong, you're foul!"

"I'm you," the Other Rey hissed viciously.

"I'm everything about you that you don't want to admit!" The doppelganger came closer. "Everything you smother!"

"Go away!" Rey put her hands over her ears, bowing her chin to her chest.

"You're the reason your parents left, why they never wanted you! They couldn't stand another minute of you! They sold you because of how little they loved you!" The echoing whispers had faded—in their place was an underlying hiss.

"Stop it!"

"When he called you nothing, you knew he was right, that you were nothing! That you've never been anything! Nothing but a filthy scavenger—"

"Quit! Now!"
"—It was your fault Han died!"

Rey sobbed and fell to her knees, shaking her head back and forth, her hands tight to her ears.

"And now you love the murderer who did it—the person who you wanted to be your father so badly! He killed his father, he tried to kill Master Luke, and where are you?! Right at his side!"

"Go away…!"

"He doesn't even love you—he only said it so you'd agree to be with him! He wanted to corrupt you—when you had sex that first time, he wasn't prepared for the light! This was forced on him! You know you can never know the truth—what's real—"

"STOP IT!" Rey screamed again. "GO AWAY!"

"He'll never marry you—he only said it so you'd get off his back—so his mother would—"

"HE LOVES ME!" Rey yelled over the hateful woman. "HE LOVES ME, AND I KNOW HE LOVES ME, AND YOU CAN NEVER CONVINCE ME OTHERWISE!"

The hissing stopped.

Seconds ticked past into minutes, nothing but silence to surround her.

A breeze tickled her cheeks and hair.

Sniffling, she lifted her head, lowering her hands partially.

The darkness was gone, the doppelganger was gone, the void was gone.
She was in a glen, wildflowers in full bloom, a stream trickling nearby. Trees ringed the circle, and birds chirped to one another. She swallowed, examining everything, wondering how real it was. Something inside of her told her it was—that she had passed that hellish trial. This was the limbo Id had talked about.

Rey went to the stream and scrubbed her face with the water. It wasn't real, but that didn't matter. She hated having a swollen, puffy face. She didn't want Ben to see her like this when he appeared… _if_ he appeared.

She sat back, putting her hands on her knees.

"Id?" she called quietly.

After several moments, it became apparent that he was no longer with her—not consciously. She'd done this last part without him, but she wouldn't be here if he hadn't helped her beforehand. He intended to carry on at the back of her thoughts, he'd told her that.

Where was Ben?

Rey was so tired. There was a patch of flowers nearby, and she fell into them, her eyes drooping heavily. She could take a nap while she waited. What she was waiting for was still up for debate. Ben to meet her here or to surrender to his grandfather.

She closed her eyes.

A nap would do just fine.

"Rest, Rey," she heard Anakin murmur from far away.
All right. Sorry about that hiatus! I was writing How to Save a Life. It's a Christmas story, and I wanted to get it finished. I know myself too well. If I hadn't pushed to get it done before Christmas, it would have gotten abandoned by the wayside. But check it out if you have the time and/or interest! As I said, it's already done, and it's only ten short chapters and an epilogue.

That being said, here we are again. I'm happy to be working on Bond and Falling. I missed these two stories. The small hiatus was nice, but woot! to being back at work.

As a refresher, we spent the last several chapters battling illusions. Now it's the aftermath. This is a transition chapter—Ben and Rey have important things to go over before they face what's ahead.

"Rey?"

The world was so blurry…

"Rey!"

Shadows were moving everywhere… her eyes were open, but they might as well have been closed, for all the good it was doing…

There was a voice—far away. Something was touching her shoulders—hands? It was all so familiar, yet foreign, too. Had she been drugged? She hadn't ever been before… she wouldn't really know… What she did know was that nothing felt right…

In her ears there was a persistent ringing. It was growing louder the more seconds passed.

REY!

She took a deep, gulping breath. The world became more clear. She could see Ben above her,
concern writ large on his face. She wanted to reassure him, but she didn't have the breath for it. What had happened? Why was she incapacitated like this?

"She's still coming awake from the depths of your mind," someone said. Master Anakin?

"I didn't struggle this much—"

"Her struggle wound up being much more than yours. Interestingly enough," Anakin said. "You'll have to discuss it once this is over. She has many insecurities you'll need to address."

Ben growled.

Rey placed her hand on the ground, the other on her head, and made to get up. She stumbled against the bed. Ben grabbed her, held her to him. He rubbed her back and pressed kisses to her hair. He wasn't usually so affectionate in front of others, but she could sense his worry. It ran through the bond, an undercurrent impossible to ignore.

"I'm fine," she told him after a moment. "Just help me sit."

By the time she was perched on the edge of their bed, the fogginess had mostly retreated. She ran her fingers through her hair, which had tumbled out of its braid. She sifted through silky strands for pins until they were all out. The exercise kept her calm and focused.

Feeling more like herself, she looked to the Force ghost. His arms were folded, his brows furrowed deeply. His eyes blazed with challenge, a challenge Rey would never take up again.

"I'm sorry," she croaked. "You were right. We are nowhere near ready."

Anakin glanced to the window. "Each of you passed the test," he said.

"Only because we had help," she replied, and he smiled faintly.

"I'm glad you can admit that," he said.
"It was foolish to yell at you." She lowered her eyes. "I'm sorry."

Breeze abruptly appeared in a physical form, shooting around her head as a glowing ball. It made Rey give a startled laugh.

*Ben Solo did very well*, Breeze said. *After a time.*

Ben glared at the Force knot.

"I struggled, too," Rey told him. She gripped his hand. "Master Anakin, what if… *we* wanted to learn to cast an illusion?"

Anakin waited a handful of moments to respond. When he did, it was with a slight shake of his head. "I don't know," he said. "The only person I have seen do it was my son, and he killed himself in the process."

"But he was projecting across the galaxy," Rey said, her heart heavy at the reminder.

"Yes. Fortunately, we can speak with him." Anakin gestured. "Luke. Appear."

His son shimmered into existence. He was irate. "Quit that. I'm trying to enjoy my eternal rest."

Ben snorted derisively.

*Eternal rest.*

*Shh.*

"Nephew," Luke said dryly in acknowledgement. He turned to his father. "I thought we discussed this. We're not appearing. This is your—"
"They want to know how to cast illusions," Anakin interrupted. "You are the only person they can seek answers from."

Luke inhaled deeply, though he didn't need to breathe. He glanced around at all of them before sighing. His gaze landed on Rey. "It's in the texts you carry."

"What?" Rey frowned. "No, it's not." She would have seen it.

"It's in the area in the first book with the dead language." He smiled to himself, muttering, "Page turners, they were not."

"Was that Grand Master Yoda?" Anakin asked.

"Yes. He showed himself to me on Ach-To before the end. Burned the place where the sacred texts were kept."

"I haven't seen him in some time," Anakin admitted.

"Yeah, well… he doesn't really respond to summons, does he?"

Ben cleared his throat. Loudly.


Rey hopped off the bed and went to paw around in her belongings.

"I have a task for you," Anakin said.

_of course, he does…_
"There are those who can help you—those in tune with the Force. I need you to find them. They will greatly aid your mission."

*I told you,* Rey thought a bit smugly. She'd called that the second they'd discovered Starkiller was siphoning off Force sensitives.

"There are two who are separate, operating on their own, oblivious to the fact that they can use the Force. But there's a third party… you'll need to reach them first."

Rey returned with the text in question.

"We can't just leave," Ben said.

"If you can't trust your generals to take care of things while you are away, then they shouldn't be your generals," Anakin replied simply. "You're going to journey to Solaris."

"*Solaris?*" Rey echoed in disbelief. "Why? There's nothing there! Nothing but jungle and swamps…" she muttered. "And giant bugs… and cats… and reptiles…" And flowers. Everything there was oversized. And troublesome. She did not have fond memories of that planet.

"There is a group there," Anakin said. "They can use the Force—they're trained to."

"Why didn't you tell us this before?" Ben replied.

"You weren't ready," the ghost said. "Now you are. Luke will—"

But Luke was gone.

Anakin sighed.

"Why did he leave like that?" Rey asked. "Why was he so upset?"
"After he… passed, he discovered something that brought him great pain," Anakin said quietly, watching the place where Luke had stood seconds ago.

"What was it?"

"He'll tell you in his own time," Anakin said.

"But the text—" Rey held it up uselessly.

"I suspect he'll help you with that in time, as well," Ben's grandfather murmured. "You should rest. This will be a long journey, and you need to make preparations for it. I'll see you in the morning."

I hate that they can just disappear, Rey thought. I have a million questions left.

I will go, too, Breeze announced. Tomorrow, I will look at the language. I may know it. Goodnight.

Goodnight, Rey replied.

But Ben had already moved on. What did you need to tell me? He said you had a hard time.

Rey hesitated. She closed the text and wet her lips. It's—it will take a long time to go over. Maybe he's right. We should just go to sleep. Prepare for tomorrow.

He grasped her elbow, unwilling to let it—or her—go. Rey.

Defeated, she sat on the edge of the bed again. All right… I'll tell you. But you have to tell me your end of things, too.
Ben was stricken. Rey…

They were side by side on the bed, in their usual positions. It was so quiet in this wing of the castle that Rey knew Finn and Poe hadn't returned, likely enjoying some festivities. Sitrine loved being a host. Although now Rey wondered if Poe would want to have anything to do with him. It hadn't seemed like it at the meeting.

*It's all right.*

*It's not. I didn't… I didn't know how bad—*

*We don't have to talk about it.* Rey rolled onto her back.

*We do,* Ben insisted. *We have to.*

*You never wanted to before…*

*That was different. Like I said, I didn't know how bad it was. You need to tell me. We can't let her use any weaknesses against us.*

Rey's eyes warmed. She waited until the threat of tears passed. "I never knew I worried about those things so deeply. And then I faced myself, and…" The words were wobbly. "Ben, it was so awful." She'd shown him because nothing else could do it justice.

He snugged an arm around her and pulled her against him, her back to his chest. His chin rested atop her head.

*And it's things you really don't want to talk about.*

*I don't want to talk about them,* he agreed. *But I don't think I have a choice anymore.*
She sniffled. *I don't want to force you into discussing it.*

He kissed behind her ear. *I want to marry you, Rey.*

She bit her lip. Her eyes were hot again.

*I wanted to marry you before my mother said anything about it.*

Rey swallowed, nodding.

*And… as for the possibility of children…*

Tensing, she turned her face into her pillow. This was the hard part, the part she could never breach with him. He'd said plenty of times he wasn't ready to go over it. She'd respected that—she'd even thought it hadn't bothered her so much.

And then she was shown how very wrong she was.

*I don't think I'd be a good father,* he said. *That will never change.*

She nodded, her heart sinking.

*But someday I will be. Your vision… I know it's real. I know it will happen. And when it does, I will be… happy.*

*Don't lie.*

*I'm not. The thought scares me. But I can't pretend I feel nothing when I think about the vision, or when the topic comes up. It will be fine, Rey. I'll find a way to manage.*
Ben squeezed her. *Stop. It will be fine. I don't want you to worry about this anymore. Promise me you won't—or that if you do, you'll tell me.*

You'll get angry—

*I won't. I won't.*

Rey turned so she could snuggle into his embrace. He held her to him, stroking her hair, kissing above her brow.

*I'm sorry you faced—all of that.* He didn't have a word to describe it. She didn't, either. Brutal, sadistic?

You didn't have as much trouble.

*I had Breeze for the most part. At least we found each other's ids... at least they can help us now.*

*Did you face yourself at all?*

He sighed softly, tiredly. She couldn't blame him. She was worn out, too. It had taken a toll not only on their minds, but their bodies, as well.

*I did. But you already helped me face my inner demons. It wasn't as bad.*

Rey hid her face against his neck.

*I don't know what I would do without you...*
Die? It was a poor joke, all too real.

Stop.

Yeah… I know what you mean. But in all reality, you probably would have torn apart the galaxy.

I think you would have found a way to stop me.

I don't know if it would have been without…

Killing me?

I'm likely wrong. I don't think I could ever kill you.

Even if there was no other choice, and we weren't bonded?

Even then. You make me weak, Ben Solo. But also strong. And she knew he felt the same. I love you.

He pressed the gentlest of kisses to the curve of her ear.

I know.
Here we are, a year later, with 100 chapters! And so many of you have been with me from the very beginning! I appreciate all the support you guys have given me, whether a new reader or a veteran. I love you guys!

Holy—

Rey ducked around the corner, her eyes wide. Had she seen… that?

No.

Slowly, carefully, she peeked back into the corridor. It turned out that she had indeed assessed the scene correctly.

Sitrine had Poe against a wall, and it was looking like a rather cozy situation.

What had happened to Poe's words from the evening before? But it was Sitrine. He would stick to Dameron like glue—he'd already made up his mind. Rey had seen it at the meeting. It was strange. Strange in that Sitrine had even gazed at someone that way. Like… it was… some definition of permanent for Sitrine.

She hadn't even known that word was in his vocabulary—or that he was capable of the concept.

He wasn't in love, but he was definitely in like.

Rey bit her lip, observing despite knowing that she should let them have some privacy. But now she was just so curious.
Nothing was going on in this corridor—this wing of the castle, even—so she could hear everything perfectly. And what was better, Breeze was still hiding her presence in the Force. Sitrine wouldn't be able to detect her eavesdropping.

Sitrine stroked Poe's cheek. "Come on… why is it so bad?"

Poe averted his eyes but notably didn't shove him off. "You know why."

The Knight pouted. "No, I don't."

Poe rolled his eyes and shifted slightly, standing up straighter against the wall. "Yes… Yes, you do."

"All right, fine. Say I do. You know I'm not on the Order's side."

"Yeah, but have you killed people?" Poe retorted.

Sitrine narrowed his eyes. "Have you?"

A flush coated the pilot's cheeks. "Well… That's—different!" he sputtered.

"How?" Sitrine challenged.

"Because the Order—" Poe shook his head. "I'm not having this discussion. We can't. Okay? It's just not going to happen again."

"Then why are you still standing here?" Sitrine murmured.

"I…"

Sitrine kissed him, and Rey made herself have the decency to look away. She'd hate it if someone
was watching a private moment between Ben and herself. She did cast one last glance back to see if Poe was kissing Sitrine back.

He was.

Grinning, she went on her way. She had to see to their belongings while Ben called a meeting to tell everyone they were leaving, which would be any moment now. Best not to let the two men embracing one another a corridor away know she was on to them.

You know, I've never seen two men kiss.

Ben raised an eyebrow.

Do I want to know?

Well—

No. No, I don't want to know.

Rey snorted, but it was with a smile.

"We have to leave," Rey announced once everyone was settled. This immediately caused a stirring of whispers, and a confused frown from their primary people. "There's—someplace we have to go."

"Where?" Poe, flushed and having been the last to enter, leaned back in his seat. "We just got here."

"Our plan won't run itself," Ben growled. He stopped when Rey kicked his ankle.
She smiled as if she'd done no such thing. "Leia, Sitrine, and Rellen will continue to run things here. We were given a specific task to help our cause."

"Specific task?" Finn was frowning harder than the rest of them.

"…Yes," Rey said. "I'm afraid that we can't share very much of the details except for where we're going. And I can't say how long we'll be gone."

"This is some… Jedi thing, isn't it?" Poe wiggled his fingers in front of him.

"Um—sort of," Rey replied. "We are locating some Force sensitives." The whispers began anew, except now they weren't so much whispers as loud muttering. Rey fought to be heard over them. "Specific ones. Ones that will help us."

"And you can't tell us more than that?" Leia's lips were pursed.

Rey didn't know how to tell her without involving the rest of the group. Leia had kept it a secret that Vader had been her father. That was what had tipped Ben over the edge in the first place. And it wasn't Anakin who was remembered—it was Vader. Vader… the Sith who had destroyed all the Jedi.

Then she remembered they could communicate mentally. It hadn't happened since their time on Naboo four years ago, when Leia had been searching for her after she'd been kidnapped, but Rey was confident it wouldn't be any more difficult than it had then.

*Master Anakin,* Rey thought at her, testing the waters.

Leia's eyes widened slightly. It was the only sign that she'd heard Rey, which was fine. It had been for her ears only.

"Right." Leia cleared her throat. "Where are you going, then?"
"First… we'll be going to Solaris."

"Solaris?!” Poe was on his feet, his hands on the table. Leia didn't look any less concerned. "There's nothing there, we proved that!"

"That's not entirely true," Rey said. She turned to Sitrine. "We won't be able to travel with the Falcon. It's getting too close to our showdown with the Order, which means we can't risk it."

Sitrine stroked his chin. "So you'll need an Order vessel?"

"Yes," Ben said. "Something large enough to carry a few people, nothing more."

The Knight nodded. "All right. Anything else?"

"Er…” Rey looked at Poe.

The pilot looked back.

The seconds passed.

"What?” he asked suspiciously.

"…We need BB-8," she replied, wincing. "I'm really sorry, Poe, but—"

"That's my droid!"

"—he was the only one who got us through the jungle!"

BB-8 chittered, out of sight.
"And into the buildings, and—" Rey took a deep breath to steady her nerves. She wouldn't get through to Poe by arguing with him. He didn't respond well to raised voices. But who did? "Please, Poe. We need him. Desperately."

Finn coughed discreetly. "You weren't there for the worst of it, Poe. BB-8 really held up."

The droid in question let out a stream of beeps and whistles.

"The worst of it?" Poe said hotly. "Do you not remember the giant—reptile—thing?!"

"The giant reptile thing wasn't anywhere close to the giant cat and its kittens in the bunkers!" Finn got to his feet, as well. "Someone stayed at the other station!"

"Because someone had to! This is ridiculous!" Poe exclaimed. "You are not taking my droid!"

BB-8 wheeled over to where Rey was.

*Bweeeep, whoooo, bweep bweep.*

Poe gave the small droid an impatient look. "Really?"

"Seems like he's made up his mind," Rey said with a small lift of her hand and a shrug. What could he do about it?

"Yeah," Poe replied darkly. He steamed for a few moments more and then sighed. He didn't look at any of them, his eyes closed. Exhaustion lined his features. "Fine. Whatever. Just take good care of him, all right?"

"Of course," Rey replied graciously. She faced the rest of the members of their meeting. "I'm sorry to say that we have to leave pretty much immediately. There's only a few things left to discuss. As for the new Resistance base, you'll have to keep us informed."

Ben exhaled. "Sitrine, I have a very specific set of directions for you."
"I can't believe I'm going back here," Rey stated. The planet of Solaris loomed ahead of them, its atmosphere so bright a blue, it was startling from what they'd gotten used to on Endorom.

BB-8 chirped.

"Yeah," she sighed. "I remember."

"Was it really so bad?" Ben asked, peering up at her from the pilot's chair. She was standing behind him with her arms folded in consternation. "When I tried to reach you a few times, you were… indisposed of."

"That's a word for it," she said sourly.

Ben guided them into the planet's stratosphere. "Do you want to show me your memories of that time?"

"That's not such a bad idea." She flung herself back into the co-pilot's seat. She really did not want to return to the blasted jungle. "I will once we land. There's a lot of dangers, but this time my lightsaber will work."

She could still hear Finn's screams echoing hers as they ran for their lives in the underground tunnels. She shivered, rubbing one of her arms.

The control panel beeped.

Rey furrowed her brows. "What's that?"

BB-8 rolled forward.
"Hm…" Ben tapped on a few buttons. Rey had to admit that the vessel was nice. She loved the *Falcon* to pieces, but it was a hunk of junk, and everyone knew it. The poor thing was constantly falling apart.

The panel beeped once more in an urgent sort of way.

"Something must be out there," Ben said. They both squinted, trying to spot any potential threats. The vessel sank beneath the clouds, exposing the wild sprawl of jungle below.

"Maybe something to do with the Force users?" Rey suggested. Anakin had yet to make an appearance that day, and she could only assume he might pop up once they'd landed. Breeze herself was also conspicuously absent. She couldn't be too far, however. Not when she was masking their presence.

"Or some sort of creature flying around…" Ben muttered.

They didn't have long to speculate. No sooner had they entirely cleared the clouds than a blast came from seemingly nowhere. As they shouted, another slammed into their vessel, and they veered dangerously into a roll.

"Who is attacking us?!" Rey screeched. She thumped from the floor to the ceiling and back again. She fumbled in an attempt to buckle herself to a chair. The vessel was swinging around too much for her to touch the controls.

Another barrage—they started spiraling toward the treetops.

"Where is it coming from?!" Ben shouted. They couldn't attack back if they didn't know—

It all happened so fast, Rey would have trouble recalling it later.

The vessel broke apart, unable to withstand another round of attacks. The shields had been no good after the first hit. That left Ben and Rey and BB-8 in a forced evacuation to their imminent deaths. They were too high. They'd never make it.
Rey heard herself screaming. Her body was like a rag doll, tossed about by wind shear. The jungle was more terrifying than it had ever been. She was blind, her surroundings spinning rapidly. She was so frozen with fear that she couldn't even feel Ben through their bond.

*I'm going to die, I'm going to die, I'm going to die*

*I'm going to die I'm going to die I'm going to die*

*Rey! Relax!*

Relax?!

Was he kidding?!

*This is a poor time for a joke!* she sobbed.

*Relax, or I can't catch you!*

She had no idea what he was talking about. But she did feel his urgency for her to somehow calm herself. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to ignore the freefall. All she could do was trust in Ben. It was either that or face her death with open arms.

The tree branches were not welcoming. She cried out, her weightlessness transforming into something like a stone sinking through water. Crashing sounds filled her ears, the roar of the wind gone. In the rush of adrenaline, she barely felt the damage of the boughs.

*I'm going to die—!* The panic was back.

*No, you're not.*
How can you stay so calm?!

Meditate. Now!

Figuring she had nothing left, she stopped her flailing and withdrew inside herself. They meditated every single day—they had for years. It was second nature. Her body went soft. She was cradled in the arms of the Force.

She closed her eyes, expecting the end.

"Oof!" she gasped, landing hard in—

Ben's arms.

"How—?!" she cried.

"I used the Force to float down," Ben panted. "Learned it from Skywalker. Where's BB-8?"

"Poe is going to kill us," Rey breathed.

A loud series of tweets greeted their ears. They tilted their heads up to see BB-8 coming their way, a parachute gliding him to safety.

"Oh, thank the gods," Rey said, closing her eyes again. She swallowed and opened them to examine where they'd landed. They had to assess where they were, how in hells they would leave the planet now—

"This is a disgusting swamp," Ben observed.

"All swamps are disgusting," she whispered. "Put me down?"
The sounds of wildlife gradually returned.

Rey grimaced as her boots sunk into the muck of the swamp. She was glad for several things: that they were alive, that they'd left their important things on Endorom, and that they were not wearing their cloaks. Rey had had them dress for hot, humid weather.

BB-8 landed in the swamp, his weight carrying him swiftly beneath the surface.

Now to find out who had attacked them.

But first, wrestling BB-8's parachute off the droid so he could stick his light up and out of the water.

*Bweeep, woo, bweep, beep beep!*

"Yeah, yeah," Rey grumbled as she fought with the thing.

Solaris.

Why?

Why?

Choobies.
An eerie keening broke through the cacophony of the jungle.

Rey stiffened, knowing better than to talk out loud. She’d just finished with BB-8’s restraints from the parachute, and she slowly backed away. Her hand went to where her lightsaber was holstered. The droid was blessedly quiet.

*What the hell was that?*

*Nothing good.*

The call came again—because it was most certainly a call—and all the hairs on Rey’s body rose. Why? Because it was *much* closer than it had been before.

As one, they searched with the Force. It was mostly a pulse, spread out only half a mile to determine how much time they had. Considering the Force lit up like the mines of kesium gas exposed to, say, flames, it was a tad alarming. Whatever *it* was, there was more than one.

And they were headed straight this way.

*I hate Solaris,* Rey thought. She did not think she would ever be able to stress that enough.

*What do you think they are?*

*Remember that giant reptile Finn and Poe were talking about?*
I believe I recall something to that affect. But these aren't giant.

No. But they do feel the same. Reptilian, perhaps. Everything here is. Except for the cats, and the gods know what else.

All right, well, let's come up with a game plan.

I've got one.

What?

Run!

Rey took off, not waiting for a confirmation that Ben was coming. She wasn't getting very far very quickly, at any rate. The swamp was unkind, and she was up to her thighs in it. Sand and water sucked at her boots. Whatever the danger was, they needed to get on solid ground.

Why are we running? Ben hadn't moved from his crouched position.

Because I don't know what else to do when it comes to the species of this planet! Trust me! Run!

No. That's ridiculous. We're powerful enough to handle whatever—

A flash in the Force.

That was all Rey felt before something came at her from her left. Her lightsaber was drawn in that same heartbeat, and it drove a path through the center of the thing. She had all of a moment to observe a carcass that was small but covered in scales. Pinpoints in the Force had her whirling, her lightsaber moving defensively.
We have to get out of here!

We can take them!

There's possibly hundreds of them!

But it was the swamp! What could they do?!

Rey looked up.

The trees.

Of course, the trees!

Slicing through three more of the reptiles, Rey jumped straight up into the boughs above her. What had been threatening five minutes ago was now a safe haven. Ben was beside her shortly, and together they looked at the swamp.

BB-8 would be fine. He was hidden under the water, and he didn't exactly emit any sort of life force.

Which was a shame, because he had such a personality.

We'll use the trees. Get out of the swamp. Rey panted for breath. Dancing with a lightsaber to deflect whatever was after them while confined by quicksand wasn't precisely easy. She didn't like it. She was in shape—this was unacceptable.

Whatever they are, they move fast. She made an effort to still her breath, pushing back into the shadows. If they didn't move, they had a better chance of remaining undetected. Maybe. And they outnumber us by a ridiculous amount. We won't stand a chance unless we find some high ground.

Where in hells was Breeze?!
I can't see them. Rey was staring directly at the swamp—directly where the Force claimed these things were. What can't I see them? Can you?

No. Ben's expression grew troubled.

That eerie keening was back, so close Rey had to suppress a shiver. It hit the ear wrong, not to mention how unsettling it was.

Where were they?

Ben and Rey reached the same conclusion at the same time.

The creatures had some manner of camouflage. And, when either of them attempted to use the Force to bend the reptiles to their will, they found themselves blocked. The things were inherently protected against the Force, the gods damn it all.

Breathing.

Pulse skipping, Rey's fingers closed firmly around the hilt of her lightsaber.

The thing lunged at her, and she stifled a yell, swinging plasma. Another husk dropped to the swamp.

They could climb!

We have to get out of here. Now!

Ben didn't offer any resistance this time, but before they could get anywhere, the ground began to shake. Rey and Ben clung to the mostly dead tree, unable to drop their concentration of the Force. Dread clamped through Rey's stomach. She recognized that signature.
Seriously, now, let's go!

What is it?!

The giant reptile thing! Believe me, we don't want to be stuck in this swamp!

Ben and Rey leapt from the tree they were in into another, almost blindly. They had to hope there wasn't any sort of the tinier reptiles there. They could only focus on so many things at one time, and the immediate threat was the species Rey had fought here so many years ago.

We have to split up!

We can't!

I don't like it, either, but we don't have a choice! Take BB-8! We'll get to safety, and then you can tell me where you are! I'll find you!

And then she was gone.

Rey had never run so fast in her life. She kept thinking that with every new situation, and every single time, it was true. Jumping from branch to branch like the squirrel monkey Breeze had once appeared as was harder than it seemed.

Another giant had appeared with the first, and Rey got the impression they were mated. Which meant they were near those things' nest—which meant these tiny reptiles were likely their babies. All Rey knew was that if the giants could camouflage, she was well and truly—

Damn, she wasn't moving quickly enough! They were gaining on her!
Rey misjudged her next jump and flailed as she landed in the swamp. She fumbled in the muck, covered in mud and foul water. The scramble to her feet was a battle in itself. Those unearthly calls were right behind her, catching up. While it was cause for motivation, the swamp didn't seem to think so, as reluctant as it was to release her.

Swallowing her curses, she got into a position on her hands and knees—and then she pushed up with the Force. She scrabbled for the nearest tree and hung onto it. The tiny reptiles snapped at her feet. She'd barely gotten out of the way.

One of the giants broke the clearing, roaring. His crown of horns were wicked, promising certain doom by way of goring. He was too tall; he easily reached to where her perch was. She lunged across the swamp to another tree in time for the one she'd been hiding on to be snapped in half by a pair of powerful jaws.

This was madness!

