The Burning Season

by lucymonster

Summary

“One more time.” Rey places both hands flat on the interrogation table. “Why are you here?”

“I told you.” He’s tipped back in his chair with his heavy boots propped up on the table, looking like a frightened captive in much the same way C-3PO looks like a heavy combat droid. “I’m here to make a deal.”

When his regime hits crisis point, Kylo Ren comes to the Resistance for help.

Notes

I'll update on Monday mornings - sometime Sunday for US readers. I'll add tags as they come up. This fic is still a work in progress, and the chapter count is a well-intentioned guess based on my current plans and writing speed.

The song quotes at the beginning of each chapter are part writing aid for me and part shameless attempt to inflict my music taste on the world.

The tagged character death happens off-screen and is dealt with in the first chapter. It's one we all know is coming in canon, but please be forewarned.
fight your wars

I'm standing here all alone, won't be like it was before
The sky is changing and no one is safe anymore
Underneath I fight your wars, over and over and over again

_Underneath_ – Kidneythieves

“It wasn’t debris.” Lieutenant Connix frantically taps the control pad, trying to clear up the visuals on their aging surveillance net. “I know how to read a radar, and I know what a First Order ship looks like.”

“But it doesn’t make sense.” Poe frowns at the staticky screen like he can scare it into changing its mind. “If the First Order know where we are, they’re not going to tell us with a blip on our radar. They’re going to tell us with ten thousand turbolasers aimed right up our ass.”

Common sense says one thing; radar says another. Rey doesn’t need either of them. It’s been almost a year since she felt this presence, but she’d know it in her sleep. There’s a clatter in the Force, loud and growing louder. Like the falling stone that sets off the landslide. Like the eddies of air that come before a sandstorm. No one else in the galaxy makes quite so much noise.

He’s here.

“They must be cloaking,” says Rose. Her hand is in Finn’s and her knuckles are white. “If they’re generating their stealth field from a bigger warship, that starfighter could have fallen out of cover range by mistake.”

“We’ve got to evacuate.” The radar screen comes back into focus, and there’s no mistaking it this time. The bright red dot of a TIE starfighter is blinking its way towards the centre of their net. Fast. Poe sets his jaw. “Everybody stay calm. We’ve drilled this a million times. All pilots with me – we need to buy enough time for the rest of the crew to get out. Stay sharp and hold formation and remember, we are _only_ a diversion. No heroics. You disengage when I say you disengage.”

“The general,” Connix blurts. “We can’t just leave…”

“I’ll get her.” Rey is astonished to hear how calm her own voice sounds. It’s no coincidence that he’s come for them today of all days. He knows. He felt it, just like she did. And instead of taking a second to mourn, he’s decided to exploit their distraction. After all this time it shouldn’t shock her.

As the fighters scramble for the hangar, Rey sprints back to the medical bay. Leia’s body is exactly where they left it, small and empty on the bed, draped in white sheets, fragrant with the mourning incense that hadn’t finished burning when the first alarm sounded. Touching her feels like a violation, but there’s no way they can leave her for the Order to find. Still, Rey wavers on how to transport her. Rigor mortis has already set in, making her stiff and difficult to carry. The bedframe is fastened to the floor. Pressed for time, she does the only thing she can think of: lifts the mattress up with the Force, and holds it very steady, like careless handling might jolt its occupant from a peaceful slumber.

She navigates the corridors as quickly as she can with the mattress floating in front of her. These days, the Resistance headquarters is a cramped warren of natural caves in the side of a bare rock mountain. Arda is a tiny planet on the fringe of the Gordian Reach, the kind of place that makes Jakku look like a thriving metropolis by comparison. Its native inhabitants are reclusive, politically indifferent, and so resource-poor that no one has ever really bothered them about it. Sometimes they
trade fuel and ship parts with the Resistance. Mostly, though, they pretend not to notice that a band of galactic fugitives have set up camp in the badlands surrounding what passes for their capital city. It’s better for everyone that way.

That’s all going to change now. If they get away clean, the Order will be looking for someone to blame. It was reckless, so reckless, to stay here this long. For the best part of a year the Resistance have been staying mobile, travelling in small groups through the Outer Rim, staying out of occupied territory and spreading their message wherever they could. A moving target is hard to hit, and the smaller, the better. That’s been their only defence. But when Leia’s illness took hold, Rey had talked her whole unit down to ground. She’d reasoned that proper rest and an organic atmosphere would smooth the recovery process.

She was wrong. Leia never recovered, and now the blood of the innocent Ardans will be on Rey’s hands.

But something’s not right. As the last of the crew crowd onto the shuttle, the viewing screen shows a strange scene unfolding on the shale flats outside their mountain hangar. No Order fleet has appeared on the radar – it’s still just that one starfighter, flying a tight evasive pattern with its guns disengaged. It wants to land. Its wings brush the surface, before darting back up to avoid a volley of shots from Poe. It circles around again, expertly ducking and weaving across the open terrain, brushing off each intercept like a hiker swatting flies.

Rey’s stomach clenches. “Poe,” she barks into the main receiver, praying that comms are back up and running after their last hardware meltdown. “Pull back. Let it land.”

A tense moment of silence, and then Poe’s voice crackles through the speaker. “I’ve tried to make radio contact, but the pilot’s not answering. I think this is some kind of trap.”

If Rey’s heart beats any harder it’s going to leap out and escape her ribcage. “Just do it. Pull the squad back.”

It’s a dangerous gamble. The safest move, the sanest move right now, would be to tractor in Poe’s squad and jump to hyperspace while the starfighter finds its landing spot, and pray that their next closest stronghold is safe and uncompromised. But Rey’s instincts disagree. She doesn’t need a clear view of the Order pilot as he climbs out of the cockpit and faces the squad and holds his hands up above his head. She doesn’t need the astonished shout that crackles over Poe’s comms unit.

“Shit, guys, it’s him. It’s Kylo Ren.”

“One more time.” Rey places both hands flat on the table and leans into his space. She’s calm. She’s collected. She’s free of doubt. It’s not enough just to look tough on the outside; if her confidence slips, he’ll sense it. He’ll feel the wild pounding of her heart and the adrenaline racing through her veins. “Where is the rest of your fleet?”

The room they’re in used to be a shipping container; it’s the only part of the base they could convincingly pass off as a detention cell.

“I told you,” says Kylo. He’s tipped back in his chair with his heavy boots propped up on the table, watching her through hooded eyes, looking like a frightened captive in much the same way C-3PO looks like a heavy combat droid. He’s dressed simply, by his standards, in black trousers, black sleeves and quilted silk tunic. No overcoat. No cloak or cowl. No mask. “I came here alone. My flagship’s parked in the Tokamac sector and the rest of the fleet is dispersed on Order business
throughout the galaxy. If you’re so keen to see it I can call a couple of units to meet us here, but things will go more smoothly if we talk one on one.”

“And what makes you think I want to talk to you?”

“We’re talking right now.”

Rey straightens up and arranges her face into a glare. It shouldn’t take so much conscious effort. Even now, after everything that’s happened, being near him like this still shakes her up. “This isn’t a friendly chat, Kylo. You’re being interrogated as a prisoner of the Resistance.”

“I disagree.”

“Well then, you need to get your story straight. Because either you came here with a backup fleet to help you escape, or you came alone without backup and are therefore a prisoner. It can’t be both.”

Kylo just watches her. Last time they saw each other, his face was contorted with a rage that nearly burnt Rey’s whole world to ash. The intervening year has changed him subtly. His cheeks have hollowed out. His hair has grown a little longer. The scar across his face has faded from angry red to a soft pinkish-white. And he’s calm. All his words, all his movements are carefully designed to project an appearance of cocky disinterest.

He’s selling it better than he used to, but his actions don’t add up to his attitude. Landing in the middle of an enemy stronghold with no weapon and no backup isn’t a disinterested move. Rey can confirm, having done it herself once before. There’s no forgetting how that ended for her.

“I realise,” Kylo says at last, “this isn’t the best time for a visit. I’m sorry. I hope her death was quick.”

“You don’t get to talk about her,” Rey snarls. The memory rises unbidden in her mind: Leia’s white face slack with exhaustion from her long illness, sinking back into her pillow as those last few breaths rattled in her lungs. It wasn’t quick. And she could have been cured. Should have been cured. But the First Order blew up their medical frigate, and made it impossible for them to land on any developed planet where treatment might have been available. “It’s your fault she’s dead.”

“I know,” says Kylo.

It’s a flat statement. He’s not gloating, or celebrating; there’s no hysterical edge to his voice like there always was when he talked about his father. Rey probes his mind and meets no resistance, and she’s shocked to find that Kylo’s emotions aren’t so different from her own: the grief has settled low in his chest, the same spot she keeps hers, deep and tender and raw to touch. It’s an honest feeling, too visceral to be faked – but behind it, nothing. Inside Kylo’s mind there’s his grief, and a shallow reflection of the room they’re in right now, and absolutely nothing else. He’s letting her see what suits him, and working hard to keep the rest of his thoughts hidden.

Which means her brief rush of compassion is completely misplaced. “Why did you come here?” Rey asks sharply.

“I came to pay my respects.”

“You wouldn’t waste a trip on that. You’re here because we’ve got something you want, and I’d rather not have to force it out of you.”

This falls about as flat as every other effort Rey has made to intimidate him. “Try me,” Kylo says, his eyes lighting up like she just offered him some sick kind of treat. “I’ve been wanting to see how
“You’ve grown in the Force since the last time we fought. How badly are you willing to hurt me to get the answers you want?”

“You’re disturbed,” Rey says, curling her lip.

“I’m not the one threatening to torture people.”

“Maybe not this time.” Oh, Rey needs a break. “But if you don’t talk soon, I’m giving up on this and handing you over to someone you did torture. Remember Poe Dameron? Because I’m fairly sure he remembers you.”


“I know you’re making fun of me.”

Kylo’s lips twitch. “Actually, I was quoting Poe Dameron.”

It’s so hard to accept that this smirking sadist is the same man who once held Rey’s hand while she poured out her heart on the stormy crags of Ahch-To. The man she once honestly thought she could save. “Alright,” she says, and pushes her chair back. “Fine. Have it your way. I’ve got better things to do if you’re only here to –”

“Wait,” says Kylo.

This time, when she turns around, he doesn’t try to out-stare her. His gaze drops to his gloved hands folded in his lap. “Listen, Rey.” The words are stilted, like they’re leaving his mouth under duress. “There may…” He swallows. Tries again. “There may be something you should know.”

Kylo lets them lock him inside the old shipping container. They’ve searched him for weapons, cuffed him, and triple-bolted the door. He’s a little too relaxed about it all. There has to be some kind of trick up his sleeve; Rey can’t imagine him taking his confinement so well if he didn’t know he could escape in a pinch.

“Okay,” says Finn. They’ve met in the command room for a situation briefing, on the doubtful premise that following procedure might make this crazy situation feel a bit more routine. “Give it to us again. Slowly, for those of us who can’t read Kylo Ren’s mind.”

Rey looks around at the assembled faces of her friends. Some anxious. Some angry. All very confused. “Honestly, I’m not sure I know much more than you do. I’m having trouble getting Kylo to talk about exactly what’s out in the Unknown Regions. All I know is that the First Order has an ally out there—a kind of advanced uncontacted nation who helped them amass enough strength and tech to take on the New Republic.”

“I knew they had some kind of help,” Rose interrupts. “Their tech is like nothing we’ve ever seen before. Remember that time their flagship tracked us through lightspeed?”

“Vividly,” says Connix.

“But all that was part of Snoke’s game plan,” Rey pushes on. “With him gone, Kylo has had to step up and spearhead the alliance himself—and reading between the lines, I’d say his diplomatic skills have fallen short of the task.”
“Imagine that,” says Poe. “But Finn, you grew up in the Unknown Regions. Do you know anything about these allies?”

“You kidding me? That’s way above my clearance level. I never even got to leave base.”

“How about Grand Marshal Hux?” asks Rey.

Finn pulls a face. “Oh, him I know. Total headcase. Used to broadcast these crazy sermons over the intercom that we all had to pretend to be inspired by. ‘Might is right’, ‘Freedom is slavery’, ‘The New Republic has cooties’, that kind of thing.”

“I know him too,” says Poe. “We go way back, Hux and I. He’s the son of a bitch who blew up Hosnian Prime. If Kylo Ren thinks we’re gonna team up with him –”

“Actually,” Rey says, “Kylo wants our help getting rid of Hux. Now that things are turning sour between the Order and their allies, he thinks Hux might use the tension as an excuse to mount a coup and unseat him as Supreme Leader.”

“Cool,” says Poe. “I think I speak for all assembled company when I say: boo fuckin’ hoo.”

A murmur of approval goes around the room. “That was my first thought too,” Rey admits. And her second. And, arguably, her third. “But the problem for us is this ally nation. Their deal with the Order isn’t selfless – they’re using the relationship to sway the galaxy by proxy and to access resources from the colonies. If a fight inside the Order threatens their interests, they might decide to get involved directly. That’s what Kylo came to warn us about.” Rey chooses her next words carefully. “I know it sounds crazy. But if we help Kylo get rid of Hux, he’s offered us a temporary truce and a serious upgrade to our fleet and firepower. And…” She never thought she’d hear herself saying this. It goes against everything she believes. About herself. About the Resistance. About the final wish that Leia breathed in her ear before she passed away. “I think we should help him.”

The silence that follows is broken by a loud Wookiee groan.

“Chewie has a point,” says Rose. “I get what you’re saying, Rey, but why should we team up with a known enemy on the off-chance an unknown one turns out to be worse? Our mission is to protect the downtrodden and win the galaxy back its freedom. First Order infighting doesn’t affect that.”

“Of course it does,” says Rey. “Kylo’s only thinking about this in the short term. He wants Hux out of his way, but if Hux wasn’t an essential part of his military then he wouldn’t need our help to get rid of him in the first place. He’s deluded if he thinks he can run that army by himself. He’ll need our help more than ever once we’ve completed the mission. We need to be realistic here. No matter how hard we recruit, we’re never going to have the strength to dismantle the First Order from the outside. But this is a chance for us to get inside the machine. To hit them where they live.”

She looks around the room and meets everyone’s gaze in turn. It’s a trick she learnt from Leia – people trust you more if you look them in the eye. Chewie and Poe look angry. Finn and Rose look skeptical. BB-8 is beeping discontentedly around Rey’s ankles. Nobody loves her argument, but nobody has an alternative, either. They all know their current approach isn’t working. For a year now they’ve been living on the run, telling themselves how close they are to being ready for another move against the Order – just another day, just another day. Watching the galaxy burn while they wait. It’s long past time they found a new strategy, and it’s unlikely another one will land in their lap if they turn this one down.

“Okay,” says Poe at last. “I’m not saying I’m on board. But just hypothetically, if we did decided to go in on this, what would it involve?”
Last night, as Leia’s lifeforce seeped away, Rey sat beside her and held the general’s wilted hand in both of her own.

“Rey,” Leia said, her voice like the rasp of dry sand on skin. “Listen to me carefully. You’re the last person I can count on. When he comes home, you need to be here to meet him.”

Rey didn’t have the heart then to say what she knew. That the boy Leia missed so much was never coming home. “You need to rest,” she said, gently.

“Promise me you’ll help him. I know you’ve felt it, just like I have. He’ll never really be gone as long as there’s someone who refuses to give up hope. I need—” A fit of coughing cut her off, and watching her shake and heave, Rey barely recognised the steely-eyed warrior who held the Resistance together through so much pain. She looked so reduced. So exhausted. “I need you to hold on for me. Just promise me you’ll keep holding on to hope.”

Hope. It had been so long since Rey touched anything that felt like hope. “I’ll do what I can,” she said, because anything more felt too much like a lie. “I promise.”
“Tell me one thing.” Rey says. “Do you ever regret the choice you made? Do you ever wish you’d come home instead?”

The Resistance embark on their new mission. Kylo gets some sleep. Rey takes a long, hard look at her priorities.

I was looking for an ending when I fell into you
You were like a dream, cause you never came true
You said it all meant nothing to you
All of Nothing – The Birthday Massacre

Kylo Ren doesn’t look like a monster. There’s a wounded kind of beauty to his features, the scar on his cheek, the sad line of his mouth, the little stress tic under one of his eyes. His voice is like burnt honey, rich and dark and sweet. His hair practically begs to be stroked back out of his face. He even – Rey learned this by accident when he was steering her into Snoke’s throne room – he even smells kind of nice. He’s earnest, intelligent, and surprisingly gentle when he wants to be.

But maybe that’s the point. Temptation. Seduction. Those are the words people use when they talk about the dark side. If evil was ugly, it wouldn’t enjoy such a steady stream of new recruits. Evil can draw you in, can make your heart beat faster, can make you ache for things you didn’t even know you wanted. Monsters aren’t always the wild-eyed maniacs who run around slashing people up. Sometimes, monsters are the ones who speak softly and hold out their hands as they tell you that all you have to do is make a few small compromises.

Kylo is a little bit of both. So really, it’s no wonder Rey didn’t fare so well against him last time. But she knows better now. She knows not to get emotionally involved.

And she should probably be careful with the mind-probing. Rey’s been training hard in the Force, but Kylo has years of experience on her and there’s a lot in her head that she doesn’t want him to see. Resistance plans. Hidden resources. The locations of their cells around the galaxy, the coordinates of their secret bases, the names of their supporters. She needs to keep her guard up, and use their connection only as a matter of last resort.

Her heart does beat a little faster when she unlocks the door to the shipping container. Kylo is sitting exactly where Rey left him with his hands cuffed securely behind his back. “Do we have a deal?” he asks as soon as the door has finished screeching open.

“No, I don’t care about your conditions,” says Kylo over the top of her. “I promised I’d get you a new ship and not blow you up. It’s a good offer, so you can take it or leave it.”

Maybe remembering to dislike him won’t be quite the challenge Rey thought. “A guarantee,” she
repeats firmly, “that once this mission is over you’ll let us escape and prevent the Order from tracking our departure. You’ll also give us the access code to your starfighter as a gesture of good faith.”

“No one’s touching my ship,” says Kylo.

“We’ve already towed it into the hangar. Our mechanics tried to get inside the hatch for a security sweep, but it locked them out.”

“If they left one scratch on the hull–”

Rey stares at him, incredulous. “Is that what you’re worried about? Because we’re worried you might have wired it to blow up our base, or rigged the comms to transmit our secrets back to the First Order. And we’re not going to cooperate until we’ve made sure that’s not the case.”

“No one,” says Kylo through gritted teeth, “is touching my ship.”

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Poe is touching Kylo’s ship.

“Cracked the lock code,” he says, as BB-8 beeps happily in the cockpit beside him. “The transmitter’s clear. Can't find anything suspicious in the cabin, but I should probably check inside the engines to make sure there's no–”

“You keep your filthy hands out of that engine,” says Kylo. He's seething at Rey's side, his cuffed hands balled into fists. He stopped pretending to be calm the moment he caught sight of his open cabin hatch.

“What, you worried I'll mess her up?” Poe smirks and pats the navigational array. “Only a monster would hurt a thing this beautiful. You're an evil son of a bitch, Ren, but I'll pretend to be your friend if you let me take her for a spin some time.”

“Dream on,” says Kylo. He’s sneering, but he also looks relieved. “Sienar-Jaemus built that model specifically for me. I'm the only person in the galaxy who's ever flown one, and the flight controls are all customised to my designs, so I doubt you could even figure out how to–”

“What's the hyperdrive class?”

“Point four-six,” says Kylo. He’s torn between his territorial rage and his obvious desire to show off. It shouldn't be possible to bait a person with so little effort. “Knocked point oh-two off the previous record.”

“Wowza. That doesn’t leave you much margin of error, though.”

“I don’t need a margin of error.”

“Yeah, yeah. No one’s coming to your funeral when you blow yourself up.” Poe’s attention drifts over to the weapons matrix and his eyes flash. “Speaking of blowing shit up…”

It’s Kylo’s turn to smirk. “Laser cannons, mag-pulse warheads and a proton torpedo launcher. The built-in guidance is pretty sharp if you’re not under pressure, but I always prefer–”

“Manual lock-on, of course. No autogunner’s as good as a real pilot. How do you toggle control modes?”

“Under the dash there,” says Kylo, stepping up to the viewport so he can look on. “It’s a work in
progress. I’ve tried a few different switches, but the transition’s still clunky.”

“With all this firepower, I’ll bet it is. Your problem’s the system bloat. It takes a lot of processing space to boot up auto mode for this many guns at once. If you’re not using it much anyway, why not slim down? Put the launchers and the heavy cannons on full manual, and just keep an auto mode on the light ions for emergencies—”

Rey clears her throat. “Are you two done? Because I was hoping to finish our security inspection some time this week.” She’s not going to ask for a look inside the shiny state-of-the-art starfighter with its point four-six class hyperdrive and fully equipped mag-pulse warhead array. She is not.