The only good news was that Horns was by itself—its mate had gone after Ben. Not that that was good news for Ben, but it was something.

Rey continued leaping, severely out of breath from fear and the exertion of dodging death. Being extremely powerful was worthless if one was outnumbered. She didn't have the time to do anything to really save herself or make them go away, and taking them all on like this was a very, very bad idea.

Very, very bad.

She could only rely on the Force so much to pinpoint locations when she was this severely outnumbered.

Her heart leapt when she saw flat land. She dropped from the trees, not losing a beat as she hauled her arse over the roots and giant flowers that coated the ground. They were much easier to navigate than the swamp, and that was what she put her energy with the Force into—letting it guide her through this humid slice of hell.

Why hadn't these things let off yet?! They were too determined! Surely, they had enough of a food supply?
Just as she came to a clearing, so did someone else.

Rey nearly went down from the shock of seeing a human, but she composed herself in short order. As she was yelling in warning, the man drew out, of all things, a lightsaber. Exhilaration fueled her dying adrenaline. Master Anakin had been right: there were Force users here!

Drawing her own lightsaber, she fell into step with the man. He was sweating as heavily as she was, and they came to stand back to back.

"Friend or foe?" he panted.

"Let's say a friend!" Rey twirled her saber, slicing through three of the Tiny by lucky coincidence—she'd thought there was only one. The Force was too overwhelmed with all the life signatures. "There's a big one coming!"

"I've got a speeder nearby!" The brunet flung his arm out, and she heard yips of pain. "What's your name?!"

"Rey!" she gasped. He had a speeder? Excellent! "What's yours?"

"Jacen!" he replied.

And then they were jetting to the right.

"You came in with that Order vessel, didn't you?!" he yelled over his shoulder. She did her best to keep pace with him.

"Yes! But I'm not from the Order—I was using it for subterfuge!"

"I'm only choosing to believe you because your lightsaber isn't red! That, and your presence in the Force is a bit terrifying!"

"I'm not alone!" she cried. "I have—my—my partner, he's out there—"
"We'll find him, don't worry!"

They skidded around a copse of trees. Buried among their roots was the speeder Jacen had mentioned. He gestured, and she climbed up behind him. The jungle was shortly a blur. By the way he was maneuvering so recklessly, she knew he'd tapped into the Force.

"You stink!" he said helpfully.

"You're not doing much better yourself!" she retorted. "Why are these things so relentless?!"

"They're hungry!"

"Isn't there enough wildlife for them to eat instead?!" she questioned over the roar of the wind in her ears.

"They like the hunt! Why go after prey who won't put up a fight when a nice, tasty human dangles herself before them?!"

"Assuming you shot at us—" Because who else would have? "—you put this nice, tasty human in their nest!"

"I'll let you know how sorry I am later!" he promised. "Now where's your partner? If you tell me, I can have my sister locate him!"

"Your sister?"

"Yeah!"

"What's her name?" Rey asked.

"Jaina!"
All right, you guys, I am in the middle of moving, plus I am leaving tomorrow evening for Christmas vacation and will not be back until Tuesday. I wanted to pump something out before then. Didn't want you to think I'm abandoning you! I'll try to update Falling, but I can't make any promises. Sorry if that lets anyone down.

Everyone have a Merry Christmas!!! <3

Rey was worried.

For multiple reasons.

The first and foremost: some kind of camouflaged, reptilian army was after their tasty human flesh. The second? Ben (not the main priority because he was still alive, judging on the fact that their bond hadn't been severed). The third… Jacen had mentioned he felt their presence in the Force, which meant that Breeze, wherever in hells she was, was no longer hiding their location. And the fourth? Master Anakin was also completely MIA.

Rey reasoned that Breeze might be tuckered out—she could only do so much before expending all her energy. This was why Master Anakin had been pushing them so hard on their training before they left. They couldn't rely on Breeze forever, temporary solution that she was. But now, of all times, for this to happen? How would they be able to use the Force to protect themselves without risking the chance of drawing Starkiller's attention?

She didn't think they had any choice.

The big reptile—and she had named him Crown—was barreling through the jungle after him. Its children weren't far behind, but they were small and didn't have the height and long legs to travel as quickly. The last time Rey had dealt with a crown, she'd shoved a lightsaber up through its head. Doing this on a speeder would be tricky.

"They're gaining on us!" Jacen's bravado had fallen away to concern.
"I'm going to do something!" Rey announced. "I need you to make a circle!"

"What?!"

"I'm going to jump off—make a circle to come back for me, and quickly!"

"No! You'll be eaten alive!"

"Remember my terrifying presence in the Force?!"

"Er—yes?!!"

Rey flung herself off the speeder into a graceful backflip, landing behind Crown and avoiding his snapping jaws. The moment her feet touched the ground, she thrust out a hand. The Force exploded from her, sending the tiny crowns flying a good distance—distantly enough for her to deal with Papa Crown.

Crown roared so loudly she almost lost her footing, and her eardrums rang. She had her lightsaber out, and as Crown came at her, she tossed it, not having time for anything else. The diamond plasma sliced cleanly through its neck. She held out her hand, her saber turning itself off and landing on her palm.

Jacen rounded the corner. Rey timed her jumping before leaping onto the back of the speeder, her arms around him for purchase. By then, the tiny crowns were returning, and their horrified cries filled the air as they discovered their dead parent. Rey wasn't sure if this was going to present more problems—it almost sounded like a homing beacon—but it had solved the most immediate one.

"I've never seen anyone do that!" Jacen cried. "You flung fifty of them like they were nothing!"

"I was just buying us time!" Rey replied. "How far away are we from your sister?!"

"Close!"
Close wasn't enough. A search through the surrounding Force revealed that big crowns were on their way. Excellent. They'd drawn an entire—herd, for lack of a better word. The problem? They were after Ben.

*Help is coming!* she thought at him.

*I don't need help!* There was a pause where he was battling a big crown. *Wait, what?*

"There's no other way to get rid of these things?!" Rey questioned.

"They hate really high-pitched sounds, but we—"

*Ben! BB-8!* She showed him her thoughts.

*Good idea.*

A screech so loud it made Rey's teeth clench tore through the jungle. She'd known a sonic whistle could be loud, but she hadn't been prepared for the intensity of it.

The tiny crowns began keening again. They notably stopped following, and Rey looked behind her. In their discomfort, they had shed their camouflage. They were shaking their heads wildly. What alarmed Rey was how many of them there were.

"How did you do that?!!" Jacen demanded.

"Help me find my partner and I'll explain everything!"

The reptiles were fleeing as the whistle continued.

"Help" just arrived. A girl. She's got a speeder.
*Go with her! I'm with her brother! I think they're the ones Master Anakin wanted us to find!*

**BB-8—**

*He'll catch up!*

*When did you get so demanding?*

*Desperate times call for desperate measures.*

Which was bantha dung. She was always demanding, and they both knew it. But he was, too, so it wasn't like he could say anything about it.

Eventually, the reptiles were entirely gone, and BB-8 stopped emitting his whistling. The sounds of wildlife returned over the roar of the wind the speeder was creating. Rey's heartbeat slowed somewhat.

In a way, despite her hatred for it, she respected Solaris. Only the mighty could survive here. The rest would be eaten or led astray and *then* eaten.

That roaring of the wind was replaced with a different sort, one she recognized from their time on the vergence planet. She looked over Jacen's shoulder. Up ahead, there was a sheer cliff that rose hundreds of feet above the jungle, not dissimilar to the one she'd perched on for two weeks four years ago. What made it majestic was the waterfall, along with the reptilian birds swooping here and there at the top.

What she wasn't expecting was Jacen to take them straight through it, quickly enough that the crushing weight of water was more of a harsh slam than a death sentence. Soaked, she sputtered. Her hair was hanging in her eyes, but there was nothing she could do about it while they were going so fast.

*Did I see you go through that?*
Ben was right behind her.

*Yes. Brace yourself, it hurts.*

Jacen slowed the speeder until it came to a stop. She followed his gaze to the arrival of Ben and Jacen's sister. Ben looked as miserably wet as she was.

Now that they were stopped, Rey examined their surroundings. They were in a dark, dank cavern. She wondered how on earth BB-8 was going to get through the waterfall until she saw what was undoubtedly a hatch into the bunkers. He'd map it out and find them that way.

Once all four were on their feet and fixing their drowned hair and clothes, they stared one another down. Brother and sister versus Ben and Rey. Now that they were away from the danger, no one was committed necessarily to the alliance they'd forged.

"We need some answers before we go any further," Jaina said. She was beautiful, with very similar features to her brother.

"Well, we need some, too," Ben snipped.

Rey gathered they weren't getting along very well.

"We were sent here," Rey said, deciding to get to the point.

"By who?" Jacen's eyes narrowed.

"Anakin Skywalker," Rey said, counting on them to not recognize at least the first name. The last depended on how well they'd kept up with what was legends to some people. Solaris was near the Outer Rim.

"Skywalker?" Jaina whispered. "That's not possible. We're the only Skywalkers left."

Ben and Rey froze.
Looked at each other.

*Did your mother—?*

*No.*

Rey flashed back to Luke's reluctance the day before—the way he'd left in a hurry. Master Anakin had said he'd discovered something after he'd passed that had brought him great pain.

Was this it?

"Ben," Rey said, turning to him and speaking aloud because she was certain their mental conversations disturbed people and had before.

*Don't say it.*

"I believe you have cousins."

*Fuck.*
"Cousins?" Jacen and Jaina echoed as one.

"Yes," Rey replied.

Ben was scowling and looking everywhere but at the other three. His jaw was tight. Rey could hear his thoughts spiraling from extreme anger, to vexation, to confusion, and then back to anger again. She wasn't worried about it, so long as it wasn't aimed at her. She'd accepted that was just Ben—his temper would never be entirely gone.

He had his father to thank for that.

The pair looked like they were expecting an explanation, but Rey wondered how to give them one when there was so much to the story.

"It'll take a while," Rey said. "To tell you everything, I mean. Is there a place we can go to talk?" Namely, down the hatch that was right next to them. It was difficult to hear one another over the roar of the waterfall without resorting to shouting.

"We can't just take you in there," Jaina said, crossing her arms. "We don't trust you."

"Well... Jacen and I agreed to be friends," Rey coaxed. Granted, it was in the thick of battle, but...

Jaina looked to her brother for confirmation. Jacen hesitated, his devil-may-care attitude hidden for the moment. Then he straightened and shrugged, gesturing toward Rey.
"I saw her do some pretty amazing things," he offered.

Ben stepped in front of Rey. "We don't have time for this. We're here for a reason."

"Your grandfather guided us here," Rey said.

*You're going to start with that?*

*Isn't it best to get straight to the point?*

*Not when they already think we're crazy.*

*They don't—*

Rey caught sight of Jaina's expression. It was one of high suspicion.

*I take it back.*

"Dead grandfather," Rey elaborated.

*This is not making us look any better.*

Rey shot him an impatient look. *You talk to them, then.*

*I was trying.*

Ben shook his hair back—he'd lost his hairband somewhere—and ignored Jaina entirely as he turned to Jacen. "What do we need to do to prove we aren't going to kill anyone? Even if you should be proving to *us* you won’t kill us, considering you shot us out of the sky."
"They thought we were with the Order," Rey muttered. *I already explained to him.*

*Then it's her that needs convincing. Figures.*

*What happened out there with her?*

*We just don't like each other.*

Normally, Rey would have told him that he was being paranoid. In this case, he wasn't. Jaina kept her eyes on Ben at all times, clearly waiting for him to mess up and give her a reason to intercede. How, Rey didn't know.

"Taking away their lightsabers is pointless," Jacen said. "You can feel their presence."

"Yes, and it's overwhelmingly dangerous," his sister countered. Her brows furrowed with concern. "I don't want to endanger the others."

"You can't exactly stop us," Ben drawled.

*Nice,* Rey thought with a sigh.

*What?*

*You know what.*

Threatening his cousins wasn't going to get them anywhere.

But Ben had always found forcefulness and intimidation to work in his favor.
Jaina, however, wasn't going to be intimidated.

"You're seriously underestimating us if you think that," she said.

"I will tell you *everything* that you want to know," Rey insisted. "Everything. But we can barely hear one another. If you don't want to take us down the hatch, that's fine. That is perfectly acceptable. But there must be a place where we can talk freely."

The other woman hesitated.

"We were sent here to find you," Rey said, reminding her of their purpose. "Or—rather, we were sent here to find… others, and we believe you're them."

"How can you know—?"

"Because Ben is a Skywalker, too," Rey interrupted. "We can feel your presence in the Force, as well, and it's powerful. You're against the Order, and so are we. We need your help if we're going to defeat it."

"*Defeat it?*" Jacen echoed. "I don't know about—"

"Is your plan to hide here on Solaris for the rest of your lives?" Rey demanded. "If so, you'll be sorely disappointed. There's a—woman—out there. Her name is Starkiller. She is more powerful than you can imagine. She's recruiting Force sensitives. She *will* find you."

Rey didn't know if this was true, precisely, but the siblings didn't need to know that.

Ben's cousins exchanged an uneasy glance.

"I don't know," Jaina said.

"Do you want to know about your father?" Rey asked.
The other brunette looked at her with some surprise. For a flash of a second, there was an eagerness to her eyes, an eagerness for more information. It was gone as fast as it had come, proving that Jaina had good control over her expressions. Rey wouldn't have been able to hide her hunger to know more about her own parents.

"He died," Jacen said. "Years ago."

"Shortly after we were born," Jaina elucidated.

"What?" Rey was now the one to be confused, and Ben's thoughts mirrored hers. "That's—not true at all. He died four years ago."

"What…?" Jaina whispered. Her brother gripped her hand tightly. "No. Our mother wouldn't have lied to us."

"She did," Ben said bluntly. "I trained under him… for a time."

"Who was your mother?" Rey asked gently.

"Her name was Mara Jade," Jacen muttered.

"Mara Jade Skywalker?" Rey pressed. Anakin and Luke hadn't hinted at the latter being married, but it was possible. She didn't know much about Luke's past, and Ben refused to think about it. His uncle would probably always be dead to him. He'd come close to murdering Ben in his sleep.

"No," Jacen said with a shake of his head. "She… She wasn't married. He didn't even know we existed… He left her."

"Left her?" Ben asked skeptically.

It did seem unlike Luke.
"Mother said he'd—had a vision that she would die. They parted ways. She found out she was pregnant after."

"Would you allow us to speak with her?" Rey asked.

"You can't," Jacen said in a flat sort of voice.

"Why not?" Rey replied.

"She's dead."
Rey wasn't sure how to continue this conversation. It wasn't very productive, and Ben scowling his cousins down really wasn't helping. Jaina was still facing off with him—both had their hands near their lightsabers. That wasn't good, mostly because this was a confined space. There wouldn't be anywhere to fight.

"How do you two know how to use lightsabers?" Rey asked in an attempt to draw the conversation to somewhere civil. "Did you make them or find them?" Though where they'd have found one was beyond her.

"We made them," Jacen answered. "Our mother… she could use the Force. She'd learned a lot of things from our father. She passed them onto us, and we passed them onto the… others."

"How many others are there?" Ben asked bluntly.

"Like we'd tell you," Jaina retorted hotly.

"You should," he replied. "I don't have a lot of patience, and I don't particularly care that you're my cousin—supposedly."

He'd said it just to rile Jaina up, and it worked. She bristled, clenching her hands into fists at her sides. "You're calling us liars?"

"I just find it difficult to believe that that pathetic Skywalker would leave behind someone he loved. Especially because listening to that vision would mean following in his father's footsteps." Ben was the one who was lying. Luke hadn't known about his father's vision.
Jaina took a step forward, but Jacen grabbed her arm and held her back.

"He's trying to upset you," Jacen said.

"I don't like this," Jaina said without taking her eyes off Ben even for a moment. He wore a faintly smug smile, gazing straight back. "There's darkness in him. I felt it."

"There's light in him, too," Rey said sharply. Ben shouldn't have been goading Jaina so much when they needed them, but she wouldn't let Ben be attacked. Not after all they'd been through. "Which you'd find if you looked deeper."

"I don't need to look deeper," Jaina said. "We're—"

"Do you think there isn't darkness in each of you?" Ben interrupted. "Because you're kidding yourselves if you do."

"We're not—"

A wave of power radiated from Ben, and Rey felt him pulling at her own. The Force flew through her. She'd only ever borrowed from Ben before, not the other way around. But that didn't matter. Ben was about to do something they'd regret later. Well, she would.

Don't do that—

"You're angry at your father," Ben said softly. Jaina clutched either side of her head, groaning in pain. When Jacen went to protect her, he found himself unable to move.

Ben's hand stretched forward, his head dipping in concentration. He was still tapping into Rey's reserves of the Force. She didn't want to stop him now. If she did, they'd be attacked by his cousins, and there wasn't a way his cousins would win. She'd have to let Ben make his point.

"He abandoned your mother, and he abandoned you." Ben clenched his jaw. He was struggling.
Jaina's will was strong. Sifting through her thoughts was growing increasingly difficult as she found a way to fight him.

Rey gave an inward sigh before actively shoving the Force at him to give him some extra juice. If anything, this was a show of power, and he'd pulled them too into it to quit now. It pushed Jaina's guards back down, leaving her mind exposed once more.

"Stop it!" Jacen cried.

"The burden is heavy, watching the others..." Ben murmured. He tilted his head. "You're afraid your brother is more powerful than you are."

Jaina's will flared.

Ben released her mind, and his cousin fell to her knees, panting and shaking. She was covered in a thin layer of sweat. Ben himself was slightly out of breath.

*Definitely Skywalkers.*

It wouldn't have been as much of a challenge otherwise.

"I could go on," Ben said. "But I wouldn't want to cause strife between you and your brother."

Jaina glared, something close to hatred glittering in her eyes, and Ben pointed at her.

"There it is," he said. "The streak."

He relaxed his grip on Rey's share of the Force, and she found some tension she hadn't known she'd accumulated easing out of her. She told him mentally that they were going to have a talk about what was acceptable and what wasn't. This wasn't—random people they'd had to deal with. This was his family, and their presence here was extremely important.
"It means you're human," Ben said. Jaina had yet to get to her feet. She was staring at the stone. "Enjoy it. It could be worse."

"Worse?" Jaina quavered. Jacen had his hands around her shoulders, resting on one knee.

"There's light in you, too," Ben said. "A lot of it. But it doesn't make you better than anyone else. That's the path to true darkness. The nuances—the things you think don't matter."

Jacen helped his sister into an upright position, not letting go of her. He looked at Ben and Rey with pursed lips. Rubbing his hand over Jaina's arm soothingly, he furrowed his brows in thought. The expression sent a pang through Rey's heart. He'd looked just like his father.

"If you let us talk to you, I'll tell you whatever you want to know about Luke," Rey said gently. "Everything I know. Ben knows more."

He turned to her in disbelief. I am not—

She cleared her throat. Loudly.

Ben bit his lip against a curse, closing his eyes for patience. He kept his back to his cousins so they wouldn't see his thoughts on his face. "I know a little."

"Please?" Rey asked. "Please hear us out? If you—if you decide you can't help us, then we'll leave. You have my word."

"You saw my thoughts," Jaina whispered. "You... exposed me. And you expect me to believe you'll keep your word?"

This is why I said not to do this.

I have no regrets.
Of course, he didn't.

Rey stepped forward. "I'll let you into my own mind. That will make us even, won't it?" She was desperate to gain their trust. Ben had blown everything to shreds, and he wasn't even sorry about it. He disliked them because they were his uncle's children, nothing more.

It made Rey feel sad. Ben had more family. Yet she, Rey, had no family. If she had been able to find lost cousins of her own... or an uncle, or an aunt, or anyone... anyone she could claim as her own—she would be so incredibly happy. And Ben was squandering it, all because of a grudge he held against his uncle.

And it was a fair grudge. But his children weren't him.

_Rey, I—_

"I don't know how to do that," Jaina said.

"I'll show you." Rey held out her hand, not expecting either of them to take it. "You reach out to my mind—you exert your will. It's quite painful, as you learned, but... I won't fight you. I'll let you see my thoughts. It won't hurt."

_Rey, Ben said with mild alarm. It will still hurt you. Any sign of resistance—any at all—_

_I can't let them hate us_, she said.

Jaina reached out, gripping Rey's hand.

_Sand._
Jaina yanked away, breathing raggedly. Rey blinked and opened her eyes. Jaina had gotten only a flash of her thoughts. She was giving up already?

Then Rey felt the tears on her cheeks.

"I can't do that," Jaina said, her eyes wide. "I couldn't do that to someone." She swallowed and was quiet for a long time. But she finally nodded and jerked her head in the direction of the hatch. "… But I felt you. You're not—you're not on the dark side of the Force. You're… you're in between." She shook her head slowly. "You're—"

"Gray," Rey told her. "We're gray."
Chapter Notes

This chapter was a little sad for me to write.

There had to be something close to thirty Force-sensitives in the underground bunkers.

Ben and Rey met with each of them. It was nearing dinner, so no one was out. Everyone was home and manning their stations or attending to a chore of some sort. Half were simply meditating. It was interesting to take in, since they weren't surrounded entirely by metal.

The bunkers traveled for miles—as Finn and Rey had glimpsed—but quite a few of the exits were blocked off. BB-8 had the floorplan, and they'd compared what was there now with what had been there originally.

Several cave systems existed above. Some of the bunkers let out into them, while others led directly to the surface. The ladders were used interchangeably; they opened to the world above, to other chambers, and made good spots for individual "rooms."

Jacen and Jaina's were close together. Theirs was near the cliff top, close to the waterfall roaring outside. There was an opening in the rock, enough to see the green world below. And speaking of green, Rey saw it everywhere. It was poking through the metal in blades of grass—moss covered rusted red along where a stream flowed. Vines dangled down in the spaces located the highest.

The prettiest sight to Rey was the tree. They couldn't see the upper half of it, only its roots. The roots were a system that had woven themselves through the metal. More greenery sprung up around them. They didn't have the sun, but they had the lighting of the bunkers and the freshness of the stream.

Younglings stuck to its base, splashing in the stream with happy shrieks.

There was a cafeteria. It was mixed with non-perishables and fresh things from the jungle. There was meat, and Rey wondered if it was from the crowns. She decided likely not. Even Jacen and
Jaina had seemed to struggle with them. *Rey* had struggled with them, and with Ben, they were infinitely stronger.

Electricity was stable from the generators. There were showers. The beds in the cave rooms had been dragged up from the depths of the bunkers—they were too man-made to say otherwise. A few of the Force-sensitives had made their own beds, however, out of jungle vines for frames.

And then they were following Jacen and Jaina—who had revealed themselves to be twins—to the world above. The hatch opened to a portion of the jungle. Rey was worried about seeing crowns, or anything else vicious, but there was nothing to concern herself with. Only the markers for what she realized was graves.

"How many have you lost?" she whispered.

"Enough," Jaina said sadly.

"The jungle?" Ben grunted.

The twins nodded.

"Is your mother…?" Rey trailed off.

"Yeah. Here, come with me." Jaina grabbed her hand and tugged. Rey almost fought her. She really abhorred when people did that, with the exception of Ben, and she barely tolerated *that*. She was a grown woman. She could walk on her own!

But this was Ben's family, and Jaina seemed like she wanted to bond a bit.

Leaving the boys behind, they walked for a while, hands still clasped. Rey snuck a few glances at the other woman. She was really beautiful. Rey could see more snatches of Luke in the profile of her face. That stubborn expression—lips pursed, gaze intently focused.

*Can you hear me?*
Rey jerked. She made to take her hand back, but Jaina held on with something close to a death grip. She glared at Rey, making Rey's heart ache all over again.

Yes. But so can he.

Jaina's scowl relaxed as she tilted her head, curiosity getting the better of her. He?

Ben.

Stay out, Jaina.

It was Jaina's turn to flinch. The only difference was that Rey let her go. Ben's cousin stumbled until her back smacked into a tree. She stared at Rey, not quite afraid—alert, Rey supposed. Rey, for her part, stood patiently until Jaina figured out what it was she wanted to say.

"That..." Jaina sounded out of breath. She swallowed. "You two—the two of you. You did that without effort. I—to talk to you, directly, I really had to focus the Force. But you—I could feel him. I heard him, like he was in your head. That's not poss—"

"It is possible," Rey said. "We are bonded."

"W-What?"

"Bonded," Rey reiterated. Sweat was gathering on her skin as the humidity of the jungle took its toll. She preferred the dryness of the desert in that moment, not that she'd ever willingly return to Jakku.

Rey swiped the back of her wrist over her forehead. "We're bonded through the Force."

"How?" Jaina scrambled forward, nearly tripping over a flower.
"I… don't know." Rey frowned and looked away. "There was a—monster named Snoke. He claimed to have formed the bond that ties us. All we know is that… we had to even out. We trained for a very long time to manage that."

"What's it like…?" Jaina touched her shoulder.

"It's like…" Rey sighed softly and watched the boughs sway above. There was darkness on the horizon. In a few hours, rain would be here. The creatures of the jungle were already quieting in preparation for the storm. "I can't explain it. I'm sorry. I don't know how."

"But… is it bad, or is it—?"

Rey smiled and let her eyes meet the brunette's again. "It's the most wonderful thing to ever happen to me." She wouldn't tell Jaina that the downside was that one of them would die, and so would the other. That was a weakness she couldn't afford to expose—not even to Ben's family.

"That explains why your presence in the Force is so prominent…" Jaina hummed to herself. Tapping her chin thoughtfully with her finger, she stepped onto the path and resumed their journey, not waiting for Rey. "Is that all I'm going to get out of you?"

"For now," Rey allowed. "Where are we going?"

"To my mother's grave."

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**You safe?**

**Afraid to leave me alone with Jaina?**

*She doesn't know her own mind. I knew when I saw her, and I confirmed it when I touched her thoughts. She's lost. It means she's a liability.*
Rey frowned. *She's your cousin.*

*TGusting someone blindly because they're of your blood is incredibly foolish.*

Rey tuned her thoughts out a bit so that she was mostly alone in her head again. Jaina was talking to her.

"You said our father died almost four years ago… Do you know… exactly when?"

Rey's mouth opened and closed as she considered. In the end, she shrugged helplessly. "No. Not the exact day." She knew Breeze would know, but Breeze must have been still tuckered out. "Why do you ask?"

"Our mother died four years ago," Jaina said. They came to a stop in front of a grave. It had fresh flowers around a marker at the head, and on top was a purple crystal. Someone had used a knife to inscribe Mara Jade's name on it. "We traveled, finding others like us… We taught them what we knew. And then, suddenly, she fell ill."

"Ill?" Rey replied. The wind played with her hair, cooler than it had been, though not by much. There was a distant rumble.

"Yeah." Jaina knelt before her mother's final resting place. She grabbed the crystal and held it up to Rey. "She clutched this the whole time. We could barely get a word out of her… I had never even seen it before. She must have kept it hidden. And then—one day, she was… gone."

"I'm sorry," Rey whispered, her skin prickling with goosebumps. "That's terrible to hear."

Jaina smiled faintly. It was tinged with bitterness. "Ben was right. I am angry at my father. I'm so angry that I can't stand it. It grows every day. I wish I knew how to make it stop, but no amount of meditation makes it go away."

"It's because you don't have any answers." Rey lowered herself to one knee. "I know how you feel. Sort of. I'm an orphan."
"Oh, I'm sorry," Jaina said, and Rey knew she truly meant it. Jaina's eyes hid nothing. "But you said you knew my father…" She placed the crystal into Rey's hands. "Do you think you know what this is—?"

Rey—!

The world melted.

"Luke!" A young woman, redheaded, was laughing. "You're too serious."

A flicker, and the purple crystal being shoved into Mara Jade's palm. Luke closed her hands around it and lowered his forehead to them. His lips were trembling. He was so young—young like Rey had seen in Leia's memories.

"I'm sorry."

"But I don't understand!"

"I have to protect you."

"Luke—!"

"Take this crystal with you. It's glowing because it means I'm alive." Luke released the redhead's hands and stepped away. "I will always… always—"

"Don't say it—please don't say it—"

"—Love you. I will always love you."

"Luke!" Mara Jade clutched at his shoulders, tears running down her cheeks. "Please don't do this! Please don't leave me! It's just a vision—it can change, we can make it change!"
For a moment, Luke wound his arms around her shoulders and held her close. He rested his cheek on her hair and closed his eyes. They were as wet as hers. Then he pressed a kiss to her temple and drew away.

"Luke—no—!"

"You'll be safe. I've taught you everything I can."

"Luke—"

"I love you. Please remember that."

"Luke!"

Mara Jade chased him to an X-wing. Luke had climbed into it, had put up the shields. It forced Mara Jade away so she wouldn't be injured by the liftoff.

He didn't even glance back as he took to the sky.

"LUKE!" Mara Jade screamed.

Everything shimmered.

Mara Jade watched as the glow in the crystal she'd held onto for so long faded.

Luke was—

He was dead.
After all these years, he was dead.

He was out there—somewhere—somewhere away from her—and he was dead.

He was dead.

He was dead.

He was dead.

He was dead! Hewasdeadhewasdeadhewasdead!

"Rey!"

Rey cracked her eyes open. She was on the floor of the jungle, curled into the fetal position. Jaina hovered anxiously in her peripheral. Her voice sounded further away than it really was. The scent of the earth overwhelmed Rey's senses.

Rey! It happened again?

"He gave it to her," Rey croaked. She was feeling weaker than usual. She'd never had a problem bouncing back after seeing someone's memories before. Why was this so taxing?

"W-What?"

"The crystal…" Rey felt sick. She didn't know how much was physical and how much was mental. All she knew was that her heart hurt. "He gave it to her. Luke."

I'm on my way!

Jaina was holding the crystal. She looked rapidly between it and Rey.
Rey gave her a faint smile. "It meant he was alive. When he died, it stopped glowing."

"All that time," Jaina breathed. "She had it all that time, and she never…"

Rey didn't hear the rest of what Jaina intended to say. Her eyes rolled back, and it was only as she was slipping into unconsciousness that Breeze's voice reached her, tiny as it was.

*I'm sorry, Rey. I'm so tired. I'm so tired. I think it's pulling you with me because of it. Ben Solo is safe, but I had to choose—*

*It's okay, Rey thought.*

Blackness descended, taking her with it.
Shit be going down this chapter, my friends! Some questions will be answered, more will inevitably be raised. The ball is rolling now.

Did you know?

Did you know you were bonded?

Would you have sacrificed yourself to aid our escape if you did?

Were you bonded, or am I jumping to conclusions?

Is that why you reacted so violently when you saw me reaching for Ben's hand?

Did you know…?


Luke, did you know?

Rey!

Screams.
Rey, wake up now! NOW!

She can't! She's too drained!

Fix this now, Breeze!

I am trying, Ben Solo! I tried to protect her from the crystal—but the lingering aura was so full of darkness, and I am so tired!

We have to get out of here! I need her!

Pick up her body—I must use the last of my strength to hide your presence! What little I've gained back!

The equivalent of a mental snarl. We're going to have words later!

Help them, Ben Solo! Help them escape!

Ben hefted Rey over his shoulder. She was so tiny and weighed nothing—it wasn't exactly a burden. Yet.

"I don't understand what's happening!" Jaina cried as another orbital bomb hit the ground and the bunkers were shaken to their foundation. She ushered the younglings to her, and then they were running down a corridor, BB-8 far ahead of them. Jacen was gathering everyone else.

"She found us!" Ben didn't really feel like talking—he never did—but they were on the run. Shit was going down. Communication was unfortunately essential. "Where is your craft?!"
"Our craft?" his cousin returned.

Ben barely refrained from growling. "The vessel you use to get off this planet?"

"I—it's ahead, there's a place we keep it—"

"Will it fit everyone on it?!" Ben demanded. Jaina was staring wildly around, gasping as the bunker shook yet again, rust falling like dust. "Jaina!" She snapped her head up. "Will everyone fit on it?!"

"Yes! I mean—it'll be cramped, but we can do it!"

"What's happening?" the children were crying. "What's going on?"

"Let's get to the ship—now." Ben didn't wait for her.

"We could fight—"

"There's no way we're fighting!" The Order had found them—Starkiller had found them—and they were not safe. They were so far from safe, and Rey was unconscious, and Ben would never admit it, but he was scared. "We have to escape!"

____________________________

Rey, wake up!

Rey groaned.

Relief filled her—it wasn't her own.
Ben shook her shoulders. She tipped her head back to see him. There was so much shouting going on. She had no idea what was happening. But she could sense his panic.

*What's going on…?* She didn't trust her voice. Her mouth was too dry.

**Starkiller found us. The Order is here.**

Rey sat up straight. The world spun, and Ben caught her shoulders. *Starkiller? Is she here?*

*I don't think so. I imagine if she was, we'd feel her presence. But the Order is here, and we're about to take off.*

*How are we… how are we going to avoid them…?* She wasn't sure if she was in a condition to fight off anyone or anything. She was so drained, she wasn't even sure how she was conscious. Maybe from Ben's sheer willpower.

**We're going to be piloting.**

Rey tried to shake off her grogginess. She allowed Ben to pull her to her feet. She'd been sprawled on the floor of what she assumed was their escape vessel. It was beyond crowded with every last Force-sensitive they'd met.

*How long was I out?*

*Half a day maybe.*

That meant it was morning.

*She must have found us because Breeze was tapped out.*

**We can figure out the particulars later.**
He was right.

*If everyone concentrates, together, we can deflect anything if these shields don't hold up. And I don't know if they will. This is an old ship.*

Rey found her way to the co-pilot's seat, shaking. Her adrenaline was attempting to spike, but her body had little in the way to give it. She was too drained. *It's not as bad as the Falcon.*

Alarms were blaring. She could hear them in the distance. The older Force-sensitive were struggling to rein in the children. BB-8 chittered at Ben before projecting the pathway the bunker had to guide them all out. It was an opening close to the waterfall.

*How did they figure out we were down here?*

*Once we're out of here, I'll tell you everything.*

Black spots danced in front of her vision.

*Rey—!*

"I don't know what in hells you expect me to do with this hodge podge of Jedi!"

"Lower your damn voice, Sitrine!"

"Half of the Resistance is gone! If your presence isn't hidden anymore, they'll target here next!"

"Our presence *is* hidden! The Force knot has had to pull on Rey to make it happen!" *We need more*
Rey groaned and felt the side of—what, a bed?—give in. Ben's hand was on her forehead and cheek a moment later. She squinted her eyes open to see his worried face. Sitrine was close-by, steaming silently. Seeing that Rey was awake, he came forward, the anger slipping away to concern.

"Heard you had a rough patch," he said.

Everything hurt.

But there was something important she had to get out.

*Ben. Ben, I know how to hide our presence.*

His head whipped around. **What?**

*While Breeze was using me as a tether—I was semi-conscious in her… flood of the Force. I saw how she was doing it. I can teach you. We can protect ourselves. We can be safe.*

Ben bowed his head, exhaling.

"While it's adorable that the two of you can exchange words silently, the rest of us aren't so fortunate in reading your minds!" Sitrine snapped. "Is Rey all right or not?"

"I'm fine," Rey mumbled. "Please stop shouting."

There was a knock on the bedroom door. Jacen and Jaina strolled in without waiting for an invitation. Both looked grim. Rey eyed them from where she was curled up on her bed. She didn't yet have the strength to sit up on her own.

Sitrine shoved his fingers into his hair. He was close to ripping it out, Rey could tell. But he kept
his agitation to a growl. "I'm going to make the servants open up rooms in the south wing. Excuse me." He cut between the twins on his way out.

"Where are we?" Jacen asked. His eyes found Rey's. "Are you okay? You've been unconscious for a day."

"I've been better," she croaked.

"We're on Endorom." Ben climbed more fully onto the bed and pulled Rey's head onto his lap. "Do you still have that crystal, Jaina?"

She started in surprise. "What? Oh—" She reached into her pocket. "Yeah, it's right here."

"Destroy it. Now."

Jaina bristled, and Jacen wasn't exactly indifferent himself. "No!" she said. "That's the only piece of my mother that we—"

Ben glared hard at them. "That crystal is responsible for what happened to Rey." He notably didn't mention the other reason. "It's full of darkness."

"That's not possible," Jacen said flatly. "Our mother—"

"What your mother felt at the moment of her death was an overwhelming grief," Ben said. His voice was low and threatening. Any sane person would have backed up, walked away. But his current adversaries were Skywalkers. They were all bullheaded. "Destroy it or I will."

"Okay, let me explain something to you," Jacen began in his own low, threatening voice. It was eerily similar to Luke's. "We were living—somewhat—happily on Solaris until you arrived a day ago. And it's all gone to shit since then. You're responsible for what happened—for bringing the Order to our home!" His voice was gathering heat as he went on, and he was pointing at the ground. "And now we're on some foreign planet, with all of our trainees, and you're telling us to destroy our mother's crystal!"
"Yes," Ben growled.

"No!" Jacen refused. "No. We're not doing that. Come on, Jaina. Let's go. We'll gather the others, find someplace else for refuge."

"Are you as idiotic as you look?" Ben snapped. "Maybe we weren't clear enough about the danger Starkiller imposes. The Order now knows about you."

"Yeah, because of you!" Jacen thundered. Jaina was standing behind him, frightened at the growing depth of his rage. Rey felt that was fair—things in the room were beginning to float. "We would have been fine if you had never come to Solaris!"

"We came to Solaris to save you before Starkiller found you first!" Ben snarled.

"No! You said you came to Solaris to find someone—that our grandfather had sent you!"

"Yes! To get your aid and to save you from Starkiller!"

"We're leaving now! Right now!" Jacen grabbed his sister's arm.

Ben narrowed his eyes, and the door to the room slammed shut. "You are not going anywhere!"

That same door opened a second later, Ben's mother spilling into the room.

"Will someone please explain to me what is going on?" Leia burst out. "There are countless children in the castle, Sitrine is in a snit, and—" She paused.

Everyone was frozen in action.

"Hi," Rey said weakly from her position on the bed.
"I thought—for a moment, I thought you were Luke," Leia whispered, her eyes never leaving Jacen.

The twins turned to Ben and Rey in question.

Since everyone was arguing, Rey finally found some strength to prop herself up. Sustaining her shield on their presence was expending most of her energy. And that was before worrying about how they were going to protect the twins and their ilk. It would have been only a matter of time before Starkiller found the collective on Solaris—their presence had just sped it along.

"Jacen… Jaina," Rey rasped. She nodded to the general. "This is your aunt, Princess Leia."
One of our protagonists’ problems conquered.

"That's not…" Leia shook her head. "That's not poss…” She trailed off, her gaze going inward. Jacen and Jaina were equally stunned.

Jacen whipped on Ben, his temper still in high gear. "You didn't tell us we had more relatives besides a grandfather!"

"We hadn't gotten to it yet!" Ben snarled. "And your mother could just as easily have told you!"

Rey's headache was only deepening, and she was afraid she wouldn't be able to stay awake much longer at this rate. Breeze was still helping her maintain their hidden presence in the Force. Without being about to teach Ben and equalize it between them, she could barely stay conscious.

Ben… please… don't fight…

He's the one who—

"Mara Jade," Leia breathed. "She would be the only—" Her eyes moved between the twins. "I'm sorry. Is she still—?"

"No," Jacen said curtly. Energy was practically crackling around him, all but visible. He was so similar to Ben. What had happened to his carefree attitude when he'd run into Rey, even in the face of the crowns? "She's dead. She died four years ago."

"Jacen," Jaina whispered. "Don't talk to her like that."
"I'll talk however I want until I get some answers!"

You said Jaina was afraid…

What?

When we read her mind, you told her she was afraid of Jacen… of how much more powerful he is than her… I think he's like you…

That's—

I think he was feared by his family, too…

The world turned gray—flickered—went black.

You always pass out right at the most inconvenient—

Rey rested on her side on her side, curled up. When she opened her eyes, she saw Breeze there, in the same position. Breeze's eyes were their usual deep violet. Beneath them was a pool of water. Somehow, they weren't sinking, as though there was a layer of firm ground beneath it.

It rippled outward in places with soft tings as faint lights drifted down to touch it.

She wasn't sure what was making the peaceful noise.

"Where are we?" Rey breathed.

Why? How?

Though the questions had been wordless, Breeze still answered them in that soft voice. "This is where I exist. You're here with me because you've gone so deep..." A frown creased between her brows. "You shouldn't be this deep. You should wake up—you should be with Ben Solo."

"But I can't, can I?"

Breeze gave a slight shake of her head, her eyes full of sadness.

_Ping._

_Ping, ping._

"Why do you have a body?" Rey asked, because there was nothing they could do about what had happened, and it was too scary to think about. "Why do I?"

"Your mind shaped us," the Force knot replied.

"What are the lights?"

"The pieces of your soul," Breeze whispered.

---

_Rey—_

Ben swam into view.
Rey!

He looked so worried that Rey had to reach up with shaky fingers to touch his frown.

*How long was I asleep?*

*Too long.*

She felt herself smile. *How long is too long?*

He braced an arm around her to help her sit up. She leaned into him, and he fell back against pillows. She realized they were in their bed. It made it easier to snuggle into his chest, to breathe in the scent of him, musky and Ben.

*We need to talk about this. I can't go where you're going.* His fingers were in her hair, combing it. She wondered when it had been let down. *We're alone. For now. It's night.*

That, she'd been able to deduce. It was dark in their room.

*Is Breeze killing you?*

Rey considered the question. She thought of the peaceful water, the ripples… the lights from fragments of her soul singing oh-so-softly in the background… She thought of Breeze across from her, their hands loosely clasped.

*No,* Rey said. *She's trying to save me.* She attempted to sit up on her own. It didn't go too well.

Ben caught her as she fumbled.

*I need to show you—I need to show you how to protect ourselves, or else…*
*Or else what?* There was so much torment and concern within Ben that he couldn't keep it hidden. It resonated through their bond in a way that was nearly physical, so that she experienced it with her entire being.

It was like being surrounded in an enclosed space in a roaring wind of visceral fear.

*Or else I'll disappear.*

Ben lowered her to the edge of the lake. *I don't like this.*

*We have to do this now.*

*From what you told me, we'll be surrendering a piece of ourselves to the Force.*

*It's equivalent exchange.*

Ben let out a string of curses.

*What's wrong?*

*This is bullshit! I haven't heard of anything like this!*

*Breeze is made from the Force. I... She is the Force... I think that's how she knows. Help me sit up again?* Rey grunted as Ben acquiesced. *It's not so bad. Calm down.*

Ben fairly growled. *I will not calm down.*
The golden orbs were dancing along the water of the lake, reminding Rey of where she'd been with Breeze. Breeze had stated that that was where she resided in the Force, but she'd also said that Rey's mind had shaped things. Had she envisioned this lake, in a way?

*The consequences aren't so terrible.*

*I disagree.*

*Ben... all we have to do is accept that if we conceal our presence within the Force, it will always be hidden. Forever. I know that nothing is ever as easy as it seems, but I'd like to survive this. I'd like to not die. I'd like you to not die. Wouldn't you agree?*

He pursed his lips. His silence was telling.

*Is it so important to you that our enemies fear us?*

*We have an upper-hand because they can sense us.*

*And what's happened, every single time? We're still tested! I think, for now, the benefits outweigh the risks!*

He inhaled very, very deeply and then gave one short nod.

*All right, Rey said, getting down to business. We do this, and then you update me on everything that has happened since I touched that crystal.*

*...Agreed.*

The wind blew past Rey and Ben as they held hands in front of the lake. They weren't near the
castle—Ben had carried her deep into the forest before he'd set her down, and it was for this specific reason. They were making an offering.

_I still think this is a bad idea._

_You think everything is a bad idea._

_You said you learned how to do it from Breeze, and—_

_And we don't have time for that. Not if my soul is to stay intact._

Maybe if Starkiller wasn't after them.

Maybe if there wasn't so much danger.

_All right._ Rey closed her eyes, recalling what Breeze had told her in that in-between place. She turned their arms so that the insides of them were facing upwards, shifted their hands so they were clasping one another's wrists. _Invite the Force in._

_Meditate?_

_No. Invite the Force in. Like this._

Rey opened herself completely. It had nothing to do with meditation—it was both harder and easier than that. It meant dropping every shield one had within themselves and leaving themselves vulnerable to the Force. The good thing was that the Force was neutral and wouldn't take advantage of such a state to fill someone with something like darkness.

_Ben._

_I can't do that._
Yes, you can. I believe in you.

That's great. I still can't do it.

Ben, you have to! Rey's brows furrowed.

I can't!

Then I'll do it with you!

Rey had to close herself up for the moment it took to reach for where Ben was in her existence. All of his walls were instinctively up, protecting him. She lowered them one by one with soft, reassuring thoughts. His subconscious was intimately familiar with hers, and it allowed this without much protest.

They were empty vessels.

The wind swelled to a crescendo. It wrapped around them, and Rey kept a solid grip on Ben's wrists. No matter what, they couldn't break their hold, or it wouldn't work. They were connected, and it had to apply to both of them.

The simple braid Rey had thrown her hair into whipped her in the face as it flailed through the air. It was so loud that she wanted to cover her ears. Beneath her feet, the very ground seemed to shake. When she slit her eyes open to see as best she could, she found they were in almost a globe of wind, a wind so strong it was visible—because of the golden lights it carried with it.

She looked at the ground. Stones were lifting through the strands of grass.

The Force slammed into her hard enough to take her breath away.

-You know the exchange?­-
They weren't words so much as feelings.

Yes, Rey said. *I was told.*

*Then it will be taken now.*

The wind exploded outward with the orbs, the stones and bits of earth getting sucked into the vortex in the process. It continued to grow, more orbs joining their brethren, until there was nothing but a sheen of gold. It crossed over the top of them, above the treetops, blocking out the moons.

They nearly lost their footing as the ground gave another fierce rumble. Their fingers slipped—grappled—Rey cried out—Ben caught her at the last possible moment. Slowly, they tightened their grip to where it was in the chaos.

*This is insane. This should not be happening. This should not be possible. If it was possible, I would have known! Snoke would have known, or Skywalker! Or—my grandfather!*  

*Concentrate! Keep yourself open, I can't do it for the both of us on my own, Ben!*  

*How is this display of power not going to draw Starkiller herself?!!*

Rey wasn't able to answer. The ground shifted again, and they fell against one another. Something—some piece of her—from someplace inside of her that she wasn't able to describe—was being pulled from her body. Her natural instinct was to fight it. She held it back, squeezing her eyes shut.

*Ben, do this! For me!*

He let go—let his piece be taken from him.

The wail of the wind died at the same time that the earth stopped shuddering. Thousands of golden lights dispersed, flinging themselves away in all different directions. Rey’s bangs hung in her eyes,
and she found herself panting. She had a death grip on Ben's wrists, her fingers white at the tips.

Then all she heard their heavy breathing and the sounds of the forest returning.

Rey swallowed, fighting to make her heart stop pounding so fast.

**Well, that was anti-climactic.**

Yeah…

**Do you feel different?**

No. Do you?

No. And now we're going to make my grandfather show his face. I have some questions, and he's going to answer them.

You heard… You heard what it—what the Force said.

The part Breeze hadn't warned her about. Why? Because there was a chance Rey would have said no?

**It doesn't matter.**

*It does!* Rey tried not to let panic take her. She let go of him. *It does, it matters!*

*I want to talk to him!*

Ben—
I want to talk to him before I think about anything else!

Ben!

Don't do this right now, Rey! Don't do this right now! If you do this right now—

We won't be able to—

DON'T DO THIS RIGHT NOW! I NEED TO SPEAK TO HIM!

BEN, WE WON'T BE ABLE TO SENSE—

IF YOU DO THIS RIGHT NOW—

—WE WON'T BE ABLE TO SENSE ANYONE WHO HAS THE FORCE!

—I'LL BLAME YOU!

They stared at each other in the moonlight, breathing raggedly.

You can't blame me, Ben, Rey said. She fought not to tremble. We didn't have a choice!

Ben's eyes were as murderous as she'd ever seen them directed at her. Let me speak to my grandfather.

Ben!

I CAN'T TALK TO YOU RIGHT NOW!
"This isn't fair!" Rey yelled, her frustration boiling over.

I can't look at you! Go!

"Just where in hells do you expect me to go?!" Rey gestured all around them with a hint of hysteria to her voice. "We share a mind!"

Ben grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her so hard that her teeth clacked together. He bent his head to hers, his eyes dark and fiery. "I'm tired of this! You don't let me make any decisions! You take control of everything!"

"That's not true!" Rey cried, stung.

"What are you afraid of, Rey?! That I'll lose control?! That I'll become Kylo Ren again?!

Rey choked on her thoughts, a sob on her lips.

He shook her again. "ANSWER ME!"

"I DON'T KNOW!" she cried, tears running down her face. "Ben, you're scaring me!"

"I don't care!" He shoved her away from him, and she tripped and went down, scraping herself on the way. She felt a flash of concern from him—then his thoughts were sealed away. Trying to reach them was like beating on a glass wall.

"We've been together for four years!" he yelled. "We're never apart!"

You never said—you never said— She couldn't seem to breathe. Her throat was too locked up for her to talk vocally.
I never said what?! 

You never said it bothered you!

It didn’t! But it does now!

BEN! Rey sobbed.

YOU'RE SMOTHERING ME!

He left her there, gasping for breath, striding quickly in the opposite direction of the castle.

We can’t be separated! she cried desperately. Ben, we—

But he never answered her, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t punch through the glass.

So she punched the ground and screamed.
Close Your Eyes and Listen Carefully

Chapter Notes

The end of the last chapter killed me, too! I actually woke up somewhat depressed about it, haha.

Before the truth will set you free, it'll piss you off,
Before you find a place to be, you're gonna lose the plot,
Too late to tell you now, one ear and right out the other one,
'Cause all you ever do is chant the same old mantra
-MANTRA, Bring Me the Horizon

In the end, Rey decided to go to the castle.

Ben hadn't returned to her. She didn't think he would, not anytime soon, and she couldn't spend the night sobbing on the forest floor. She had to pull herself together. This wasn't her fault. The strain would have been too much, too quickly. She hadn't lied to Ben—if they hadn't done what they did, she would have disappeared.

But it was a long trek. She stumbled the majority of the way, eyes bleary, swollen, every other breath hitching. Her heart ached so badly. It ached so badly, and Ben wasn't there to soothe it. This was wrong, it felt so wrong. It was like all of the progress they'd made had flown away with the winds of the Force.

"You're smothering me!"

She flinched, her foot knocking into an overgrown root. She caught herself on a tree. Bark peeled a layer of skin off her palm in the process, and she stifled a yell. She clutched her hand to her chest, ducking her head down, and just trembled for a moment.

"I'm tired of this! You don't let me make any decisions! You take control of everything!"
Did…

Did he really feel that way?

Or was it… or was it because he was scared and lashing out at her? It was one of the only ways he knew how to deal with his temper. He never could keep it in. Not entirely.

She trekked onward. The golden lights swirled around her.

"What are you afraid of, Rey?! That I'll lose control?! That I'll become Kylo Ren again?!"

…Was she…?

Was she afraid of that?

But there was so much potential for darkness inside of him…

If they did it his way, they'd level the galaxy and everyone in it!

She placed her uninjured hand over her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut. Her heart was in so much pain. Every word he'd said had been a dagger, buried deep. They were sure to leave scars. She'd barely made it through the illusion where she'd confronted herself, her insecurities. And now…

"You're smothering me!"

Ben was her entire world.

And she was smothering him.
She was… smothering him…

"Rey."

She looked up from where she curled up at the base of a tree. Her face had been buried against her knees, her arms wrapped tightly around her shins.

Anakin was standing there.

Rey sniffled and swiped hastily at her eyes, not wanting him to see her in this state. Which… she belatedly realized was ridiculous. He could see anything he wanted to, and likely had already. Still — she hated appearing so weak.

Ben was the only person she truly let herself be free with anymore.

"What happened was unavoidable," his grandfather told her. "Don't blame yourself."

"But he—" Her voice cracked. She was embarrassed. She sounded like a lost child.

"He'll realize he's being foolish." Anakin folded his arms within his robes. His expression was as serious was ever, that scarred brow furrowed. "You must see to my daughter—to my son's children. Jacen is close to being lost. We can't let this happen."

Rey sniffled. The last thing she wanted to do was interact with anyone right now, but he was right. There were things to do, important things.

"And might I offer a bit of advice?"

She looked at him with some confusion. He always gave them advice.
Anakin sighed, his eyes still serious, but now growing stern, as well.

"Yes?" Rey questioned.

"You always forgive him so easily." He held up a hand to Rey's protests. "There's nothing wrong with that. However... in this case, I think it's best for him to realize the damage he's done. If he doesn't, this will fester."

Rey knew he was right about that, too.

"How will we be able to search for the other Force-sensitives you wanted us to?" Rey asked sadly.

"You didn't need any help to determine the twins were Force users. Those who can use the Force often show it. The three who are left that I need you to find are aware of their power. For those who aren't, the twins will be able to aid you."

Rey's shoulders relaxed. Some of the tension she'd been holding there about the sacrifice they'd made had eased. This was a manageable crisis.

She called it a crisis despite its fairness to the Force.

She hoped Ben would come to understand that.

"Go to Jace," Anakin said.

"Will you go see Ben?" Rey pleaded.

The Force ghost averted his gaze.

She sighed and buried her face in her hands.
Just another thing for Ben to be angry at her for.

"Why me?" she asked, her voice muffled.

"Because you make no demands of me," Anakin replied. Except the once, and she supposed they'd settled that. "You have no ties to me."

And with that, he disappeared.

Rey listened to the sounds of the forest. Somewhat terrified she wouldn't find anything, she sent out her awareness, probing the wildlife. The Force bounded back to her as it always did, illuminating everything as far as she wanted.

So it was just people, then.

That was good.

"I think it's best for him to realize the damage he's done."

Rey allowed herself to cry for a little while longer.

Sitrine fell into step with her as she entered the castle. What had he been doing, waiting? It was the middle of the night! Annoyance rose within Rey, but she stamped it down. She wouldn't do what Ben had done to her—she wouldn't lash out at Sitrine when he didn't deserve it.

Although, he usually did more often than not. It was only a matter of time.

"Where's Ky-Ky?" he asked.
"Taking care of something," Rey said indifferently.

"Did he bring you up to speed?"

Rey stopped in the corridor they'd crossed a moment ago. "What do you need, Sitrine?" she asked tiredly.

"I need to know when all the little Jedi will be gone!" he said tersely.

Rey snapped.

Sitrine flew up against the stone wall, knocking down a tapestry as Rey raised a hand and closed her fingers. He struggled, clawing at his neck as his lungs were starved for air. She didn't need to draw on Ben to do this—she was powerful enough on her own from their bond.

Their bond that she was apparently smothering him with!


So much for not lashing out.

Pissed, she let him go and walked off. She heard him hit the ground, sucking in great gulps of air.

Jacen was in the library. Jaina was, too, as a matter of fact. The latter was sprawled over a comfortable looking chair, a book open in her lap. She was fascinated by the paper. Rey remembered Ben's memories, the way he'd preferred to read paper, as well, when he'd been younger.
"Can you read it?" she asked, and Jaina jumped. Rey smiled. "That engrossed?"

"No, I—I couldn't feel you. Usually, you're a—..." She wet her lips. "Never mind. What's up?"

"I was looking for your brother."

Jacen gave a single wave from where he was on a sliding ladder nearby. "Yo."

"Where are the others?" Rey asked.

"...They're asleep in their wing," he said indifferently, turning back to the book in his hands. He handled the pages delicately, as they deserved. They were quite old. "What are you doing up so late? I thought you were ill."

"I could ask the same of you," Rey replied. "Why you're awake, that is."

He scoffed.

"What happened, Jace?" she asked. "When I met you, you weren't..."

"I don't know," he interrupted. "I—I get like this sometimes. Where I'm so—angry. Worse than Jaina. I can't control my temper. And then bad things happen."

"Bad things?" Rey lowered herself onto a chair beside Jaina's. The other brunette was studying her book, but Rey knew she was listening to everything that was being said.

"Yeah... That hasn't happened in a while." Jacen closed the book in his hands and climbed down from the ladder. "Something about Ben brings it out in me."

"Perhaps it's because you're so similar," Rey suggested.
Jacen and Jaina gave her a bewildered stare.

Rey's smile was soft, faint. "You wanted to know everything. I take it Ben hasn't told you much?"

"No," Jaina said wryly, closing her book, as well. Rey had their complete attention. "He's been dealing with—politics, I think."

"All right. Before I continue, have you… spoken with Leia?" Rey asked.

"A little," Jacen admitted. He traced the engravings on the cover of the book he'd chosen. "We've… avoided her all day."

So Rey had only been out for another day. That was a bit relieving.

"Why?" Rey asked.