Kylo steps back from the viewport. He exchanges a quick and dirty glare with Poe, as if to affirm that this moment of connection hasn’t damaged their enmity.

“You know,” he tells Rey, as she steers him back out of the hangar, “the Falcon never broke point-five.”

Rey doesn’t dignify that with an answer.

In the control room of the base, Lieutenant Connix has assembled all their officers for a briefing. There are a lot of hostile eyes on Kylo as he sweeps into the room ahead of Rey, straight-backed and disdainful despite the heavy cuffs still holding his hands behind him. Every bit the Supreme Leader. It’s not a flawless act: his eye tic is going steady, and as he runs through his proposal there’s a subtle strain to his voice that wasn’t there when it was him and Rey alone in a room. But Rey might be the only one who notices. Kylo’s speech has the weighted finality of someone who’s not used to hearing his ideas questioned, and he seems genuinely offended by the idea that he might have to argue his case.

“Because, you stupid throw rug,” he snaps after Chewie’s third interruption, “if you don’t come with me to the Torque system, you won’t be able to collect the warship I promised you. It’s not like I can bring it in my carry-on.”

Chewie sounds so angry, she’s surprised Kylo can stand to face up to him. It’s weird to think of how far back they go – that Chewie probably held Ben Solo as a baby, and now they’re snarling at each other like two lone wolves meeting for the first time on the border of their territories.

“Yes, I’m well aware it’s Order space. We’re only there for the pit mines, so steer clear of our main outpost and you’ll be fine.” He turns to Rey, visibly confused. “What’s going on here? Don’t your people know their orders yet?”

That explains some of the attitude, at least. With Leia gone, Kylo figures Rey is the new Resistance leader – and in his world, leadership has some very specific connotations. “That’s not how this works,” she says. “I’m not ordering anyone to fight for you. If you want these people to help you, convince them that it’s worth their while.”

“You’re kidding,” says Kylo. He looks around the room, at the small assembled crew and the run-down computer array, and then he lets out a short breath and dips his head as if to say, fair. “No, you’re not kidding, are you? This is why the Resistance never accomplishes anything. Your leadership is a joke.”

“Just keep talking,” Rey snaps.

“Fine. Like I said, your new ship’s waiting in the Torque system. I’ll take you to it, then we’ll split up and you can fly to Taris and make a not-so-stealth run on the shipping port there. Taris is part of
Mordana Ren’s province and it’s right on the Hydian Way, so everyone will think you’re trying to disrupt our trade network. Mordana will call Hux for reinforcements, and while the troops are busy searching the sector for your hideout, you can jump off the Hydian and take a back route around to Ord Mantel.”

“Why Ord Mantel?” asks Poe.

“We have interests in Ord Mantel,” says Kylo shortly. “I’m not telling you what’s there. But it’s important, it’s top secret, and I’ve been warning Hux for months that it’s vulnerable. You hit that planet hard enough, the Order’s going to feel it and the blame’s going to lead right back to Hux. Then I can court-martial him like I want to, and you can fly off into the sunset like you want to, and everyone goes home happy.” His face warms a little as he reflects on this bright prospect. “Except for Hux, obviously.”

It sounds simple. It sounds a bit too simple, and several of the officers are exchanging wary glances. “Ord Mantel may be under-guarded, but Taris is a major trade port,” says Poe. “How can you promise we won’t get caught?”

“I can’t. Don’t get the wrong idea – I can give you the resources and the coordinates, but you’re the ones flying the mission. You fuck up, you’re on your own.”

“You said you’re giving us a warship,” says Finn. “How the hell are we meant to fly a warship with a crew this size?”

Kylo turns his head. “FN-2187,” he says, like he only just noticed Finn standing there. Rey knows he’s thinking back to the last time they saw each other, on the forested surface of Starkiller Base. “How’s your spinal cord?”

“Good as new. How’s your face, Ren?” Finn’s nonchalance is a lot less convincing than Kylo’s. Rose must sense trouble as well, because she quickly puts a hand on Finn’s shoulder – comforting him, but also making sure he doesn’t try to lunge forward.

“Don’t call him that,” she says, in an earnest voice that clashes impressively with Kylo’s jaded smirk. “His name’s Finn now.”

Kylo blinks. “Who are you?”

“Rose Tico, and I mean it. How would you like it if we all called you by your old name?”

“I don’t care what you call me.” Kylo’s gaze flicks over to Rey as he says it, so fast it could almost be a trick of the light, but she feels the knife twist and hates herself a little for letting it hurt. So much for staying emotionally detached.

She used to think the difference mattered. Kylo Ren was a puppet on Snoke’s stage; Ben Solo was a human being caught up in the wires, waiting for someone to see him and cut him free. She thought it meant something when she called him by his birth name. But there was no one pulling Kylo’s strings when he made his decision that day in the throne room. Kylo is who he wants to be – who he’s chosen to be. And now he’s mocking Rey for thinking he could have wanted anything else. For thinking he could have wanted her.

It’s a mistake she won’t repeat. At least this time she knows upfront that he’s using her.

“Finn’s right,” she says. “A new ship’s no good to us if we don’t have the crew to fly it.”

“Obviously,” says Kylo through clenched teeth. He’s reaching the end of his rope. It must be a long
time since he’s had to do this much talking. “You’ll be able to fly this one. Just trust me.”

“Trust you?” Rey scoffs. “How stupid do you think I am?”

It’s an easy opening. Maybe it’s too easy, because Kylo doesn’t bother insulting her like he’s insulted everyone else. He tries to move his hands, then remembers they’re still cuffed behind his back, and instead he sighs and shakes his head. “Give me a break, Rey. I’ve never lied to you.”

It’s strange that that’s where his limit is. Monster’s fine, murderer’s fine, heartless creature of darkness is fine – but don’t call him a liar. Rey will never understand how his priorities work. She has literally been inside Kylo’s mind, she’s felt his feelings, she’s thought his thoughts, but the more she sees the less sense he makes to her.

He holds her gaze. There’s that veiled look in his eyes again, that willful blankness that he wears like armour. Kylo doesn’t care about being understood. He’s honest, yes, but selectively. For him, honesty is a means to an end. A survival technique in a world where his mind is a book that too many people know how to read.

“Allright,” says Poe, and Rey realises that she’s lapsed into silence, and that the whole room is looking on waiting for her reaction. “If that’s your whole pitch, Ren, I vote we set this aside for the moment.” He’s all calm, cool authority, but his next words are impossible to say in a neutral voice. “I’m sure you know we’ve got a funeral to organise.”

Leia never talked about her wishes for the funeral. Rey tried to ask her once, towards the end of her illness, but she brushed the question off. For Leia, what happened to her body was irrelevant. It wasn’t like she’d be around to see.

There’s no homeworld to bury her on; no favourite place to scatter her ashes. They build a pyre on the shale flats outside their base, and for what feels like an unbearable length of time, no one can bring themselves to light it. They stand in a circle with bowed heads and swollen throats as they say their last goodbyes to the woman who changed their lives so much.

“She’d want you to say something,” Rey grits out. Letting Kylo come wasn’t a popular choice, but Leia’s final words are etched in Rey’s brain. It’s not about what he deserves, or what any of the living want. Somehow, against all evidence and reason, Leia knew her son would be here to see her off.

Uncuffed, Kylo steps up to the pyre. He doesn’t seem to notice all the angry eyes watching him. The cold Ardan wind turns his hair into a rippling curtain that shields his face from view as he places his hand on Leia’s lifeless forehead. Whatever he’s saying to her, it’s not for anyone else to hear. After a moment he steps back, and leaves the circle of mourners to watch the rest of the funeral from a distance.

Which means it’s Rey’s turn next. After a day too frantic to leave room for thought, her grief is spilling like a burst main inside her. She knew for so long that this day would come, but nothing could have prepared her for the emptiness that opened up when Leia’s spark went out.

There are so many things she could say. That Leia was a hero. An inspiration to the galaxy. The warmest, kindest, bravest person Rey ever met. The leader she looked up to. The mother she never had. It all sounds so shallow in her head. None of it captures the depth of her feelings. Across the pyre she can see Poe’s face, crumpled under the weight of worlds. Connix is crying silently; Rose is crying aloud, raw, deep sobs like a funeral dirge. Finn’s head is bowed, his eyes closed in respect.
In the end, all she can force from her throat is: “Thank you for everything, Leia. We’ll miss you.”

And then they light the pyre, and the flames rise up like a beacon under the empty sky.

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In a way, it’s nice to have a pressing call to action. It saves them having to sink too deep into their misery. Leia’s death still hangs like a black cloud over them all, but there’s enough work around to keep everyone busy: the base needs packing up, the supplies need cataloguing, the Holdo needs prepping for its journey into enemy space. It’s what Leia would want, Rey thinks. To know that, with or without her, the Resistance flagship is flying proud.

Of course, calling it a flagship is a bit grandiose. Rey has done her best with the haggard old ferry they swiped last year from an unused Republic shipyard. She’s modded in some cannons, a sensor jammer and a basic cloaking system, and juiced the hyperdrive up to a functional but uninspiring class three. The Falcon docks outside on the hull, and there’s room in the hold for the dozen mismatched starfighters Poe picked up from here and there. They have to find space to dock Kylo’s TIE as well, because it would look too strange to have a single First Order fighter escorting a civilian vessel. And then they have to find space for Kylo himself, which means giving him one of the private officers’ cabins, since the main dorms are open plan and no one really wants to bunk next to him. If he appreciates the special treatment, he doesn’t mention it. They haven’t heard a peep out of him since Leia’s funeral, which no one minds, although his silence doesn’t make it any easier to ignore his looming presence in what used to be their sanctuary.

“I still don’t like this,” says Finn, hovering over Rey’s shoulder as she sifts through a pile of spare parts for anything that might come in handy on the trip. “Ambushing us the minute Leia dies – it’s off, Rey, it’s so off. And how did he even know where to find us? Has he–” Finn pauses. Swallows. “If you don’t want to tell the others that’s fine, but I need to know. Has he–” Finn pauses. Swallows. “If you don’t want to tell the others that’s fine, but I need to know. Has he been inside your head again?”

Rey drops the compressor chip she’s holding. “What exactly are you–”

“No, no, no,” says Finn quickly. “I’m not accusing you of anything. I’m worried about you, that’s all. I saw the way he looked at you in the control room, and I saw how shaken up you were after you interrogated him. I swear, if he’s doing something to mess with you, I’ll fuck him up so bad they’ll have to clean him off the floor with a mop.”

“I don’t need your help to handle Kylo,” Rey snaps, and regrets it almost at once. Finn means it. Not the mop bit, perhaps, but the worry. Other than Chewie and Leia, he’s the only person who knows the truth about why Rey was on the Supremacy that day. She’s never been able to bring herself to tell anyone the whole story – but Finn seemed to understand, even with all the details she left out. “He’s not lying to us,” she says, a bit more gently. “Trust me, I’d know. He really does need our help with Hux. He knows his regime’s a mess, and he knows he’s in danger of losing control, and right now he cares far more about that than he cares about destroying the Resistance. “After all–” She can’t help the note of bitterness that creeps into her voice. “We haven’t been a serious threat to him since Crait.”

Finn picks up the compressor chip Rey dropped. “Do we need this?”

“No, it’s fried.”

“Good,” says Finn. He sits down on an upturned barrell and starts stripping the wires. He never used to be a fidgeter. This past year has had its effects on all of them. “We’re rebuilding, Rey. That takes time. If Ren’s counting us out already he’s crazier than we thought. He’s got a big army, so what?
We’ve got a Jedi. The only one in the galaxy.”

“I’m not really a Jedi, Finn.” It’s not for lack of trying. She’s tried so hard, poring over the ancient texts she took from Ahch-To, meditating on the Force, building her strength through hours upon countless hours of practice. Her hands are calloused from gripping her mended lightsaber. But it never comes. The inner peace, the conviction, the balance, they never come. “And Kylo’s stronger with the Force than I am.”

“Is he really? Then where’s your scar?”

“He was already injured when I faced him. It was his mistake, not my superior skill.”

“I bet that’s what he wants you to think.”

“Well, good for him,” says Rey blandly. “Because I do think it.” She already knows how Finn sees her. How all of them see her. Knowing it only makes the failures harder to bear. She can’t let them down, so she trains harder and harder and tells herself that one day the breakthrough will come.

“And right now he’s the one begging for our help,” Finn persists. “Just don’t let him get under your skin, that’s all I’m saying. He’ll try. He’s still got his weird obsession with you.”

“He doesn’t—”

“Like I said,” says Finn, “I saw the way he looked at you. And if you say he’s not lying about Hux I believe you, but I don’t think he’s told you the full story, either.”

Rey doesn’t know what to say to that, because Finn’s right – there’s a lot that Kylo’s keeping hidden. So she goes back to her rummaging. “Here,” she says, and tosses a nanowrench over her shoulder. “Hang on to this. We’ll need it if the hyperdrive starts acting up.”

Finn pockets the wrench, but she can feel his eyes on her as she goes back to rummaging.

To no one’s great disappointment, Kylo stays put in his cabin during takeoff. Rey suspects he’s crashed out – the First Order runs on Galactic Standard Time, and the Resistance crew are adjusted to Ardan local, and even all-powerful despots aren’t immune to jetlag. Sure enough, he shows up in the mess hall around the time the rest of them are drawing lots for night shift, with his hair mussed and his eyelids droopy, and pours himself a large mug of caf from the canteen. He takes the seat farthest from the rest of the group and buries himself in a datapad he must have had stashed on his ship.

“I’ll take the first shift,” says Rey.

“Oh, you don’t have to,” says Rose, looking at the card in her hand. “I just drew the—”

“No, it’s fine,” says Rey. “You get some sleep.”

She can’t leave anyone else alone with Kylo, and they’ve already agreed they can’t reasonably keep him locked up for the trip, even assuming he lets them. Which means if he’s awake, Rey’s awake. It’s only for a couple of days.

The hall empties out, and Kylo stays in the corner and drinks his caf and pretends to be absorbed in his datapad. She doesn’t need the Force to sense his attention on her, steady and intense.
So they’re like this now. Well, silence is better than deranged aggression. Rey does a lap of the main consoles and the engine room, checks that everything’s in working order and autopilot is activated, then settles down to watch the navscreen in the cockpit for a while. They’ve mapped a route that keeps them off the main hyperways and leaves a wide berth around other inhabited systems, so if everything goes to plan, she shouldn’t see anything interesting until they drop back to realspace on the outskirts of the Torque system.

She fills in a bit more time by clearing the transmitter caches and inspecting her makeshift weapons system, but she knows she’s only stalling the inevitable. From the moment she took the shift they were always going to end up talking. Avoiding him shows too much weakness. Once the cannons have all been aligned and re-aligned and there’s not a speck of dust left on their targeting circuitry, she bites the bullet and goes back to the mess hall and takes a seat across the table from him.

He puts down his datapad. They look at each other. It’s like it used to be when they first started connecting, except that this time Rey is here with her eyes open.

Despite his long nap, Kylo looks tired. There are purple shadows under his eyes, and he’s cradling his caf mug like the tiniest and most precious of firstborns. Rey’s temper rises at the sight. He has no right to look all drained and vulnerable now that they’re alone. He had plenty of energy earlier when he was taunting Finn and bossing the crew around.

“You look thin,” Kylo says at last. On a rich world like the one he was born on, that kind of thing is usually a compliment. Coming from him, it’s neutral. Just stating a fact. “You’ve lost weight.”

“I’ve spent the last year running for my life,” Rey says. “From you, as it happens.”

Kylo looks her up and down with an expression she can’t read. “I don’t want to kill you, Rey.”

“Are you sure? You took a pretty good shot at it last time we saw each other.”

His throat bobs. All his smug bravado from the interrogation room is gone, and it dawns on Rey that he’s every bit as on edge as she is. She’s still trying to spot the trap in his plan, and he – well, whatever he’s looking for from her, he hasn’t found it yet.

“You know,” he says, and chews the air inside his mouth like he always does when he’s nervous, “hatred is a dark emotion. The more you hate me, the more like me you become. How’s your Jedi training going? You can’t do it, can you?”

The chair legs screech on the floor as Rey gets to her feet. “If you’re going to start that again–”

“Okay,” says Kylo, and throws up a hand. “Okay. It was just a question. Lie to yourself if you want.”

“I don’t need your permission to–” No. Wrong answer. “I’m not lying to myself. The Jedi path takes longer to master than the dark side, that’s all. Luke told me that.”

“Oh? And what else did he tell you about the dark side?”

“Absolutely nothing,” says Rey, spotting the trap from a mile away. “Congratulations, you got me. I don’t know exactly how the dark side works. I still don’t want to join you.”

A wayward muscle jumps beneath Kylo’s eye. “I didn’t ask you to join me.”

“Because in case I didn’t make it clear enough last time, that’s never going to happen.”
“I know that.” He doesn’t bother trying to hide his bitterness. “You’d never abandon the people you care about.”

“Oh, for the love of—” First the sad eyes, now this. Rey wants to feel straightforwardly angry. But it’s hard to keep up much of a temper when he’s acting this pathetic. “I risked everything to reach you, Kylo. I cared. Sometimes I still care, despite my better judgement. I put my life on the line for you, but it was never enough. All it did was drive you off the deep end.”

“I was already off the deep end,” says Kylo, with a rueful twist of his mouth. “You just didn’t want to believe it.”

“Maybe not,” Rey allows. Why does it always go like this? She can hate him all she wants from afar. Can keep her guard up, keep her distance, tell herself they’re on two different paths and can never be anything more than enemies. But when they’re face to face, the whole act crumbles. It says something about her, surely, that she feels so comfortable talking to an unbalanced tyrant with the blood of millions on his hands.

“Tell me one thing,” she says. “Do you ever regret the choice you made? Do you ever wish you’d come home instead?”

Kylo thinks about the question. Really thinks about it. He scrunches up his mouth and stares down into his mug like he’s divining some omen in its murky surface. “I regret…” Rey’s pulse spikes. It seems impossible – was Leia right to hope, after all? “I regret the way it happened. It was all too sudden. If only we’d had more time, I know I would have been right about you. You would have joined me.”

Guess not. It’s just Rey making an idiot of herself again. The infuriating thing is that even now, even after everything, she knows there’s still conflict in Kylo Ren. There are still embers of conscience burning somewhere inside him, embers he has to walk over every time he makes the wrong decision. But he does it anyway. Over and over and over, he keeps doing it.

She was wrong before when she thought he didn’t care. Time and distance had written over her memories, letting her believe for a second time in the myth of the unfeeling monster who smiled as he turned away from the light. But that’s never been him. Kylo’s problem is that he feels too much. Pain, to him, isn’t a deterrent – it’s an obsession, an addiction, a welcome distraction from the twisted mess inside his head. And he never smiles.

“I wish you weren’t like this,” Rey says, and means it. Kylo isn’t the only one of them who lives in pain. But unlike him, Rey has the comfort of knowing she’s on the right path.

“Oh?” Kylo sets down his mug and leans forward on one elbow, resting his chin on his knuckles. Like he’s settling in now that he’s sure she isn’t going to storm away. He studies her face just a little too intently. “What should I be more like? Like you? We’re not as different as you think, Rey.”

“Maybe not. But we’re different in the ways that matter most.”

Rey already knows how this story ends. She’s going to honour Leia’s final wish. She’s going to help Kylo, knowing full well that his plan will do him more harm than good; she’s going to kneecap his military and use whatever shreds of influence she has to slow his campaign of destruction. If the Unknown Regions become a problem, she’ll find a way to deal with that too. She’ll buy as much time as she needs while she keeps growing in the Force, and one day, somewhere down the line, she’ll have the strength to bring Kylo to his knees for good.

And she can do it without hating him. He’s right about one thing – hatred is a dark emotion. And
Kylo, with his sad eyes and his scarred face and his heavy air of exhaustion, is a living lesson in where that darkness leads.

Their new ship is parked at the bottom of a canyon in the deep Torque wilderness. How Kylo got it there, Rey can’t imagine and prefers not to ask. She’s never seen a ship quite like it before. It’s about the size of a small escort frigate, maybe 250 metres from nose to tail, slim and modular and bristling with laser turrets on every free surface. No visible registration; no clues on the hull as to where it came from. It doesn’t look anything like a First Order ship. More like some kind of high-tech pirate vessel.

“It runs on a miniature hypermatter-annihilation reactor,” Kylo explains as they scale the ramp up to the airlock. “A smaller version of the cores we use on our dreadnoughts. It’s brand new tech, but the trials have been going well. You’ve got twelve ion engines, a class one hyperdrive, and some Destroyer-grade weapons systems that I’m probably going to regret giving you.”