"I dunno," Jacen said with a small shrug.

Too much change, maybe, Rey thought.

"Well, you'd best sit down," she said. "This might take a while."

Ben didn't come back to bed. It was the first time Rey had spent the night by herself in years.

Which meant that she didn't sleep at all.

When she "woke up" in the morning, she was briefly unaware of what had happened the evening before. Then it all came rushing back to her, and her heart sank. Her eyes were still puffy and
swollen, and her pillow was soaked with tears. She hated herself a little for that. She couldn't remember the last time she'd cried herself to sleep.

She contemplated skipping breakfast, but ultimately decided it wasn't an option. She was the future empress. She couldn't hide away in her room when she was at their base of operations. She had to make an appearance now that she was strong enough to.

A bath was drawn, and she sank beneath the water, holding her breath. She did this until she couldn't any longer, trying to squeeze the last of the tears out. When she emerged, she began working on her long hair. With every pull of her fingers through her locks, she summoned the will for meditation. It would be the only thing to get her through this.

Her clothes were chosen with care. She laid out four separate outfits. In her opinion, they all looked the same. Black and black… black and black… The only colors Ben tolerated. A pang hit her heart, and she closed her eyes and exhaled. If she broke down every single time she thought about Ben or his name was mentioned, there was no way she'd make it.

A clingy, tight shirt that went to mid-thigh. Equally tight pants, but leather, tucked into knee-high boots. Her usual fingerless gloves. No cape. As for her hair, she pulled it into the buns Leia had once given her. She had no reason not to wear them today.

Satisfied with her appearance, she left for breakfast.

Sitrine glared daggers at her down the long table. Rey ignored him as she buttered her toast. She didn't care if he was wounded. She was nursing her own.

Now that the twins knew everything, they were with Leia at the opposite end of the table. Rey listened without seeming to. Her eyes kept straying to the entrances to the great hall, expecting Ben to walk in at any moment. She thought it would be better if she knew he was safe.

No one questioned her at Ben's lack of appearance.

Rey finished eating early and told everyone she'd meet them in the war room. No sooner had she
entered it than she found Rellen. He was seated, his feet on the table, his eyes closed, his hands clasped over his stomach. He heard her footsteps but didn't look up.

"Sitrine is still waiting for an apology, you know," he drawled.

"He can keep waiting," Rey said sharply. She knocked his feet off the table. That made his eyes open finally, and they formed a glare. "Where have you been?"

"Need I remind you that I'm the general for the First Order?"

Rey retracted her metaphorical claws. "…Right. Sorry."

"What's gotten into you?" Rellen's amber eyes raked over her.

"Nothing," she said curtly.

"It's hardly nothing."

"It's nothing that I want to talk about," she parried.

"Very well," he said.

And he closed his eyes again.

So much for being alone and gathering her composure once more before meeting with everyone. How was she going to explain where Ben was?

It turned out she didn't have to worry about that. As soon as everyone was gathered—including Rellen, Jacen, and Jaina this time—Ben strode into the room. His hair was damp, as though he'd bathed, as well. His gaze immediately went to Rey, and the glass wall faded, but she couldn't look at him.
"Well, I know everyone is wondering why we have so many Force-sensitives here," Rey said to the room at large. "We never imagined we'd find so many. But we were found by the enemy while we were on Solaris. It's thanks to everyone's quick thinking that we were able to escape without anyone getting injured."

Rey.

"You're smothering me!"

"The problem is that not so many Force-sensitives can stay here," Rey continued. She leaned onto the table, fingers splayed as she looked at each and every one of the members of their alliance with the exception of Ben. "I propose that the new base for the Resistance also house our new guests. That way, Endorom will remain safe."

There were some murmurs.

Rey cleared her throat quietly. "This is Jacen and Jaina—they're… Skywalkers."

Now the murmurs were shouts of disbelief.

Rey waited until they'd more or less simmered down.

"They're Luke Skywalker's children—" She had to raise her voice to be heard. "He didn't know about them—"

"Everyone, be quiet!" Leia ordered, and a reluctant hush fell over the room. "They clearly pose no threat. You can discuss it amongst yourselves later."

Rey!

"Right," Rey straightened. "Have there been any new ideas, other than Poe's, about possible bases?"
"There's been close to a hundred," Poe said. There were shadows under his eyes. What was he losing sleep over? Sitrine? "We could be here for hours talking about them."

"I think it's best if you can narrow them down to the top twenty suggestions, and we'll meet again tonight and try to come to a decision." Rey looked at Leia, who nodded. "All right. Meeting adjourned. I encourage you to introduce yourselves to our guests, since you'll be getting to know them intimately soon enough."

Rey went to go with the rest of them, but Ben clasped her elbow. Since she didn't want to struggle in front of everyone, she stayed back, turning her face away so they wouldn't see her pursed lips. Eventually, the room had emptied out except for the two of them.

Rey… Look at me.

No, she said. I have to go.

Go? Go where?

Away from you.

And she left the war room without a single glance back.
Lately, everyone has been telling me how much they're still invested in this story, even over a hundred chapters later. I can't express how much this means to me! I love you guys so much! I can't state enough how much you guys get me through my day!

"Rey, I love you!"

Rey sighed from where she sat on the floor by their bed, organizing her things. They'd be leaving again soon, and they'd lost what they brought last on Solaris when their ship was shot down by the twins. She had to pack new sets of clothes and was ever grateful that she'd left the Jedi texts behind.

"I know," she said tiredly. "That's not what's in question."

"Let me in—"

"No."

Ben growled his frustration as he always did. "If you let me in, I can see what you're feeling—"

"No." She shoved an outfit into a larger bag she'd had to grab from the armory.

"Why are you determined to shut me out?"

"I don't know," she replied softly. "Maybe I feel suffocated."

He stiffened.
When he walked out without another word, Rey wasn't surprised.

But it didn't make her any less sad.

"This is nice," Poe said as he sat with Rey beside the lake. He drew one knee up to his chest. "I feel like you're always afraid to be alone with me."

She shook her head and picked up a stone, rolling it around in her fingers. "I'm always with Ben, that's all." Ever since Poe had backed down on Arna, she hadn't had a problem with being around him.

"Well, you're not always with him..." Poe trailed off when Rey tapped her temple. "I see. So that's a constant thing, being in each other's heads?"

Rey tossed the stone. It sank.

How had Rellen managed to make these stones skip so many times?

"More or less," she said, grabbing another stone. She needed to keep her hands busy. It was much easier to distract herself that way.

"How do you not go insane?"

"There's..." Rey searched for a word. There really wasn't one, but she had to come up with something. She'd never really talked about this with anyone before. She hadn't had to. But now... "There's a veil. It stays between our thoughts. We can hear one another, speak to one another, but we don't... hear everything, not unless we push. We can put up a wall, as well, keep the other out, although that's painful."

She gave the rock another go.
"Definitely complicated." Poe stretched.

She smiled a little. "Yeah."

"So why did you really bring me out here?"

Rey hesitated. This was the tricky part. It all depended on how she phrased her concerns.

Poe took a rock, and it skipped five times before it disappeared beneath the surface of the water. Rey's mouth dropped open.

"You know how to do it, too?!" she exclaimed.

He laughed, his eyes bright. "I'll show you. Here." He held up a rock, waving it a little. Then he shaped his fingers around it to hold it properly. She watched avidly, chewing on her lower lip. Would it work a second time?

Skip, skip, skip, skip, plunk!

Rey puffed her cheeks in frustration. "You make it look so easy!"

"It just takes practice. And you need the right stone. The flatter, the better."

They spent the next several minutes searching the immediate vicinity for rocks of that description. In the end, they came up with eight of them. Rey giddily went to work with Poe coaching her. The first seven joined their brethren on the lake's bed, but she managed to get the last one to skip once.
"Yes!" she cheered.

Poe clapped for her. "Very good. Now stop avoiding the question—why am I really here?"

"Oh." Rey's shoulders slumped. She fidgeted by sinking her fingers into the soft soil at the water's edge. "Promise not to run away?"

Poe hung his head with a sigh. He scritched his thumb over an eyebrow. "This is about Sitrine, huh?"

Rey didn't say anything.

"Do we really have to talk about it?"

"I'm only concerned, Poe. You look as if you haven't slept at all."

"So do you."

She opened her mouth and closed it.

He had her there because she couldn't really say it was about something different. It wasn't. They were both having... relationship?... troubles.

"The only thing I wanted to say is that I trust Sitrine with my life," Rey stated plainly. She leaned back on her hands. "Isn't the sunset pretty here on Endorom?"

Poe fell into a similar position. The waves lapped gently just beneath their boots.

"When do you think this will end?" he asked.
"This?" Rey tilted her head.

"You know… *this.*" Poe rolled his head back on his shoulders, gazing upward at the pink haze.

She knew he didn't mean the flowers. "Soon," she said. "It'll end soon."

He looked at her sharply. "Really?"

She nodded. "Yeah. We've got a few people left to find… we've trained in important things to save us… we've got everything set up to take over once the time comes. And that time is 'soon."

"I don't suppose you could be more specific." He gave her a lazy grin.

"I can't," she chuckled. "I wish I could. But it's in the not-so-distant future."

"Okay, my turn." She raised her eyebrows at him, and he sat up straight, crossing his legs to form a lap. "I get to ask a serious question now."

"Let me guess. It's about Ben?"

"Yeah." He tapped the tip of her nose with his finger. "Do you really want to be empress of the galaxy? Or is it Ben's dream?"

"I really want to be," she told him even while knowing it wasn't strictly true.

But she had taken so many things from Ben that he'd wanted.

She could at least give him this.

Or was it… that she could better control the damage this way…?
"Is it okay if I say I don't believe you?" Poe gave her a lopsided grin.

She lightly punched his arm. "You're treading dangerous ground, my friend. Keep on, and I'll bring Sitrine back up."

He held up his hands in surrender. "All right, all right, message received."

They were quiet for a while, just watching this system's star set. It was peaceful with the sound of the water so close.

"Soon, huh?" Poe asked.

Rey nodded.

Soon.

Even with her half of the bond shut off, it would take an idiot to not see how close Ben was to damaging something. Himself, another person, an object—all three, all at once. When she entered the bedroom, he was nearly on top of her, fury in those dark eyes of his.

"Where have you been?"

"By the lake," she said honestly. "I was talking to Poe about Sitrine." She began to pull her hair down. She needed to tend to it before dinner and the meeting.

"How long are you going to let this go on?" he snapped.

She didn't pretend she didn't know what he was talking about. She just took out a different pair of
trousers, since the ones she'd been wearing had mud all over them. She was slightly cheerful—she'd at last managed to skip a stone more than once, an all-time record of three. It was a small moment of happiness, but it was something.

"We have to be at dinner," Rey said, wriggling into the new pair. "Hopefully, they'll have actually narrowed it down to twenty options." She tugged on a fresh shirt, pulled her hair free from it. "At this point, I'd take Poe's suggestion for the planet near the blackhole."

"I. Don't. Like. This," Ben hissed. His hand closed over her shoulder.

She ignored him, starting the process of a spiral braid. "Sitrine's likely still pouting. I'll have to apologize to him. I took my temper out on him last night." It went unsaid who had caused that fit of temper.

"Rey!" Now he had both of her shoulders, and he yanked her around to face him. "Look at me!"

She took a deep breath—steered herself.

She looked him dead in the eye.

"What?" she asked.

"Why can't we talk about this?" His fingers tightened on her, enough to be bruising. It didn't come from a place of hatred. No, it was borne of desperation.

"Because I don't want to talk about it right now," Rey said.

"Why not?"

Rey leaned down, dipping out from under his grasp. She finished with her braid. "I'm still angry." And hurt. Very, very hurt. "You got to have your space. Now let me have mine."

She paused at the door. He hadn't followed. When she turned to look, she found him with his head
down, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. He was trembling. It almost made her cave—almost.

"I'll see you at dinner," she said.
Someone was screaming.

Rey could hear them so clearly, but she couldn't see anything. She was standing in utter darkness—a cool void of nothingness. She took a step forward and found she couldn't move at all. Her entire body was frozen.

What was going on?!

"I CAN'T FIND HIM, I CAN'T FIND HIM, I CAN'T FIND HIM!"

Rey wanted to run. She thought she might know that voice. At the moment, it was filled with hatred, echoing around her as though it had bounced off walls. The words pummeled into Rey over and over. She was half-afraid they'd sink into her skin, drag over her bones, leave runnels that would neve heal, that would stay with her forever.

"WHERE IS HE? WHERE DID HE GO? HOW DID SHE TAKE HIM AWAY FROM ME?!

Starkiller…?

"HE'S MINE! NOT HERS! MINE TO DEAL WITH, MINE TO KILL! MINE TO—"
"Rey?"

Rey choked and grabbed onto the arms of the person standing over her. The bleariness cleared from her eyes enough for her to make out that it was Ben. She held onto him for a moment and then let him go, sitting up in bed. Early morning was streaming through the window.

Ben sat on the edge of the bed. He raised a hand to her temple—dropped it before he touched her.

"I'm afraid," Rey whispered, watching the sunbeams.

"Of what?" he murmured.

"I wonder…" I wonder if she made a connection with me those times she found me. I wonder if it's still there. I can't let her know it's still there….

Rey swallowed and abandoned speaking the thought aloud. She'd tell Ben, but not now. No, she still needed time to mull it over. It had nothing to do with their fight. She was afraid. If Starkiller wanted Ben so much, why had she grabbed hold of Rey?

Was Rey the weakest link?

But…

"If I promise not to push you right now, will you at least lower the wall?" Ben asked quietly.

Rey bowed her head. It wasn't an unreasonable request, so long as he stuck to his word. After a long heartbeat, she nodded and began the process of letting go of her shields, one by one. The bond returned to its usual, open state, with only the light veil between them.

Ben breathed deeply, his forehead dropping to her shoulder. She knew how he felt. Closing him off from the bond was awful and lonely. They were together in a way that very few people would ever experience. Even if she was angry at him, that fact remained the same. However…
She shifted so that she was moving around him to get out of bed. His emotions were a dark, looming well, and she didn't pay them any mind. She couldn't. She'd crack. This was all she could allow either of them so she wouldn't go mad.

Rey—please—I can feel how you—

Ben, I will close the link again!

Just give me someplace to start!

Rey lifted the wall.

Ben muffled a scream.

"No!" Rey yelled, standing across from him, the bed between them. "I'm tired of forgiving you so quickly! You do the same things over and over, without a single care to how I feel! You never learn!" That was a bit harsh. He'd learned many things. But on this matter…

"—WHERE DID SHE TAKE HIM, WHERE DID SHE TAKE HIM—"

Rey flinched, gripping the side of her head.

"What's wrong?" Ben demanded.

She waited until she could control her voice. "Nothing. Just—a headache. I didn't sleep well."

"If you had let me in, we—"

"You made me spend an entire night away from you," Rey said. A quiet threat had crept into her words, and if he wasn't careful, she'd unleash her temper on him. "I don't want to hear it."
"Is that all this is about? Revenge for what I did?"

"If that's truly what you think, then you aren't close at all to understanding the problem," Rey said with a trace of hurt. "It's been four years, Ben. You can't stay stagnant forever. At some point, you have to move forward!"

"How can you say that?!" He threw a hand out to the side.

"I don't mean you haven't made any progress at all!" Rey cried. "You have made—tremendous strides of progress, and I am so happy for that!" The entire galaxy was unknowingly happy for that. "I love you so much, and I will never regret a single thing we've done! But I refuse to be your punching bag any longer!"

Rey, Breeze said, appearing as a shimmering ball from out of nowhere. It tore her attention away from Ben, which was likely for the best. She wasn't in the mood for a screaming match, not when she was so concerned about—

*It's okay. Those thoughts were from yesterday. They were extremely powerful—they resonated throughout the galaxy. Some Force-sensitives might have felt discomfort, it was so strong. But because she touched you briefly, and you're both powerful, you got the trail of the thoughts. They are long gone. Fear not!*

Rey exhaled with intense relief. Oh, thank the gods.

"Would you at least tell me what's going on now?" Ben asked, each word weighted with concern.

Breeze must have been speaking to Ben on his end, because Ben's face began to undergo a range of expressions. It started with quickly stifled fear, ran the gamut through anger and the determination to do something, before eventually settling into a resolved acceptance.

It soon turned into bitterness, like he had the taste of ashes on the back of his tongue. "And you wouldn't tell me that?"

"I didn't want to worry you," Rey replied.
"That's something that goes beyond worrying me!" Ben shouted in disbelief. "That concerns both of us, that—!"

"Right, well, it doesn't concern us now," Rey said loudly. "We need to get ready."

For the second time in nearly twenty-four hours, Ben grabbed her elbow. But his fingers were harder, more bruising, and she winced. He yanked her to him—she sidestepped before she could stumble into his body. This only resulted in him grabbing her other elbow, as well. A half-a-second later, she was crushed against his chest.

"Ben—let go of me!" she snapped.

His fingers tangled in her hair at the nape of her neck. He gripped it and yanked her head back. Stormy eyes stared into her own, and her hands came to his chest in the form of fists. They never quite landed.

"Let. Me. Go," she said softly.

"Punish me," he murmured in a deadly voice, dragging her even closer. She tripped over her feet, causing his fingers to pull harder. "Punish me all you like. But I know you're suffering just as much as I am. And we're vulnerable like this."

"Which is it?" she whispered.

His brows contracted, anger fading to confusion. This wasn't the reaction he'd expected.

"Am I suffering as much as you? Or are we vulnerable?" Rey took advantage of his slackening grip to step away from him. "Which is more important to you?"

Anger filled Ben all over again. "Why are you being this way?!"

"Because not everyone—gets a cheat card, Ben!"
"We're not 'everyone'—"

"What would have happened if this bond hadn't formed the way it did? Would you have kept forcing darkness on me? Would we have lasted? You act however you want to, without ever thinking about how it will affect others! You rely on my mind, my heart, to tell you what I'm feeling and thinking!"

"And what is so wrong about that?!" Ben exploded. "Why isn't that a good thing?!"

"Because it's made you blind to other things!" Rey shouted back. "When our thoughts are tied together, I can't resist you! When you're hurting, I'm hurting! I put you before everything! But when you're hurting, you're hurting, and nothing else matters! How I feel doesn't matter!"

What looked like the dawning of understanding, just an inkling of it, touched his face, made him grow still.

"...Rey," he said, reaching for her.

"No," she said. "And I'm—I'm tired of it, honestly." She pulled her hair over her shoulder. It was a mess, and he'd only made it worse.

He sat on the bed, as lost as ever.

Rey bent to kiss his forehead. Her hands hovered over his shoulders. But her lips never landed, and neither did her fingers.

She closed her eyes and drew away.

"I'm taking a bath," she said. "And then we have to head to Sukuru, right?"

They were going to find one of the Force-sensitive s Anakin had mentioned, and they weren't the
only ones headed out today. The Resistance would be leaving for an extrasolar moon named Kenmun. Rey didn't have all the details on the latter—it had been decided after two hours of hemming and hawing—but she was planning to update herself on the trip.

Ben didn't answer her.

It took everything she had to leave him there.
"Why does this hug feel like a goodbye?" Leia asked.

"Because... I think the next time we see one another, it'll be... time," Rey replied, withdrawing from the other woman's arms. She didn't think she needed to explain. This was confirmed when Leia's eyes tightened at the corners.

"Is it so close?"

"We've made great progress," Rey said, silently adding, *We had most of it taken care of before we approached you.* Which had been the plan, because doing otherwise would have been stupid, and worse, pointless.

Leia was understandably worried. "What's going on between you and my son?" The look on her face told Rey not to try and pretend there wasn't anything. "Should you be leaving with things this way? Is that safe?"

Rey dropped her eyes. In the face of her future mother-in-law, she wasn't sure what she could say. *If* the other woman would even understand. It was her son. It was *Ben,* but it was her son. It was Leia's duty to take his side on something like this. That was what mothers did, wasn't it?

She wouldn't know.

"We're having a disagreement," Rey whispered. The floor grew simply fascinating to stare at. "But I think it will be sorted out soon."

"A disagreement?"
Rey didn't even know where to start with that one. She sighed and did her best not to meet the general's eyes. "He—grew upset the other night. He doesn't know how to handle being upset, so he usually takes it out on me. Master Anakin told me that I always rush to forgive him, so he's not learning anything."

"My father—?"

Blast.

Leia's brown eyes were wide.

Rey tried to think of what to do. It wasn't like she never brought him up—she did, under circumstances that were of dire importance. But she hadn't ever mentioned him casually like this. Even now, the princess seemed lost, and Rey remembered Leia asking if she'd ever seen him again.

"Yes," Rey mumbled. "But… Ben—I think he's starting to understand. I think things will be fine." Rey took a step back, ready to go. She had other people to see off. But Leia hadn't moved, and it left Rey with a spiraling sense of helplessness. She knew what was bothering her now, and it wasn't the idea of Ben's troubles.

"He doesn't show himself to Ben, either," Rey whispered. She gripped the general's hand tightly in her own. "The only time Ben sees him is when he's with me."

"But why?" Some sort of agony—some inner hell—pinched at Leia's eyes. "Why doesn't he…?" She trailed off.

"He said…" Rey wasn't sure if she should tell her. But watching Leia was painful, so she drew her shoulders straight with another sigh. Master Anakin had stated it bluntly.

"Because you make no demands of me. You have no ties to me."

She could twist the words around make it to sound better. "It's hard for him to show himself to his family. He knows he will never have all the answers. He knows that whatever he says will never be enough. But he doesn't want his line to end, either, so he's helping us." *Through me.*
"Has he ever…?" Leia's lips worked silently. Was it killing her pride to have this conversation?

Rey decided to say what she knew. "He showed us his past. He has many regrets. He didn't know he had children—he hadn't meant to kill your mother—" She broke off. This was hard. "Please fly safely? Ben said he's coming by to see you soon."

The two women shared one last hug and then parted ways.

Rey couldn't help but wonder if the Skywalker line was cursed.

Finn was working on his X-wing.

"Have you heard anything about Rose?" Rey called.

Her friend nearly fell off the vessel. "Rey! I didn't see you there!"

Rey stifled a laugh. "I didn't exactly announce my presence beforehand."

Her friend hopped down. He wiped sweat from his brow and set the tool in his hand aside. "I haven't heard anything, no." He patted the vessel, wiping what appeared to be soil off some of the paint. "I'm really worried. I wish the general would let me go out."

"You know she's worried, too," Rey said, putting a hand on his arm.

"Not worried enough." Finn's brows pinched together. "I mean, she could be dead! She's my wife, Rey!" He gestured with both his hands toward his chest. "What would you do if Ben up and vanished?!"
"I'd go after him," Rey murmured, lowering her eyes.

"See?!" Finn exclaimed. "You know how I feel!"

"I do know how you feel," Rey replied. "But Leia's your general. You need to take your orders from her."

"I'm your secondhand!"

Rey stifled a sigh. Finn would take it the wrong way. She lifted a hand, touched the nose of the X-wing. It was better than looking at her friend. Agony was writ large on his face. They'd had this discussion over and over, and it hurt. It hurt to tell him no, hurt to tell him to listen to Leia.

But it was keeping him safe.

How could Rey tell him that Rey had the benefit on her side of being able to actually search for Ben in that situation without nearly the amount of handicaps that Finn would?

"Just be patient, Finn," Rey said. "I know it's hard," she went on, talking over him as he nearly flew off the handle, "but how would Rose feel if she came back and you were gone, or worse, dead?"

Finn deflated. "...I hadn't looked at it like that."

"I don't want you in danger, either," Rey told him.

"Take me with you?" he begged.

"I can't," she replied. "It's too dangerous this time." She wouldn't know if someone was coming at him. She had her instincts to rely on, but that only went so far. The less possible disasters, the better.

In that moment, Finn looked a thousand years old.
Rey hugged him tightly. "You're going to a new base. Once it's stable, she'll let you go out for her. And we won't be gone terribly long, either. After that…"

"After that?" Finn prompted, his voice empty. His arms remained at his sides.

She let him go. "After that, we'll be taking on the Order."

Some light returned to his eyes. "Whoa. Wait. Really?"

She nodded. "We're very nearly there."

Finn threw his arms around her. "Be careful," he said fervently into her hair.

"I will," Rey whispered. "I promise."

She would be as careful as she could be.

She only hoped it would be enough.

"And what do you want?" Sitrine asked in quite the nasty tone.

Rey gave him a Look. "I've come to apologize, but if you'd rather I'd go—"

"No, no, don't leave!" the Knight changed his tune, switching to something closer to a puppy. "Please stay! I was finishing up some paperwork." He rolled a hand at one of the chairs before his desk. "Sit, sit!"
She laughed a bit as she dropped onto a seat. "You're ridiculous, do you know that?"

"It's a point of pride with me," he informed her mock-stiffly. He leaned back, propping his feet on the desk and folding his hands on his stomach. "Now what can I help you with, my dear? I believe an apology was in order?"

"Yes. I'm sorry that I choked you the other day," Rey said sweetly.

"You don't sound very sorry." The Knight narrowed his eyes.

"Take it or leave it," Rey half-sang.

"You're a devil woman," Sitrine stated. "You do realize that?"

Rey smiled serenely.

Bags hit the bed, along with satchels.

Rey straightened, her hair slipping over her shoulders. She blew her bangs out of her eyes. She was reluctant to pack heavy after the incident on Solaris. But it made her uneasy to leave behind the texts again and again…

She rubbed at the bracelet Ben had given her, currently encircling her wrist. She thought that maybe she could have said more to Sitrine. That only ever encouraged him to get into trouble, though. Telling him to back off on Poe would only push him on him more. The same went to the rest of the people staying in the castle.

Sitrine was Sitrine.

"Ready to go?"
Rey got to her knees, brushing them off. Ben stood beside the bed, his expression uncertain.

"I'm going to let the wall down," she said softly. Whatever he was thinking, she didn't know. He kept his thoughts remarkably off his face. "It's not safe to go out closed off to each other."

"Is that the only reason?" The gruffness to his voice betrayed him.

She let her eyes run over him. When was the last time she had just… looked at him? Not sexually, not with love, just…

As a person?

Had she ever? He'd hunted her, and then he'd taken off his helmet when he was interrogating her, and while terrified, she'd still noticed his untraditional beauty.

They'd been through so much together…

"I miss you," she said.

His lips tightened. "But you haven't forgiven me, have you?"

Rey busied herself with her luggage. "Honestly? I don't know. But I do know that I miss you." Every second they were apart was a fierce ache in her heart. She was barely even tolerating it. Half the time, she wanted to claw her skin off. She had scabs on her forearms in places where she'd dug her nails in to fight the pain.

Ben gripped one of the posts of the bed and pressed his forehead against hit, his face turned away from her. "Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

"If you haven't figured it out, then—" Rey wanted to cry from exasperation. "It's not something I can tell you to do, Ben! It's—"
"I take you for granted!" Ben shouted into the room. "I know that!" He fought to get a hold on the volume of his voice. "Can we please just—?"

Rey waited.

"I can't—I can't change so quickly!" Ben pushed away from the post. "It's going to take work! Please, Rey—forgive me, this is killing me!"

Her lower lip trembled.

He stepped in close, his hands closing over her shoulders. "I can't touch you—I can't hear you. This is torture. And I know you're hurting just as much. I know I'm taking advantage of you. I see that now." His voice was thick. "Let me in. I can't fix anything if you don't let me in."

"I said I was going to let you in," she said, looking down.

"Rey," Ben choked. "Touch me."

She couldn't stand it anymore.

She put her arms around him, burying her nose against his shoulder, her eyes clenched shut. She held onto him as tightly as he held onto her. It didn't mean things were perfect—it didn't make everything magically better—but it was like breathing again.

His scent engulfed her. His arms were warm, strong.

The wall she'd put between them faded.

And, for now, that was enough.
All right. I haven't had to say this in a long time, and I'm sorry I have to say it now, so I'll do it as politely as possible: if you don't like the story, then please, stop reading. Do not attack me. There is no reason for it. I am not forcing you to read. Furthermore, if you do not want Ben and Rey to wind up together, then this is not the tale for you.

Anyway, I've had a Spotify playlist for months for this story, and I keep forgetting to make it public. It has all the songs used for some of the chapter titles listed in order, so I'll link it here if anyone is interested!

https://open.spotify.com/user/1252078465/playlist/5RjWBja8xQUyrYNirvpXMG?si=PAE2ftuOQCmadBvYzdIqMQ
I wanna tell you everything will be fine,
But I'm afraid that it's a waste of your time,
Let me out, I'm lost in the words,
Don't know how I ended here,
Trapped in a blur

-Blur, MØ
Rey could see herself—see Ben.