Probably. “With everyone on deck, we’ve got just under 150 people.” Rey doesn’t like handing out tactical info, but Kylo can count. “That’s if we all worked around the clock. A ship this size needs a bigger crew than that.”

Kylo’s eyes skim the crew, packed around the bottom of the ramp waiting for the all clear to board. “It’ll be tight, but you can do it. There’s an AI hooked into the command matrix that can run your life support and basic propulsion for you.” Rey crosses the threshold, and the ship comes to life like it’s been listening for its cue. Bright lights illuminate a spacious entry bay, and the air vents rush open and blow cool, slightly stale air in Rey’s face.

“You’ll need maintenance help, especially with the reactor core,” Kylo goes on. It’s hard to tell, but he seems to be enjoying himself. Any excuse to show off. She doesn’t want to think about how much a ship like this would cost. “I pulled some mech droids from the Order line, but they’re not hard to wipe if you’d rather make them your own. Paint them orange, teach them to pick pockets –”

His spiel is cut abruptly short when Rey grabs him by the collar and slams him back into the wall. She’s expecting at least a token struggle, but Kylo doesn’t bother to defend himself. Without any pushback Rey finds herself suddenly much closer than she expected, glaring into his calm face with no buffer between them but the few inches of air mandated by their height gap. She can feel the heat of his body through his tunic. It’s too late now to change her mind. “I don’t want an AI running our life support. How do we know you haven’t tampered with it?”

Kylo’s sigh ruffles her hair. “Why should I keep promising? If you didn’t believe it the last five hundred times, you’re not going to believe it now.”

“Let me hear you say it,” says Rey. “Be specific. No loopholes.”

“I haven’t tampered with the ship.” She reaches out as he speaks, focusing carefully on his intentions. Feeling for the friction that would indicate a lie. “I have no special way to hack into your system, track your location or spy on you. The AI’s only function is to keep you and your crew alive.”

“And the droids?” She’s more heated than she needs to be given his total lack of resistance. She can’t reasonably get angry with him for not fighting her. But this close together, she wants to be angry. Her whole body is flushed with it.

“Maintenance units,” Kylo says. “No tactical capabilities. If I want to change my mind and betray
you, I’ll have to do it the old-fashioned way.”

Rey lets go of him and steps back. There are goosebumps on her arms, which she puts down to temperature change – Kylo runs warm, and the air vents overhead are pumping cold air down her back. But there’s no trace of dishonesty in his mind. The only emotion she can find is disappointment: he expected her to be pleased with the ship. And he thought his AI solution was clever.

It’s a bit unsettling, actually, how well he has anticipated their needs. As they tour the rest of the ship, it hits Rey just how much he seems to know about the Resistance: the storerooms and the medcenter are stocked for about the right number of people, and he’s automated all the key systems that their small crew would have struggled to operate manually. Rey’s starting to regret not questioning him harder on where he got the intel that led him to their base. Some of what he knows can only have come from inside …

But there’s no traitor in their midst. That much, Rey knows for sure. The thing about training in the Force – the thing about living in a constant state of stress and paranoia – is you develop a keen radar for betrayal. Rey knows her crew well: she’s felt their passion, their commitment to the cause. If there’s a traitor then it’s someone from another cell, or possibly even an outsider they crossed paths with on their journeys.

And there might not be a traitor at all. Kylo’s telepathic skills make Rey look like a hack street performer. Chances are, he simply found some poor witness and took what he wanted. Whatever his source, there’s no denying he’s done a thorough job, and if the Resistance weren’t already committed to the deal then they would be now. Not in a million years of begging and bargaining and stealing and scavenging could Rey get another ship like this.

And the AI really was a clever idea. Not that she’s going to tell that to Kylo.

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“Are you guys seeing this?”

Considering the size of the ship in front of them, a better question would be why they only saw it just now. Heavy cruisers aren’t known for being hard to spot. They’re still at a standstill over Torque, waiting for their newly fired engines to warm up for the jump to hyperspace.

“This isn’t right,” Kylo says.

Finn rounds on him. “That’s a Order warship, Ren. In a system you promised had no military presence. What is this, some kind of trap?”

“Fucking Mordana,” says Kylo, ignoring Finn completely.

The ship hasn’t seen them yet. Their cloaking shields, at least, are up and running. “This Mordana Ren,” Rey says, “is one of yours? Another dark side user?”

Kylo doesn’t take his eyes off the Order ship. “She was the youngest of us at Skywalker’s temple. Useless kid could hardly feel the Force if you hit her in the face with it.” His tone suggests he’s speaking from practical experience. “But she wanted to join me, so I left her in charge of this sector and told her to keep the ore trade moving. It was the easiest job I could find for her. Only now…” He gestures out the viewport as the huge ship glides on towards them, smooth and silent in the vacuum of space. “Whatever this is, I didn’t authorise it.”

Rey eyes the ventral cannons on the ship’s belly. “What do you think she wants?”
“I have some theories,” says Kylo grimly. “Keep those shields up. I need to get on the transciever.”
“Wear this,” says Kylo, and drapes his cowl around Rey’s shoulders. It’s still warm from contact with his skin.

There are more warships now, a small fleet of them, moving at sublight through the scattered moon belt of the Torque system. Rey counts five heavy cruisers, each with their own full set of support frigates.

Kylo stands by the bridge central console and punches broadcast codes into his transciever, one after the other. So far only static. “They’re jamming all the official channels,” he says, in a voice so tense that Rey’s braced for an eruption any second now. “No registered coordinates. No credentials on the hull.”

“They don’t want anyone to know they’re here,” says Poe, frowning out the viewport. “Why are they here? Could they be guarding the pit mines?”

“No.” Kylo gives up on the transciever. “They’re on their way to Mandalore.”

For someone who didn’t know what was happening five seconds ago, he speaks with a lot of confidence. “Mandalore?” Rey echoes. She knows that name well. Mandalore’s black market is almost as legendary as its long record of bloodshed. The past few decades have seen it passed around from regime to regime like a hot potato – the Jedi and the Sith, the Republic and the Empire and then back to the Republic again, with several independence movements along the way. None of them have ever lasted long.

“Last time I spoke to Mordana,” Kylo says, “we were hearing reports of unrest from across the Mandalore border. I gave her clearance to intervene but she didn’t think it was worth the effort. The Mandalorians are always blowing each other up, except on special occasions when they join forces to blow up our peacemakers. She told me the local forces could handle it.”

“But now she’s sending illegal troops in,” says Rey. “Even though she could do it legally?” That makes exactly zero sense. Unless … “She’s using the Mandalore conflict as cover to move her forces around. Without you noticing.”

“Or there is no conflict in Mandalore,” says Kylo. “She’s stirred this up herself. It’s a power grab. Fuck, I didn’t think she of all people—” He breaks off, and with what looks like an overwhelming mental effort he stops his outburst in its tracks. “This doesn’t affect your mission,” he says flatly. “Once that fleet passes, you can drop me off at the system’s edge and then head for Taris like we
planned.”

He’s not making eye contact. Rey reaches out for the lie he’s trying to hide from her, but touching his mind is like grabbing a live wire: anger, betrayal, fear, and beneath it all a hot, sick surge of humiliation. Coming to the Resistance for help was bad enough when the problem was single-pronged. They don’t need to see all the other fault lines in his empire, the tangled mess of debts and rivalries and power struggles he inherited from Snoke. They’re laughing, he can feel it. Laughing at the weakness of a leader who can’t keep his own inner circle from turning on him. And Rey will think–

Rey lurches back. As soon as she’s out from under Kylo’s psychic stormcloud, she can see clear as day that he’s overreacting. No one on the bridge looks anywhere close to laughter. Honestly, she can’t think what could possibly be funny about a rogue First Order faction wreaking havoc on an already war-torn system for their own political gain.

“The Taris plan only works if Hux has to send his own army to respond,” she says. “That’s not going to happen if Mordana Ren has an armed fleet as close as Mandalore. Kylo, is there any reason we need to stage a distraction in this sector? Couldn’t we just take our chances and fly straight to Ord Mantel?”

Kylo furrows his brow. To everyone else he probably looks thoughtful, but Rey knows he’s recalibrating after his silent meltdown. “Ord Mantel…” He takes a slow breath. “Ord Mantel is the centre of Hux’s attention right now. You need to lure him away or you’ll never make it through to the…”

“Through to the what?” Poe demands.

“The target.”

“You know, sooner or later you’re going to have to tell us what the target is. We can’t blow it up if we don’t know what we’re aiming for.”

“You’ll know it when you see it,” says Kylo.


Kylo’s expression turns wooden.

“Oh, you’ve gotta be kidding me,” says Poe. “How many of those things have you people built now? And how many times have we kicked your ass for it?”

Weirdly, the argument seems to be helping Kylo ground himself. He turns on Poe, visibly annoyed but no longer on the brink of crisis. “Don’t look at me. I told Hux it was a stupid idea, but as long as he’s got a new toy to play with he stays out from under my feet.”

Poe rolls his eyes. “Well, that’s a great reason to bankroll an apocalyptic superweapon. One more question, Ren. Who the fuck put you in charge of the First Order’s budget?”

“If it makes you feel any better,” says Kylo, “I’m the one he wants to use it against once it’s finished. That’s why he’s building the thing – well, that and his fond memories of Hosnian Prime.” Kylo rolls his eyes in disgust, which to Rey’s mind is more than a bit hypocritical. “But Hux is on high alert after what happened last time. A chance to catch the Resistance is the only thing I could think of that would tempt him away from guarding it. And a move on our most trafficked trade route is going to get his attention.”
That raises the stakes. If luring Hux into the field is their best chance of stopping his superweapon – and if attacking the Hydian trade route is their best chance of getting him out here – then the mission has to go ahead. But Mordana Ren’s army makes things difficult.

Unless they can find a way to get Mordana out of their way as well.

“Guys,” Rey says, interrupting what she’s sure is going to be another of Poe’s well-aimed jabs at Kylo. She steps out into the centre of the bridge. All eyes on her. “I think I might have an idea.”

If everything goes to plan, Rey won’t be needing much in the way of supplies. But there’s no telling that to C-3PO. Still reeling and glitchy from the upheaval of the last few days – losing Leia, moving to a brand new ship, leaving the Holdo behind on Torque – he goes straight into worst case scenario mode when it comes time to help Rey pack for the trip. She’ll need plenty of backup rations, of course. Thermagear in case she gets stuck on an ice planet somewhere. Hydro-reclaimers in case she gets stuck on a desert planet somewhere. A spare medkit in case her first one runs out, and then a second spare for good measure. Piles and piles of extra power packs.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand any of this,” says 3PO, as he stuffs a roll of mesh tape into Rey’s already bursting satchel. “Surely, Miss Rey, your energy would be better spent helping the Resistance with their mission on Taris. It’s high time Master Ben learned to clean up his own messes.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” says Rey. “But now’s not the time to be teaching him a lesson. If he gets it wrong, all our lives will hang in the balance.”

Rey’s strategy is simple. The Resistance fly their new ship to Taris and get in position to hit the trade port. Kylo and Rey go to Ord Radama and distract Mordana Ren for long enough to keep her fleet out of the fray. Everything else goes ahead as planned.

“He always was a frightfully difficult boy,” 3PO tuts. “Tears and tantrums for no good reason. Smashing things around the house. Do you know how much broken glass I’ve swept up in my time? And then there were all the incidents at school…”

This isn’t the first time Rey has heard the talk about how Master Ben is a disgrace to the family name. Somehow, 3PO’s rage never quite stretches to dropping the honorific title. That would just be sinking to his level. “Is that right?” she says, without much interest.

“Oh, yes. My poor princess paid a fortune in tuition fees to get Master Ben into the very best embassy school. And how did he thank her for it? By defying his teachers, ignoring his homework and positively terrorising his poor classmates. I daresay they would have expelled him eventually if he hadn’t dropped out.”

That part’s new. Rey never went to school herself – the Jakku desert wasn’t famous for its robust learning facilities – but she knows that on the Core Worlds, formal education is considered a fairly big deal. “Kylo didn’t finish school?”

“Oh, it was quite the outrage,” 3PO says. “Princess Leia said it was his father’s influence, but I always suspected it was a sign of a much more serious problem. As his mother you should put your foot down, I said. But one didn’t put one’s foot down with Master Ben, even back then.”

Rey doesn’t find that hard to believe. “So what did he do, if he wasn’t going to school?”

“Lived on his parents’ generosity, mostly. He was handy in the shipyards, thanks in no small part to
my tutoring efforts, but he never could commit to a job for long. It was quite a relief when Master Luke took him off our hands, I don’t mind telling you.”

“I’m sure,” Rey says distractedly. She’s trying to imagine what the galaxy would be like today if Kylo Ren had become a mechanic instead of a megalomaniac.

“Disgraceful,” says 3PO, shaking his head. “And now look where it’s led us. I always said that boy would drive his poor mother to an early grave. She might have recovered from her illness, you know, if he hadn’t been disturbing her rest with his visits. And she might never have fallen ill in the first place if only he—”

Suddenly, 3PO has Rey’s undivided attention. “What?” she snaps, much sharper than she means to. “What do you mean, his visits?”

“Interrupting,” 3PO scolds under his breath. And then, “It was a terrible drain on her energy, Miss Rey, not that he ever cared. Pacing the room when she should have been sound asleep, soothing Master Ben when she should have been worried about herse – oh.” 3PO freezes like he just shorted a circuit. “I promised I wouldn’t tell anyone. Oh dear, oh dear, this is all my fault! My poor princess. She relied on me, you know, right until the end. I was her most trusted protocol droid, and let me assure you I never took the honour lightly. And now I’ve broken my very last—”

“3PO! What do you mean, Kylo’s visits?”

3PO bows his head. “I shouldn’t have overheard,” he says. “I heard the princess’s voice while she was alone in her room, and at first I thought it was a new symptom emerging. But there was nothing wrong with her wits. Master Ben was there with her. Oh, Miss Rey, it’s my fault the princess is dead. I knew it was wrong. I knew I should have intervened. But the princess was so determined, and I … and I…”

Oh, Rey has been an idiot.

It all makes perfect sense. Kylo showed up at the Resistance base within hours of Leia’s passing – but the preparation must have taken him weeks, let alone the travel time. He knew things about their operation he should never have been able to know. And Leia’s final request. *Promise you’ll be here to meet him when he comes home. Promise me you’ll keep holding on to hope.* Helping Kylo was never Rey’s decision. Leia planned it.

How did he win her trust? Rey knows firsthand how convincing Kylo can be when he wants, but she can’t imagine Leia buying into the act that first caught Rey off-guard. She knew her own son better than to think he was going to change his ways just because he felt a bit conflicted. Did he use the Force to bend her mind? Impossible – Leia would never have fallen for a trick like that.

Did she see a vision of his future? Bitter experience has taught Rey how misleading those visions can be. But maybe in her weakened state, desperate for something to comfort her in her final hours, Leia might have…

3PO makes a noise like a sob. She’s never heard a droid cry before. “It’s not your fault,” she says, and puts a hand on his cold metal shoulder. “You’re programmed to follow instructions. You did the best you could.”

There’s only one person to blame for what happened to Leia. And it certainly isn’t C-3PO.

—

Kylo looks around the *Falcon’s* cockpit, and Rey has seen sand-vipers with kinder expressions than
the one he’s wearing. “I can’t believe this piece of shit hasn’t rusted clean through by now,” he says.

It takes all of Rey’s effort not to lash out. She’s in no mood to deal with Kylo today. “Would you feel better if we painted it black?”

“Those Quadex cores have been out of production since the civil war. One surge in the engine motivator and they’ll flood the whole ship with vapourised fuel. They’re not just old, they’re dangerous.”

“Wow, I wish you hadn’t told me that. I’d hate to be in any danger while we fly into the jaws of an insane First Order lackey who apparently wants us both dead.”

“If you’re scared,” says Kylo, “I can go by myself.”

“I’d love to respect your deathwish,” Rey snaps. “Truly, I would. But the Resistance can’t afford to let your empire implode all at once. You’re not scheduled to die until after we’ve gotten rid of Hux and Mordana.”

She takes the pilot seat and runs a quick check of the propulsion systems, ignoring Kylo’s sidelong look. It’s been a while since she had time to service the Falcon, and the last thing she wants is to give Kylo the satisfaction of seeing it break down after he argued so strongly against using it for the mission. The only reason she won that fight is because Kylo’s TIE, although fractionally faster and with a better weapons array, is guaranteed to draw the wrong kind of attention.

Luckily, everything’s in working order. Kylo takes the copilot station with a distinct air of disappointment. Good.

They don’t talk much as they clear the docking bay and prepare for the jump to lightspeed. Rey punches in the coordinates for a flight path that should get them to Ord Radama without too much trouble along the way. Kylo watches the readout from the core and twiddles the power gauge. The world shudders around them and dissolves into a star-streaked blur, and they’re off.

“So,” says Kylo casually, “what’s your problem today?”

“Nothing’s my problem,” Rey says shortly.

“You keep glaring at me.”

“You’re my enemy, Kylo. I can glare at you whenever I want.”

“Okay.” Kylo leans back in his seat and kicks his feet up on the dash. “But something’s upset you.”

Upset isn’t the word Rey would have chosen. “It was Leia, wasn’t it?” she says, because hiding it from him isn’t worth the effort. “You used Leia to find our base.”

Kylo doesn’t ask how she knows. He doesn’t look at all surprised by the question, which makes Rey wonder if he’s been inside her head again, poking around where he doesn’t belong. But surely she would have noticed. “I didn’t use her,” Kylo says. “She offered me the coordinates.”

“Liar,” says Rey, even though she can hear his honesty loud and clear. “How did you convince her to trust you?”

Kylo snorts. “Did you ever meet my mother? There was no convincing that woman of anything.”

“She could hardly walk unaided by the end. But somehow she found the strength to connect with
you through the Force?”

“Are you jealous?” Kylo has no right to give her that piercing look. He’s the one being questioned here. “Don’t be. She adored you.”

“Oh, spare me. Just tell me what she told you.”

At first, she doesn’t think Kylo’s going to answer. He’s staring down at his hands in his lap, weighing up what he should tell her, but Rey doesn’t sense any intention to deceive. He just doesn’t want to talk about it.

Knowing that, Rey pushes harder. “Did she tell you it wasn’t too late to come home?” Kylo’s eye twitches. “That she still held out hope for you?”

“No.” His voice has dropped about an octave, and she can barely hear him over the engine’s background hum. “She said she’d given up. That I’d chosen my path, but it didn’t … I was still her son. And she wanted to say goodbye before she died. She wanted to know I was going to be okay.”

He glares up at Rey, eyes bright with defiance and a conspicuous damp sheen. “Is that so hard to believe?”

Rey will never get used to how fast his moods change. From cocky swagger to trembling grief in the blink of an eye. “You didn’t deserve her kindness,” she says.

“I know that.”

“I’ll never understand. Leia loved you. And you obviously loved her. How could you turn on her the way you did? Is power really that important to you?”

Kylo’s mouth tilts. A sneer – no, a smile. Not a very good one. Watery and out of practice. “The galaxy doesn’t run on love, Rey. That’s a fairytale.”

“Don’t patronise me.”

“She was afraid of me,” Kylo says.

“You tried to blow her up!”

“Before that.” He sounds hollow, splintered, like dead wood on a clearing floor. “It’s my earliest memory of her, that fear. I don’t blame her for it. When my power first started to awaken…” Kylo shrugs, his lips twitching again. “I’ve grown into it now, but it must have been a lot to deal with coming from a toddler.”

Despite herself, Rey can’t suppress a little smile. She’s heard some of this already from C-3PO. “It’s a lot to deal with now,” she says.

“Yeah. Well, I couldn’t control it back then. I couldn’t even tell for sure which parts were normal and which parts were special. I was halfway through my teens before I realised other people couldn’t look into each other’s minds when they wanted to.” His brow creases. “That explained a lot. But my parents had no idea what to do with me. I’d hear them sometimes at night, talking about me when they thought I was asleep. They wanted a normal son. Instead they got whatever I was. A nightmare. A monster. So in the end, they just gave up and sent me away.”

“They didn’t give up,” says Rey. “Leia sent you to Luke because she thought it was the right thing to do. She never forgave herself for that mistake. And Luke never forgave himself for—”
But Kylo’s not interested. His version of this story is already fixed; he’s rehearsed it too many times to change it now. “And then I found out about my grandfather.” There’s a new warmth in his eyes, drying them out – a glimpse of the fervour that lights him up whenever he talks about the dark side. “For the first time, it all made sense. It was never really me they were afraid of. It was his legacy. The destiny I inherited. But that also meant I was wasting my time trying to change the way they saw me. In my family’s eyes, I was born a monster. Why fight it?”

Rey can think of a few reasons. She doesn’t like this story. All her life she’s dreamed of having parents who loved her. The thought that someone could have that gift, and it wouldn’t be enough … it doesn’t make sense to her. She doesn’t want it to make sense.

“I’m going to check the auxiliary tanks,” says Kylo abruptly. He swings his legs down off the dash and gets to his feet in a hurry. But at the door of the cockpit he hesitates, and Rey turns to see him staring at her with a strange, intense look. “Oh, I envied you.”

She blinks. “Envied … me?”

“You’re just like me. Powerful. Ambitious. Angry.”

“I’m not–”

“Yes, you are.” His eyes bore into hers. “And instead of recoiling, they love you for it. They’re drawn to you.” He swallows, and she sees his throat bob, sees his eyes soften. “But I can’t blame them for that.”

And then he leaves, and Rey’s alone in the cockpit with only the blinking consoles and her churning thoughts for company.

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They can’t avoid each other on a ship this size. Maybe they don’t need to. Next time Rey goes back to the main hold, Kylo is slouched over the dejak table stirring powdered soup into a bowl of hot water. There’s a second bowl already hydrated, which can only be for her, and he doesn’t say anything when she sits down across from him and tucks in. Daro root and bacon. He adds an entire extra spice sachet to his before even tasting it.

Rey props her elbows on the table, avoiding the button that wakes up the holographic projector. Chewie once tried to teach her to play dejak. She couldn’t get her head around all those arbitrary rules and stratagems. “Auxiliary tanks in order? she asks Kylo, to break the slurpy silence.

“Mm,” says Kylo around a spoonful of soup. And then, once he’s swallowed, “Eroded, but they should work fine if we need them. Why’s there so much sand in the filters?”

Damn. Rey could have sworn she’d gotten those clean. “It sat in a junkyard on Jakku for years. If you think it’s bad now, you should have seen it when I first came on board. I almost wished I’d left it in the desert.”

“It’s a shame you didn’t,” says Kylo, and goes back to his soup.

He doesn’t seem embarrassed, or expectant, or any of the things Rey’s pretty sure people are supposed to be after they confess their interest in each other. Maybe he didn’t think of it as a confession – maybe she was already supposed to know. If she’s honest with herself, there were definitely signs. Like the fact that he hardly ever insults her the way he insults everyone else. Or the fact that she keeps surviving their fights unscathed. Or that one time he asked her to rule the galaxy by his side.
They pilot the ship in turns, and when he’s not on shift Kylo reads or snacks or works out in the cargo hold or finds things to tinker with in the engineering bay. One time Rey finds him napping in the gunner seat, mouth askew and hair hanging in his eyes, with a datapad in his lap displaying a page from some dense religious text. She would have thought there’d be more drama, living alone on a small ship with the First Order’s most infamous enforcer who’s apparently also infatuated with her. But Kylo is a surprisingly easy shipmate. Mostly, he just keeps to himself.

Rey should probably enjoy the quiet while it lasts. It won’t last long: once they reach Ord Radama, she’ll need to be firing on all cylinders. But she’s restless. Rey isn’t used to having so little to do, and she finds herself oddly preoccupied with Kylo, simply because he’s the only other player on the board right now. She doesn’t like some of the things she catches herself thinking about him.

Back on Jakku, the only time Rey thought about men was when she needed to keep them away from her. Well, okay – there were those novels she always loved to read, the ones she found stashed on her old salvaged datapad. Whoever owned it before her had a weakness for court romance stories, full of strong-jawed barons and perfumed women who bathed so often that they didn’t mind putting their mouths on the most unlikely parts of each other’s bodies.

And there was that boy from Niima outpost, the one she used to make eye contact with at the well sometimes. He had broad shoulders and sweet brown eyes and a complexion like the sand dunes at dusk. But they never got around to speaking, and one day he flew off on a trade ship and never came back.

The strong-jawed barons were imaginary; the Niima boy might as well have been. Kylo, on the other hand, is dangerously real. She’s known since the first time he took off his mask that she found him attractive, in a purely physical sense. It somehow never occurred to her that he might find her attractive back. Assuming that’s what he meant. Technically, Kylo didn’t say anything about wanting her that way – all he said was that he didn’t blame other people for being drawn to her. Not exactly a baron-worthy confession of desire. But that one simple sentence has brought everything rushing to the surface.

She doesn’t want to deal with it. Preferably not ever, but certainly not now.

It’s been almost an hour now since Rey laid down to sleep in the crew quarters – technically shared, although they’re never in here at the same time, and Kylo keeps his side so neat that he might as well never have set foot inside the room. Her mind, by contrast, is a churning mess. Somewhere far away, her friends are hurtling towards Taris while she flies off in the other direction to play distract-a-fascist on a First Order capital. Farther away still, the grand marshal of the galaxy’s largest military threat is building yet another superweapon that they have to find a way to destroy. But instead of thinking about any of that, Rey is tossing and turning beneath the sheets as she tells herself, in the sternest way possible, that she doesn’t want to fuck Kylo Ren.

Because she doesn’t. Really. It’s a terrible idea.

It wouldn’t even be worth the trouble. Kylo is nothing like the men in Rey’s novels: she can’t picture him patiently kissing his way up from a woman’s toes to the apex of her thighs. She can’t picture him patiently anything. He’d be rough, demanding – and selfish, almost definitely. He’d want what he could get for himself, never mind her pleasure. That’s the kind of person he is.

Since nothing else is working to calm her down, Rey pushes her leggings down her thighs slips a hand between her legs, blocks out everything but the warm, shivery feeling of her fingers on her clit. She strokes herself slowly, in circles, willing the tension to ease from her muscles and the noise inside her brain to go quiet. The soothing hum of the engine is all around her. The rustle of her sheets, the soft sound of her own breath.
It doesn’t take much to make her body respond. There’s never much time for this at home on the Resistance base; there’s never much time for anything. Pent-up frustration, that’s Rey’s problem. She sucks on the fingers of her free hand, and then spreads her legs wide and works one digit inside herself. The friction feels good. It’s so tempting to rush, but then it’ll be over and she’ll be back to having nothing to do except stew over Kylo.

Which is a complete waste of time. Kylo wouldn’t bother pleasing her like this. He wouldn’t care enough to warm her up, teasing and cajoling and wallowing in sensual pleasure. He’d just want the end result. He’d dig his hands into her hips and push inside her and fuck her hard, fast – too fast, never mind the newness of it all and the aching, burning stretch of her body’s struggle to accommodate him.

Rey picks up her pace a little, rubbing harder, rolling her hips in time with her fingers. This is working just fine. She can do this for herself, so she has no use for Kylo: for the roughness of his touch, the weight of him on top of her, the ragged, greedy heat of his want. She’s fought him, she knows what he’s like with his body. All strength and passion and nothing else, no refinement, no restraint, no compromise. He wouldn’t waste time crooning endearments in her ear. He’d fuck her like he had to, like he needed her, and maybe –

– maybe with all that unpolished strength he’d be able to reach the aching place inside her so she could finally –

Rey spills over all at once, and arches her hips off the bed as a violent orgasm wracks her body. It lasts longer than it should, and when the spasms subside she’s shaking all over and panting for breath. For a few blissful moments, she’s so wrung out that the shame doesn’t even register through the haze of her satisfaction.

But then it catches up, as shame always seems to do, and Rey wipes her sticky hand on the sheets and pulls her leggings up and rolls onto her side. That didn’t go quite the way she planned.

She looks over at Kylo’s bed, with its tucked sheet corners and his trunk stowed neatly underneath. There’s a dip in the pillow where his head would rest. Does he ever lie there and think about her like she just thought about him? The thought makes her skin feel hot, and not just with embarrassment.

No. Kylo’s thoughts are off-limits now, more so than ever. She can’t afford the risk that he’ll see back through the connection and realise the truth: that apparently, despite her best efforts, Rey does want him that way after all.

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In the privacy of the empty hold, Rey pulls on her disguise: black trousers, black shirt, a high-necked black vest. Black boots. Black gloves. A flowing black robe thrown over the top and tied in place with a thick black sash. So many layers. She doesn’t like how restrictive it all feels, but she has to admit C-3PO has done a good job.

Her heart skips a beat when she enters the cockpit and sees Kylo preparing for the drop out of hyperspace. It’s not a pleasant skip. Rey’s so used to seeing him in his home clothes that she almost forgot how sinister he looks in full dress. Jackboots, a floor-length overcoat, and that ragged hooded wrap he used to wear over his helmet. Is it a sentimental piece, or did he deliberately fray the ends for dramatic effect?

With his back to her, he’s a shadowy wraith – but it’s still him underneath that hood when he turns around to appraise her new look. His gaze lingers longer than it needs to, given that she probably looks like a walking First Order laundry pile. 3PO didn’t have time to tailor.
“Your face,” Kylo says.

“What about it?”

“It’s on wanted posters all over the galaxy. You need to cover up or you’ll be recognised.”

Oh, no. Not another layer. “If I cover up much more than this I’ll disappear. How can you stand wearing so many clothes all the time?”

“I’m comfortable,” says Kylo. He steps out of the pilot seat, unwraps his cowl, and something in Rey’s stomach unclenches as his face emerges from the shadows. “Wear this.” He drapes it around her shoulders, and pulls the hood up over her head so it hangs in her eyes.

Rey snatches the rest of the fabric and steps back to the safety of the doorway. “I can do it myself,” she says, because he was standing much too close and the cowl is still warm from contact with his skin. She adjusts the hood, and wraps the trailing scarf-ends around her face, so that when she’s done there’s only a narrow strip visible where her eyes are. Everything else is covered. “Better?”

“Better,” says Kylo.

It smells like him. Rey breathes in deep, then pretends she didn’t. “Now they’re going recognise you,” she points out.

“They were always going to recognise me. Are you ready?”

Rey nods. Hugging her borrowed cowl tight around her shoulders, she takes a seat and straps herself in. The ship lurches, and outside the viewport the bright blur of hyperspace solidifies into an unfamiliar star system.

They’ve arrived.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are love! <3
Kylo pauses with his thumb on the lockpad. “Anything else you need to get out off your chest? Once I open this airlock, no more attitude. You’re my apprentice. My respectful, silent apprentice.”

Rey snorts. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Content note: this chapter contains some heavy drinking and some mild canon-typical violence. I've also redated the chapter due to yesterday's archive meltdown, so sorry if you're seeing it twice now!

I just want to say a big thanks to everyone who's following along so far. This fic is a big hop-step outside my comfort zone as a writer, but seeing you guys’ subscriptions and reviews and kudos and bookmarks makes me feel so motivated and lucky. Thank you for taking such an interest, and I hope I can keep on hitting the mark for you. <3

From space, Ord Radama looks idyllic: a rolling, swirling expanse of green and blue beneath a hazy wrapper of atmosphere. Traffic to and from the planet is restricted, and there's a station in orbit where new visitors can apply for a planetary visa. But Kylo's Order clearance gets them past the patrols and through the planetary shield.

The capital comes into view as they fly lower. Nestled between two snow-capped alpine ranges, iridescent like fish scales in white and chrome and sparkling glass. An urban marvel of impossibly tall towers and complex highways. It’s enough to completely baffle Rey, but Kylo seems to know where he’s going. He bypasses the signs to the spaceport and steers the Falcon into a queue of ships heading for a massive compound at the city’s heart.

“Why is everyone stalled?” Rey asks. This close to the capital, most of the traffic is made up of military scouts and personnel shuttles. But the Falcon isn't out of place either. A few spots ahead of them, another Corellian YT model with an independent freight code is revving its sublight drive.

“There’s a checkpoint up ahead,” says Kylo. “All ships have to be inspected before they can land.”

“So we’re just going to queue calmly for inspection?” Rey looks at him. Down at herself, swaddled in heavy layers of black. Even if Kylo’s face weren’t so recognisable, there’s no way they’re going to breeze through the checkpoint without incident. They look like a two-man Sith revival cult. “Why
don’t we fall in with the civilian traffic and see if we can slip around a back route?”

Kylo looks offended. “I’m not sneaking into my own facility like some lowlife pirate. It’s bad enough I have to show up in this rustbucket.”

Of course. Sound strategy isn’t enough anymore – now all her plans have to factor in Kylo’s ego as well.

“Relax,” Kylo says, misinterpreting the look on her face. “I know what I’m doing.”

As they draw closer to the checkpoint, holographic billboards loom into view. Present your ID for inspection, reads one, over an image of two smiling humans welcoming a stormtrooper onto their ship. If you see something, say something, reads another, over an image of a Mon Calamari in an orange Resistance jumpsuit clutching an improvised explosive device.

Kylo does, at least, turn out to know what he’s doing. Rey should probably be taking notes in case she needs to break into a First Order facility again. A calm wave of his hand in the boarding party’s faces: “There’s nothing to see here.” A transfer of clearance codes. They still have to fly through an explosives scanner, but they’re not carrying anything to trigger it. And then it’s over, and they’re bringing the Falcon to dock inside an enormous cargo bay in Mordana Ren’s home compound.

“I thought this would be harder,” Rey says. Outside the viewport, a party of cargo droids are converging around them. Ready to help unload the ship. “The First Order’s really gone soft on security.”

“Don’t get smug. Without my clearance codes, we wouldn’t have made it past the first patrol.”

“But no one’s thought to ask why a battered little freighter has elite military clearance in the first place?”

“That’s the difference between your forces and mine.” Kylo eases past her to the cockpit door. Their shoulders brush, and Rey feels an unwelcome little squirm in her stomach. Those seem to be a key feature of life in such close proximity to Kylo. “Mine are disciplined. They respect the hierarchy. They don’t expect to personally understand and agree with their orders – they just obey.”

Rey follows him down the corridor. “You say discipline, I say exploitable weakness. Your people are just going through the motions. They’re not invested, they’re not adaptable, they’re not thinking about their work at all. You might as well replace them all with droids.”

“Tempting. I’ll consider it.”

With difficulty, Rey bites her tongue. This isn’t an argument she actually wants to win. The less thought Kylo gives to his system’s failings, the better it is for the Resistance in the long run.

They come up to the airlock, and Kylo pauses with his thumb on the lockpad and says: “Anything else you need to get out off your chest? Once I open this airlock, no more attitude. You’re my apprentice. My respectful, silent apprentice.”

Rey snorts. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Kylo looks her up and down, from the hem of her floor-length robe to the narrow slit of her eyes peeking out from beneath the cowl he lent her. “Oh, you have no idea,” he says. And then before she can reply, opens the airlock.

The world that emerges outside the Falcon's bubble is more like a palace than a cargo bay. This isn’t
First Order architecture, and it’s hard to believe that its original owners ever intended it for its current use: the white high-domed ceilings and intricate detailing are impressively at odds with the din of squealing tires and rumbling engines as a bustling droid army unloads dozens of freight ships worth of deliveries. Organic personnel are thin on the ground here. The military transports they saw on the flight all veered off to another landing port. Despite his noise about not sneaking in, Rey notes Kylo hasn’t quite dared go as far as to land in front of his actual soldiers.

Maybe he just doesn’t want them to see the Falcon.

None of the droids take any interest in two humans striding across the cargo bay. They’re chirping away at each other in droidspeak, wholly absorbed in the stacking of crates and the shifting of heavy goods. Rey doesn’t hear any backchat or bickering, which is new: the Resistance droids, left to maintain their own memory banks, tend to pick up all kinds of foul language and protocol quirks from their organic colleagues. The First Order would have their droids on a strict regime of wipes and defrags to keep their programming standard.

The exit, though, isn’t guarded by droids. Rey’s stomach clenches at the sight of two stormtroopers standing at attention either side of the hold gate. Several more are emerging from the adjacent control room. She’s unarmed – her lightsaber is back on the Falcon, where its colour can’t betray her disguise the moment she draws it. She’d been glad to have a reason not to bring it out in front of Kylo, who she knows would have have plenty to say about her repair work on the broken weapon. But the troopers are carrying heavy-duty blaster rifles, and in retrospect, her hesitance feels more like suicidal vanity.

She scans her surroundings at lightning speed. Steel carrier crates about twenty metres away, if they’re forced to take cover. An ionised forcefield covering the door. The switch for that will be in the control room. Off to one side, a hefty crowbar she could use as a–

“You,” Kylo snaps, marching right up to the nearest of the troopers with his hands loose by his side and his lightsaber hanging untouched at his belt. “With me. Now.”

No one asks how the Supreme Leader of the First Order got inside a droid-run cargo bay. No one asks why he’s on this planet in the first place, or where the rest of his entourage is, or what that strange hooded being is doing at his side.

They really do just obey.

Mordana Ren is like a shorter Kylo. Black robes, black hood, gloved hands and heavy boots. Her face is hidden by a black and chrome mask like the one Kylo used to wear, with a vocaliser that modulates her voice to a low mechanical growl. None of it’s enough to hide her anxiety. It rolls off her in waves, grating on Rey’s nerves through the Force. They’re standing in a large, bright stateroom, its walls and ceiling carved from the same pearly white stone as the cargo bay.

“The Cheravh temple?” Mordana says. “Supreme Leader, I don’t recommend it. You’d be flying right through Mandalorian space.”

Kylo studies her mask. What good it does him, Rey can’t say. “You told me Mandalore was under control,” he says. Very casually, given what he and Rey both know: that somewhere across the Mandalore border, Mordana is marshalling a secret army against him in a desperate grab for power.

“I told you the conflict is irrelevant to our interests. It’s a small, localised meltdown, one that we can safely ignore. But Mandalore isn’t a holiday resort.”
“Then it’s a good thing I didn’t pack my beach towel,” says Kylo coolly. “I want my apprentice to see that temple, and learn the history of our Sith forefathers. I don’t see why a few brawling Mandalorians should stop us. But if you’re worried, Mordana, you’re welcome to lend us a guard convoy. We’ve been travelling the peaceful sectors undercover to avoid distraction. We might need stronger forces now that we’re entering contested space.”

Mordana’s breath rasps through the mask. This plan is a delicate balance: Kylo needs to frighten her enough to disrupt her plans and keep her eyes off the Resistance warship in Taris, but not enough to provoke her into a panicked act of self-defence. “I’ll give you my personal guard,” she says. “They’ll keep you safe wherever you want to go. But I need time to organise replacements.”

“We’re not in a rush,” says Kylo. Stalling for time is the whole point of this mission. “Make your preparations.”

Mordana steps closer. “I’m glad you’re here, Kylo,” she says, with unexpected sincerity. “It’s been a long time since we saw each other.”

Kylo inclines his head.

“I’m sure you must be tired from your travels. I’ve already ordered my staff to prepare a guest suite for you. I’m supposed to be attending a dinner with some local leaders tonight, but I’d be very happy to–”

“No, you should go,” says Kylo.

Carefully, without drawing attention, Rey skims the surface of Mordana’s mind. She’s on lockdown, of course, guarding the secret of her fleet behind a wall of mental discipline. But outside that wall are loose wisps of her more immediate thoughts: the waning shock of Kylo’s arrival, the work that needs doing to accommodate him, and an emotion so unexpected that Rey almost mistakes it for something else. Mordana’s stomach flutters when she looks at Kylo. There’s heat creeping over her skin and her heart is beating fast in her chest. But it’s not fear. It’s not dislike. It’s not excitement at the thought of her impending betrayal. Rey knows that feeling. Knows it intimately.

Startled, Rey pulls back. Mordana hasn’t noticed the intrusion – she’s too fixated on Kylo. “Come with me,” she says. “I still have time before the dinner. Let me show you what I’m building here, thanks to your support.”

Rey trails behind them as they leave the stateroom. Her cowl and her shy apprentice persona take pressure off the act: all she has to do is stay close to Kylo and keep her mouth shut. She studies their path through the compound, noting the route and the layers of internal security. Stormtroopers patrol at regular intervals; uniformed staff cross their paths, black-clad military personnel and loyalty officers in distinctive white tunics. All of them give Kylo and Mordana a wide, slightly terrified berth. No one so much as glances in Rey’s direction.

It’s bizarre, to be surrounded on all sides by enemies and yet to be so perfectly invisible.

They pass through a guarded checkpoint to a single, narrow turbolift. They must be entering one of the towers Rey saw from the air. The lobby they arrive in is awash with natural sunlight, and the windows show a panoramic view of the city. Ord Radama’s capital is a beautiful place – built on an immaculate grid, bustling with commerce, everything whistle-clean and orderly. In a different lifetime, Rey might have fallen in love with the wealth and beauty of a view like this. But she’s been on the frontlines for too long now to be taken in by gloss and illusion. She knows where all this money came from. She knows what those clean streets cost.
Mordana leads them through a reinforced door to some kind of observation room. About half a storey below them, through a one-way viewport, Rey sees a classroom. There are half a dozen students in there, all human or closely humanoid, aged in their late teens or early adulthood. They’re dressed in simple black robes and poring over their books, supervised by a hooded figure in front of the holoboard.