The sunlight was bright, and they were smiling at one another. The backs of his fingertips traced the curve of her cheekbone. Her hand rested over his chest, near his heart. When the wind tugged at loose strands of her hair, he tucked them behind her ear. She closed her eyes and nuzzled into his wrist.

Everything was so quiet; the world had grown still.

It was the only place that existed in all the world.

Rey's eyes were a lush hazel, the freckles of darker colors brought out in the light. It complimented the shadows of them. The highlights in her hair, the slightest of dips in her lower lip, the shape of her chin…

*She's so beautiful. Why don't I tell her enough?*

He slid his fingers into her soft, soft hair. She'd kept it long for him. It was loose at the moment, free of its usual braids or some other sort of arrangement. She rarely wore it down like this. Only when they were asleep. It must have been a bother, with tresses like these.

*When was this? I don't remember this. Does it matter?*

Rey, the real Rey, startled awake. She sat up straight in her seat. Ben was slumped in the pilot's chair, long lashes feathered against his cheeks. He'd nodded off half an hour ago, and all she'd done was close her eyes for half a second—

*He's dreaming of me,* she thought. She unfastened her restraints and leaned over the control board to watch the vast emptiness of space. *I'm not that beautiful.*

He'd imagined her in a way she truly didn't—

But…
Was that how he saw her?

Rey let her eyes travel to his slumbering form. She'd grown to love that grumpy face of his. It was difficult to imagine that he'd dream of something as sappy as that, the two of them touching so romantically in the sunlight, but he was. He had a soft heart underneath it all.

The panel beeped.

Their destination was ten minutes away.

That was a shame. She really didn't want to wake him.

She lowered herself to one knee and cupped his cheek in her hand, turning his face toward her. He jerked awake easily, his eyes bleary despite the short nap he'd taken. He swallowed, saw Rey. He reached for her, stopped himself. He hadn't realized yet she'd touched him first.

"We're almost there," she said softly.

His hand slid up to cover hers, his eyes slipping closed again. "Okay…"

Rey didn't want to pull away, so she didn't. She got down on her other knee to be more comfortable. Her fingers slipped into his raven locks, mussing them from where he'd pulled them back off his neck and face. A puff of breath hit her wrist. His hand tightened.

"You're beautiful," he said.

It meant more than he could have ever intended since she'd seen his dream. She smiled and kissed the corner of his mouth. That earned her a startled and then quickly hopeful look. He leaned in, his lashes falling shut, and his lips brushed hers. She let them, entangling her fingers more firmly in his hair.

Rey expected him to press for more. He didn't—he dropped his forehead to her shoulder and
exhaled loudly. Rey felt a pang of disappointment, and that made him lift his head. He grasped her by the chin, forcing her to meet his eyes. She didn't fight him.

The control panel bleeped in the background, quietly running data.

"No," he whispered.

Her brows contracted with confusion. "No?"

"Not yet." Ben released her. "Not until... you've really forgiven me."

Rey's mouth dropped open, and she sputtered.

He kissed her forehead, gently cupping the back of her head as he rose. "Look. We're here. An extremely shady ecumenopolis."

He gestured to the rust-colored dwarf planet. Rey wouldn't be able to tell what it was like until they were within the atmosphere. The "rust" was clouds, not soil. From what Rey understood, there was some sort of protective shield for proper oxygen.

"Have you ever noticed how many things happen in cantinas?" Rey asked from her position on the floor. "Or clubs, or casinos?" Because what were the chances they would find the person they were looking for in such a location?

Ben frowned at her.

"Nothing," she muttered. "Never mind."

"Sitrine said if we get this ship blown up, he won't be able to get us another one," Ben said. He rolled his eyes. "As if he has a say in the matter." Rellen was the one who supplied them with the vessels.

Rey got to her feet. "Ben..."
He pulled her into a hug, one she returned easily.

*I love you.*

*I love you, too.*

He pressed one last kiss to her forehead. "Trust me."

Rey bit her lip around a sigh.

What choice did she have?

Sukuru was balmy like Solaris and very tropical. The atmospheric shield was a pleasant blue—one could only see the rusty haze behind it if they strained their eyes. There was a simulated sun. Clouds rolled about lazily, and the trapped heat from the *real* ones outside that shield throbbed persistently. It quickly soaked through their clothes.

The city was settled amongst the palm trees that encompassed the majority of the planet. The place they needed to go was beside a beach. There were many sidewalks, unlike the rest of the sectors, with citizens and visitors alike walking to and fro or hanging out on storefronts. Everyone was wearing barely any clothing. The light glistening off the glass buildings wasn't helping with the temperature.

Naturally, the first thing Ben and Rey did once they docked their ship was hit up the local apparel shop. Rey wasn't very happy about wearing anything skimpy again—that business with the Hutts would stay with her forever—but she didn't want to battle the heat. Humid heat was so much more different than dry heat, and she much preferred the latter.

"How is anyone supposed to take me seriously in this?" Rey frowned at the black bikini she'd donned while she tied an equally black wrap around her hip. Strappy sandals completed the look. There wasn't much to fitting in with the crowd here.
Ben's eyes ran down her body, and Rey's breath caught.

See? If you're looking at me like that, who else will be?

**I'll murder them,** he promised. He was wearing what they called "board shorts"—black, of course, with mesh on the lower end of one side—and a loose black shirt, also with mesh in places. Rey really needed to introduce him to a color palette. Yes, they looked amazing in black, but honestly. Black did not reflect heat!

*Your legs are so pale,* she observed. *I never noticed how much.*

His eyes narrowed. **Well, it looks like I'll have a chance to get a tan, won't I?**

*What? No biting remark? You really are trying to take a higher road.* Rey smirked.

Ben's fingers closed around her elbow. His lips were at her ear. His voice was velvet soft as he jerked her into him. "Don't goad me."

She closed her eyes. Her skin had tightened all over, and it was about twenty degrees hotter in the shop.

Her nipped her ear and stepped away. "We should purchase these."

"Y-Yeah," she said faintly.

Guh.

*Is turning me on supposed to make me forgive you faster?*

*No. But it is designed to remind you of why you want me.*
I don't need a reminder for that! Rey tried not to whine. And I have forgiven you! It was still complicated, but she had!

Not entirely. Now give the nice lady your things so we can get out of here and hunt down our target.

Rey huffed as she did as she was told.

Ben casually laced their fingers together and squeezed.

"Trust me," he'd said.

Trust him to what? Not turn her head? If that was his mission, it was successful, had always been successful.

I want to earn it this time.

That brought her head up. What?

The cashier chatted away happily while she rang up their things and took their credits.

He smiled down at her. It was so real and true that it made her heart ache in all the best ways. The only time she'd ever seen that had been… in his memories…

We need to find some protective armor to go over this.

He wasn't wrong. Flimsy attire or not, no one here was unprotected—no one who wasn't a common citizen. And now that they couldn't sense the Force in anyone, which meant that they couldn't sense if someone was coming—as there was traces of the Force in every individual—they would need a little more than their lightsabers to aid them.
How much did you want to wager the target's in a casino?

Rey laughed beneath her breath. She squinted in the sunlight as they exited the shop. She opened her mouth to say she couldn't very well wager if they both thought the target would be in a—

She seized ahold of his elbow and pointed.

What?

There! He's right there!

How did she know?

Because he was a peddler in the markets stretched between the glass buildings, and every time a knot of people moved past, he would twitch his fingers, and they'd draw close to him. And every time, they'd walk away with an armful of purchases.

Guess we both would have lost that bet.

So if Master Anakin had sent them to him, what else could he do?
I'm Bad Behavior

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the support last chapter. I promise I don't take these negative reviews to heart! I just don't like to deal with them in the first place, so I make sure to head them off.

The adventure continues!
Sometimes the only pay off for having any faith,
Is when it's tested again and again every day,
I'm still comparing your past to my future,
It might be your wound, but they're my sutures,
I am the sand in the bottom half of the hourglass,
I try to picture me without you, but I can't,
'Cause we could be immortals, immortals

-Immortals, Fall Out Boy

I just thought of something.
Rey sighed. This was pure luck. This is a dwarf planet, but it's still huge. There's no way we're going to easily find the people Master Anakin wants us to… he mentioned sending Jacen and Jaina in our stead, and I think he's right… I think we'll have to get that message back to them…

He talked to you? When?

Rey braced herself. Things had been going so nicely. She didn't want to go back into that dark void. He talked to me the night we… fought.

She waited for him to lose his temper.

His jaw tightened.

There was a mental countdown.

Then, slowly, the tension eased out of him.

It's not—it's fine. It's a good idea. We'll follow this guy, and when we have a chance, we'll pass along the information to the twins.

Follow?

Yeah. He'll lead us somewhere. This isn't his only gig.

Rey hummed. They found another shop eave to hide under to watch the young man. He wore a confident, gleaming smile. His hair was the color of sandpaper, and his skin held a dark, dark tan, likely from the climate. His eyes were so dark a brown they were almost black. He was thin, but Rey could tell it wasn't from hunger. Clearly, he could provide for himself.

I'm sorry we have to do this the hard way. Rey couldn't bring herself to look at Ben.
It's—it's for the better. No one can sense us, either. Maybe later we can reverse it. I'm sorry I overreacted.

But what if we can't reverse it?

We'll figure it out. Go in the shop across the way. I'll keep an eye out.

Rey didn't bother arguing with his direction. He was much better at blending in than she was, her shadow.

What a wealth of protective gear and armaments.

"What can I do you for?" A tiny green woman bounced toward Rey from across the shop. All the walls were covered in anything from camouflage suits to something a bounty hunter might consider. How in hells did the lady get away with selling things like this so freely in the open?

Rey touched a few arm bracers, just enough that she didn't set anything off. They were likely on safety, but she wouldn't tempt fate. "Isn't some of this military grade?"

"Oh, the military hardly bothers nobody out here," the woman said. She went behind a counter full of knives and different types of blasters and reappeared with a rifle twice the size she was.

Good gods!

"Sukuru is a cesspool, hadn't you heard, pretty lady? Now come inspect this here gun. I've got an eye for people." Yellow teeth showed in a grin. Rey hesitated. That rifle was... something. Daunting wasn't the word for it.

"I'm afraid you don't know me very well, then," Rey said. "I don't fight with projectiles."
She was laughably terrible with them.

Good thing she took to the lightsaber so easily.

"Look, I just need something simple," Rey told the lady. "This… swimwear isn't going to save me if I get into a fight." Not that she'd ever really worn anything extra with her *regular* outfits, but there was so much exposed skin, and an increased danger since…

She truly needed to stop mourning over what was gone. They would either get the ability to sense people in the Force again once this was over—while giving the same of themselves in return—or they wouldn't. Until then, there was nothing she could do about it.

"Perhaps a… knife," Rey suggested. "Or one of those stealth armors." She went over to one displayed on the wall. This would go well over her bikini. The only downside would be the added heat…

The green woman threw herself over the counter and rifle—with a jump that was quite impressive—and skidded to a stop at Rey's side. "Reflective! Won't sweat a drop! *Completely* invisible! Absorbs blaster damage! Cost a pretty credit, though!"

Rey gave a slow smile. "Oh, really?"

---

It was growing dark when Rey returned to Ben, who slipped out of the crowd to fall into step with her. They moved with the traffic as people shut down their stalls for the evening, the sound of closing chaos on the air. The smell of cart food lingered, making Rey hungry. She'd eat later.

*Find anything?*

*Got us a few gadgets and some costly camouflage gear. That she, of course, spent nothing on. *Did he do anything different?***
He did it in intervals. Didn’t want to draw attention to himself. Now he’s closed up and headed off. If he catches a cab, we’ll have to follow fast.

I got some other stuff, too. Night clothes.

Are they anything better than what we have on now?

Marginally.

Fantastic.

You really look out of place with your shirt on.

I'm not taking my shirt off. Then he smirked. Nice try, though.

Oh, Ben Solo, not everything is about—your body!

In this case, isn't it?

She found it best not to answer.

Which worked out, as their target was now hailing the cab they'd anticipated.

Rey lifted her wrist to her mouth. A tiny comm link was situated there on a bracelet Rellen had given her before she left. It was a precaution for if their ship got blown to pieces again, or if something happened to them on this gods-forsaken planet. Help was nearby—still on the lookout to field calls from anyone who recognized them reporting to the Order—but also now tethered with a direct communication to Sitrine.

She wasn't sure when they'd get back to their ship.
As the cab carrying their target flashed past, Ben launched a tracking device at it. It attached itself neatly onto its end. They hailed their own cab a moment later and took off, telling the driver who to follow. Rey tossed her "purchases" at him while she dealt with patching through to Sitrine.

"You need me already, darling?" Sitrine's voice was slightly static-y.

"I need you to deliver a message to Jaina and Jacen," Rey told him.

"I don't know," Sitrine sang. "That might cost you extra—"

Ben held up his clothes for the evening and frowned. Heavily.

She mouthed that she was sorry.

She'd done what she could!

"Right," she replied distractedly. "Tell them they'll have to set out, once they've got everyone settled, and look into the areas I told them about before I left. I've got to go."

"Oh, so you had nothing to say to me?"

"Bye, 'Trina."

"TRINA?!"

Rey ended the connection to deal with Ben's growing fury at his attire. "What do you want me to do about it? There wasn't anything better. At least there's trousers involved this time."

"I wanted to wear a shirt," Ben stressed.
"I've got some military grade armor to go over it," Rey reassured him. She grabbed their part of the beacon. They were edging into a deeper portion of the city, where the lights were far more glamorous. "Doesn't look like he's headed home first."

The cabbie twisted around. "It's gonna cost you extra for all this subterfuge."

"Extra?" Rey narrowed her eyes. "Subterfuge is the essence of this planet."

"I have a family to feed—"

Ben waved his hand, and the man's eyes glazed over. He went back to steering.

They began to change into their new things. Ben made pleased noises over the armor.

"Do you really think he has a family to feed?" Rey muttered.

"Would it matter?" Ben asked.

"No."

And it wouldn't.

But she consoled herself with the fact that the man was out of the line of danger, anyway.

Probably.

Twenty minutes later, they slipped out of their cab onto one of the most beautiful terraces Rey had ever seen.

"Oh, look," Rey said. "It's a casino."
The floorboards creaked underfoot as Ben methodically explored the ancient mansion. Rugs were threadbare—tapestries were lopsided on the walls, torn in places. Rey kept her distance. Her skin was crawling, and the feeling wouldn't let up the deeper they ventured into this place.

Ben's fingertips traced the edge of a mahogany banister. It was attached to a spiral staircase, the steps rotted through. Rey was of the opinion that leaving the first floor would be an immensely terrible idea.

*Why here? Why hasn't this building been demolished?*

*There's layers upon layers of city in Coruscant. Sukuru isn't much different, only smaller. There's no efficient way to keep up with everything on this planet. A planet that's already barely policed.*

They passed room after room. Each was as thoroughly trashed as the one before it. Furniture upended, springs and stuffing strewn across the ground. Curtains that had seen better days covering wooden slats over all the windows. Ben and Rey's lightsabers hummed continuously, providing a source of light.

*He's trying not to draw attention to himself.*

*You saw how much he won at the casino.*

The boy had raked in so many credits, not that anyone had noticed. Those who had hadn't remembered for very long. A familiar flick of the fingers, and they went on with their business. The boy had played table after table, never lingering for more than a few minutes at a time—just enough to acquire a tiny fortune.
While Sukuru was a breeding ground for the underhanded, the casino had been the only upstanding establishment they’d seen so far. Security was at every door; they patrolled incessantly, their eyes on all the patrons. And it was classy there. Top-notch machines, perfect felt on the tables, not a stain to be seen. Whoever owned the casino was not someone to cross.

Everyone had known it.

The boy wasn't brave, but he wasn't stupid, either.

And now here they were, having followed him for hours and winding up at this dump.

Rey stopped to adjust her armor, her lightsaber shutting off. The bikini and wrap she'd worn earlier had been swapped out for a dress that barely covered anything. It was strapless and white—she was so sick of black—and the hem stopped where her thighs began. Underneath it was the armor.

Ben's thoughts volleyed between appreciation of Rey's outfit and resentment of his own. It wasn't at the forefront of his mind, just background noise. He had a silky tie around his neck over the invisible armor, and his pants were low on his hips. With that and his boots, it was the only thing he was wearing.

You really could have gotten me a better outfit.

You didn't stand out at all. The gentleman at that particular shop had said it was the evening fashion.

Ben grunted. Let's just focus.

You're the one obsessing over being half-naked.

The wood creaked ominously as he halted. Rey kept her expression impassive.

Pick your battle. We can argue about how you could be wearing a cowl, or we can go and find our
Ben resumed his searching pace. Rey tried not to feel smug.

She didn't hide it well.

_How old do you think this house is?_ she asked.

*I don't know. It's so derelict… I'm surprised it's still standing._ Visibly relaxing at the change in topic, Ben idly twirled his lightsaber. _Where do you think he's hiding in here?_

*I don't know._

With this wreckage… it could be anywhere. There was the very real possibility he'd get the jump on them.

Rey could see how he'd be useful in their employ. The boy was a master of subterfuge. He'd blended in with the crowds so well, people had forgotten him the second they'd seen him. Combined with his skill at Force-persuasion…

Did he know what his ability was? Or did he think it was magic, like the species on Endorom did?

_Should we split up?_ Rey hated to ask.

_No. Something tells me he'll show himself soon._

Rey nodded. She trusted Ben's intuition.

They reached the kitchen.

Sure enough, the boy was there, tossing some sort of fruit up and down as he leaned against a
counter. He didn't take his eyes off it, his mannerisms telling them he was very unconcerned, dripping with arrogance.

Candles were lit around the large room.

"You've been following me for hours," he said. His voice was higher than Rey had imagined.

She gasped.

Because he wasn't a boy.

He was a girl.

A very androgynous girl.

And now that Rey was looking, she could see a slight curve to the girl's chest.

"What do you want?" The girl tilted her head, swiping at the fruit. She took a large bite out of it and walked across the kitchen to peer between the slats of a window. "Something tells me I won't be able to make you go away."

"Actually, we… wanted your assistance," Rey said hesitantly. She hadn't thought through a plan to win their target over yet, but this little twist had thrown her off. She shook her head and struggled to get back in the game. "How much do you hate the First Order?"

"Coming at me strong, aren't you?" The girl laughed. She swiped her wrist over her chin where juice had dribbled. Up close, Rey could see how her eyes were very large, her lashes thick and long. She was very pretty, in a tomboy-ish way. "To assume I hate the First Order like that… wooooow."

Rey set her jaw—forced herself to make her expression blank again. The sarcasm tainting Tomboy's words rankled. "Are you a fan, then?"
The girl snorted softly with derision. "I don't want to talk to you." She smiled cunningly, her eyes sliding to Ben. "I'll talk to him, though."

*I'll kill her.*

Ben's thoughts rubbed reassuringly over hers. "I don't have anything to say that she doesn't."

"Boo, no fun," Tomboy pouted. But she was grinning in the next moment. "I like you two. All right. I'll hear you out." She propped herself up on a counter, her legs dangling over it. "How much do I hate the First Order? They murdered my family. Next?"

"What's your name?" Rey asked. "You don't have to give us your real one if you don't want to."

"Good, 'cause I don't. But you can call me…" The girl tipped her head back, mulling it over with her lips swished to one side. "Hmmm…"

This proceeded for another forty-six seconds. Rey was positive she was doing it for the very purpose of getting beneath Rey's skin.

It was working, unfortunately.

Rey grinded her teeth.

"Rose!" the girl decided.

"Hard pass," Rey replied. "I know someone with that name."

"Hmmmhmmmmmmmmmmm…"

*I am going to kill her.*
Tomboy hopped down. She tossed the core of the fruit into the old sink and wiped her palms on her pants. Rey wondered how she stayed cool in the balmy heat of this planet.

"Noelle." Tomboy smirked. She stretched, cracking her knuckles above her head. "That's what you can call me! Now…" Her eyes ran over Ben with all the shame of a whore at a brothel. Which made her next words unfortunate. "Let's discuss my fee."

"Your fee?" Rey repeated tersely.

"What was it you said you needed? My 'assistance'? Well, it's gonna cost you. I don't do anything for free." She finally acknowledged their lightsabers with a tilt of her head. "Although I gotta admit… those aaaaare kinda intimidating. Why don't we put those bad boys away?"
Noelle pouted. She stood with Ben and Rey in the First Order vessel's cockpit.

"Awh, you've put more clothes on?"

Rey's fingers clenched into a fist at her side. She rolled her head on her neck. Her right eye was close to twitching. She wasn't sure how much longer her patience was going to hold out. The woman was shameless, and in that shamelessness, insufferable.

Ben's thoughts thrummed with amusement.

*This is not funny,* she seethed.

*It's nice being on the other side.*

"I've gotta say… this is a weeeird-looking planet," Noelle said upon approach to Endorom. She fiddled with the straps of her ankle boots, patted her belt and pockets, making sure everything was in order. She hadn't needed to grab anything after they'd exited that creepy building.

Rey wasn't particularly fond of Endorom, and her hackles *still* rose. "At least it's atmosphere isn't completely simulated."
"Yeah, but that's what I like about Sukuru." The other female crossed her arms behind her head and kicked her feet up on the back of Rey's seat. "Blue skies, all day long."


"You didn't say please," Noelle sang.

Ben caught Rey's wrist.

Don't.

But—! She's goading me!

You're only this jealous because of me.

What?

It's the bond.

Rey bit down on the backs of her teeth. If she stifled her anger… she knew he had a point. They carried one another's traits. This was a prime example of that.

Ben brushed his lips over her knuckles and let her go.

"Awwwh," Noelle mocked. "So sweet!"

Ben caught Rey's wrist again.

"What?" Noelle protested. "I was being serious!" She pouted at Rey's expression and the murder that must have been written there. "I was. That was very gentlemanly. You don't see that too often.
You guys are cute, you know?"

Rey didn't trust the merc's smile.

Especially as it grew.

From what little Rey had managed to get out of Noelle, she was from Coruscant. She refused to speak about her family more than she already had. She spent her time acquiring a fortune off unlucky tourists on Sukuru, since it was so out of the way that it wasn't monitored by any sort of military force. Occasionally, she did some recon if the job paid well enough—and she ensured it always did.

They'd promised her the fee she'd wanted, which had, of course, been exorbitant. Sitrine was likely going to raise all hells once he saw the exact figures, but R'iaa's shorts, Rey had wanted it over with. Anything to get them off Sukuru. It was so hot, one couldn't think with a straight head. Rey had no doubt this was partially how Noelle flourished so well.

Rey suspected Noelle had her credits stored in some sort of bank on Coruscant. The second they'd agreed on a price, she'd insisted on meeting back near the beach in an hour. When she'd returned, her gritty outfit had transformed into something almost reputable, though still androgynous: a simple, loose black top, tight gray pants that tucked into her ankle boots, and a well-worn but comfortable-looking bomber jacket that had a hood and zippered pockets on the upper arms. She carried no things.

Rey had warned they'd be gone a while. Noelle had only winked.

*What do you think we'll use her for?*

*I've got some ideas.*

*Like?*

*Remember that meeting where Rellen mentioned EMPs?*
Noelle's eyes were drawn to the giant flora above them, fascinating her to the point that she stopped. The gold lights, the guardians of the forest, *tinged* as they hit the surface of the lake water. The tall trunks of the trees stood bastion against the pink haze raining down. Endorom's largest moon was a white blot against the sky, its mountains dusted freshly red.

"Something happened here," she said.

Rey almost stumbled. She managed to keep her face impassive, fussing with the clasp of her cloak. They were nearly to the castle now. Once they cleared the forest, they'd arrive in the west courtyard.

"Nothing happened here," Rey said, not lying. Nothing had happened in *that* spot.

Noelle's gaze grew unfocused. She peered over the lake, holding out a palm. An orb zipped around her hand, hovered, trailing amber dust. The other woman's eyes slipped closed. Her lips pressed together in a line of concentration. A slight inhale of breath drew her shoulders straight.

Rey hovered, unable to decide what to do. Shame flashed through her. It made her angry. She had nothing to hide. Besides, she was overreacting. Noelle was in tune with the Force, had picked up on something, as she'd claimed. The incident between Ben and Rey and their pact with the Force had occurred nearly two miles away. Whatever she had latched onto, it had nothing to do with them.

"They talk, you know?" Noelle murmured.

Rey swallowed. Her pulse quickened.
She didn't know why.

The mercenary's eyes slid back open, and the orb's light reflected in their dark brown depths. A smile touched the corner of her mouth. She closed her hand, her fingers curling suddenly around the orb—

Rey lurched forward, concerned for the creature, intending to smack her hand away—

The orb floated harmlessly through Noelle's loosened fingers.

"Stop trying to play games with me!" Rey snapped. She was shaken. She hated this. She didn't remember the last time someone had made her so uncertain of herself. And there was no reason for it. If worst came to worst, Rey could annihilate Noelle within moments.

"Why do you think I'm playing games with you?" Noelle tilted her head. "You're the one acting suspicious."

"You know what the Force is, don't you?" Rey could feel Ben at her back, but at a careful distance. He didn't want to interfere. "When we talked before, you pretended to think it was something like magic. But you grew up in Coruscant, and you're intimately familiar with the First Order. You would have at least heard about the Force."

"I didn't think I made it that much of a secret," Noelle said. "You know, you have a really bad problem of assuming things."

"How much do you know?" Rey demanded.

"Enough." Noelle's voice hardened. "I know enough. Enough to know something's up. I can feel everything... I can feel the Force in everyone. But you two have it, and I don't feel a thing from either of you."

"So?" Rey jerked her chin up defiantly.

The other woman narrowed her eyes. "If you were just anyone, you wouldn't be able to hide it. But
I already know he's Kylo Ren. Yet I can't feel either of you. The next obvious conclusion would be that you're both remarkably good at hiding your presence.

Ben came to Rey's side.

"So... I decided not to think anything about it. You guys are way more powerful than me. I'm not stupid enough to fuck with you. Then we got here." Noelle's gaze flicked to the dancing orbs and the rippling surface of the lake. "Something totally went down here. Something big. Which now raises the question—why are you trying to hide your presence?"

"That's none of your concern," Rey said stiffly.

"Yeah, all right," Noelle agreed with a casual shrug of her shoulder. "Snooping too much will get you killed, so I'll stop right there." She gave her usual grin. "We gonna finish going to the castle or what? You got big plans for me, right?"

If nothing else...

What?

She has good survival instincts.

I think you and I have a vastly different definition of what that means.

Yet, within the hour, Noelle had garnered a portion of Rey's respect.

By way of a certain Knight of Ren.

Sitrine and Rellen were waiting for them in the war room. Noelle raised a hand in greeting. Sitrine
jolted to his feet, jumping over the massive strategy table and landing before her. He equipped the best smile in his arsenal, his green eyes sparkling with fervor, and pressed her into the nearest wall.

Rey wondered if this was Sitrine's default mode to attractive people, if he had taste, if he was cheating on Poe, if this was considered cheating on Poe, if he was *with* Poe—

And then she realized she cared too damn much about Sitrine's love life.

Noelle's body tensed.

Sitrine purred. "Helllooooooo—"

Noelle punched his dick.

"—oooo… ack… !" The Knight collapsed, gripping between his legs, tears on his lashes.

"Are you *crying*?" Rey asked.

"There's a code!" Sitrine gasped pleadingly to Ben. "A code among men! Who *does* that?!"

"I would slice it off in a heartbeat," Ben deadpanned unsympathetically.

Rey couldn't stop laughing.

"*Excuse you!*" Sitrine sobbed. "I'm so glad you find this hilarious!"

Rellen rolled his eyes as he joined them, casting a disdainful glance in Sitrine's direction. "I'm surprised it hasn't happened before now," he said dryly. "It was only a matter of time." He held out his hand to Noelle, his head lifting. "I'm—"

He paused.
Noelle, still in fighting mode, frowned at him, her fists before her.

They gazed at one another while Rey giggled and Sitrine curled up in a ball in the background. Ben watched Rey, a faint smile on his mouth.

She hadn't laughed like that in days.

"I'm… Rellen," the General of the First Order introduced himself. He continued to hold his hand out.

Noelle bit her lip.

Rey pretended not to see the exchange, entertained by Sitrine's pain. But her thoughts wandered. She couldn't erase it from her mind—

Rellen's smile.