“The next generation,” Mordana tells Kylo, her voice glowing with pride under the modulator. “They’ve grown in the Force each day since they came to me. Our conquest has shifted the balance in the galaxy, and power is awakening in the most unlikely places.” She points down at one of the students. “A Kessel miner’s son.” At another. “A Timoran farmhand. The Force drew them here. When I’m done training them, Supreme Leader, they’ll be worthy additions to your army.” She casts a brief, perfunctory glance in Rey’s direction. “None as worthy as your own apprentice, I’m sure.”

Kylo isn’t looking at the classroom. He’s looking at Mordana, and behind the guarded blank of his expression Rey can sense the cogs turning fast. “My apprentice has a long way to go,” he says vaguely.

She doesn’t like the way he’s looking at Mordana. She doesn’t like it at all.

“Perhaps–” Mordana swallows. “Perhaps you’ll let me bring them with you to the Cheravh temple. You’re a far better teacher than I am.” Her admiration radiates off her in waves. She’s absolutely sincere, Rey realises. “Once they’ve met you, and seen what you can do, I know their loyalty will be fixed for life.”

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“It’s despicable,” Rey fumes, sitting across the table from Kylo with her fork clutched in her fist like a dagger. “Absolutely despicable. Dragging innocent people into the fight, brainwashing them to your cause before they have a chance to learn the first thing about their true powers.”

They’ve scanned their whole suite for surveillance and poison-tested all the food, but Rey can’t bring herself to eat. Partly it’s her temper. Partly it’s the truly horrific main dish sitting in pride of place in the middle of the table. After a lifetime slaving in the desert for rations that tasted like the plastic they came in, Rey has learned not to be a picky eater. But this thing has legs. Several dozen horrid little spindly ones, with two enormous clawed pincer-hands jutting out in front of its body. Its shell is thick and hard and bristly green, like it’s covered in moss. Its dead, bulbous eyes seem to be staring at Rey through the forest of leafy garnish surrounding it.

“I don’t know what you’re yelling at me for,” Kylo says, digging a spoon into a large gash in the creature’s shell to scoop out its translucent grey-green flesh. “You heard Mordana. They came here of their own free will and asked her to teach them.”

“How should they know any better? You’ve suppressed every trace of Jedi lore throughout the galaxy. They’re confused and vulnerable, they don’t understand their powers, and the dark side is the only place they can look for answers.”

“The Force has chosen them, Rey. And they’ve chosen the winning side. You ranting at me isn’t going to change the fact that those kids have been called to make something of their lives.” He frowns at the green leggy claw thing on the table, but not for the reason it deserves. “I don’t know why Mordana showed me that school. If she’s trying to rally her army against me, a unit of trained Force users would have made a good trump card. Why give the game away now?”

Of course he’s only thinking about himself. Of course. Rey puts down her fork and folds her arms. “The dark side won’t hold sway forever,” she warns Kylo. “Recruit while you can, but the light
grows brighter every day.”

“The brighter the light, the darker the shadow,” Kylo intones. He sounds bored. “Are you going to eat?”

Rey considers her options. Other than the main plate, there’s a bowl of smaller leggy things with softer green shells – its offspring? Another dish holds a tangled salad of dark purple stringy vegetables with a slimy-looking sheen to them. There are a few kinds of pickles she doesn’t recognise, red and pink and vivid yellow, and thin strips of what appears to be raw flesh arranged into rosettes, and several plates of deep fried who-knows-what. Kylo has served himself a bit of everything.

“Er...what is it?”

Kylo smirks, just a bit. “It’s Mordana showing off,” he says. He taps his spoon on the shell of the horrifying clawed thing. “This is a Borgan swamp bug. Completely unnecessary, but I’m not going to complain.”

“Aren’t you?” Rey eyes the swamp bug doubtfully.

“It’s a delicacy. Try some, it’s delicious.”

“Maybe I’ll start with … uh, one of these smaller swamp bugs?”

“Those are just shrimp,” says Kylo. “Seafood,” he adds, in response to Rey’s lifted eyebrow. “Right. Desert planet.” He holds one of the shrimp so she can watch him snap its head off. “You peel off the shell, devein it – just here – then you eat the rest.”

His amusement sets Rey’s teeth on edge. Why should he feel superior, just because he knows how to flay aquatic insects and she doesn’t? The technique is harder than he makes it look, but when she finally bites down on her prize, she stops feeling annoyed at once. It’s delicious: juicy and crisp, with a meaty taste and a bright tang of salt like the ocean breeze on Ahch-To.

Emboldened by this early success, Rey puts Mordana Ren to the back of her mind so she can focus on the table in front of her. The swamp bug, despite its excess of legs and its unpleasant name, has mellow, buttery flesh that melts under the slightest pressure from her tongue. The salad is as slimy as it looks and takes some deft work with her fork, but once she’s caught a mouthful, she’s surprised by how much she likes the unusual texture and briny flavour. The crumbed morsels turn out to be root vegetables, steaming hot inside their golden crusts, and a welcome earthy counterpoint to all the weird and wonderful flavours lighting up Rey’s palate. She keeps coming back to them to ground herself when she makes accidental eye contact with the Borgan swamp bug.

But the real payoff comes when she takes her first sip of the honey-coloured beverage that came served in a crystal pouring jug. Rylothian wine, Kylo says, from Mordana’s homeworld in the Gaulus sector. It’s sweet and spicy, much milder than any wine Rey’s had before – made not to help drinkers forget, but to give them something to really remember. Once she’s tasted it, she doesn’t want to stop.

“You know,” Rey says, once the comforts of a full belly and a full glass have made short work of her will to stay angry with Kylo, “this feast is a lot of effort to go to for someone you’re planning to kill.”

“Yeah,” says Kylo. He’s broken one of the legs off the swamp bug so he can suck out its contents, like a kid with a lollipop, or like a dog eating marrow out of a bone. “She’s hiding her hostility well.
But that’s not all she’s hiding from me. You felt it too? You felt her deception?"

Rey felt a lot of things inside Mordana’s head. She takes another generous mouthful of wine and says, “The two of you go back a while.”

“We studied together at Luke’s temple.”

That much, Rey already knew. “But you’re close to her.”

“Not particularly.”

He’s being evasive on purpose, Rey’s sure of it. Still determinedly gnawing his bug leg. The sight of it almost makes her smile – it’s horrifying, but he’s so obviously enjoying the treat. To hide the twitch of her lips, she takes another drink.

But it’s in her head now. It bothers her more than she’d like, the idea of Kylo and Mordana together. It shouldn’t come as a surprise to her that she’s not the first woman in the galaxy to notice him. Kylo is – well, he’s evil, but some people like that in a man. And he’s charismatic. Handsome, in his strange and slightly mismatched way. Not to mention older than Rey by around a decade. He’s been alive more than long enough to have figured out that part of his life.

It’s just that he always seemed so lonely, so needy. She’d thought maybe the tension between them was something special. Like their shared power in the Force.

Rey sips her drink. “I just noticed,” she picks up again, “that Mordana seemed quite interested in you. Not just as her boss. There was … well, there was an energy about her, an attraction, and I couldn’t help wondering if … if…”

Kylo looks up, bug leg dangling from his lips, head tilted in mild confusion. “Attraction? Are you trying to ask if we fucked?”

Heat rises to Rey’s face. The way he says that word makes her insides squirm. “I was going to take a more subtle approach.”

Kylo snorts. There’s that amusement on his face again. Like he’s so worldly, and Rey’s a silly child who doesn’t know how to peel shrimp or say the word ‘fuck’ aloud. “It was a long time ago. And it won’t stop me from getting rid of her, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Well,” Rey mumbles, “that’s reassuring.” She’s not sure quite what possessed her to raise the subject. Maybe the wine’s affected her a little more than she thought.

She’s not a child. She says ‘fuck’ all the time. She really, really doesn’t want to care what Kylo thinks of her. And yet.

Kylo props his elbows on the table and studies Rey intently. “That’s not it,” he says. “You’re upset.”

“Well, I thought this was a political mission. If I’d known we were flying all this way to patch things up with your evil ex-girlfriend, I’d have let you come alone.”

Kylo’s mouth pulls tight, his brows contracting. “Is it that hard for you to believe that someone could be interested in me? Am I so disgusting to you?”

“Take that bug leg out of your mouth and ask me again.”

He spits out the leg, and Rey can’t believe that this – this – is what they’re going to waste the
evening arguing about. But before Kylo can give voice to whatever petulant comeback is forming in his head, he catches sight of the wine jug and his expression turns shrewd. “Rey,” he says, “how much of that wine have you drunk?”

“I–” Honestly, she’s not sure. The jug is empty. And she feels fine. A little lightheaded, maybe. A little less alert than usual. “No more than you.”

“Yeah, and I’m twice your size. It’s stronger than it tastes.” Kylo sits back and rolls his eyes. “You’re drunk.”

“I am not. Is there any more wine?”

“No.”

“I really like it. You can tell your girlfriend I like her wine.”

“She’s not my girlfriend. I told you that already.” There’s that intent look again, like he’s trying to see straight through her. With what little mental coordination is left to her, Rey fortifies her mind so he can’t break in and start sifting through her thoughts. But the telltale pressure never comes. He’s not reading her mind. Just looking at her.

“I need to – um, washroom,” Rey says.

“Okay.”

She doesn’t move. His eyes are like magnets, pulling her gaze up to meet his. “Actually,” she says, “it doesn’t matter if I find you disgusting or not.” He blinks, soft and slow. “You’re a bad, um. You’re a bad person. And we’re enemies.”

“I am,” says Kylo. He sounds wistful. Sad, almost. “We are.”

Rey gets to her feet. The world lurches around her, and okay, she really should have been more careful with that wine. This is stupid. Irresponsible. She stays in the washroom far longer than she needs to, telling herself that the situation is under control.

Kylo’s eyes are back on her the moment she reenters the main room. Focused and concerned. The floor rolls beneath her feet as she totters back to the table, reaching out to catch her balance on the back of her chair. But he’s already there to meet her. He scoops her clean up off the ground, and without even thinking, Rey throws her arms around his neck for security. “Bed,” he says.

The situation is not under control.

Bed can only mean one thing. What’s the point fighting it? Limp and sleepy from all the wine, Rey can’t even imagine finding the willpower to turn him down now. He knows. Somehow, despite that bit she said about them being enemies, he’s figured out her shameful secret – the way she thinks about him when she’s alone, the way her mind’s eye has mapped every contour of his brawny body and sweet, soulful face. He sounds confident. Decisive. He knows, and he’s going to act on the knowledge, and the parts of Rey that haven’t gone numb in her drunken state are hot and alive with want.

Kylo’s taking her to bed. His strong arms hold her up like she weighs nothing at all, and she rests her head on his shoulder, smelling his hair and absorbing the heat of his skin with her lips hovering just over a pulse point. This is fine. It’s nice, actually, now that she knows she’s crossed the line and can’t go back. There are no more decisions to make. No more lies to tell, no more self-restraint to call on. Just him and her – and, crucially, no Mordana. That bit’s important.
He carries her into the bedroom, deposits her on the mattress without ceremony, and throws a blanket over her.

Wait. Why – why is he leaving? Did Rey do something wrong? Maybe he’d rather go to bed with Mordana, who already knows what she’s doing. But that’s not fair. Rey is a very quick learner. “Kylo…”

He turns back at the doorway. “You okay?”

Not really. Now that Rey’s lying down, vertigo is catching up to her. The world spins and the mattress lurches and her stomach is threatening to revolt. This isn’t good. Too much wine. She’s such an idiot. But she can’t let that distract her. “Stay here,” she says.

“I’ll just be out on the couch.”

“No, here.”

Rey sits up. It takes a lot of effort, and with all the spinning she can’t quite tell if she’s gotten herself completely upright. But her achievement has the right effect on Kylo, who comes back to the bedside, takes her very gently by the shoulders, and eases her back down onto the pillow.

Then his hand passes over her face, and the Force ripples, and the whole world goes black.

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Fear, sharp and biting like teeth around her heart. Rey is dizzy, disoriented; her mouth and stomach feel like she swallowed fistfuls of sand and salt. The fear turns to rage, and she’s throwing off her blanket and surging forward to meet the threat head-on – except that she’s not, because her whole body is heavy and her limbs don’t want to respond to her commands. The fantasy fades. She’s safe in bed, and her still-drunk mind is playing tricks on her.

There’s a crash. A thud that reverberates through the walls. Someone screams.

This time, Rey does make it out of bed. It’s more a stagger than a surge, adrenaline warring with the drowsy effect of the alcohol still coursing through her veins. She can’t have been asleep more than a couple of hours. She’s fully dressed, hot and clammy in too many layers of clothes. Her legs find the door to the adjacent main room, and her fingers find the control pad, and her eyes – when she forces them open, when they stop stinging and watering from the sudden rush of illumination – find Kylo standing by the couch, feet planted and hand outstretched in a clawed, choking gesture. The cause of their rude awakening is pinned to the wall by the Force.

Without her mask Mordana Ren is a young woman, only a few years older than Rey herself. She has pin-straight black hair cropped to just below her jaw, and downturned eyes with stubby lashes. She looks human except for the purple-blue tinge to her complexion that’s definitely not just from Kylo’s chokehold. She’s clutching her throat, gagging for breath, her eyes wild with panic.

“Kylo, let her go!” Rey doesn’t know what makes her say it. Her defenses are down, her wits dulled by the first whispers of her impending hangover, and she can’t filter out the cacophony of emotion churning all around her in the Force. Mordana’s fear is her fear, and Kylo’s rage is her rage, and her head is spinning and her ears are ringing and it’s all too much.

To her surprise, Kylo listens. He drops his hand, and Mordana slumps to the floor, but before Rey’s slow brain can process what’s happening, an invisible blow sends Kylo skidding back across the floor. Mordana is on her feet again. Her eyes blaze with fury. She lunges for Kylo, but she’s no match for his strength or his reflexes, and her attack comes to a screeching halt when he calls on the
“Pathetic,” Kylo snarls, advancing on her. “Is this all you’ve got, Meg? Is this the best you can do? I expected more, even from you.”

“St-stop,” Mordana rasps, barely forcing the word out from under the weight of Kylo’s hold on her.

“You want mercy? Who do you think you’re dealing with?”

“Kylo, please—”

Kylo takes another step forward. The pounding of his anger makes it all but impossible for Rey to think clearly. Is this why the old Jedi texts say practitioners shouldn’t drink? It’s like the boundaries have dissolved between her and the Force, between her and the living beings nearest to her. “I know the truth,” Kylo says. “I saw the warships you thought you could hide from me. I felt your lie the moment I set foot in this place.”

“Oh? Well, I felt your lie a long time before that.” Mordana bares her teeth. “The little Resistance girl killed Snoke. I was helpless to stop her. As if anyone who knows you would fall for that. You killed him yourself, didn’t you? You outgrew him, you wanted more, so you did what you had to do. But you blame me for doing the same.”

“For sneaking into my room to kill me while I sleep?”

“Are you having another episode?” Mordana demands, her fear and anger giving way to concern. “What the fuck would I want to kill you for?”

“Then what else is that army for? What else are you doing in here at this hour?”

But the clouds of his rage are breaking up. Rey can feel it, and she can also feel the new confidence in Mordana’s voice when she says, “Kylo. Let go of me.”

Kylo releases his hold. The two of them stare at each other, eyes locked in silent communication through the Force, and Rey hears the message like an eavesdropper from outside the window: Mordana’s growing enmity with another of the Knights of Ren who governs a nearby sector. Her loneliness out here in the Outer Rim, her sense of abandonment, her longing to be closer to the centre of action. Closer to where Kylo is. Her complex plan to eliminate a rival and draw the Supreme Leader’s eye with her power and grit. To earn her rightful place in his inner circle, as a trusted fleet commander and the truest of his true disciples. She had to keep it secret because she wasn’t sure whose side he would take if he came in on the conflict before she’d finished undermining her rival.

And as for sneaking into his room – well.

It’s been so long since they saw each other in the flesh. So to speak.

“Oh,” says Kylo. His eyes have gone wide and dewy. Now, more than ever, Rey wishes she could shut out the churn of his emotions in the Force. His anger has evaporated. His suspicion, his distrust, his scorn for her – all gone. He’s looking at Mordana like his dearest and most treasured of friends.

Mordana puts a hand on his shoulder. “Why did you think I, of all people…?”

Kylo swallows visibly. “I thought you might have jumped on the bandwagon,” he says. “A lot of my so-called inner circle want me dead at the moment.”

A flicker of protective rage crosses Mordana’s face. “Traitors. Tell me who they are.” But then
before he can answer, her eyes drift over to the bedroom doorway where Rey is standing. “Your apprentice. Why’s she in here? Why were you sleeping on the couch?”

“She drank too much at dinner,” says Kylo, before Rey can answer for herself. He doesn’t look at her. His eyes are fixed on Mordana. “I wasn’t sure if it was safe to send her back to her own room. Not before I’d figured out whether you were a threat.”

Mordana’s eyes narrow. “Her face … she looks like…”

“Yeah, it’s what you think.” Kylo laughs. Rey’s never heard him do that before – it’s a hoarse, jagged little sound that seems reluctant to part with the back of his throat. “I don’t even know where to start, Meg. We’ve got a lot to catch up on.”

A lot that doesn’t include Rey. Her stomach is churning again, definitely because of the alcohol and not because of anything else. She has nothing to contribute to this, not in her current state. So she goes back to bed.

Kylo and Mordana don’t seem to notice.

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It’s like flipping a switch. Kylo has forgotten every sneering, disdainful thing he ever said about Mordana: he admires everything, from her work with the apprentices to her masterful oversight of Ord Radama’s central bureaucracy. They spend hours together wandering the compound, or viewing the city, or just sitting and talking. He’s filled her in on every single detail of his plan to deal with Hux, including details about the Resistance’s involvement that make Rey want to throttle him.

“We can trust her,” is all he says, when Rey voices her strident preference that he keep some of those details to himself. “She’s loyal.” He pronounces the word with something close to reverence.

“Loyal to you,” Rey snaps. “She’ll sell me and mine out in a heartbeat.”

Kylo just shrugs. Not his problem.

“I really don’t like where this is going,” she tells Finn, when they call in for an update. “Kylo reached out to us because he felt cut off from all his more natural allies. Now that he’s got someone on his side who he trusts, I’m not sure how long we can expect him to honour his side of our deal. The sooner we end this, the better.”

Finn’s voice crackles through the hypertransceiver and makes Rey’s insides ache. Oh, she’d give anything to be on the Resistance ship right now. Or to have Finn here with her, so that she’s not stuck alone for endless hours while Kylo moons over his new best friend. “Hang tight, Rey, we’re nearly in position. We hit a snag passing through Harloen space – don’t worry, everyone’s fine – but we should reach the trade port by later tonight. After that we’re just waiting on your go-ahead.”

“The sooner, the better,” Rey says with feeling. “How’s everyone doing out there? I want to know all the—”

“Who are you talking to?” Kylo has entered the room. He sounds wary, which is ridiculous. Rey’s the one stranded in hostile territory, not him.

“Who do you think I’m talking to?” But he doesn’t leave. “I’ll call you back later, Finn.” She puts down the transceiver and turns to face Kylo, making sure her expression shows just how little she wants to see him right now.
Kylo moves the air around his mouth. That nervous tic again. “We’re having dinner in the banquet hall tonight. I thought you might want–”

“No, thank you.” Rey can’t think of anything she wants less than to watch while Kylo and Mordana feed each other tender morsels of Borgan swamp bug. “I’ll eat in my room.”

“Okay,” says Kylo, “but we need to talk plans soon. Once Taris blows up, security’s going to go into overdrive along the entire Hydian. We need to be out before–”

“Later, Kylo.”

There’s a strange look in his eyes as he leaves. Almost like disappointment. But Rey doesn’t dwell on that too much. Now that she thinks about it, there’s no real reason for Kylo to leave Ord Radama with her. Their original plan was to part ways before Taris; they only stuck together this far because they thought Mordana was turning against him. That clearly isn’t the case anymore. She could be gone before the bombs drop. She could be gone by the time Kylo even finishes dinner. That would – that would solve the question of whether or not he’ll keep his promise.

That would solve a lot of problems.

No one is standing guard over Rey. As far as compound security know, she’s the Supreme Leader’s chosen apprentice, possessed with any manner of dark and terrifying powers. And she doesn’t have much to pack. For the sake of appearances, she puts on her black robe and the oversized cowl she borrowed from Kylo. She wraps the scarf-ends around until it covers her entire face, and the faint, lingering scent of him envelops her senses.

She needs to move now, before the sudden surge of inspiration loses its thrill. Before her unruly emotions realise just what it is she’s planning.

No one stops her as she leaves her suite and makes for the cargo bay where she and Kylo docked the Falcon. Stormtroopers clear the way for her, standing aside and saluting sharply as she passes. If only they knew.

It’s chancy, taking the Falcon up without a copilot. She can handle the cockpit by herself, but not the guns, so she’ll have to hope that she doesn’t meet any trouble between here and her friends. The engine rumbles to life, the enormous cargo bay doors grind open, and then she’s airborne, watching the city shrink away beneath her, feeling Kylo’s presence in the Force fade to a dull background throb.

He’s left her a souvenir. The Falcon's transceiver is still hooked into the First Order broadcast network, which – for as long as the connection lasts – should help her keep away from anything that could make her lack of gunpower a problem.

She’s leaving. Just like this, she’s really leaving. Why shouldn’t she? Her alliance with Kylo was only ever meant to be temporary. Now they can go back to wanting each other dead, and Rey won’t have to think anymore about the pit in her stomach or the awful, burning, unstoppable want that overwhelms her common sense every time she lets Kylo get too close to her.

But something’s wrong. As she breaks the atmosphere, the transceiver crackles to life. A guard unit on the visa station has noticed her departure, and their scans aren’t pulling up any registration data. They’re trying to make radio contact with her. She rejects the call and glances at the hyperdrive readout. Less than a minute left before it’s charged up and ready to take her to lightspeed. If she can just make the jump before–
A long-range tractor beam locks onto her. The *Falcon* comes to a grinding, shuddering halt.
know I'll get burned

Chapter Summary

Rey can’t keep the resentment from her voice. “Do you expect me to thank you? You saved me because you still need my help.”

“I saved you so you wouldn’t die,” says Kylo.

Chapter Notes

If you're a returning reader, welcome back and please note the new tags! If you're just dropping by for the smut, you'll find what you want about two thirds of the way down the page.

This flame is coalescing, this fire’s burning bright
I know I’ll get burned but it’s alright
Trade sense for sensation this time
I Can’t Wait – Celldweller

The transceiver crackles with noise from the First Order channel. Unauthorised departure from grid point E-34247. Pilot is non-responsive. Do we have any origin details? No, the registration check pulled up empty. Deploy a boarding party.

Rey’s sublight engines stall, thwarted by the powerful tractor beam yoking her to the nearby orbital station. At least no one’s rushing to attack: as far as the station crew know, the Falcon is just a harmless freighter whose pilot has been a bit careless with credentials. If they knew they’d caught a Resistance ship, they’d be moving faster. But slow is good. The hyperdrive has almost finished firing up, and Rey should be able to break the tractor beam’s hold with a surge of power to the deflector shields. It’s risky. Unorthodox. The circuits definitely aren’t going to love her for it, but there’ll be plenty of time for repairs once she’s safely out of range of that station.

Except that, when she trips the power generator, something happens that has never happened before in Rey’s whole history of flying the Falcon. Its failsafe kicks in. The excess power diffuses through the backup circuitry, and the computer spits out a proud error message. Warning: power surge detected. Rerouting to auxiliary capacitors.

“Don’t,” Rey groans at the console. After all its years of glitching and grumbling, now is not the time for the Falcon to start manifesting functional safety controls. She trips the generator again, but the same thing happens. Warning: power surge detected. Rerouting to auxiliary capacitors. Rey doesn’t have to think for long to figure out what’s happened. All that time Kylo spent working on the ship during their journey here – he must have repaired the shield array, which, thanks to many years of ill-advised add-ons and modifications, has until now always been prone to erratic bursts of power. Rey never bothered to fix it because she’d found ways to make its unstable forcefield work to her advantage.
Even when he’s doing the right thing, Kylo somehow always finds a way to make her life more difficult.

There’s no time now to fume. As station command transmits instructions to the First Order boarding crew, Rey leaves the cockpit and rushes down the corridor to the main hold. She’ll have to manually wind back whatever upgrades Kylo has made, and trip the generator directly from the control box.

She can’t hear the transceiver from the engineering bay. Assuming no one on the station recognises the *Falcon* and picks up their pace, she should have a few minutes at least before the boarding party arrive.

The shield array Rey’s used to is a jumble of wires and circuit boards: three separate deflectors unwisely linked to the same power generator. But when she lifts up the panel, what she finds is like a whole new system: the parts are all the same, but they’ve been cleaned and redistributed, their wires packed together into neat little cable-tied bundles. How much time did he waste straightening out the individual wires? Somewhere inside the power distribution core, there should be a logic board controlling the flow from the generator. Pulling it will solve the issue – if only Rey can get to it. Apparently it didn’t occur to Kylo that someone might need to deliberately overload the system.

Outside the *Falcon’s* airlock, a sudden burst of cannonfire shatters Rey’s concentration.

Have they figured out who she is? Nothing hits for now – if they’re shooting at her, they’re still out of range. Focus. There’s no use panicking, no use kicking into fight-or-flight just yet. She can’t fly anywhere if she doesn’t break free of that tractor beam.

The distribution core is in the very back, behind all Kylo’s reconfigured wiring. Nothing else for it: Rey scrunches her eyes shut and sticks her hand in, feeling for the logic board. Her fingers close around the right shape of object and she yanks it free, hears an unpleasant crackling noise, but nothing blows up. So she moves on to tripping the generator. More cannonfire outside. In the cockpit the transceiver’s volume is rising to a panicked crescendo, but Rey can’t make out a word it’s saying, only the frantic tone of the speakers’ voices. Whatever’s happening out there, the First Order don’t like it, which is fine by Rey. For now. Probably.

Something connects with the *Falcon’s* hull. Not a laser blast, but a grappling bridge. She can hear it creaking and clanging, can hear the screech of metal as someone forces the airlock open. Heavy footsteps in the entryway, and – there, that’s the generator, and the shield array buzzes at an unhealthy new frequency as too much power goes surging through the system. There’s no way the tractor beam will be able to hold onto her through all that deflector noise. Footsteps, shouting, and the boarding party storm into the hold with their weapons raised.

Six of them. Not ideal, but not too many for Rey to handle.

“On the ground, rebel scum,” the leader shouts. So they’ve figured it out. Heart leaping in her throat, Rey throws up her empty hands, miming compliance while her mind churns frantically through the available options. She needs to disarm those stormtroopers, obviously, as a first priority. The Force ripples all around her, fed by her adrenaline, ready for action. Should she steal a blaster rifle? Use one of their bodies as cover from the rest? They’re advancing on her, moving as a single unit, and Rey throws out her hand and reaches for the Force and–

And before she can find it, they drop. Slump to the ground like dead weight, all six of them, rifles clattering uselessly to the floor.

Behind them, on the boarding bridge, stands Kylo. Without saying a word to her – without saying a word about how he got up here, or what all those explosions were – he uses the Force to
drag the whole pile of unconscious troopers towards him, and for a wild second Rey thinks he’s going to slaughter their unconscious bodies in cold blood. But all he does is hurl them back out the airlock, none too gently, with much knocking of heads and clattering of armour. They land heavily back on board the TIE boarding shuttle they came from. Kylo disengages the grappling bridge and slams the airlock shut.

Then he turns to Rey, eyes ablaze with an intensity that seems to suck all oxygen from the atmosphere. He’s here. She thought she’d left him behind, she meant to leave him behind, and they’re looking at each other and Rey’s heart is pounding from unspent adrenaline and –

He opens his mouth and says, in a voice raw with fury, “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“What am I–” Rey shakes off the spell, furious. “What do you think you’re doing? What did you follow me up here for? This is me leaving, Kylo.”

“This is you making a senseless mess. I was going to get you off this planet quietly, but instead you’ve gone and endangered the whole plan on a whim. What do you think’s going to happen if word spreads that the Resistance is active in this sector, before your friends even reach their target? They’ll be lucky to make it out alive.”

As if Kylo cares what happens to her friends. Rey can’t even begin to fathom why he came all this way in such a huff. His meddling with the shield array slowed her down a bit, but she’s more than capable of fighting off a few First Order traffic officers without his help. This is a typical overreaction. Charge onto the scene and start throwing his weight around at the first sign of trouble, never mind what anyone else is trying to do.

“What happens to the Resistance now is none of your business,” she snaps. “We’ve got the ship you promised us. And you’ve got Mordana, so I don’t see what further use you can have for us.”

“What does Meg have to do with this?”

“How stupid do you think I am?” Rey snarls. “You came to the Resistance for help because you didn’t have anyone else. Now you’ve got her, it’s only a matter of time until you turn on us. What use are we to you when you’ve got her whole secret fleet at your command?”

“What use are you to anyone when you’re rotting in a prison cell because you got yourself arrested over a fucking permit violation?” Kylo kicks a console in disgust. “We don’t have time for this. Get on the guns.”

“I don’t take orders from–”

“Fuck, Rey, I’m trying to save your neck,” Kylo yells. He’s already halfway down the corridor to the cockpit. “Just do it.”

“Who says you’re coming with me?” she shouts after him. No reply. Livid, Rey takes the gunner seat. She still doesn’t quite know how Kylo got up to her, but the trail of strategic wreckage outside tells a story: smoke and ruined ships hang in space all around them, and escape pods litter the battlefield as their pilots wait for backup to arrive. This isn’t an elite First Order hit squad that’s come for her. They’re traffic wardens with oversized guns, and Kylo – Rey wouldn’t have expected this – Kylo has taken a surprising amount of care not to cause too much carnage. He must have posed as one of the boarding party’s escort and turned on the rest once they came in range of the Falcon. Shooting to disable rather than to destroy. Giving each pilot plenty of time to eject to safety.

Through the haze of destruction, a second wave of fighters are pelting towards them. These ones
look a lot less friendly than the hapless traffic wardens. “Can’t you call them off?” she barks at Kylo over the intercom.

“On what excuse?” Kylo snaps back. “They know who you are, they know I’m supposed to want you dead. Just fire up those lasers and don’t let the fighters get too close.”

“Thanks so much for your advice. Here was me thinking I’d sit back and let them flank us.” One of the fighters comes screaming into range, and Rey unleashes a quick burst of fire then grabs onto her seat as Kylo swerves sharply to avoid the return volley. “Stop showing off and take us to lightspeed!”

“I can’t. The hyperdrive’s flooded, you left the tanks on while you were messing around in the engineering bay. I need to vent all this excess fuel first.” Another burst of fire. Rey locks onto the closest fighter and lands a hit to its wing joint. The metal splinters, and the pilot loses control, spinning out and knocking the ship behind him off course.

Those wretched tanks. If only Kylo had upgraded them instead of the deflector shields, they’d be flying free already. “Just siphon it into the backup hyperdrive and we’ll deal with it later,” Rey yells at the mic, as a near-miss laser bolt goes searing past the viewpoint.

“The backup – that’s it!” Kylo spirals out of range of a torpedo, and an ominous groan sounds from somewhere deep inside the Falcon’s guts. “Okay, I’ve got this. Just lay down as much fire as you can.”

And then he hits the sublight accelerator, and it’s all Rey can do to keep a hand on her trigger. Laser bolts scatter wildly all around as they lurch forward at full speed, but the First Order fighters are still gaining on them, trying to get ahead so they can herd the Falcon back in range of the station’s tractor beam. Another ship gets hit – a lucky shot from Rey or a less lucky shot from one of its allies, it’s impossible to tell. “Stop spinning,” Rey howls, because Kylo is way too used to flying his single-seater TIE, it’s like he’s forgotten how to hold a steady sightline for a gunner.

“Hang on, I’m nearly – just a little–” The whole ship roars and trembles, and for a split second Rey thinks they’ve been hit too, until her eyes register the starry blur of a hyperspace tunnel outside the viewport.

“There,” says Kylo.

Fighting the urge to throw up, Rey unclips her harness and staggers to the cockpit. She doesn’t like the noise that’s coming from the hyperdrive, but even in her current temper she can’t blame Kylo for making the jump a bit too early. His rage seems to have evaporated along with the fuel they just burned. He’s perfectly calm in the pilot seat, working the controls with steady hands, eyes fixed on the hyperdrive readouts. Both of them, main and backup. Running at the same time. One propelling them through hyperspace while the other boots up to take over.

That explains the impending-system-meltdown noises. “We’re clear,” she says, because it almost seems like Kylo hasn’t noticed.

Kylo spares her a brief glance. In his abnormal new state of level-headedness, he reminds Rey eerily of Poe. There’s a certain kind of fighter pilot who finds nothing quite so soothing as an all-out dogfight. Rey’s no timid flyer herself, but this backwards adrenal reaction is something she’ll never understand. “We’re not,” he says.

“What do you mean, we’re not?”
“That orbital station was equipped with a lightspeed tracker,” Kylo says. “They’ll be moving to intercept us as we speak. I told Meg to go all out – she has to make it look realistic or she’s in as much trouble as I am.”

“So we’re going to come out of hyperspace and find a Dreadnought on our tail,” says Rey.

Kylo nods. “Normally when a ship drops out of hyperspace, it takes time to get the hyperdrive ready for another jump, so the tracking software uses that window of time to recalibrate after it registers our coordinates. We can’t stop them from following us to the end of this jump. But if we drop to realspace then make another jump right away–”

“The tracker will lose our signal,” says Rey. She’s not going to compliment his creative thinking. Not after the raging fight they just had. “But no ship’s meant to run two hyperdrives at the same time. You’re going to completely trash the Falcon.”

“What a shame,” says Kylo unconvincingly.

The Falcon’s backup hyperdrive was built for breakdowns on a trade route, not for life-or-death escape runs. It takes a few minutes to boot up, and its deafening groans of protest save Rey the trouble of making any further conversation. She straps herself into the copilot seat and keeps half an eye on Kylo while she pretends to be looking out the viewport. Now that she’s had time to calm down and think, she can admit to herself that it was probably for the best he came to help. She hadn’t even spared a thought for the Order’s lightspeed tracking capabilities. It would have been an unpleasant shock to come out of hyperspace thinking she was clear and find herself staring down the barrel of a loaded missile launcher.

At the very least, the fact that Kylo went to so much effort to save her means the Resistance haven’t yet outlived their use to him. He doesn’t want to jeopardise the alliance by letting Rey get arrested on his watch. That’s good. That was the original goal, wasn’t it? To get under the First Order’s skin, to use Kylo’s need as a weapon against him. Somewhere along the way Rey lost sight of that goal. She let herself get distracted by the day-to-day intensity of working so closely with Kylo. He has a contagious way of making even the hugest galactic-scale issues feel secondary to his emotional dramas.

She’s not proud that his way of thinking is starting to affect her. She felt so clear-headed when she took off from Ord Radama, but her chain of logic looks a whole lot hazier in retrospect. Kylo has been a betrayal risk since the first day she agreed to help him, but there was nothing more urgent than usual about the warning signs she used to justify her impulsive departure. Her real motives, if she’s honest, had less to do with strategy and more to do with how intimate Kylo seemed with Mordana. How much he seemed to like her, and how quickly his interest in Rey fizzled out when a better option came along.

Which is not a very good excuse for endangering their whole alliance while Rey’s friends are off staking their lives on it.

Rey knows jealousy. She knows what it feels like to go hungry while another, luckier scavenger takes home a satchel full of portions. She knows what it feels like to sit alone by the well at Niima outpost and see families pass by, parents and children hand in hand. She’s used to pining after things she doesn’t have.

But Kylo – well, she thought she had him. True, she’d been back and forth on whether she wanted him, but she’d known with such easy certainty that he was hers for the taking if she so chose. Until Mordana turned all her assumptions on their heads.
From the corner of her eye, she can see him punching coordinates into the flight computer. There’s a little furrow between his brows. Not all that long ago, everything was going his way: his scheme against Hux was coming to fruition, the Resistance warship was waiting on his order, and a follower he thought he’d lost was doting on him like a king. There were a few ways he could have solved the wrench Rey’s departure threw in his plans. But he chose the one that meant putting himself in danger’s path to help her. She can feel his frustration simmering in the Force, and something else - relief. Deep and shaky. Like he just outflew the very worst of all possible catastrophes.

Rey would love to know what he told Mordana. She can’t have been too pleased to see him fly off into the sunset, leaving her behind to explain to the rest of the First Order why the Supreme Leader vanished from her side at the exact same moment a Resistance fugitive slipped through her fingers. She’ll probably never find out now.

The backup hyperdrive is charged and ready to go. “Hold tight,” Kylo tells her, raising his voice over the painful shriek of the *Falcon*’s overloaded engines. He hits the engine switch, and the hyperspace blur coalesces briefly into the stars of an unfamiliar system – but before Rey has time to breathe, before the engine has time to cool, he jumps them straight back. The whole ship lurches. The backup hyperdrive screams. The error readout goes ballistic. The world shudders–

And then they’re back in realspace again, safely off the First Order’s trackers. Nowhere near as far from their last coordinates as Rey would like to be, but apparently as far as Kylo planned to take them. The small blue-green planet in front of them looks both empty and habitable. The best they can hope for on an emergency landing. Carefully, with much wheezing and groaning from the sublight engines, he brings them down.

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The campfire dances in the breeze. There’s plenty of fallen wood in the clearing, and the dry logs give off a purplish tinge and a sharply fragrant smoke. When they made planetfall, the whole land was lit with a warm, bright sun. But darkness arrived with disorienting speed as the planet spun around on its unfamiliar axis. Rey has made contact with the Resistance and given them the go-ahead on Taris. She’s dragged their supplies for the night off the *Falcon*, which is leaking gas from three different ruptures in its overwrought engine tanks. She doesn’t have it in her to do anything about them now.

It’s not cold, but her spot by the fire is pleasantly warm. She’s made a nice cushion for herself out of one of the cold weather bags C-3PO insisted she pack. Later, when she spreads out its contents, she’ll have a soft bed to sleep on.

“You shouldn’t have tried to leave,” says Kylo.

He’s sitting across from her on an upturned storage crate, studying his hands. The firelight casts deep, sad shadows across his face. Rey prods the fire with a stick and says, “Can we not have this argument right now?”

“I’m not arguing,” Kylo retorts.

“Do you even hear what comes out of your mouth?”

“You nearly got yourself killed today.”

“And I’m meant to thank you, is that it?” She’s not even angry anymore. But fighting is a difficult habit to break. “The Resistance would have called off the whole deal if anything happened to me on
“I saved you so you wouldn’t die,” says Kylo, staring down at his palm. For once, he’s taken those thick leather gloves off. “I don’t want—” He stops. Swallows. Rey watches his throat bob, dark and prickly and overdue a shave. “You shouldn’t have tried to leave,” he repeats.

His presence in the Force tonight is strangely quiet. She’s gotten so used to his constant aura of aggressive energy that she’s almost stopped noticing it. But now he’s tired. Withdrawn. Fighting him’s no good if he isn’t going to fight back.

It’s time for Rey to try something new. Something radical. It seems unwise, but nothing else she’s done so far has worked. Ignoring Kylo doesn’t work. Hating him doesn’t work. Sniping, bantering, fantasising in secret – none of it has even skimmed the surface of her problem. Being honest with him, unpleasant as the prospect sounds, is about the only option she has left.

“I was upset,” she admits. “I thought … look, this is difficult to say.” His gaze snap up to hers and it’s her turn to look away, because those wary, needy eyes don’t make it any easier to get the words out. “I got used to it just being the two of us. It’s different when you’re not busy fighting wars or trying to look all tough and scary in front of your generals. For a while, when I had you to myself, it was like we stopped being enemies. Like we didn’t even hate each other anymore.”

“I don’t hate—”

“But then Mordana came along,” Rey presses on before she loses her nerve. “And suddenly you were more interested in her than in me.”

She risks a glance up. Kylo’s eyes are wide, and the softness in his face reminds her of that night on Ahch-To after her ordeal in the cave. When he told her she wasn’t alone. When he took her hand. When she saw a vision of their future together, so bright and beautiful that it blinded her to the storm clouds on the horizon. “Rey,” he says, barely audible over the crackling of the fire. “Meg and I, we’re not … she’s not…” He swallows again. “She’s not you.”

Like that explains everything. Maybe, for Kylo, it does. But this whole thing is a lot for Rey to try and make sense of. “Kylo, honestly, I have no idea what I want from you. Every time I find an answer, the question changes.” She smiles bitterly. “But apparently, the thought of having the problem taken off my hands is too much to live with. I can’t lose you to someone else.”

“Lose me?” Kylo leans forward, and Rey doesn’t realise she’s leaning forward too until the heat from the fire forces her to stop. She can see the flames reflecting in his eyes. “One word, Rey. One word from you, and I swear, I’m at your fucking mercy. Whatever you want from me. Whatever questions you’ve still got. Change your mind a million times, I don’t care. Just don’t leave again.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier if I did?”