A real, human smile, so quick it had nearly gone unnoticed.

*It's funny.*

*What is?*

*That even though we're headed to war… no. Nothing.*

*No. What?*

*Well… I don't know if you've noticed, but... we're surrounded by...*
Never mind. Don't say it. It's too much. Ben pulled a face.

Rey chuckled a bit.

"Hey," Sitrine groused. "What are you laughing at now? My misery isn't enough for you?"

Love.

They were surrounded by love.
Brewing Trouble

Chapter Notes

Hey, guys. Sorry I haven't updated in a while. I've been editing the earlier chapters. This one is short, but that's because it's a transition. Shit is about to go down. As I've warned, we are quickly approaching the climax of the story.

Updates with other things have been going more slowly because I've had some personal stuff going on that's prevented me from being able to write. As always, I prefer quality over quantity. I don't want to give you guys stuff that isn't worthy.

Hope you haven't left me! :)

A loud beeping came from the transmitter on the strategy table.

Rellen and Sitrine exchanged a glance. Ben and Rey knew what that meant. They nudged Noelle across the room, tucking themselves behind a bookshelf where they wouldn't be seen. They'd had the hologram installed for their own purposes, but it had had dual benefits for the Knights when it came to contacts from the Order.

Noelle had the good sense not to question what was happening.

The image of a Knight of Ren in full regalia appeared. Despite the voice modulator, Rey could tell it was a girl. Ami Ren. This was the first she'd seen her in real life and not as fragments from Ben's memories or references from Rellen and Sitrine.

"Ah… To what do we owe the pleasure, Ami?" Sitrine asked smoothly.

"Oh, good," Ami said. "Rellen's there, as well. Saves me a step. Tro'dai's called an emergency meeting."

Emergency? Rey's instincts went haywire. They were all screaming that this had everything to do with Ben and Rey and nothing to do with the Order.
"He'll need to see both of you as soon as possible. That's all."

She disappeared with blue shimmery static from the hologram.

*They still don't know the truth about Tro'dai. The only people we've told about Starkiller are Jacen and Jaina.*

Everyone waited another full minute before congregating around the table, Ben, Rey, and Noelle coming out of their hiding place. Sitrine was pensive, chewing on a knuckle. Rellen was equally worried, his eyes fixated on the transmitter where Ami had hovered. The room was thick with tension, though Noelle was more curious than anything.

"Someone want to tell me what just happened?" she asked.

"Why wouldn't Tro'dai say what it was about?" Sitrine turned to Rellen, the slightest of winces in his movements.

"If he didn't, then it must be bad," Rellen replied. "He's never called you from Endorom before, and I can't remember the last time he required all of us for a meeting… in person. The transmitters have always been enough."

*She's figured out he's funneling money.*

*Should we tell them the truth?*

The only reason they'd avoided doing so thus far had been to protect them.

*I don't know if that's feasible yet. We should see what the meeting is about first.*

But that presented its own risks. If Starkiller confronted Sitrine directly… What excuse would Sitrine give them? Or what if Starkiller took either one of the Knights hostage—what if she killed one of them? Neither were strong enough to take Starkiller on. She would eliminate them effortlessly.
Ben and Rey were barely capable of dealing with her themselves and nowhere near ready.

_**Maybe it's about something else,**_ Rey thought. _**We shouldn't jump to conclusions.**_

_**Whatever it is… it's big.**_

Noelle gave a bored sigh and threw herself onto one of the chairs around the table. No one was speaking. They were all immersed in their thoughts.

_**Rellen's General of the First Order. It's been months. We've had plenty of time for preparation if a situation like this arose about the funding. We have to believe in them to handle it adequately.**_

_**We don't have a choice.**_

_I'm—I'm… I'm just not sure if we should let them go in blind._

The fact that Starkiller wanted them all there in person was very troubling indeed.

Where was Anakin? Where was Breeze?

They needed advice! Every ruler had advisors!

_If we knew it wasn't a deathtrap, it would be different._ They'd be able to wait until Rellen and Sitrine returned and then act accordingly.

"Everyone looks like they're about to lose their minds," Noelle observed with a drawl.

"I keep hearing this annoying little voice," Sitrine said. "Does anyone else? Or is it just me?"
"I don't know," Rey replied. "You have so many voices in your head, I'm sure it's difficult to keep track of all of them."

The severity of the situation became evident when Sitrine didn't have an immediate comeback. He exhaled raggedly and yanked at his hair with his fists. He kicked at a chair and whisked out of the room, his cloak snapping behind him. The remaining foursome watched him go.

"I need to prepare for the journey, as well," Rellen murmured.

And then he, too, was gone.

*What do we do?* Rey asked Ben helplessly.

They needed to come to a decision.

*Fast.*

*We can't show our hand yet,* he said in frustration, but that frustration wasn't aimed at her. *We can't afford the risk. I hate it as much as you. If something's wrong... She may be counting on the fact that we told them. It's still best they know as little as possible.*

There was a knot behind Rey's ribs that was making it hard to breathe properly. *We should be prepared for a rescue plan.*

*We've spent months preparing for war. If something happens to them, we'll hear about it soon after.*

*Fine. What do we do in the meantime?*

*There's nothing to do but wait.*

Rey fought the urge to pace. Ben.
He drew her into an embrace, and she clutched at his back, tears in her eyes. She buried her face in his shoulder and bit back a sob. She didn't want to show weakness in front of Noelle—in front of anyone. Not now, when things were so urgent. But she couldn't deny the peaceful, comforting feeling of his arms around her. She'd missed it too much.

She would have asked him to tell her it was all going to be all right.

But she knew he couldn't do that.

And she knew she couldn't ask him to.
Passage

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait!

It was the whispering that woke her.

Tension prickled through Rey as she lifted her head from the war table, where she'd drifted off. She'd had about enough with the eerie voices, and she was concerned as to whether she was in an illusion. But all the tell-tale signs were missing, and her Id was quiet.

A golden orb swirled in front of her in slow loops.

"You're far from home," she wondered. "Why?"

She laughed at herself a little. As if it could answer her. Despite Noelle's claim that the little creatures could speak, they'd never done so for Rey.

But the whispering hadn't stopped, and the tiny ball of light was floating away.

Because *that* wasn't ominous.

Rey got up from the table and followed it, her body wrought with tension. She didn't see any point in staying where she was. The whispers weren't going to stop, and it was odd that the orb was here in the first place.

She was concerned that she *was* dreaming—she was more than sure of it—yet she couldn't seem to halt her footsteps.

This wasn't right. She was lucid. She knew it. So why did she remain so helpless?
Corridors passed. Another golden light joined the first, then another, and another, until there was an entire swarm of them. They were tailing Rey, surrounding her, leading the way. There were more of them than she had ever seen, even when she had made the pact with Ben that night with the Force.

It didn't make any sense that they were in the castle.

The whispering just grew louder. It was almost enough to make out… something. A word? Perhaps two. Goosebumps stayed on Rey's arms, and she dearly wished there was some way she could break this. Calling out to Ben had proved futile.

Whose doing was this?

Could it possibly be the orbs?

It was night, and the torches weren't lit as the glowing balls guided Rey deeper into the castle, to places she hadn't been before. Of course, she didn't need any help seeing, not with her newfound companions. They were nearly as bright as Breeze and shedding enough sparkles to be a golden version of the pink pollen that hazed Endorom's lower atmosphere.

Where are we going?

How long was she going to be forced to play this out?

The air grew stale, the steps Rey was climbing down descending into a dank darkness. They spiraled, one after the other, steep enough that her dream-self placed a hand on the wall to balance herself. It was a surreal moment—the coolness of the stone against her palm, the fear of the unknown.

She was made to walk for what she knew to be well beneath the surface of the castle, well past the dungeons. When the staircase finally straightened itself out, there was a bridge to greet her, and water lapped gently at its sides. The lights who had been her guides thus far spread out from her, tinging over the surface of it as they liked to do to the lake.
"What in hells is this?" she asked. Why was she allowed to speak, to laugh, to frown, yet nothing else was within her control?

The golden balls were coalescing deeper into the cavernous room. Having no choice but to squash her uneasiness, Rey strode forward, the loop of the dream ongoing. The stones beneath her feet seemed… ancient. All of this did. How was it so well-kept, then? How was it not falling apart? No one knew of this—that was what the dream was telling her. No one who currently inhabited the castle.

Water was abruptly lapping at her feet, and she halted. The rest of the bridge was covered in it. The room went on, however, confusing Rey. From what she could tell, she'd only made it to the radius. She looked up at the ceiling, spotting… she didn't know. She didn't know what she was seeing. Elaborate… stones…? Jewels? They were in a grid of some sort, delicate metalwork that covered the entirety of the ceiling.

"I don't understand," she said.

-A- Protection -

A whisper she could interpret. It echoed through the room, made louder by the water, by the sheer enormousness of the area. It made the golden lights, such small creatures, carry the weight of something much larger.

"P-Protection?" Rey fumbled.

-A- Protection -

It was all they said, over and over, until Rey's ears were numb with it.

"This—I need more!" Rey cried in a desperate bid to be heard. She didn't think the things were very interested in what she had to say. "Protection? From something? For something?"
"Yes! Protection! But where am I, and what is—?!
" She shrieked as the bridge abruptly crumbled beneath her, and she was tossed into the water, which had grown angry, frothing, waves swallowing her whole.

_Something else to be sick of_, she thought.

If she never dreamed about water again, it would be too quick.

It didn't last long. Between one yank through bubbles and the next, she was standing, dry, in a castle that wasn't Sitrine's, directly in front of its doors. It was… underwater—beneath… some sort of… shield? Rey could see it far above her and knew that, somehow, she was still within that very same room.

_-Protection-_  

The whispers were back.

There was… a castle… where?

Her eyes widened.

Beneath the lake?!

The orbs weaved around her in an explosion much like the bubbles. They were harmless, brushing against her skin like nothing more than wisps of a breeze. But their whispers were so loud, it was making Rey's ears hurt, and she finally broke free of their hold. She clutched at her ears, gritting her teeth as her knees hit the stone beneath her.

"STOP!" she screamed. "I can't make out what you're saying!"

Her head was going to split open—

A name.
They were giving her a name.

Just when she thought her ears would begin to bleed, her eyes opened to the real world. Ben was at her side, in the middle of shaking her. His thoughts, wild with fear, clashed into hers. He'd been cut off from her. He'd seen everything, but she'd been unable to hear him, no matter what he'd done.

_They're a threat! They're—_

_They're a part of the Force. Come on. We have to go._

"Get up."

"It's the middle of the night. Fuck off."

Rey growled.

"Oooo, I'm so scared." Noelle rolled away from her, tugging her covers more snugly over her shoulder. "Come back in the morning, at a reasonable hour. Like, I don't know. After noon?"

"That's not the morning anymore, and that is beside the point! I need you! Now!"

"Oh, you need me?" That garnered Noelle's attention, though not in a way that Rey appreciated. The petite woman smirked, pushing her elbows beneath her as she waggled an eyebrow at Rey. "Well, _that's_ a new development."

"Why are you _like this?" Rey grabbed her and physically dragged her out of bed. Noelle yelled, and a scuffle broke out. Ben looked like he was going to interfere and then thought better of it."
The wrestling ended with Rey's fingers securely over the back of Noelle's neck, pinching in a place that had the smaller woman hunched over in pain. "Could you be cooperative just once?!" she panted.

"Notice you never seem to say 'please'!" Noelle snapped. "Manners go a long way, you know!"

"Fine!" Rey released her with a shove. "Get dressed. Please."

"Why?" Noelle rubbed at her sore neck with a wince. In the few weeks since Sitrine and Rellen had left Endorom to go meet with the other Knights and essentially disappeared off the grid, there hadn't been any love lost between Rey and her guest.

"Because I need you to talk to the golden lights at the lake," Rey told her.

"Why?" Noelle leered at her. She had some sort of supernatural ability that Rey was convinced wasn't the Force that was designed to push every single button Rey had. Ben had no problem with the girl, which was all well and good, but Rey wanted to rip her head off her shoulders on a nice day.

"There's a fortress under there," Rey said. "They want to tell us how to get to it."

The other woman snorted dismissively. "Sounds like a fairy tale. And any kind of 'fortress' under a lake would be useless. It's underwater. Hello?"

Rey snatched her by the elbow before she could get too far. "I don't care how ridiculous it sounds," she snarled. "We're going. Get dressed."

"I was under the impression I wasn't a prisoner here," Noelle said tightly. Rey had struck a nerve.

So the smarmy woman did have a chink in that armor.

"You're a guest in my castle," Rey said.
"Sitrine's castle—"

"My castle," Rey stressed at a higher volume. "And as of now, you'll do well to remember it. If there's a hidden fortress on this planet, it benefits both of us."

"Look… I'm starting to feel like there's really no point to staying here—"

Rey could feel it all slipping away. No Sitrine—no Rellen—were they safe? Were they in danger? They couldn't contact them. There was no way to know.

No Anakin. No Breeze.

And now Noelle, the last task Rey was charged with, was thinking of bolting?

"I'll tell you anything you want to know," Rey said quickly.

Rey.

I refuse to make her a prisoner.

She'd caught Noelle's interest.

"All right," Noelle said, her lips spreading into a broad smile. "I'm listening."
AND THE TIME HAS COME!

"I told you it wasn't a fairy tale."

"Geeze, let it goooo already," Noelle sniffed. "Can't we just revel in the fact that we found the treasure trove of fortresses? It's almost too good to be true."

What if it is?

I don't think it is. Rey took stock of the library they were currently exploring. There wasn't any need for torches. Lights ensconced in glass turned on as they passed, glowing faintly. The place was powered on its own. How, she had yet to figure out. Think about it. Anakin didn't appear until we were on Endorom, and he stopped doing so once we found Noelle. And those golden balls have been here all along.

You think it was his grand plan? The words dripped sarcasm.

Of course not. Rey ran her fingertips over books that were in pristine condition and hadn't collected dust. But I wonder if he thinks we won't need him for a while anymore. She glanced over her shoulder where he was eyeing a bookshelf of his own. We've seen the entire fortress. We can call your mother back. They'll more than fit here.

We don't even know how everything works yet.

That was true.

"Can you two stop with the creepy inner monologues?" Noelle drawled. "The rest of us can't keep up."
"You're the only person here," Rey snapped. "You hardly qualify as 'the rest of us.'"

Noelle stepped forward, jerking her chin up, her eyes flashing with warning. There was a stubbornness there that matched Rey's, and perhaps that was one of the reasons she set Rey on edge so much.

That, and the fact that she enjoyed checking Ben out regularly to shoot Rey's blood pressure through the roof.

"Look. I came here because of some things I was promised, and so far, those things have yet to be delivered. I've helped you more than you've helped me. I can easily go back to the life I had before."

She's right.

I know she's right!

That didn't make it any better to listen to.

"But instead I've stayed here, and I let you drag me out in the middle of the night to talk to the forest creatures." Noelle set her jaw, tilting her head much like a predator would. "Skewer me through with that fancy lightsaber if you want to, but you need me. I helped us get in here. I went with you all over this gods-forsaken planet to convene with whatever tribal leader we could find to figure out how to open those sluice gates, and now we're here. All I ask for is a little respect."

Rey pursed her lips.

"I'm a part of this team." Noelle thrust a finger against her own chest, her eyes darker than ever. "And if you don't start treating me like it, I'm gone. It's just the three of us, Your Highness. Look around! We're alone!"

"Shut up!" Rey slammed a fist on the table between them, making heaps of books jostle. "We are not alone."
"Those Knights of Ren left weeks ago, and they haven't come back! Weren't they an integral part of the whole plan? You told me everything, remember?"

Rey didn't want to hear this. "You're a part of the team," she said, just to shut her up. She knew Noelle was right, but knowing it and dealing with it were two different things.

**You two are going to have to end this feud if we want to move forward.**

She knew Ben was right, too.

"Glad to hear it," Noelle said with a satisfied purr, though the look of death hadn't quite left her gaze. "Now tell me what we're supposed to do. The fortress is nice and all, but like I pointed out, I can't exactly read your minds. Gonna fill me in?"

*You do it, Rey said.*

**Where are you going?**

Rey's cloak snapped as she strolled purposefully across the library, intent on exiting.

*Away from Noelle until I figure out how to get along with her.*

The next two weeks were a flurry of activity.

Getting Leia to return was a much-needed hassle in itself. They'd barely claimed a place to settle when the call had come to return to Endorom, that a base had been found for them. It had taken some explaining and working around, but she'd come. It was the rest of the force that had grumbled, not that Rey blamed them. Being pulled this way and that had to be very frustrating.
Once they saw the fortress, however, that all changed. Everyone's spirits were raised.

Hope glimmered.

Doubts that had been lingering since the attack on Arna III were vanishing.

If only Rey could hear from Sitrine or Rellen—anything, anything at all.

Until the day they appeared.

Rey stumbled upon them by chance, in Castle Sitrine to gather some belongings she'd left behind. Both were completely bewildered.

"What in hells is going on?" Sitrine bellowed. "Everything is gone! There's a blasted fortress sticking out of the lake with a shield over it! What in—oof!" His arms were full of Rey. "Oh—this is unexpected… I feel like I should make a salacious comment…"

"Don't," she sobbed into his chest. "Just come with me. I'll explain everything."

A private council was held first. It consisted only of Ben, Rey, Sitrine, and Rellen, and no one knew it was taking place, as no one knew the Knights were back and they hadn't left Castle Sitrine. The foursome stood gathered around the strategy table, the holo-transmitter powered down like it had been for weeks now. Ben and Rey hadn't needed a surprise message from the Order.

"Give us the bad news first," Ben said, taking command.

Dark circles bagged under Sitrine's eyes. Rellen, comparatively, was shoring up rather well, as if he hadn't lost a wink of sleep. Why such stark differences?
"Tro'dai Ren thought Hendou—sorry, Sitrine—we've been under intense scrutiny—was behaving suspiciously. He hasn't been allowed to leave headquarters." Rellen set his heavy helmet on the table with a clink and removed his thick gloves. "He's been keeping me on a tight leash, as well, but that's to be expected. He senses you're about to make war on us—them. Sorry, this double agent thing is not really my forte."

"Um…” Rey didn't want to mince words. "You wait until now to tell me that?"

"It was a joke," Rellen replied. "I've been there for weeks. I've course I'd bungle it up. What do you expect?" An edge underlined his voice, and the room spiked with tension.

"You're right. I'm sorry. I've just been… worried. For both of you." Rey exhaled heavily. "And that's it? Tro'dai—let you go?"

Sitrine nodded. His throat worked with a swallow.

"Then why are you acting like you were tortured?" Ben asked sharply.

"Because I might've been," the Knight admitted. When Rey gasped, he shrugged like it meant nothing, which of course it did.

"What? Why?!" she demanded.

"Because Tro'dai's gone off the deep end?" Sitrine shook his head. "It's completely mad at headquarters right now. Do y'know we've got an army of… I don't know what you call them. They're not Jedi. They're not Sith."

"Force-users," Rellen supplied.

"Right. He's gathered them all up, and they're a—a tiny army of their own. That's one of the things we wanted to talk to you about." Sitrine seated himself at the table. "Rellen has more information about it. He told me on the way here. I spent the last day in the torture chamber. Tro'dai kept trying to read my thoughts. He's almost better at it than you, Ky-Ky."
Rey tried not to panic.

Ben got there first. "And he didn't find anything?"

"You know better than I do," Sitrine said with furrowed brows.

Wait. What does he mean?

Rellen was frowning at Ben, as well. "Of course, he didn't. We all trained together."

What does he mean?

He means we can't read each other's thoughts. Except that wasn't Tro'dai.

"We need to get out of here," Ben said. "Right now!"

"Can't a bloke get a break for a moment?" Sitrine grumbled. "Shall I show you the scars I incurred? I'm not nearly done telling you how insane Tro'dai's gotten—"

"That's not Tro'dai!" Rey shouted over him. She was already running for the entrance to the fortress.

"Not Tro'dai?" Sitrine protested. "Ky-Ky, what is she talking about?"

"Get up! Let's go! Now!" Ben bellowed.

"Why? I don't understand! Tell me what's going on first—!"

They all shouted and struggled to grab ahold of something as the entire castle shook to its very foundations.
An orbital bombing had just taken place.

"NOW!" Rey screamed.

She threw herself out of the war room, Ben and the two Knights hot on her heels. They blazed a trail through the corridors, ones well worn from recent weeks. Moving everything from the castle to the fortress had taken everyone's help, and there were a lot of subverted stormtroopers in their employ.

"How long did she wait to interrogate you?!" Ben snarled.

"I—I'm not sure!" Sitrine sputtered. "As I said, a day ago?! He was gone through most of it!"

BOOM!

Rey was tossed into Rellen, and they hit the nearest wall and went down in a heap. The General of the First Order grabbed her and got her to her feet. They kept going, Ben and Sitrine taking the lead. Dust rained down. Yet another bomb hit the castle, and the ground bucked, knocking them all off their feet, throwing them forward.

Ben's head cracked on stone. Blood trailed from his temple.

"Are you okay?" Rey gasped, dizzy from her place on the floor.

Worried the castle-side entrance is going to cave in.

Fear was ice in her veins.

Keep moving!
"What do you mean by 'she'?!" Sitrine asked once they were moving again.

"Wait until we get to the fortress!" Rey yelled over the noise. Stone cracked overhead, more dust sifting. They made it out of the way in time for a large chunk of it to crash behind them, blocking the corridor. "Speed run!"

The four pulled on the Force, and Rey charged ahead, the castle a growing wreckage all around them.

Five minutes later, they reached the spiral staircase that led down to the cleared sluice gates. Rey was half-afraid she’d slip, trip, and break something, but that moment never came. Ben was behind her in the cramped hallway, Sitrine and Rellen nearly on top of him. The latter were talking to one another about what was going on, but Ben and Rey weren't sparing them a breath to answer.

The next orbital attack forced a halt—their route was sufficiently blocked by fresh rubble.

Ben cursed. He brought out his lightsaber and started hacking at it. The others stood back. There wasn't enough space to help him. When attacking the stones head-on proved fruitless, Ben shoved the plasma of his saber straight into them, intent on melting them. Rey separated hers into the two halves and mimicked him. Rellen and Sitrine added theirs just to the outside, and a crude diamond was formed.

It worked. Moments later, the stones fell over. The path was cleared.

"Thank a drunken wookie's hairy balls," Sitrine breathed. "I'm far too pretty to die down here."

Everyone kept their lightsabers out going forward.

"Hey, where are you?!" Noelle's voice came over Rey's comm link, the faintest of crackles. They'd found the fortress made it difficult to communicate with anyone outside of it. It was a tiny problem compared to the benefits it presented.

"Is the fortress safe?!" Rey panted.
"Of course, it is! But are you and Ben?!

"We're trying! Can't talk!"

The line went quiet.

Noelle wasn't one to mince words, either.

Except: "GL;DD," she added.

Rellen chuckled breathlessly.

"What did that mean?" Rey gasped. In shape or not, this was incredibly exerting. Her heart was ready to explode. Using the Force to run faster didn't mean it didn't take a physical toll on one's body.

"Good luck; don't die," Rellen explained.

They burst into the giant chamber with the bridge.

"Where in hells are we?!" Sitrine's head whipped about wildly. "Seriously! Someone answer me! This is my own castle, and I've never seen this before!"

"From here on, trust me!" Rey shouted. She clipped her lightsaber onto her belt.

"Why?! We're at a dead end! That bridge is broken, and there's a deep, yawning chasm!" Sitrine was somewhat hysterical. "You've led us into a death trap!"

Ignoring him, Rey shot off. When she reached the radius of the room and the end of that bridge, she leapt.
Sitrine was the last to land, and he screamed like a baby the whole way. How he'd become a Knight of Ren and made it through the First Order, Rey would never know.

*He's incredibly good at math and decent with a lightsaber?* Ben offered. *And, like he said, he's pretty.*

*You're making jokes at a time like this?* Rey wasn't displeased, merely surprised.

*I thought we wouldn't get here in time. We did.*

The bubble around Sitrine popped, leaving him standing unharmed.

"We're below the castle," Ben said, drawing a ragged breath. They were all covered in a light sheen of sweat and no small amount of dirt from the destroyed castle. The shield they were beneath shivered above them the way ripples spread in a pond, largely unbothered by what was happening outside of the chamber. It was the source of the transfer bubbles, the entryway marked by a golden circle of sorts.

Rellen was quiet, his eyes above them on that shield. He knew Ben was speaking for Sitrine's benefit.

"Yes, I gathered that!" Sitrine swept an arm to his side, sending his cloak flying back. "Why aren't we still running?!

"Because we're safe for the moment," Ben replied.

Rey was taking this "moment" to stand bent over with her hands on her knees. Her lungs were burning for air, and she needed to get a grip on herself. Ben's thoughts were centered, a wellspring of calm to draw from. She did so, pulling it into herself, letting it ground her.

They'd had so many close encounters with Starkiller.
This was by far the scariest.

"You expect me to believe that shield is going to hold?!" Sitrine shouted. The receiving room they were in was cool and had a slight howling sound to it, much like a cave or a tomb. It was shaped in a circle, carved into the bedrock beneath Castle Sitrine, and flowed into a walkway that would guide them outside of this grand chamber and into the drained lake—and, eventually, the fortress, all the while shielded by that nearly transparent haze Rellen was studying.

There were faster ways to entrances, though few of them, and Rey wasn't sure they'd discovered all of them yet.

Either way, no one could get into the damned fortress itself unless they were anointed by those golden lights.

"We tested it," Rey panted. She shook her head and straightened, pushing her hair out of her eyes. Her braided bun had partially unraveled over her shoulder. "Believe me. Nothing's getting through it."

"Let's not tempt fate, then," Rellen advised.

The foursome fell into a jog.

"I can't believe it's gone," Sitrine whispered to Rey. "All I wanted was Endorom… to live in that castle and rule Endorom… and now it's gone… Why? What's going on?"

"War, Sitrine," Rellen said. "And lies."

"Lies?" Sitrine furrowed his brows.

Rellen glared at Ben. "They know something about Tro'dai."

"We weren't lying—" Rey began.
"A lie withheld is still a lie!" Rellen snapped. "I don't like being played. I'm not a pawn in someone's game."

"Geeze, Rell," Sitrine complained. "Get some original lines, you're embarrassing me…"

"I mean it!" Rellen ignored the taller man, his eyes never leaving Ben's. "This better have been worth it. My life's been in danger this whole time, and you didn't let either of us know! And what have we spent the last year doing?! Coming to your side, turning against the First Order for you! That's all we've ever done! Blindly follow you!"

"It was for your own protection!" Rey cried. "She would have killed you!"

"There's that 'she' again." Rellen's amber gaze hardened. "Start talking, or I turn around right now and go back to the Order."

"We're not hiding anything!" Rey elbowed Ben out of the way, who was about to rip into Rellen, judging by the dark cloud his thoughts had become in half a second. "I swear it to you!" Tears rose to her lashes. Now wasn't the time to get emotional, but the stress was getting to be too much to bear. "It was agony, not hearing from either of you! It was the hardest decision we've ever had to make, to let you go without knowing the truth! I promise you, we would never deliberately harm you!"

The sky shone down on the group. They'd reached outside.

Rellen stopped.

Rey skidded to a halt when she heard his footsteps cease and he was no longer at her side.

"Like Kylo Ren would ever care about what happened to me," Rellen said darkly.

"Rellen, what are you…?" Rey trailed off as the hum of Rellen's lightsaber filled the air.
And she knew what had happened.

"Listen..." she said slowly. "Whatever Tro'dai told you..."

"Making us follow him when we burnt Luke Skywalker's temple down..." Rellen bared his teeth, his lips pulling back from them. His feet spread into a fighting stance, the soles of his boots scraping over dry lakebed. Rey's hand dropped instinctively to where her lightsaber was holstered. "Becoming Snoke's favorite, ordering the rest of us around like we didn't matter anymore..."

"Rellen..." Rey's fingers shook as she stretched her fingers toward him placatingly. This wasn't going to work, he wasn't going to hear reason, but she had to try. Starkiller had put some sort of seed in Rellen's mind, some sort of darkness meant to grow against Ben, to manipulate Rellen this way. "Rellen, you know that's not the truth..."

"And then he left! He killed Snoke, and he left! For you!"

*Of all the worst fucking possible times for this bullshit!*

Which had been exactly Starkiller's point.