“No,” says Kylo, and there’s heat back in his voice now, a brief glimpse of the aggression she’s so used to. “You think you’re ever going to find a simple answer to this? You’re not. There is no answer. I’ve looked everywhere. I’ve gone out of my mind and back trying to stop wanting you, but I can’t do it. And if there’s any chance – if there’s even one single part of you that wants me back – you can’t take that away from me. You have to let me try.”

“You’re being melodramatic,” Rey says, because she doesn’t know what else to say. Surely human hearts weren’t meant to beat this fast.
“I am not. And you’re one to talk, anyway. Flying off to your certain doom because you thought I had feelings for someone else.”

If he leans in any closer, he’s going to set his own hair on fire. Rey’s not sure he’s even noticed the danger. Her pulse is racing, and it’s like the heat from the fire is reaching deep inside her, lighting up her core. If she didn’t already know how this was going to end, she knows now. They’re alone together in the wilderness. Stranded, with nowhere else to go and nothing to do except wait for rescue. No one but each other for company, and a year’s worth of denied want weighing them down.

She can’t keep doing this. She can’t keep pretending. Not when he’s looking at her with such naked desperation in his eyes.

Maybe it’s fate, or maybe it’s the Force trying to draw them together, or maybe it’s just basic human instinct making fools of them both. Maybe the difference doesn’t matter right now. “You’re at my mercy,” Rey echoes. Abandoning her makeshift cushion, she circles the fire and comes to stand over him. Slowly, cautiously, he tilts his chin up to look at her.

Before the uncertainty can take hold again, Rey reaches out to touch his face. She half expects a revelation when they make contact – another vision, a bold new brushstroke of destiny – but all she feels is warm skin and prickly stubble. The Force gives her flashes of Kylo’s emotions, but they’re hard to pick out from the maelstrom of her own. Longing. Excitement. Disbelief. He’s staring at her as if hypnotised, and when she steps closer, he brings both his hands to her waist. They’re trembling, just a little.

She takes the plunge. Straddles his lap.

The fire his hot on her back, but it’s nothing to the heat of Kylo’s mouth when it meets hers. Rey’s never kissed anyone before. She wouldn’t have thought there would be quite so much nose-bumping, or quite so many teeth in the way, but she knows Kylo has done this before and anyway, she doesn’t mind the sweet little sting when he bites her lower lip. She doesn’t mind the rush of his breath, or the softness of his lips, or the muffled little sound he makes when she grabs onto either side of his head and tips it back so that she can take control of the way their mouths move.

The empty crate creaks beneath their weight. Kylo throws one hand back to steady them both, and with his other arm he clings to Rey like at any second she might change her mind and try to pull away from him. There’s no danger of that. This isn’t as hard as she thought it would be. It’s so, so much easier than fighting.

She runs her fingers through his hair and deepens their kiss. She likes the taste of him, the warmth of his body, the softness of his hair in her grip. Experimentally, she strokes his tongue with hers, and she loves the way he yields to her touch. Loves the hot spark of pleasure when she tilts her hips and finds him already hard through the fabric of his trousers. There’s an ache somewhere deep inside her that flares and spreads when she rolls into that hardness, and Kylo makes a noise somewhere between a choke and a whine.

It’s happening so fast. But it doesn’t feel wrong. “We’re going to break this crate,” Rey says, as the rocking motion sets off another ominous creak.

Kylo’s voice has dropped about an octave. “I don’t care,” he says against her mouth.

“You will when it breaks. Come on.” Pulling away – and okay, this part’s not fun, the less time apart right now the better – she tugs him with her to the ground. Stretches back on the grass and wriggles till she finds a spot that’s not too twigggy.
“Are you serious?” says Kylo.

“I don’t know. Apparently.”

“But we—”

“Don’t make this more complicated than it needs to be,” Rey says sharply. Then she softens her voice. “Just come down here and kiss me.”

Kylo obeys. Presses his mouth to hers again, hungry, clumsy, needy, as he comes to rest with one leg between both of hers and his weight propped on one elbow by her head. Even holding himself up like this, he’s heavy.

“Help me get – mm,” Rey says. Kylo’s hand has found one of her breasts, cupping it through her clothes. Squeezing. Pawing. “Clothes are in the way.”

She’s hated this costume since she first put it on. Too black, too restrictive, too little like her. But she’s never hated it more than she does now, when it’s getting in the way of his skin on hers.

“Yeah.” Kylo fumbles one-handed with the belt of her robe. To his credit, he makes a decent amount of progress before Rey gets impatient and takes over. She has to sit up to remove her breast bindings, which on the downside means Kylo has to get back off her, but on the upside it gives her a chance to pull some extra clothes off him as well.

It would be easier if he’d stop chasing her mouth with his, kneading her breasts, grabbing her waist, making it almost impossible to focus on the complicated fastenings and buckles that hold all of his too many layers together. But they get there. And it’s worth the frayed patience and torn stitches, when finally they’re both stripped bare and they meet again, skin to skin. Kylo’s hands on her body have a frantic, greedy strength, but he slows down to stretch his cloak out on the grass before lowering Rey on top of it.

That small thoughtful gesture turns something inside Rey to liquid. This is different from how she thought it would be. It’s taken them so long to cross the line, but now that they’re here, nothing feels more natural than touching him. She doesn’t even have to think about it.

Then Kylo’s weight settles back on top of her, and she doesn’t have to think about anything at all.

She wraps her legs around his hips and pulls him closer. She’s slick and hot and wanting, so ready for this, despite the flutter of nerves and the impulsive newness of it all. Kylo fumbles between her legs, teeth gritted, and she can’t stand that he’s not already fucking her. She grips his shoulders hard and he hooks one of her legs and shifts her body underneath him and then oh–

Oh. Oh, he’s inside her. It feels – it feels different. It feels a lot. Kylo lets out a hissing, shuddering breath and pauses with his forehead resting against hers. Too close for her to see his face, but she doesn’t need to. His cock is buried deep inside her and she can feel him in a way so intimate it hurts.

“Come on, I’m fine,” she says, after a drawn-out moment of unbearable stillness in which Kylo cruelly refuses to move. To give her more of whatever this stretching aching feeling is.

“I’m not,” says Kylo, breathless. “Fuck, Rey.”

“That’s the general idea.”

“Can you not be like this for just five seconds?” His voice is strained.
Rey grabs a handful of his hair and pulls his head back so that she can see his face properly. His pupils are so wide that his eyes look black. “No, I can’t, and you can live with it.”

Kylo groans. He’s not coping – she can feel in his mind that he’s close to the edge even though they’ve barely started. Breathless. Punch-drunk. Anxious. Anxious? He wants so badly to make this good for her. But he’s not sure he can, he’s not sure he knows how. It’s been so long since the last time...

“How long?” Rey asks, curious despite herself.

“How long what?”

Oh. Right. This wasn’t an out-loud conversation. “How long since you did this last?”

Kylo thinks. It doesn’t seem to come naturally to him while he’s buried inside her like this. “Um, about ten years. Longer, maybe. We were young.”

“Well, at least you’ve had some practice.”

“It was only Meg,” says Kylo, as if that somehow makes it count less. He shouldn’t mention Mordana at a time like this. But in fairness, Rey did ask. He’s so hard inside her that it’s driving her mad. She wants more. Wants him moving, stretching her out, hitting that place deep inside where she needs him most. Hasn’t she waited long enough already?

She plants her feet on the ground and twists, and rolls them over so that she’s on top. If he’s not going to take the reins then she will. Kylo gasps when she starts to move, rolling her hips, first gingerly and then picking up the pace once she’s confirmed that the new sensation works for her. If she tilts a certain way, she can grind her clit on him with every thrust. This is nothing like touching herself. It’s raw and it’s messy and it fills her in a way that her own fingers never have, and she’s clenching around him, drinking in his pleasure grimace and his hissing breath and the sharp spikes of his arousal that flow through the Force. This is good. So good it almost hurts, or maybe that’s just her body getting used to being touched in a way it never has before. But she needs this feeling not to stop.

And the state she’s in is nothing compared to Kylo. He claws his hands up and down her sides, too desperate to be gentle, and he’s started murmuring her name and oh, she loves that she can do this to him. She leans forward to kiss him, relishing the heat of his mouth and the rasp of his stubbled skin on hers.

“Rey,” Kylo breathes against her lips. A plea. A warning. “I can’t–”

“Yes, you can.” Oh, this feels good. She grinds harder, fucking herself onto his cock, rubbing her clit against him.

He breathes out shakily. “You’re – fuck – you’re the expert now, are you?”

“Someone has to be.” She bites his lip, hard, and feels him twitch inside her. “You said you were at my mercy. Did you mean it?”

“Nnnnnhh,” Kylo says.

“Then wait for me.” At this rate, he won’t have to wait long. Rey sits back, bouncing up and down on top of him, and the new angle hits something inside her that makes her want to cry out loud. She shoves two fingers in Kylo’s mouth to wet them, then brings them to her clit. Rubbing in quick, urgent circles, clenching around him and picking up the pace with her hips.
Kylo swears again. “I’m serious, I can’t–”

“You can.” Without slowing her pace, without pausing the attention on her clit, Rey fists a hand in Kylo’s hair and pulls hard. She has a vague idea that the pain might help calm him down, but it seems to have the opposite effect. He’s meeting her thrusts now, holding her hips and urging her on even as his mouth issues a steady stream of _fuck please slow down too much I can’t_.

He’s wild for her. Too far gone to think, and she can feel it in the Force, can feel his haze starting to spill into hers. His body is trembling all over, and Rey lets go of his hair and rakes her nails down his bare chest, underneath his scar. She loves the way his blood rushes to the surface where she touches. She put that scar there, but now she’s putting another kind of mark, writing her ownership on his skin in a line of little red welts from his collarbone down to his navel.

She’s going to come. She can’t _not_ come. She digs her nails in harder and throws her head back and moans, rubbing herself hard, too close now to focus on the rhythm of her hips. To focus on anything more than the fact that he’s here, that he’s _hers_, that she should have done this a million fucking years ago. So Kylo takes over, holding her still and thrusting up into her again and again and the pleasure’s overwhelming her senses and she’s drowning in it, falling apart. Dimly she’s aware of him coming with her, moaning raggedly, his grip so tight that there’ll be finger-shaped bruises on her hips tomorrow.

And then it’s over and they’re panting for breath, and Rey collapses onto Kylo’s chest and stays there while the aftershocks wear off. The intensity gives way to a new kind of spent euphoria, and when Rey lifts her head up she finds Kylo looking back at her with glazed dark eyes.

She brushes a few locks of hair out of his face and smiles down at him. His return smile is crooked and sloppy and takes years off his age. “Don’t get up,” he murmurs.

“I won’t.” Rey slips off his softening cock, but keeps their legs entwined as she rolls off to the side. She can feel the mess they’ve made, sticky as it leaks out of her, but she’ll care about that later. It’s his cloak they’re ruining, anyway. Not her problem.

He wraps an arm around her and pulls her close, and for the first time in as long as Rey can remember, life feels simple.

There are problems, sure. Some catastrophic differences of opinion that they’re going to have to work through. Some skeletons no doubt still lurking in the closet. But there’s nothing complicated about the cool night air or the crackle of the nearby fire or the sweat-damp warmth of their two bodies nestled together.

Kylo’s lips are wet and soft as he kisses the juncture of her neck and shoulder. Rey lets her eyelids flutter closed, and just breathes.
search for the strength

Chapter Summary

Rey’s light has always been shot through with a vein of shadow, and it’s only getting darker. Kylo knows the anger that simmers there under the surface, the quick temper, the envy, the hunger.

But when she falls to the darkness, she won't fall alone. He decided that a long time ago.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Do not pray for an easy life
Search for the strength to walk the line
I see a hope that’s hard to find, so don’t run away

Rise – A Skylit Drive

Kylo wakes, but without much conviction. He’s warm. Drowsy. Comfortable. The whole world around him is peaceful and quiet. No sinking weight in the pit of his stomach, no gnawing hole in the centre of his chest. When was the last time he slept this soundly? It doesn’t happen often. It’s tempting just to pull the covers up over his head and see how much further he can push his luck.

But there’s sun in his eyes and a light breeze in his hair – he’s outdoors, sleeping on a nest of bundled thermagear and fleece blankets, which for some reason Rey brought on their journey in industrial quantities. Last night the two of them fell asleep together, her face tucked into the crook of his neck, his arm wrapped around her, both their bodies soft and sated. He could almost have dreamed it. But there’s an empty dip in the pile right next to him that’s roughly the size of her, and when he opens his eyes he can see her in the clearing not far away. Leaning over last night’s fire. Stoking it back to life.

She’s wearing only leggings and a thin black undershirt. Her wet hair hangs in waves about her face. Losing interest in sleep, Kylo clambers out of the makeshift bed and fumbles for his discarded clothes. They must be here somewhere. Trousers. Those will do.

A strange, bubbly warmth spreads through him as his sluggish system comes to life. The grass prickles beneath his bare feet – he’s definitely awake. This isn’t a dream. It’s real.

“Morning,” says Rey when he joins her by the fireside. She sounds casual. A little distant, maybe. But her eyes linger on his bare chest, and the bright red welts her nails left last night, and he sees the corners of her mouth curl just a little. “I was going to wake you up soon. I made breakfast.”

That’s nice in theory, but worrying in practice. “What is it?” Kylo asks, accepting her charred offering with a healthy level of caution.

“Aren’t you the seafood expert? It’s fish. I caught it in the river. Don’t worry, I ran it past that poison scanner you used on the food Mordana gave us. It’s definitely safe to eat.”

The scanner? So she’s been helping herself to his belongings while he slept. Jakku habits must be
hard to break. But Kylo can’t muster up much in the way of annoyance. The only thing he really wants to think about is whether she might be open to a repeat of last night - assuming they both survive the fish. That scanner can detect almost any toxin, but it’s no defence against bad cooking.

It actually tastes fine once he scrapes off the burnt skin and the flecks of loose ash. Rey wolfs hers down, and in between bites she points at a kettle on the fire and says, “Caf.”

There’s only one mug’s worth. “You don’t want any?” She can have it, if she wants. He’ll brew more.

Rey wrinkles her nose. “I don’t know how you can stand the stuff. But we’ve got work to do today, and I’ve seen what you’re like in the mornings without it. So enjoy.”

He wouldn’t have expected her to think of something like that. Kylo tries to catch her eye, but Rey’s focus is already back on her plate. He can’t read her at all this morning. He’s mostly gotten used to the silent space where Rey’s presence in the Force is meant to be – she’s locked him out so completely that he never gets more than flashes of what she’s thinking. He could force his way through if he wanted to. But … he doesn’t want to. Not that way.

It just puts him a bit off-balance when he has no way of finding out her thoughts. “Thank you,” he says, and Rey gives him a fleeting little smile.

Last night those barriers came down a bit, and could feel her in a way he’d hardly dared to dream. Not just her body, although that was – no. Don’t think about Rey’s body too much right now. That way lies extreme distraction. He felt her heart, is the point. The warm, bright core that has haunted his dreams since the night they first touched hands. The fire in her spirit, the kindness, the compassion, the desire – desire for him. But this morning her barriers are back at full strength. He can’t even tell if she’s guarding herself on purpose.

It doesn’t matter. Thanks to last night, he already knows the answer to his most urgent question. Everything else can wait if it has to.

He has no idea what to do with this emotion. He’s giddy with it.

Rey attacks her meal with unselfconscious gusto. It’s just fish, overcooked and underseasoned, but she caught it and made it and now she’s enjoying every morsel like it could be her last. When her plate is clean, she picks her teeth with a fishbone and says, “There’ll need to be some conditions. To, uh.” She gestures vaguely between the two of them. “This.”

“I figured,” says Kylo. There are always conditions. He’s learned to live with that. What matters is they’re admitting out loud what happened last night. Since Rey’s crisp tone doesn’t suggest she’s about to drag him back to bed any time soon, he downs a large mouthful of caf and tries not to get distracted by the way her damp hair curls against her neck.

“I know you’re not going to turn,” Rey says. “I won’t waste my time fighting you on it anymore. But can you at least promise to stop killing people?”

“No, I can’t. We’re trying to end a war.” Rey glares at him, and he hastens to add, “I can do my best to minimise the death count.”

“You can definitely stop killing civilians.”

He’s never had much appetite for killing civilians. Rebels, sure. Politicians. Traitors, enemies, religious insurgents, Jedi-worshippers. People who deserve it. Innocent bystanders are more the domain of people like Hux. “I’ll talk to my generals. Anything else?”
He means it in good faith – means he’s listening, he’s willing to compromise – but it must come out wrong because Rey scowls and says, “Yes. This one’s non-negotiable. I don’t ever want to hear another word from you about the power of the dark side. If you’re going to keep up your vile dogma, you can do it in private and leave me out of it.”

Interesting that she’s so much more heated on this than on the issue of civilian casualties. What is it about the truth that frightens her so much? It’s frustrating not to be able to see her thoughts. But he knows what he’s missing, more or less.

“No vile dogma,” he echoes. "Got it.”

It won’t matter much in the end. Rey’s light has always been shot through with a vein of shadow, and it’s only gotten darker in her year on the run. He doesn’t need an inside view of her mind to recognise the anger that simmers there under the surface, the quick temper, the envy, the hunger. She hates it, and she fears it, and Kylo wishes like burning that he could have reached her before the world had time to plant that seed of self-rejection in her heart. It’s going to make it so much harder for her when she finally falls to the dark side. He knows that from bitter experience.

And she will fall, sooner or later. Resisting it won’t work. Ignoring, fearing, praying, denying – none of it can work forever.

“Good.” Rey looks satisfied. “Then for now, I don’t have to worry about planning your downfall.”

"Well, that's a relief," he says, only half-sarcastically.

Unlike Kylo, Rey isn’t going to fall alone. He decided that a long time ago. It’s fine if she’s not ready to hear him now. He can wait until the day she is. And while he waits, he’ll keep working hard to build a world where the gulf between light and dark doesn’t matter. Where people like the two of them won’t be hated and cast out for what they are. Where all those who’ve wronged them are dead in the ground, and the whole galaxy is clean and ordered and peaceful.

It would be easier, of course, with Rey’s help. But Kylo didn’t get to where he is today by following the path of least resistance. He doesn’t do what’s easy.

He does what’s right.

–

There are three ruptures in the *Falcon*’s tanks. They probably should have patched them last night – the main one, roughly the size of a fist, is easy to find, but the two pinhole breaches were only visible when high-pressure gas was hissing out through them. Now that the leaks have slowed, the smaller ruptures are all but invisible. Invisibility won’t make them any less dangerous.

Kylo adjusts the gas mask over his face and crouches down to search the underside, which was definitely jetting gas last night. “Did 3PO pack any glowrods?” he calls over his shoulder to Rey. He packed just about everything else. Factory-standard gas masks, which have already come in handy. Mass quantities of pine-scented atmospheric filters, which haven’t and probably won’t.

He catches the flying glowrod before it can hit him in the head. The extra light bounces off a blemish right underneath the shell. It’s hard to be sure from this angle, but that could be their culprit. Yanking off a glove, he feels around the area. Jagged metal. A faint trickle of leaking air. Yeah, that’s the one.

“I don’t like the look of this motivator,” Rey calls, while Kylo waits for his solder to heat up. Her voice is muffled by the gas mask. “There are scorch marks around the wiring.”
Knowing the *Falcon*, those could have been there for any length of time. “Might have reacted with the gas leak yesterday. We’ll need to rev it up and check – but don’t do it while I’ve got my head under the fuel tank.”

Other than the leaks, the engine damage isn’t as bad as it could have been. It’s still a solid morning’s work between the two of them to get all the obvious triage done, and the sun is high in the sky by the time they emerge for a break. But on this planet, that could mean anything.

Rey’s mouth and nose are imprinted with red lines from the gas mask. She sits down on the ground outside the airlock and cracks open a thermos. “If we keep up this pace, we could be back on our way by nightfall.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.” It’s not smart to count on anything when it comes to that fucking ship. He sits down beside her. Not too close, not too far.

“Oh, I’m pretty confident,” says Rey. “I know my way around a hyperdrive. And 3PO says you used to work in a shipyard before you turned evil.”

Her lips twitch. “No way, scavenger,” Kylo says, because the twitch is turning into a smirk. “You don’t get to laugh at my background.”

“I’m not laughing,” Rey says. “I think it’s a shame you didn’t stick to your first career choice. You look so cheerful when you’re working inside an engine.” She inspects his face, then rubs his cheek with a thumb. “You’ve got some grease.”

She’s so casual now about touching him. “I like fixing things,” he says, trying not to look too flustered by the attention. Laughter or not, he doesn’t really want to reminisce about life on Chandrila. He took that shipyard job because he didn’t know what else to do – because his mother wanted him back in school and his father wanted him out of the house, and he just wanted a break from all the nagging and the lectures. He’d been surprised by how much he enjoyed the work. The manager was awful, sure. But ships are never awful, present company excepted. They’re never dishonest or selfish or any of the things that people are. They just want their thrusters tuned and their systems maintained.