*She's a fucking—*

"Rellen!" Rey couldn't get him to focus. Rellen's eyes were distant. He was listening to some other voice. "This is a trick! Please! Believe me!"

*We can't kill him!*

*We'll overwhelm him in two seconds. One blow with a swat from the Force, and he'll be out.* Rey could feel his mental eyeroll.

*Thank you, she thought. Thank you for taking this so seriously.*
"I'M TIRED OF BEING A PAWN!" Rellen screamed.

He ran at them, lightsaber swinging.

Well, choobies.
SORRY THIS UPDATE IS SO LATE! I was writing out the plans for the rest of the story, and I wanted to get that all finished up before I picked up writing again!
Anyway, here we are! And, with a long awaited (or so it's been no so subtly hinted at) … drumroll…

(But for those of you who skip the NSFW, there is actual plot in here!)

EVERYONE, PLEASE READ BEFORE CONTINUING

I know it’s marked as a whole for the story, but guage in here that may offend some of you guys. Likewise for proceed, please bear this in mind. I mean this is want any complaints when I gave fair warning!

All right, please proceed. : )
We don't have time for this! Knock him out! We'll take him into the fortress and deal with him later!

A bomb hit the shield—it absorbed it, rippling outward with no effect to the land it protected. Others followed their brethren, and each failed as the first had. The shield was impenetrable. Ben and Rey hadn't been lying when they'd said they'd tested it. Who and what had made it so indestructible was another story.

Rey yanked her lightsaber in two and met Rellen head-on.

Rey!

Red sparks danced with white. Rey's boots skid over the lakebed, kicking up a cloud of dust.

This isn't going to just go away!

Rellen darted into the air, swift as the wind. Not having forgotten his chosen method of fighting, Rey swung to her left, blocking his blow as he came at her from above. His amber eyes were backlit by red, making them almost demonic. It scared Rey, yet not in a way that made her want to run away. No. She was afraid of losing him.

You can't feel him in the Force! Don't risk it!

Rey dove toward the fortress. Rellen was on her heels. Rey had to dodge, jumping with the aid of the Force, sometimes twisting to parry blows from Rellen.

Are you saying I can't handle him?!

That's not what I'm saying, and you know it!

"Rey!" Sitrine cried. "Rellen! What is this madness?! Stop it! Rellen! What's gotten into you?! You
know they're on our side!

The general screamed with a sort of raw, primal pain that Rey had never heard from him before. He was putting everything he had into his attacks. It wasn't like that time they'd faced off for a "friendly" duel in the courtyard at the castle so Rellen could test her mettle. This was the sort of drive that was overriding good instinct, something that could get him killed.

That's what she wants, Rey realized. She wants him to die.

"Why are you fighting him!?!" Sitrine yelled.

"Haven't you noticed I've been entirely on the defensive?!" Rey shouted back. The open path of the lake was tunneling ahead, and Rey had to stop running. She flipped backward, over Rellen's head, their lightsabers grazing on the way as he followed her. This caught her off-guard, and she fumbled, falling hard onto her side.

"We're out in the open, and I don't trust this shield!" the Knight countered. "Can't you make him pass out?! Here, I'll do it—"

Rellen thrust an arm forward, and Sitrine went flying.

"He's super strong at the moment!" Rey said. She was already five feet away, a lightsaber where she'd been a moment ago. Rellen snarled and rushed her.

"...Yeah, thanks for that warning..." Sitrine rasped from the crumpled heap he'd landed in. "Ben, do it!"

Don't!

"Ben!"

I said don't!
Sparks danced, and plasma hummed as Rey parried each of Rellen's moves. She wasn't quite as fast at it—Ben was correct in that she couldn't sense him in the Force. But she was still stronger than Rellen, and she was being cautious, never taking the offensive, letting him fight it out. The man didn't need this simmering in his system!

Rey, we don't have time!

Ben, no—!

There was a pull on her side of the bond, and Rellen's eyes rolled back in his head. With a cry of dismay, Rey shut off her lightsaber and ran forward to catch him. Her knees got banged up on the lakebed as she barely grabbed him in time, and he was heavy. She patted his cheek, tried to open his eyes.

Damn it, Ben!

Ben was at her side, grabbing Rellen like he weighed nothing and throwing him over his shoulder. We have to get out of here!

This was a mistake!

Then we'll deal with it later!

We do not have time for careless mistakes!

Explain to me how this is a careless mistake! Ben fumed. He needs to be locked up while we deal with the situation at hand!

It's better that he works it out of his system, that we get through to him!

I disagree.
And that was supposed to be that?

But they didn't have time to argue.

The orbital bombing refused to let up. It unnerved Sitrine to no end. He jetted ahead, boots kicking up dust. Adjusting Rellen to a more comfortable position, Ben shifted his shoulders and made for the fortress, as well. Rey stayed behind for a second, breathing hard, her eyes scanning the shield and the rubble of the castle. There wasn't much of it left. Sitrine's legacy, crumbling into nothing.

She thanked the gods that they'd gotten what they could of the planet's meager inhabitants into that fortress.

Starkiller wasn't going to leave anyone alive.

---

*Are you out of your mind?!* Rey raged. *We have to walk into the strategy room in minutes and explain to our terrified army that the First Order is after us, and that the Knight of Ren we trusted is under mind control from an enemy we didn't bother to explain because—*

*REY!*

She gulped a breath down and paced away from Ben. She unwound her braid, fingers trembling with her fury. She had to get it orderly before she presented herself to their cabinet. They were waiting for an explanation, for their next course of action. Plenty of people were undoubtedly terrified.

*Throwing him in the dungeon doesn't look good!*

*We wouldn't have been able to subdue him!*

*You don't know that!*
I wasn't willing to take the risk! And the orbs wouldn't have permitted him here if he was out of control!

I could have gotten through to him!

The stress had eaten away at them. Rey pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes and ignored the stitch in her side. So much had happened since she'd had the dream about the fortress, since they'd relocated here. There'd been tension… tension leftover from Rellen and Sitrine going blind into that meeting with Starkiller… tension from the fight weeks ago that had placed a wedge between Ben and Rey…

They hadn't made up. Not—especially physically. There just hadn't been… a good moment for it. Rey didn't know. Ben had made it clear prior to their arrival on Sukuru that he wanted to earn her forgiveness. And he had, he'd more than earned it. She could get the gist of what was going on from his thoughts. With all the worry that had her stomach in knots every day, he didn't want to push her.

Rey stood in front of the mirror so she could see what she was doing as she redid her spiral braid. She'd taken her cloak off so it wouldn't weigh her arms down, hindering her progress. Ben was behind her, frowning deeply at her reflection, his brows pinched together. She held his gaze for one long moment and then returned her attention to her nimble fingers.

They'd left Sitrine in the war room with their cabinet and had promised to return soon.

Soon was expiring.

Their cabinet would be filling Sitrine in on the details of what had happened in his absence now. It was the muttered command that Ben had issued on his way out the door. Shortly after, Ben and Rey had seen to Rellen's safe arrival in the dungeon cell awaiting him. The cells there were as technologically sophisticated as the rest of place—Rellen wouldn't be breaking out of there when he came to.

Rey badly wanted to make sure he was all right, to talk to him, to get through to him.

We need to prepare what we're going to say to my mother—to the rest of them.
Rey put a pin in wrong and cursed.

Locating the fortress from the dream had been simple enough. Lowering the sluice gates to drain the lake, well, that had been a whole other layer of hell... Noelle, however, was able to convene with the orbs. And she had—for countless hours. The only issue that had cropped up was that the orbs didn't speak in words to Noelle; they showed her images, impressions. Noelle had tried to say, during one of her many snits with Rey, that it wasn't so easy, since Rey could hear complete sentences from them. Rey had quickly shut that down. It wasn't anything like that at all. But she'd been more patient with Noelle after that.

And even once they'd worked that out, that the orbs wanted them to find the tribal people populating Endorom—not very many, thanks to Sitrine, past diseases, and inner fighting amongst themselves—it evolved into more insanity. Most of the people here couldn't speak Basic. They'd had to search high and low to find someone who could, since Sitrine had chopped off the hands of the last person who had, who was able to translate for someone who even knew about the choobies-damned fortress in the first place!

In short, the thing was a legend, and most hadn't heard about it for centuries.

Some race had been here a very long time ago and left it. Rey wondered frequently what had happened to make Endorom's civilization devolve so drastically. She suspected it was war.

Everything always traced back to war...

So that was where they were. They'd pieced a few people together who knew about the legend, some scholars, who didn't know Basic, who didn't know the language their first translator knew, thereby requiring a second translator... gods, the whole process had been so slow. And from there, Noelle had more to exchange impressions with the orbs with, and they located the sluice gates. The lake drained, the fortress was revealed, the shields were put into place, and it was enormous here.

The inhabitants of Endorom had their own underground wing they'd taken to. Those who could fight had wanted to fight, and that, in itself, was a mess, but her cabinet reported that they were able to find a pattern with Leia's army and the stormtroopers. All three of those sets of warriors belonged to Ben and Rey, and they were kept quite busy.

But they needed Rellen to kick off the start of this retaliation against the Order.
Until then, they were sitting ducks. They hadn't been foolish enough to put all of their ships within the safety of the fortress, but those would only hold for so long. Starkiller may know of their plans now, but that didn't mean they couldn't rescue at least some of the mess. They'd subverted many people over the last year and much more.

Rey shuddered in memory of their dealings with the Hutts.

They had to act quickly!

_How are we going to get him to talk? We need to, to make the order before we meet with the cabinet._

Ben's expression was grim in the mirror.

_You're not going to like it._

She read his thoughts.

He was right.

She didn't like it.

_There's no other way?_

_Not unless you can think of something better._

She couldn't.

His arms came around her, pulling her into his chest. She started, dropping her brush and pins. They clattered to the vanity. She twisted in his embrace in confusion, only to be met with the
heated press of his mouth, and it stole her breath away, made electricity zap beneath her skin. It had been so long.

He was doing this now?

_We don't have time_, she protested. She held herself very still. She didn't want him to change his mind even as she did. He was so close, she could feel, as well as hear, the rhythm of his breath. She clenched her eyes shut to avoid the temptation of tilting her head up for more kisses.

_It's all you're thinking about. And we do have time. This won't take long at all._

_What are you—?_

Her rump hit the vanity. Her trousers were yanked down, and everything happened so quickly after that. He was inside of her, pounding into her, and she was biting into his ear to stifle a yell. He hadn't filled her cunt in weeks. Her eyes rolled back in bliss as he held her hips steady.

_Why? Why now? You've been waiting._

Their groans mingled in their chambers, along with the coarse slap of flesh on flesh. Rey dug her fingers into his shoulders; from his angle, all she could do was hold on. Her back was pressed into the mirror—Ben had her legs folded up.

_Do you think I haven't earned it?_ He hefted her up higher, his hand going straight for her clit and attacking it with vigor.

Rey writhed and bucked as orgasm soundly smashed into her. Ben's strong arms locked her in place as he rode her body through it. His teeth were gritted, face intense with concentration as he took her. She knocked her forehead against his cheek and listened to their ragged breathing, trembling.

He wasn't far behind her. His seed flooded her, warm and sticky, and he moaned, dropping his face to her neck.
Fuck.

Yes.

What? His thoughts were adorably scrambled.

That is a word for what we did.

He nipped her ear. To answer your question… because I love you. And…

And?

And Rellen was coming after you, a man possessed, and you couldn't feel him in the Force… and while I knew you could handle him, I imagined you facing off with Starkiller… and I knew she was out there, and that while she couldn't feel us, we can't feel her, either… and I thought about losing you… in a very… visceral way…

Rey stroked his hair, hoping to calm him—to calm herself.

She's here. Everything we've been preparing for… That time is here. It's war. He kissed her gently.

She closed her eyes.

There's something I want to talk to you about. But it has to wait until after we deal with Rellen and address the cabinet.

Rey's heart sank.

Rellen…
I really don't want to do this... Her eyes flitted to his. What do you want to talk about?

*It can wait.* Reluctantly, he pulled out of her, his lips finding hers. *I know you don't want to do this. But we have to. There isn't another way.*

Using their powers to override Rellen's mind and bend him to their will... making him put into motion their plans, as only he could...

*We're no better than Starkiller.*

*That's not true.* Ben was exasperated. *We'll save him, Rey.*

*We're using him like a pawn, just like she is.*

*We're doing what we have to.* Ben's voice grew firm, cold. *This is war.*

*I know this is war! I—* 

Rey stopped. She could see it in Ben's face—he wasn't changing his mind. They would use Rellen. She supposed it was part of that saying. How did it go again? Easier to beg for forgiveness than to ask for permission?

*I'm so sorry, Rellen.*

*I'm so sorry...* 

But Ben was right. They didn't have any other option.
The Things That Hurt Us Most

Chapter Notes

Some of you don't read Chocolate, which is what I had updated last and had some of my personal notes in there. For those who don't want TL;DR, please commence with the story! I won't take any offense. I've had a rough time of it the last few months. I haven't had a steady home, and I've been crippled with my depression. I'm finally settled into my new, stable place, and my inspiration is finally coming back now that I'm not in a miserable, constant rain of crap. So… yay! Anyway. This chapter was meant to be longer—I do have the rest of the story planned out—but I'm dipping my toes back into the water and trying not to overwhelm my brain.

Please enjoy! I hope you guys are still there!

"I… What is ice cream?"

"What is ice—?" Rellen's eyes snapped to Ben's. "Kylo Ren, who is this trollop, and why doesn't she know a staple to life like ice cream?"

"Because I grew up on a desert planet?"

"Mmm… interesting…"

"Is he always like this?"

"Yes."

"GET OUT OF MY HEAD!"

"Don't be naïve, Princess," Rellen drawled. "You want to rule the galaxy, you want to play with the big boys, well, the crime syndicates are the big boys."
"Do you ever hear yourself?" Sitrine snorted.

"Yes." Rellen's smile showed teeth. "And it's music to my ears."

Everything was in pieces, a chaotic jumble in Rey's effort to get to the core of Rellen's mind. Ben's entanglement of power was right there with hers, plunged deep. It wasn't hurting Ben as much as it was hurting her. They were all tied together too tightly to hide from one another, the nitty-gritty laid bare. Rellen's rage—Ben's determination—Rey's regret.

"IF YOU'RE SO SORRY, STOP THIS!"

"So we're keeping the traitor?"

Rey barely resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "He's as much of a traitor as you are."

Sitrine and Rellen lifted their brows in a sudden epiphany.

"She's right," Sitrine said, like this wasn't ever the case. "We are traitors. Hm. Hadn't thought of it that way."

"That's because your brain is the size of a..." Rellen muttered.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. I don't feel like arguing with you." Rellen held out his hand to Finn. "Welcome to the band of misfits intent on taking over the galaxy. Over there is Sitrine, the comedic relief. You've already met Ben and Rey, obviously. And I am Rellen. I'm the general for the Order."

Finn frowned. "For now?"

"For now." Rellen smirked. "Then I'm alllll Rey's."
Rey didn't recognize the man behind the glass.

*Look what she's done to him.*

Ben didn’t answer her. He, too, was watching Rellen scream obscenities at them, the Force useless in the confines of his prison cell. All of them cells were composed of this glass, similar to what Leia's army had used on Arna III.

*She wants us to kill him.* At this rate, they were going to have to destroy his mind in order to subdue him. She wasn't sure if it was the seed of rebellion she'd planted, Rellen's inherit willpower, or both. Whatever the case, Ben and Rey's combined might wasn't making a dent without an intent to do damage.

Why hadn't Starkiller touched Sitrine…?

Maybe she had thought this would be enough to decimate their plans. It was genuinely seeming like it. Rey was unwilling to destroy Rellen.

But Starkiller had forgotten about one thing—love.

*What?* Ben asked incredulously.

*Noelle,* Rey replied. *We need to send someone for her.*

Rellen's eyes went blank, and his epithets halted. Disoriented, he hung his head. In the sphere of his thoughts, everything simply floated, untethered, static-y pictures that amounted to nothing. It lasted only a moment before he was back at his betrayal-induced fury again, but it was enough to show Rey that her inkling wasn't too far off the mark.

*There. See?*

*How did…?*
Because some of us know when to pay attention to the subtler things in life, Ben Solo.

Rey pulled herself out of Rellen's head, wincing, and gestured a soldier over. After an order to retrieve Noelle, she gave an impatient Ben a deeper explanation.

*Remember that day I said we were surrounded by love?*

...Yeah... He withdrew from Rellen's mind, as well, seeing as how there wasn't much point to probing it without Rey's help. He could go on without her, but he could see already she would actively resist the power boost until Noelle arrived. Though since he had seen the flicker of change in Rellen at the mention of the mercenary's name, he’d grown more open to listening to Rey.

Rey relaxed her guard, and Ben did, as well. For the first time in an hour, they felt like a team again.

*They shared this look. I know it sounds stupid, but... they connected—on some level. Clearly. Maybe if she's here—*

*It will stabilize him enough that we can break through to him?*

Rey nodded, worried.

*It's worth a shot.* He hesitated, then put an arm around her shoulders and rested his chin atop her head. *I don't want to lose him, either, Rey.*

Rellen was slumped at the bottom of his cell, covered in sweat, his every breath labored. Ben was unconcerned on the surface—beneath, his thoughts were knotted with indecision. He was hoping that this thin "grasping at straws" with Noelle would lead somewhere. Rey didn't take offense to this line of thinking. It would be akin to constantly allowing herself to become upset and, indeed, refuting Ben's very nature—at this point, she had come to accept that over half his thoughts would always likely be jaded, coated with skepticism, though not to the extreme of when he had been Kylo Ren. This wasn't a reflection of her. It was a product of everything he'd been through. Only so
much of what they'd gone through together could change that.

Besides. It was grasping at straws.

"What's up, YIM?" Noelle chirped, slapping hands casually with a stormtrooper as she was allowed into the dungeon.

YIM?

Your Imperial Majesty, Ben supplied.

Rey suppressed her initial flare of annoyance. Bickering with Noelle would waste precious time. "We need your help."

Noelle opened her mouth—likely to make some quippy retort about how they needed her often lately and were building quite the tab—but she'd caught sight of Rellen. Dismay crossed those androgynous features, and she rushed to the cell, pressing her palms to the glass. "What the fuck have you done to him?!

"Not we," Rey replied, with effort, in a civil tone. What was happening with Rellen was wounding her deeply, and Noelle already thought so ill of her. "Starkiller." Seven hells raining down all around them, and where was the first place Noelle's mind went to? Had no trust been established at all? Or was it the irrationality of seeing someone they loved in so much pain?

They barely know one another.

That hardly stopped you, Rey retorted, and Ben fell silent.

"He needs to see you," she said. Noelle had her hands pressed to the glass. "Hear your voice. Starkiller's possessed his mind, and we can't get through to him. This is going to sound callous, and I don't mean it to—you know how much I care for Rellen—but we need him to start the war. He's our general. He has command over everyone for the operations to begin." She tried to keep the words as reasonable as possible, to not let them crack with the weight of her pain, which was growing more insurmountable with each passing second.
Ben stepped in front of her, and Rey turned away, grateful. If anyone could reason with Noelle, it wasn't Rey.

"We only need control for one moment," Ben stated in what Rey knew was the softest voice he could muster for anyone who wasn't her that wasn't insidious. He knelt, his hand hovering awkwardly—it came to rest on her shoulder so lightly it nearly wasn't there. "Just enough for him to issue the command."

"Fine," Noelle said, the one word so choked it brought Rey's head up. Was Noelle crying? Rey looked at the ground to give her some modicum of privacy, no matter how small it was. She hadn't thought that aloof shell was penetrable; not when anyone was around, anyway. "What do you need me to do?"

"Talk to him," Ben reiterated for Rey.

"And tell him what, exactly?" Noelle said, sarcasm tinging the sentence, her voice thick with her tears. "I'm sorry you're being mind-raped, bro, it'll all be over in a jiffy?"

"We don't have time for this!" Rey shouted, breaking, tears of her own dripping off her cheeks. She couldn't take it anymore. "Starkiller will kill us at any moment, every single last one of us, if we can't get Rellen to issue those orders! Please—for once—don't fight us on something! Do you think this isn't killing me? Do you?! Do you?!" She realized she was screaming and had to stop, her ears ringing, her throat grown raw.

Rey licked the salt of tears from her lips. "Please," she begged in a tremulous whisper. "I don't want him to suffer anymore. I don't want to kill him. You're the only one I can think of to help us. Please—help us."

Noelle's gaze had gone blank and empty where it remained on Rellen, who was so exhausted he couldn't lift himself from the bottom of the cell. He hadn't moved since her arrival. They'd had to work extra hard to get past his defenses since he'd already had that built up immunity against Ben. It was one of the reasons his mind was crumbling away, as fragile as the edges of a brittle cookie. Rey could only imagine Starkiller had gotten off on it, found him as delicious as torturing Sitrine, and the thought made Rey ill all over again.

"I'll help you," Noelle murmured. "But then I want to be left alone with him."
Relieved she was agreeing and knowing they had to meet with their cabinet afterward, anyway, Rey accepted this condition readily. "Of course," she said.

And they began again.
Rey was about to adjourn the meeting when she received it.

The vision.

It slammed into her, stealing her breath, and the war room went dark, the faces of her cabinet disappearing.

*Rey*—

And then Ben's voice was gone, too.

The disorientation of the world shifting while she was conscious, aware of it. It teetered sideways, and she went with it, stumbling until she was on her knees, pleading, over and over, her face streaked with tears, her body aching with the torture it had been put through. Cuts lacerated her skin, and her hair was plastered to her face and neck.

"Please," she gasped. "Please—" She stretched forth her hand. "You don't want to do this—"

From the darkness, an evil, feminine laugh crept down her spine, caressing in ways designed to make her flinch with fear.

Rellen stood above her. His amber eyes were bright. "Oh, but I do," he said viciously. He gripped her by the hair, yanking her head back, his lightsaber glowing red with plasma.
It swung backward and up—slashed forward, directly at her throat—

**REY!**

The real world had returned in full glory, leaving Rey sputtering against the war table. She went down, her legs giving out on her, and hands grasped her to steady her. Ben shoved them off. He took hold of her as people shouted their concern, his hand cupping her face to see her eyes. But something else had grasped her attention—behind everyone, at the back of the room, in the shadows, a silent specter.

Anakin.

He inclined his head.

*Noelle!* Rey shoved up from the table and past her cabinet members, leaving a bewildered Leia, Sitrine, and Poe in her wake. Chirps shrilled; BB-8 was rolling with her, keeping pace at her right side. Ben was on her left.

*Did you see?!* Rey demanded, praying that they made it to Rellen's cell in time.

*Of course, I saw!*

Right. Stupid question.

*It's Noelle! We have to get there now!*

"BB-8, go on ahead!" she shouted. "Tell them to seize Noelle!"

She wasn't sure how much good that'd do. Noelle had command of the Force herself. But it would at least buy them more time.
Not a second too soon.

Rey flung her hand out. The Force grabbed Noelle, snatching her from the stormtroopers she was fighting, and smashed her against the cell she had been about to open. The other woman was a Loth-cat, snarling, spitting insults so fervently Rey could hardly tell them apart from one another. Not letting her eyes leave Noelle, Rey nodded to the troopers, and they backed off to give them space.

Ben went to examine Rellen's cell to ensure it was still secure.

It was.

We have to lock her up, too.

Rey knew it was the only way, but she didn't have to like it.

She let Ben handle the troopers and a new cell while she held Noelle in place. BB-8 hooted softly—Rey had nearly forgotten he was there. The small, spherical droid left the room, likely to report what was happening to the cabinet. Rey let him go on ahead.

"This is insane!" Noelle screamed. "This is bullshit!" It was weeks of venom unleashed. "You can't lock me away! You can't just lock us away! We're your allies!"

"You have no idea what you nearly did," Ben told her because Rey was having difficulty speaking. "You have no idea that you nearly killed us all!"

"You're crazy!" the petite woman yelled. "How would I have nearly killed you?!"

"Because releasing Rellen would have allowed him to return to Starkiller," he replied. He took Noelle from Rey's Force-hold and guided her into the cell. Noelle was fighting, of course, but she was easily overpowered. And despite every single one of Rey's misgivings for the mercenary, this was not the fate Rey had wanted for her.
She had thought… she had thought this would *help them*…

*It did help.*

But not enough, not nearly enough.

Noelle's love would have destroyed them if Anakin hadn't shown himself for the first time in ages to deliver that vision.

Rey turned her back on the scene, her cloak snapping smartly as she exited the dungeon. She didn't think she could remain another moment and maintain any semblance of her composure.

Noelle rained vitriol against her back, and it was just as well. Rey was locking her up.

But at least, Rey thought half-hysterically, she would be next to the person she loved.

Rey's quarters were shrouded in shadows. She was perched on her bed, her face buried in her knees as she remained curled in a fetal position, wishing the blankets of the four-poster could smother her, wink her out of existence. The order to carry out the war had been extracted from Rellen—her cabinet had been informed—Noelle and Rellen were safely locked away—her cabinet had been informed *again* of this bit of news, grim-faced though they had taken it… and Rey had walked away, empty, waiting like the rest of them for the reinforcements that would come and stop the ceaseless orbital bombing that was fruitlessly trying to topple the fortress.

Ben stroked her hair. *It had to be done.*

This was such a small comfort that Rey rolled over and away from his touch.

The door to their bedroom opened.
"I thought I'd speak to Rey alone," came Leia's voice. Something must have shown on Ben's face, as she added a wry, "if that's all right with you, son."

Is it all right with you?

I don't care anymore. It was morose. Rey was so defeated in that moment and wanted to be left alone, but it seemed it was not meant to be.

You shouldn't be left alone like this. Ben's fingers slid across her shoulder. His presence left her side, and the press of his thoughts against hers retreated until it was barely there. The heat of tears threatened—Rey held them back. She was supposed to be strong. She was a future empress, and they were now officially at war. This was no place for crying. All she needed was a small bit of time to get herself together, and then she could face the world at large.

Leia waited until Ben was gone to sink onto the edge of the bed.

Silence pervaded.

Something about it made Rey's tears fall free. They slipped down her temples, soaking into her hair.

It was funny, she thought. Now that it was "go-time," she was so close to cracking.

Rellen...

Eventually, Leia spoke. As she did so, her voice was soft, barely carrying past where Rey was twisted into her ball. "Sometimes, in war… we have to make decisions that are very difficult…"

"I know," Rey said, her own voice strangled from the force of her anguish. She was finding that out the hard way.

"We can't let them break us."
"I know that, too."

"Rey…"

Rey sat up, scrubbing furiously at her tears with the back of her hand, her fingers shaking. But she took one look at the mother of the man she was bonded to, and the tears came back in full force. Leia silently opened her arms. Rey fell into them. She was absorbed in warmth, Leia's fingers soothing where Ben's had, stroking a different pattern, the pattern of a mother. She rocked Rey back and forth.

"You have to be strong," Leia whispered. "What happened today was a tragedy. It was a fate Rellen didn't deserve, and neither did Noelle. But Rellen's been compromised, and so has Noelle's heart. Love is a strong, mysterious force, where logic often doesn't get its say."

Rey buried her face in Leia's shoulder.

"Could you trust Noelle if she said she wouldn't try and free Rellen again?" Leia reasoned.

Rey shook her head.

"No," Leia agreed. "So, until we figure out a way to free Rellen…"

"I know," Rey said hoarsely. "I know…"

That was the problem, all the knowing.

"It will be all right," Leia promised her.

Rey just wished she could believe her.
HERE WE GO, EVERYONE! BUCKLE UP, AND (HOPEFULLY) ENJOY THE RIDE!

By the way, there is going to be an epilogue.

It had been a solid week of fighting the day Rey's worst fears were realized.

Reinforcements, blessedly, had come quickly. From within the First Order, members began to turn on one another, and there was utter chaos. It allowed enough time for their ships to make it to Endorom, where the war started in earnest. Elsewhere, in other systems on other planets and moons, bases were being overtaken. Here on Endorom, skirmishes broke out as their ships bought even more time for the ones they had in their fortress to escape and join the battle.

After that, the fortress was more or less blockaded by their people. The shield protected them, of course, but they needed a way in and out of the fortress, and the blockade provided this. The golden orbs were busier than ever, anointing new soldiers left and right, as it was the only way to get into the fortress should one manage to make it through the tunnels.

Rey was often frustrated. Starkiller had yet to show herself, and from the reports Rey had been given, the Force-users Starkiller had collected were being utilized on Endorom. Jacen and Jaina headed these confrontations where necessary with the Force-users they had trained with on their own, and losses had been sustained on both sides. Rey wanted to help, but everyone had agreed her presence was too valuable, and that she needed to stay within the fortress.

Ben had added that they were too vulnerable without being able to sense someone coming in the Force. Until Starkiller was unveiled, they needed to remain safe.

It felt like cowardice to Rey. Their people were dying everyday to fight for them, and all she could do was pace in her rooms and try to keep it together before war meetings.

She'd let Ben handle issuing orders in place of Rellen to the army. Though she was to be his empress, she had no experience in this sort of thing, and honestly, with the helplessness she was
drowning in, she couldn't stomach it.

They were unable to pierce the First Order's defenses on Endorom. Throughout the rest of the galaxy was a different story. Important trade routes had been closed off to them, as well as mining operations and bases. It was a crippling blow that didn't help their immediate problem. Starkiller was bringing all of her firepower to this planet. At night, through the pink haze that covered the atmosphere, the view of the stars was blocked by explosions—similar explosions that rocked the fortress from time to time.

Jacen and Jaina had thus far managed to hold off the Force-users from finding the tunnels, as well as other stormtroopers. That was mostly what the ground skirmishes were over. Sitrine often took a party of stormtroopers with him to accomplish the same tasks. It was intensely dangerous work. They were sitting ducks out there.

How could Rey stand back and do nothing?!

The death toll climbed.

Rey put her foot down. They needed a boost in morale. They would do, she argued, what they had managed on Venia—they would show off the full might of their power. It may help to bait Starkiller, and it would remind their army that this wasn't a hopeless cause. Her cabinet couldn't argue too much—Rey's final word was law—but Ben could. In the end, the only way she could privately convince him was to agree that it would be a one-time show.

They couldn't be too drained for when Starkiller did show herself.

And show herself she did.

In a way that none of them were prepared for.

It was the sirens that woke her.
That, and the door to her chambers banging open.

"Rey!" Poe yelled. "You have to come—now!"

"What's happened?" Ben demanded, instantly more awake than Rey was. Rey, who had had troubled sleeping for days, had finally managed to venture into a deep slumber. It was taking more effort than she liked to blink the grogginess from her eyes.

The sirens were brutally loud. They'd been installed when Rey and company had taken over the fortress. At first, Rey hadn't been sure such a feat would be possible—the place was mighty finicky—but it hadn't resisted. Now they were reaping the benefits.

This is not a drill...! she heard. Repeat... this is not a drill...!

"Starkiller!" The headstrong, often recklessly brave commander was as white as Rey had ever seen him. "She's here, she—"

"Starkiller?!" Rey gasped, throwing back the blankets and stuffing her feet into her boots. She had never undressed. Her blood was running cold. Panic? Fear? She didn't know. The unease that had been building inside of her since she'd first heard the sirens was expanding rapidly, a mightily uncomfortable press against her ribs. She couldn't breathe.

Ben yanked on a shirt. "Where is she?! How did she get in?!"

Excellent questions. At least one of them was keeping their wits about them.

It's all right. Calm down.

Ben flooded her with his inner strength, and tension fled from her shoulders. Her fingers ceased in their fumbling with her shoelaces, not quite as numb anymore. Right. They could do this. They'd been training for this for ages—they'd known this day would come eventually; indeed, they'd been preparing for it all week alone—and people were relying on them. They couldn't afford to lose their heads now that the moment was upon them.
"I don't know where she is," Poe admitted, winded. It was clear he'd run straight here.

BB-8 twittered something at his side.

"She—" Poe started.

"Sitrine?" Rey interrupted. She pointed to the small, spherical droid. "What does he mean?"

Poe swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. Acute pain crossed his features that he couldn't fight back. "Reports are that she used him to get inside the fortress. I guess she overwhelmed him with the Force. I'm not entirely sure how that works. I just know that it did."

Oh, no…

Not Sitrine, too…

"Where is he now?!" Rey pressed. She couldn't afford to be sad, too. She would save Sitrine. Starkiller had already taken too much from her. Rellen had yet to see reason, and she doubted Sitrine would be able to, either, until Starkiller was defeated.

"She's got him under her control still," Poe answered, confirming what Rey was dreading. "It's…" He didn't mince words. "It's not good."

Ben didn't bother with his cape and holstered his lightsaber. "How bad?"

Poe chanced a glance over his shoulder. Afraid Starkiller was going to burst through the door at any moment? "Anyone unlucky enough to be in their path has died. Starkiller deflects blaster shots. She's tearing her way through the fortress—we have everyone retreating at this point—that was our original plan. I—"

"You did well, Poe," Rey said. She knew it was killing him that they couldn't fight, but he'd seen for himself that Starkiller was untouchable. Doing anything else was pure suicide. He had to know that on some level. "You're evacuating everyone, then?" she doublechecked.
He nodded jerkily, rubbing a hand over his mouth, one hand on his hip. BB-8 tweeted lowly. "I just—I've never seen anything like it—and Sitrine—it's like with Rellen—he won't listen—I barely got outta there—"

"What about Leia?"

"Hasn't gone anywhere near her. They got her out ASAP."

The only good piece of news they'd heard so far.

"And you said no one knows where she is?" Rey finished strapping a blaster to her thigh. It wasn't for Starkiller. She had it set to stun for anyone they came across that may somehow be under Starkiller's influence—anyone she hadn't killed just to kill.

"It looked pretty aimless. Like she's looking for—"

"Us," Ben finished grimly.

The halls were widely deserted, the sirens still on full blast and casting flashing red glares as Ben and Rey made their way through the fortress. Their lightsabers were out and humming, a contrast of sparkling white. They had no way of sensing where Starkiller was, but it went both ways. Rey, who so rarely prayed, only hoped everyone was making it to safety and that they hadn't suffered too many more losses since the evacuation had started.

They combed the corridors slowly, their footsteps hardly making a sound. The sirens definitely helped to mask them, but they weren't taking any chances. They still didn't know what Starkiller was fully capable of, and caution was of the utmost consideration.

Twenty minutes had passed when they began to find the bodies.
They were slumped against walls—sprawled over the stone floors. Some just looked like they were sleeping. Others had blood trails from the corners of their lips.

Rey had to turn away and press a hand hard to her mouth so she didn't scream.

She knew these people, had worked with them, and they had been so carelessly slaughtered—all so Starkiller could find Ben and Rey—

*Compartmentalize for later.* Ben gripped her shoulder, and again his emotions sank into her. She slumped into him, his strength spooling through her. It only went so far, but it skimmed the edge off the top of the utter chaos threatening to wreak havoc in her brain, allowing her to think more clearly. It meant having less control over her emotions, as it was a type of surrendering, but desperate times, desperate measures.

When she was good, she nodded, and they continued their pursuit.

It was one of the hardest things she had to do, carefully stepping between legs and over slumped figures, ignoring faces of friends, knowing that Sitrine had contributed to the wreckage—that he would hate himself for it later. Knowing that she couldn't be sure how much he would hate himself. There was already so much darkness in him. Which would he despise more? That Starkiller had gained a hold in him? Or the death at his hands?

The corridors were endless.

It felt like that, at least. They passed through them, one after the other, with still no sign of Starkiller. Eventually, mercifully, the bodies grew less in number, until they encountered only one every other hallway. The paths were, indeed, random. Starkiller couldn't feel them in the Force and was on a warpath—she would go where it took to find them, never-mind the rest of them. She wasn't concerned with rooting out Ben and Rey's army. This had been her goal from the beginning—accessing the fortress.

Where were her Force-users? She had come alone, using just Sitrine for aid.

No, Rey thought. She only needed Sitrine for decoration, as a toy to dangle before Ben and Rey to mess with their heads.
Ben's fury spiked, and Rey, in turn, soothed the embers over before they could burst into flames. He had never been good at handling anger.

_Come on, come on... Rey thought. Where are you...?_

The fortress was enormous. They could wander for hours at this rate, and splitting up was not an option.

Except—

_The dungeon!_

_She's gone to free Rellen!_

*I'm tired of this for shits and giggles bullshit!* 

"Well, look who's come and decided to join the party?"

Rey skidded to a stop, Ben holding out an arm that she nearly smacked into. She twirled her lightsaber while his crackled at his side. Rellen stood ahead of them, halfway to the route they'd chosen to take to the dungeon, a crooked smile on his face, his lashes hooded. His golden eyes weren't... right... They were even more clouded than they had been this past week.

"Let me guess," Ben hissed, beyond fed up with it all, "she's sent you here to fight us."

Rellen drew a red lightsaber that wasn't his own. Starkiller must have supplied him with one. How kind of her. He fell into his dancer's positioning, his smile baring teeth.

"You'll die," Rey choked out. "You know you can't take us both!"
"Oh, he won't be alone," Sitrine said from behind them, and Rey's heart sank.

"I don't want to kill you!" Rey yelled, so upset that no amount of Ben's calm—which was quickly unraveling on its own—could penetrate her emotions. Starkiller had no doubt been relying on this and was somewhere enjoying the show.

"So don't," Sitrine laughed. "Makes no difference to us."

_We might have to._

_No! There has to be another way, there has to!_

_Rey—_

_We'll incapacitate them! All we need is the element of surprise!_

She lunged, swinging not at Rellen but twisting around to go after Sitrine.

He stumbled. She followed, keeping her lightsaber in one piece with a flurry of attacks designed to keep him stepping backward. Behind her, she could hear Ben dealing with Rellen. They moved as one as their training had prepared them for in the cramped corridor, never straying too far, as Rellen and Sitrine were at once on the offensive, not holding back, giving it their all.

Look for an opening, Rey told herself, parrying a blow that nearly took off her arm. Not being able to sense them through the Force was not doing them any favors, and this was worse than it had been than during her battle with Rellen on the lakebed. There, at least, she'd had some _room_ to maneuver in.

She didn't waste breath with platitudes for Sitrine. There was simply no time for it, and besides that, she was feeling too—everything. Enraged, grief-stricken, afraid. Afraid for herself, afraid for Sitrine and Rellen, afraid for Leia and Poe and all the rest of their friends and those who fought for them—all those who faced Starkiller's wrath.
But Sitrine had words for her, and with the way they sounded, they weren't his own. No, Starkiller was controlling him even now. "Go ahead and kill me! This is pointless! I won't survive! I don't want to survive in a world where my best friends have betrayed me!"

"Like you'd know anything about what it means to have a best friend," Rey gritted out.

She could hear Rellen telling similar things to Ben.

"Just—show—yourself!" Rey got a boot around Sitrine's and twisted. He fell, and she used their momentum to smash with him into the wall, her wrist flicking so that his lightsaber flew out of reach. Her own shut off, preventing her from accidentally slicing through him. She pulled on the Force, and he fell into a deep sleep.

Panting, she stepped over to where his lightsaber was and picked it up.

That was about when everything went dark.

Ben?!

Rey—!

"I'll deal with her first," said an icy voice so close to Rey's ear that she whirled, slicing with her lightsaber. A cackle made goosebumps raise on her skin, but it was too far away, letting Rey know that Starkiller had moved. "And then I'll handle you. I want to savor your death most of all, Ben Solo."

It's an illusion, we're in an illusion, she thought.

There was no answer.

Ben?!
Light came, then, just enough that Rey could make out… figures. It was similar to what she had faced in the cave on Ahch-To, but instead of lined up, they were spread out—images of herself, in a large, empty void that was not the corridor she had just been in, all smiling in a dark, satisfied way, all holding a double-sided, diamond-colored lightsaber. They were spaced far enough apart that they weren't crowding one another.

*Ben…?* Rey tried one last time.

Again, there was no answer.

"Choobies," she breathed.

The Reys leapt forward, lightsabers raised.
The End: Part Two

Chapter Notes

To remind everyone: there is going to be an epilogue, of course!

To everyone who wished me a very good new year's and had heartfelt thanks for this past year: I really share the same sentiments. I couldn't have gone through this last year without my readers, without my reviewers, without my kudos-givers and bookmakers, without every hit count. Some of you shared your years with me like I had shared mine with you, and I'm so glad that I was able to give you the same support through my writing.

To all of you who have been waiting for this ending: I'm sorry I kept you waiting for so long. I hope I did this justice. I really didn't want to rush it. I know there are some unanswered questions (like where is Rose?), but they will be answered in the epilogue. However, if you feel your question will go unanswered, please feel free to mention it!

I love each and every one of you, and here we are…

For the first time since Rey had accepted the truth of her parents' fate, for the first time since she had begun to cleave her own part in the story of which she had been told she had no place, she longed for the arid, hostile climate of Jakku. She wanted the lonely familiarity of scavenging parts off rotting imperial ships in the desert sands to bring to the disgusting Unkar Plutt and his roaming eyes for her meager portions for the day. She wanted to settle in the for the night and scratch another tick mark onto the wall of the AT-AT in which she had made her home, counting down the days of every miserable memory she had ever had.

She wanted to forget that she had ever rescued BB-8 and subsequently met Finn in the Niima Outpost, learning of the Resistance. She never would have seen the only father figure she had ever had fall to his death. She never would have made so many friends, or earned a mentor, only to lose him soon after, as well.

She never would have had the pain and agony—the grief—that Kylo Ren had brought her, had brought all of them.

But she never would have known the love that kindled deep in Ben Solo's heart, either, and if there was one thing that Starkiller would never understand, it was that: love. So no matter how difficult this was, no matter the fact that betrayal was now lurking at every corner, that she had more people to fear the loss of, she would overcome this, because she had an ace in her pocket. Love would keep her going.
Every strike of a lightsaber against hers was beginning to make her arms ache. They came from everywhere at once. Rey was barely fending them off. One of her clone illusions, she knew, had to be Starkiller. But who? And if she could figure it out, how would Rey be able to get to her? There was simply too many of them! Never mind that these blows felt very real—she had no doubt in her mind that if she ceased fighting, she would be sliced straight through by hot, unyielding plasma.

Starkiller was wearing down the clock. Eventually, Rey's stamina would give out.

*Figure out where she is, Rey thought. Worry about the rest after.*

What had she learned, the last time she was locked in an illusion?

Rey flung her arm to the left. Several of her clones went flying, smashing into one another, and they were replaced soon after. She didn't have time to look. She was busy parrying blows to her front, right, and back. It was down to pure instinct, since she couldn't feel the flow of the Force coming from any of them. One wrong move, and she would be flayed.

What had she learned?!

Ben's id!

*It's about time you remembered,* a voice whispered inside of her. She didn't recognize it. When she had been locked inside of Ben's head during Anakin's maze, she had been listening to Ben's id and not her own. But it was her voice, that was indisputable. *But if you want my help, you'll have to let me take over. This is a complex illusion. She is directly involved within it.*

*Done!*

*If you let me take over, you'll be surrendering yourself to your baser instincts.*

Rey hesitated.

It cost her a slash she barely dodged, earning her a graze that burned on her arm and made her cry out, the sleeve of her shirt singed.
Fine! she shouted inwardly.

Are you sure you can come back from that? The voice wasn't insidious, merely inquisitive, as if it had all the time in the world, and this wasn't a moment of life or death. You keep such careful control of me, after all.

Just—shut up! You're making it to where I can't think! Rey deflected a lightsaber coming straight at her face.

That's precisely my point. You won't be thinking anymore.

There wasn't any time for this!

There's never any time. Do you want to know which one she is, or don't you?

Why can't you tell me now?!

Because you're smothering me. I need complete control.

Rey remembered Ben's id, all the help he had given her.

He would pull her back from the brink. He would.

Ben isn't here right now, her id reminded her.

But he would be. He would.

She didn't like talking to herself. It was making her feel mad. However, she was tiring too quickly, and she didn't have any other choice. Ben had yet to appear, and she had no way of knowing which of the doppelgangers was Starkiller. She took a deep breath, making sure she understood what, exactly, was happening. It was an illusion within an illusion. This "arena," for lack of a better
word, was within Starkiller and Rey's mind, but Rey had no doubt that anyone who would try to interfere would be trapped in an illusion of their own, just as Ben currently had to be. Meanwhile, Starkiller was dueling with Rey, wearing Rey's face, while attempting to distract Rey with multiple versions of Rey coming at her.

It was a psychological nightmare, and it had to end. Somehow, Rey had to get rid of this illusion, penetrate its core, to get rid of its doppelgangers to find the source. And they had learned that the only way they could do that was with the aid of their ids. It wasn't supposed to have been on this extreme of a level—they were meant to be able to pick out what was real by questioning the natural order of things, of what was out of place—but their training hadn't prepared them for this.

It hadn't taken into consideration that they could know they were in an illusion and still be trapped inside of it, unable to escape, their enemy right there with them, ready to deliver the killing blow at any moment.

Why Starkiller enjoyed playing with her food so much, Rey would never know.

*Do it,* Rey thought.

*Gladly,* her id replied.

Until now, Rey had been stuck inside of a circle, unable to move for fear of losing a limb. That fear had held her in check. It was gone now. The baser instincts had indeed taken over, and it was *freeing.* Concern fell away, and she lunged, calling all her might of the Force with her, confidence in every movement. It wasn't a confidence born of arrogance—it was simply survival. Kill or be killed.

"This isn't real," she snarled, cleaving through the midsection of a clone. It vanished like smoke, and she spun, her lightsaber following suit, as she moved from imitation to imitation. "This isn't real, this isn't real, this isn't real." Sweat began to trickle down her forehead and the back of her spine. That was good. *That* was real.

She moved quickly, blocking several swipes, plasma hissing as she shouted, before she fell into another circle. This time, she had the Force shoot out with her, knocking doppelgangers off their feet and sending them flying, and as she did so, she whipped around to find the one who wouldn't have—who would have resisted that effort.
Found you, she thought with a smile, narrowing her eyes.

**REY!**

Ben was at her side, panting. The darkness didn't dissipate, but the imitations didn't reform. Rey got a better grip on her lightsaber, twirling it. Ben's was ignited, as well.

*What's happened? You're different*— He hesitated. *I remember you… you're the id.*

Rey kept her eyes on her doppelganger. *She won't change back. She's not moving.*

*Probably trying to pull us into another illusion.*

*Well, it won't work!*

Rey ran forward, yelling and jumping into the air, swinging her lightsaber down at Starkiller.

**Rey! Why are you acting so reckless**— *Shit!*

He was behind her as Starkiller raised the illusion of Rey's lightsaber, swiftly parrying the strike.

Ben didn't like this. He was thinking about how Starkiller was wearing Rey's face, and what might happen if he struck the wrong one. But that would be impossible, because he would be able to feel Rey, because they were connected through their bond—

*You're distracting me!* Rey snapped as she began her duel with Starkiller through the mostly darkness, her moves mostly mirrored, Starkiller's expression empty, her eyes entirely devoid of emotion.

Ben's mind retreated.
Then he was beside her again, and the two worked in unison to bring the vergence down.

Almost as soon as they converged on her, the blackness disappeared, and a jungle sprung to life around them, the sounds of animal life and the heat and humidity trapped beneath the trees tangled above them stifling. Ben and Rey were caught off guard, and they fell back-to-back, their lightsabers held before them.

A creature growled low to their left—

*This isn't real.*

The mantra that had been tracking through Rey's head pounded through her being, and she gave an uppercut with her saber in time to avoid a deadly attack from Starkiller. The illusion melted with it, but it took Rey's doppelganger with her and was soon replaced with sand that stretched in all directions. Granules flew in a storm, making her squint to see, and stung her skin.

*She's trying to distract us long enough to attack us.*

And it was entirely effective.

*Above you!*

They dove apart from one another in time for Starkiller to collide with the ground, and laughter rang in their ears. The desert dissolved, leaving liquid darkness in its wake and Ben and Rey on either side of Rey's imitation as they battled with it, each of their blows striking harmlessly as it danced between them. The doppelganger jumped high, backflipping out of the way, and with her, the world rippled and twisted until Ben and Rey were standing in lashing rain and the burning remains of Luke's temple.

*Bitch.*
This was going to continue until they could manage to land a blow on Starkiller, and even then, it would have to be a devastating one.

*We're not breaking the illusions fast enough. Let your id take over.*

*What? No!*

Where was she? Why hadn't she attacked yet?

*You can't tell what it's doing to you, but I can—*

*Just do it!*

*If I give into my id, I'm not strong enough! I will go over to the dark side!*

He had a point.

*And, Rey—eventually, like this, you will, too.*

The clock was ticking.

The environments were constantly changing, be it shards of a memory or entirely random.

Death was lurking around every corner. It was barely being batted away.

And all Rey could think about wasn't the fact that she might go over to the dark side. It was that, if her movements didn't considerably speed, she would have no way of bringing down Starkiller. They would be trapped in this dance until either they were too exhausted or Starkiller was, and with how Starkiller was pulling on the Force-users, Rey had no doubt in her mind that Ben and Rey's
stamina would fall first.

There had to be some way to break Starkiller's illusions that she wasn't thinking of. They were stacked on top of one another, like layers to a puzzle. This arena had to end somewhere. It was no longer an option to believe that it must come from Starkiller's death—they would be dead before that happened.

But what could they do?

What if it's possible to form our own illusion? Rey asked suddenly, dripping wet and covered in seaweed, breathless from the beating against the waves of Ahch-To. Starkiller had attempted to use those waves to slam her into one of the many cliff faces lining the island. Her surroundings changed, and she was back on Solaris, except now she was knee-deep in grimy swamp water with invisible creatures with sharp teeth coming after her.

Starkiller was getting increasingly creative.

Ben and Rey leapt onto dead trees, lightsabers circling widely to bar any attacks, before the illusion broke and they were in a dusty arena with a particularly nasty android. He was larger than the one Wabba had originally had them face.

We don't know how to do that.

It wouldn't have to be anything complicated. She can't feel us in the Force, just like we can't feel her. If we faked your death—

Now the terrain wouldn't stay consistent for longer than a moment at a time, and it had nothing to do with Ben and Rey breaking the illusion first. Starkiller was trying to disorient them before she leapt in for another attempt at a kill. Sadly, it was beginning to work. After the fifth time, Rey couldn't tell up from down. She forced herself to stay where she was, her back to Ben's again.

It would distract her long enough to reveal herself.

Right.
Right, right, right.

Now, how to go about it?

At that exact moment—arguably their most dire moment of need—an old friend came to their aid.

*Rey!* Breeze exclaimed, resounding loudly within Rey's mind. *I can help you!*

---

**Where in hells have you been?** Ben snarled.

Would you like an explanation later, or do you wish to perish now? Breeze replied dryly. When it became clear that Ben's trust was hard to come by, with the illusions they were being pummeled with, she went on urgently, *It became too dangerous!* *Anakin and I knew that should we continue to aid you, you would not be able to face Starkiller on your own! So I have been helping to reinforce the shield that guards this fortress!*

**Yet here you are!**

*Only because you have solved a piece of the puzzle!*  

*Can we argue the logistics later?!* Rey raged.

Yes! *And then we can discuss how to repair your mind!* Breeze, staying out of sight, must have been working on something within the Force with the illusions, because they stopped in their fast-paced madness. *Pretend you are still overwhelmed! It will buy us some time, and you will more accurately able to predict where she is coming from, should she choose to strike again!*

**Breeze, did you not flee from your vergence planet because Starkiller found you?!**

*Ben Solo—I have lived for millennia, and while we share a great dislike for one another, I am unable to let your other half die when I am capable of doing something about it!*
We—

**FOCUS!**

The plan was, as far as plans went, not some of their best work.

But, amazingly, it did its job long enough to distract Starkiller.

Breeze had been a master of illusions from the second they had landed on her abandoned planet all those years ago. She had been a "master" of them thousands before that. The people there, still petrified and reaching for her in their equally stone city, all thinking they were grabbing for what was their greatest desire shining brilliantly before them, could attest to this.

Ben’s fear had been that Starkiller would see through this, that she would know it was the Force knot. But perhaps she was so distracted in playing around with them that she couldn’t tell the difference in reality anymore, in the ripples of the Force. For when Ben was "struck" down, sprawled on the shifting sands of some new desert planet, a hole burning through his chest—a sight Rey found difficult to stomach, despite the knowledge that it was fake—everything melted back into the fortress.

"NO!" Starkiller screamed.

Things moved seamlessly. Starkiller's form was masked as Ben's, Ben's was dressed as Rey's, and Rey disappeared into nothingness, camouflaged into stonework. Snarling, Starkiller, still wearing Rey's face, whirled on "Rey." Ben twirled his lightsaber and raised his free hand, gesturing for her to come at him.

"That was thoughtless," Ben taunted in Rey's voice.

*Move!* Breeze said in Rey's mind.
As though Rey needed to be told twice.

Ben and Starkiller went at it, and Rey was relieved to see Sitrine and Rellen slumped against the walls of the fortress, unharmed and unconscious. Ben notably steered the fight away from their bodies. Starkiller was so enraged that her intent was only on destroying Ben/Rey. Rey needed to move fast.

She did.

Though she wanted to give a mighty yell, she was silent as she warned Ben—who leapt backward in a neat flip—and ignited her lightsaber, neatly severing her head from her body.

They both panted, the sudden silence only broken by the hum of plasma.

Together, they stared at one another over Starkiller's lifeless form. Slowly, the illusion of Rey's body dissolved, and the duo stepped closer to see who had been hounding them so desperately all this time. Dark eyes stared sightlessly to the side, equally dark hair tangled around a pale face. She wasn't pretty—nor was she ugly.

"I don't know what I expected," Rey whispered.

Breeze was a glowing ball of light, swirling around them both, trailing dust. She flickered.

Golden eyes. Twisted features. A body ravaged by so much use of the darkness?

Rey didn't know what to say or do.

It was, it seemed, finally over.

We should burn the body.

Just in case, Rey agreed.
The last thing they needed was some otherworldly rift left from Starkiller's massive vergence of darkness.

Sitrine stirred. "What'd I miss…?" he slurred. And then, a moment later, when his arms were full of Rey, he gave Ben a bewildered look. "A lot?" His eyes caught sight of the mangled corpse on the floor feet away from him, and he clutched onto Rey.

"You could say that," Rellen said dryly. "Oh, I have a wicked headache."

"Like you know what's going on anymore than I do," Sitrine snapped.

Rey choked on a sob and wriggled closer into Sitrine's arms.

The two Knights of Ren lifted bewildered eyes to Ben.

He smiled.

Since his own eyes were a little misty, they gave it up as a bad job and set about to comforting Rey.

*We have to find everyone, Rey thought. We have to find your mother. We have to*—She stopped abruptly and lifted herself from Sitrine's grasp. She stood, using Ben's hand to help her up, and twisted her head wildly back and forth, but never found who she was searching for.

"Breeze!" she called.

There was no answer.

And something told her that, this time, there wouldn't be.

*They were dead*, Rey realized. *Sitrine and Rellen. They were dead*. She covered her mouth with a
shaking hand. She brought them back?

No, Ben thought, shaking his head slowly. They weren't dead. She doesn't have that kind of power.

Rey burst into tears.

"BREEZE!"

She used up the last of her energy with her illusion.

"BREEZE!" Rey yelled frantically. "BREEZE, COME ON, THIS ISN'T FUNNY!"

Your id is suppressed, too. And she said something about how she'd been hiding away in the shield for the fortress… Rey—Rey, she's gone…

Rey dropped to her knees, but Ben caught her before she could fall completely. She fell into him, sobbing. He clutched her head, cradling her against his chest. No—no. It wasn't fair; this wasn't right. How could this have happened? After everything Breeze had done for them? After everything they had gone through together? They had finally brought Starkiller down! And now… and now Breeze was gone?

Breeze!

Breeze…!

"No," Rey gasped. "No—"

Her grief flooded the bond. Victory, shining so brightly, had been submerged in shadow.

She wouldn't want you to feel this way. You know she wouldn't.
Rey didn't care about that.

**The galaxy is saved. Come on. Let's deal with Starkiller's body and then find the others.** Ben's voice was not lacking pity. His thoughts curled around hers, comforting in every place that they could.

But Rey felt so hollow and empty.

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

They weren't supposed to lose something in order to gain something.

"Balance," Ben murmured into her hair. "She was saving you."

*She was saving the galaxy…*

He pressed a kiss to her temple and rocked her slightly. *You know she cared about you more than she cared about the galaxy. She's a part of the Force. She can't die. She finally found her peace.*

*B-But she w-won't answer…*

*She will someday. She will.*

Rey shook her head against him.

*She's resting within the Force. She'll answer your call again one day. She will, Rey.*

*I just… I need a minute…*
And, because he loved her, and he knew how much Breeze had done for them and had meant to her, he gave it to her.

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