Rey grins. “I like fixing things too,” she says. “I learnt the wrong way around, though. I was always dismantling old engines, and I had to figure out what made them work so I didn’t waste any salvageable parts.”

He’s noticed some of Rey’s handiwork around the *Falcon*. Her style is distinctive: she’s messy and practical, brilliant at patching things up and hopeless at rounding off the jagged edges afterwards. She takes shortcuts that no self-respecting mechanic would take, but they somehow seem to work out for her.

After a quick lunch they move out of the ship’s guts and onto the main controls. The air up here has finished filtering so they can finally breathe without masks. A lot of things are broken that shouldn’t be – apparently, when the *Falcon*’s computer detected the gas leaks, it panicked and started shutting down all kinds of vital systems. One day Kylo is going to see this stupid ship melted down for scrap. He’ll keep a piece of the hull as a trophy.

He doesn’t share Rey’s hurry to get them off this planet. Out there the whole galaxy’s an ugly mess, but here with just the two of them it’s so much simpler. He takes his time rebooting the inertial dampeners, and then while Rey takes over the engineering bay he immerses himself in the important task of checking that the canteen works.
The water heater is fine, and the grinder, and the milk dispenser. Fresh caf in hand, he sits at the dejarik table and nudges the holomonsters around the board with no particular strategy in mind. Does Rey know how to play? Maybe tonight he’ll teach her the rules. Or maybe he won’t. There are better ways to spend their time together, since it can’t last too much longer now – once they make it back to the Resistance, he’ll have run out of excuses. They’ll have to part ways at least for a while.

An old, familiar shadow looms in his mind at the thought. No. He doesn’t need that. Doesn’t have to let it near him. They haven’t parted ways yet, and tonight, if Rey lets him – if she wants him – just the thought makes his head swim with anticipation. It’s a good thing he’s already sitting down.

He prods Grimtaash across the board to wrestle the M’onnok. Out of sight in the engineering bay, Rey is swearing profusely at a broken ship component. Never mind what the future holds or what conditions he has to meet. Never mind the looming shadows. Never mind the hellscape that’s waiting for them outside their peaceful little bubble. He’s just so glad she’s here with him. Nothing else matters as much as that.

Except that as the M’onnok falls to its holographic knees, something else intrudes on Kylo’s consciousness. A steady, one-note hum in the Force. He knows the sound well. Why it’s calling to him now, he can’t say. But Rey was searching through his things earlier, and turnabout is fair play, so he puts down his drink and follows his instincts to the bunk room where a bulging satchel holds a jumbled mess of Rey’s possessions.

In amongst the crumpled clothes and stray gadgets, his reaching hand finds a familiar shape. He pulls out the lightsaber, and the power inside it makes the cold metal shell feel warm and welcoming.

Last time Kylo saw this weapon it was in Luke’s hands. Somehow, since then, it’s changed. The casing is completely new, and a lot less elegant, and the weight feels different. But its basic energy hasn’t changed.

“Put that down,” Rey says.

She’s followed him to the bunks. She stands in the doorway, dishevelled from her work, tense and angry at the sight of the weapon.

“Why did you take it apart?” Kylo asks. She wouldn’t have done it for no good reason – well, maybe curiosity counts as a reason. But taking it apart to inspect would be one thing. Completely replacing half the parts is another.

Rey gives him a quizzical look. “What do you mean, why did I take it apart? It got torn in half during our fight, crystal and all. I had to rebuild it practically from scratch.”

That would explain the blinding flash Kylo saw before he collapsed. He’d assumed it was from the explosion when that Resistance cruiser smashed into the Supremacy. He was too busy being unconscious to conduct a fuller assessment. “You broke the kyber crystal?”

“We broke the kyber crystal,” says Rey. There’s a warning in her voice, but his curiosity wins out.

“How did you restabilise it?”

“If you’re just going to leave me to do all the work, you might as well go back to camp.”

Kylo presses the activator. Despite its rough exterior, the blade that flares to life is perfectly stable. There’s no sign anywhere of the catastrophic overflow that made his own lightsaber unusable until he figured out how to vent the broken crystal’s extra power through the crossguard. “This is amazing,” he says.
Colour rises to Rey’s cheeks. “Well,” she says, drawn in despite herself, “I did the best I could. I didn’t have a lot of spare lightsaber parts lying around, so I had to get creative.”

Kylo doesn’t know anyone else who’s successfully used a damaged kyber crystal. Not least because the things don’t damage easily. They’re as dense as durasteel, and their strength in the Force makes them twice as robust. “What did you use for the new casing?”

“An old reactor shell.” Despite her initial hesitance, Rey looked pleased to be asked. “I figured if it could withstand those warp forces, it could hold a single lightsaber blade.”

“It could probably hold hundreds,” says Kylo. He lets go of the activator and lifts the hilt up to examine the emitter more closely.

The whole thing is streamlined and traditional, nothing like his own design. It took him ages to work out the crossguard mechanism that keeps his hilt from exploding under pressure. For a while the task was the only thing he thought about, in those dark months after he escaped Luke’s temple with nothing but the clothes on his back and the few friends who didn’t turn on him when they saw the wreckage of his hut. It was the events of that night that caused the problem in the first place.

Kyber crystals all lean towards the light, and after that night even his own weapon wanted nothing to do with him. Bending it to his will took so much strength that it tore a fault right through the crystal’s heart.

But Rey hasn’t had that specific problem yet. Her repairs have taken a different approach. One he can’t for the life of him figure out, no matter how long he studies the exterior. “Okay, I give up. Where’s the run-off power going?”

“What run-off power?”

“From the broken crystal.” Maybe she built some kind of powerful heat sink into the hilt. Or a mod to the blade emitter? A custom component in the field energisers?

Rey shrugs. “Oh,” she says, “I mended the crystal too.”

That answer would never have made his list of guesses. “You what?”

“I read something in one of the old Jedi texts. For some reason there wasn’t much in there about lightsaber construction—”

“That’s because the earliest lightsabers were developed by the—” Sith. Never mind. No talking about the dark side. “Nothing, keep going.”

Rey rolls her eyes. “There was some stuff about kyber crystals, and how some people consider them living vessels of the Force. I figured if they were living, that meant they should be able to heal. So I tried pouring my strength into the broken halves, and…” She breaks off, with a floppy hand gesture that’s presumably meant to encompass the rest of the technique. “It worked.”

Kylo stares. What she’s describing, hand gestures aside … he’s never heard of anything like it. You don’t just mend a broken kyber crystal. Is he ever going to get his head around Rey? The Force moves through her in ways he’s never seen or felt or read about before. Ways that it’s never done for anyone else.

It’s not fair that she has these abilities and he doesn’t. He, who’s worked so hard to earn them. But maybe this is just how it works. He and Rey are the last truly gifted Force users in the galaxy – the old rules don’t apply to them. Their powers are designed not to match, but to complement each other.
All his life Kylo has been alone with his gift. But now he doesn’t have to be. Neither of them have to be.

“I could try to fix your crystal,” Rey offers abruptly. “If you want.”

Could she do it? He almost wants to hand it over just to see her mysterious new power in action. But … “No, the whole thing’s designed around the fault. If you fixed it, I’d have to rebuild from scratch.” He gives her what he hopes is an off-hand grin. “And I hear we’ve got a ship that needs our attention first.”

Kylo’s lightsaber was the first thing he ever built for himself when he left his old life behind. Fixing it gave him something to do when he desperately needed a distraction from the pain and panic of Luke’s betrayal. And the weapon he built from the wreckage is stronger than his old one ever could have been. He’s not sure even Rey can eclipse what that blade’s fiery crackle means to him.

“Oh, now you’re in a rush to fix the ship,” says Rey, and rolls her eyes again. But she doesn’t push the issue.

Kylo carefully stows Rey’s lightsaber back in her bag before he leaves the bunk room.

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They sleep out under the stars again. There’s no real reason to – the Falcon, although not flight-ready yet, is more than safe enough to live in now they’ve fixed the gas leaks. But they’ll be back in the vacuum soon enough. Might as well enjoy the fresh air and starlight while they can.

Kylo still isn’t sure where the line is between them. What to hope for, and how to ask for it, and whether it’s okay just to step in close and touch her. But with the same calm confidence as last night, she solves the dilemma for him. Steers him to the nest they made last night and falls back, pulls him down on top of her.

He’s not ready to leave this planet. This warm, peaceful pocket of empty land where the chaos of the galaxy can’t get to them. Weight on his hands, hair in his eyes, Kylo kisses Rey and lets the whole world melt away to nothing in the background.

It’s supposed to be different after last night. He should have calmed down, should have burned through the worst of his distracting need already. But apparently it doesn’t work that way. Rey’s mouth feels like a shock to every nerve in his body, and Kylo sucks on her lower lip and she brings her legs up and parts them wide. The heat of her against him goes straight to his cock. He pushes her shirt up, and her breasts beneath it are bare and unbound and blissfully soft in his hands.

Rey makes a throaty sound, and now that he’s touching her, the protective wall around her mind comes down just a little. She’s remembering how the last time felt. Heating up, squirming against him, deepening their kiss with her hands in his hair and her hips tilting to press against him.

Greedy, giddy, Kylo pulls her leggings down past her hips and frees his cock. He lines himself up with her and nudges in, and even this small taste is nearly too much all over again. She feels incredible. Wet and hot and eye-wateringly tight. He wants to drown in her. Wants to crawl inside her skin and never leave. But Rey doesn’t react like she did last night. Instead of melting into him, she says, “Ugh,” and presses both hands on his chest like she wants to push him away.

Kylo stops. “What do you mean, ugh?”

“Oh, don’t make that face at me. I’m still sore from last night. I can’t do this right now.” She gives him a shove, and Kylo rolls off to the side and swallows the sting of his disappointment. Not right
now doesn’t mean not ever. But stopping now, pulling away from her – it’s so frustrating it almost hurts.

Rey huffs a sigh. “Let’s try something else,” she says, with a confidence he can’t help but admire given that he knows full well she’s making all this up as she goes along. She takes Kylo’s hand, which is resting ignored on her stomach, and guides it down between her legs.

Oh. He can – he can give her that. He’s still aching, still frustrated, but the way she feels to touch is brand new and intimate and his arousal is shot through with breathless curiosity. Watching her face closely, he cups her in his hand. Feels the wiry tickle of her hair. Rey’s eyes flutter closed and her breath comes out in a little puff.

He parts her folds, feels her body slick and hot beneath the pad of his careful finger. With that ugh still ringing in his ears, he doesn’t enter her, but circles outside. Rey hisses. He’s pretty sure that’s a good sign.

Kylo knows exactly what he’s doing here. In theory. Way back at the start of eighth grade, his school made everyone take a six-week course in procreative biology. Like an astromech class learning about amplifiers and hydraulic extenders, they pored over holograms of ‘external reproductive organs – human female’ while the teacher, under strict syllabic guidance, explained the mechanics of clitoral stimulation in embarrassing detail. Even to a room full of adolescents, frustrated and curious and oozing hormones from every gland, the lessons hadn’t exactly been inspiring.

Maybe it’s the kind of thing that’s better learned on the job. But at least he has an idea of where to start, and so while his middle finger circles her entrance, his thumb finds the tender nub that earns him a little hum of approval. She sighs when he strokes it. Moans when he rolls it from side to side. Flinches and squeaks when he lifts up the hood of protective skin. He gives her a moment to recover from his misstep, and brings his thumb and fingers one by one to his mouth to wet them for her. He can taste her arousal, tangy and musky, completely overpowering but nowhere near unpleasant.

Rey opens her eyes, and gazes up at him. At his hand. His lips. Her pupils are dilated and her expression is hungry. “Will you use your mouth?”

The raw need in her voice makes Kylo’s neglected cock twitch. Or maybe it’s the image that just flashed through his mind: her writhing and arching on the bed, flushed and sweating, her naked thighs clenched around his head. Will he do it? Fuck, he’ll do whatever she asks him to. Trying to keep his mind off his own arousal – it’s not getting any easier – he tugs her boots off one by one so he can pull her leggings the rest of the way off. He pushes her knees apart and drinks in the sight of her. Open and swollen and flushed and wet for him.

Heart pounding wildly, he dips his head and presses a kiss to the top of her thigh. Breathes in the warm scent of her, so private and intimate. Rey brings her hands up and runs them through his hair, guiding him closer, nails scraping his scalp. He tries doing with his tongue what he did with his hand: pushing through her folds to taste, to stroke, licking up from her opening to her clit and circling to find a pressure and a rhythm she likes.

It’s … messy, honestly. She’s very wet. And there’s a lot of saliva. And wiry pubic hair in his nose, and possibly also caught between his teeth. He doesn’t care. It doesn’t matter. He keeps working with his tongue until it aches, listening carefully for the sounds that tell him how he’s doing, for the flares and flashes of her pleasure that reach him through the Force. When his tongue needs a break, he suckles her clit between loosely parted lips – too tight earns another flinch, it doesn’t work for her like it works for him – and brings his fingers back in to help, pushing just barely inside her, teasing and stroking. Rey moans aloud.
He’s getting this. Getting it well enough, at least. Well enough to please her. He knows how good it must feel because she’s grabbing handfuls of his hair and saying, “Just there, just there,” over and over. The biology teacher never mentioned it would be like this. Never mentioned how distractingly, painfully hard he’d be, how good it would feel to know those moans are for him. How, every time he moved his tongue in a certain way, Rey’s thighs would clamp around his head and narrow his whole world down to nothing but the shaking of her muscles and the burning wet heat of her body.

He wants more. He wants to explore her, wants to learn every inch of this new landscape, but when he tries to move away from her clit Rey whines and tightens her grip on his hair. So Kylo uses his hands more instead, pushes one finger deeper inside her while his free hand holds her hips still. He’s careful, but this time the penetration doesn’t seem to hurt her. He strokes, feeling the slick ridges inside her and the way she tightens and flutters around his finger. The same way she did last night, clenching hot and wet around his cock while he –

Calm down. Focus. Kylo tries adding a second finger, very slowly, keeping it shallow, and the noise Rey makes can only be described as bratty. “Come on,” she groans. Impatient, because of course she is. Her hot blood is one of the most captivating things about her. It’s also going to leave him with a bald patch if he doesn’t give her what she wants. He presses in all the way to his bottom knuckles, stroking her inside while his tongue resumes its steady circling rhythm on her clit. Rey groans again and kicks a leg over his shoulder.

The barriers around her mind are starting to weaken. It’s the same effect he noticed last night, if ‘noticed’ is the right word for that fever-haze of barely coherent thought. If he relaxes into it now, he can feel her pleasure almost as if it’s his own. She’s close. Arousal tightens in her core and sends tremors through her body. When he curls his fingers just the right way, she makes a sound that’s almost a sob. Keep going, her thoughts say, as her mouth passes the point of forming words. He ignores the ache in his jaw, the cramp in his hand, and when she comes it’s so intense that it almost pulls him with her. She clamps down hard and bucks her hips and shouts, gripping his hair like a lifeline and grinding hot and slick into his mouth.

It ends with one last little whimper. Rey pushes his head back. Breathes hard.

Kylo sits up between her legs and wipes his mouth and looks down at her. Her mussed hair fans out all over the pile of thermagear they’re calling a bed. Her shirt is crumpled up under her armpits. Now that he’s not absorbed in his task, his own want is like hot coals burning inside him. It’s crossed the line now from ‘almost hurts’ to ‘can’t stand it anymore’, and he feels like he could cry with relief when Rey hooks her legs around him and says, “Try now.”

There’s no issue this time when he pushes inside. Her body opens for him easily, and he sits back on his heels and she tilts her hips up and throws her legs over his shoulders, and the depth and the angle of it just about fucking kills him. He wants to savour every moment he gets, but it’s too good and it’s too much and his brain is switching off. All he can do is grip her hips and thrust inside her and bask in her moans until he falls over the edge.

He doesn’t know what kind of noise he makes when he comes or how, exactly, he ends up lying full on top of Rey like a dead weight while she cradles his head to her soft breast and strokes his hair.

But she doesn’t try to roll him off her, so he doesn’t move.

–

It’s not a dream, but it still has to end. Once the Falcon is fixed – well, once it’s been restored to its usual state of disrepair – Rey won’t hear a word about delaying their departure. She wants to be back with her friends. Quietly, Kylo hates all of them for the hold they have on her.
He doesn’t even get the satisfaction of wishing them dead. Rey and her friends are a package deal. He can’t have her without them – he tried to arrange that already last year, and the results were catastrophic.

As they leave the planet’s atmosphere behind them, his good mood fizzes and the heavy weight of reality settles back on his shoulders. This thing he has with Rey is fragile, and it may not survive the war they’re flying back into. They’ll have to tread carefully through Hydian space in the aftermath of the Resistance bombing. And if they do survive the trip, Kylo’s reward is that he has to to leave her and wade back into the treacherous swamp of Snoke’s old regime. His reforms are taking so much longer than he wants them to. Nothing goes smoothly. At every turn, there’s someone who wants to cut out his feet from under him. Even with Meg on his side, even with the Resistance working for him undercover, turning this shipwreck around is going to be the hardest thing he’s ever done.

Second hardest. His usual policy is not to think about the first. But on this ship, of all places, it’s kind of hard not to.

Alone in the hold while Rey watches the cockpit, Kylo beats himself at another round of dejarik and tries very hard to think positive thoughts. They won’t reach the Resistance flagship for another few days at least. Until then, he still has Rey to himself. Better make the most of it while he can.

It may not last. He can’t control that. But he can believe. He can hope. Believing and hoping have gotten him this far.

Chapter End Notes

I’m taking a break over the Easter long weekend, so there won’t be a new chapter next week. If you feel like saying hi in the meantime, feel free to hit me up on tumblr or drop a comment here! Hearing from you guys always makes my day.

Have a lovely, chocolately break, and I’ll see you with a new chapter on Monday 9 April.
“You’re mine now,” Rey murmurs, and tightens her grip on Kylo's arm. “Don’t forget that. When you’re finished dealing with Hux, I want you back.”

Inside the Falcon’s rear hold, behind the nook where the escape pod sits, there’s a secret compartment about the size of a standard cabin locker. It’s where the last owner used to keep those personal effects he didn’t want his wife to see: grog bottles, gambling chips, back-route smuggler’s maps, old holovids with names like Twi’lek Girls Uncut and Nautolans: Wet ’n Wild. A collection that could easily belong to any blaster-slinging deadbeat in the galaxy.

A second compartment beside it holds a slightly different stash: crumpled sweet wrappers, a deflated grav-ball, a toy starfighter with one of its wings snapped off. Animated datatapes and a special flimsiplast edition of Treasure Planet. This compartment was a much later addition to the ship’s schematics, a hastily-cut bargain when the first compartment’s contents caught the eye of a boy too young to understand the need for their privacy.

Every man needs his own hidey-hole, son. That one’s mine, and this one’s yours. But you have to make sure your mother never finds out about it. These compartments are secret men’s business, okay? I’m serious. Don’t tell her.

Footsteps sound out in the corridor. Kylo quickly closes both compartments, just before Rey sticks her head around the door. “There you are. What are you doing back here?”


“Nothing,” Kylo says. “You want me to take the pilot seat for a while?”

“No need,” says Rey. “We’re nearly there.”

–

A crowd of people are waiting to greet Rey when she steps out onto the tarmac. There’s hugging. Jostling. A clamour of happy voices that echo painfully off the duracrete ceiling of the Resistance flagship’s hangar. They’re all overjoyed to see her. Brimming with news and questions and excitement.

Kylo gives her up to the crowd. He doesn’t really have a choice.
Standing back outside the throng, he scans the hangar and absorbs what he can. Emotions are easier to read than facts, and strong emotions like these are almost impossible to ignore. He would if he could. Secondhand joy is a hollow, dissonant feeling that saps his energy and takes his mind places he’d rather it not go. But amid the general psychic din, he picks out some pieces of worthwhile knowledge: details of the strike on Taris, the performance of their new warship, the swift response from the First Order’s vanguard. The Resistance’s narrow escape from the scene, and their absolute confidence that the attack made it onto Hux’s radar.

In other words, Kylo’s job here is done, and he can go back to the Order now and leave the Resistance to take out Hux’s superweapon. It’ll only be a temporary goodbye. Rey’s mind maybe hidden from him, but the same isn’t true of her friends: he knows they agreed to help him so they could cash in the favour later in some way they haven’t thought through yet too clearly. Blackmail, maybe. Or appealing to his better nature, because hundredth time lucky.

A year ago the presumption might have made him angry, but if leadership has taught Kylo one thing, it’s that allies are worth their weight in aurodium. Their motives don’t matter if they’re delivering a useful service.

The crowd chatters on. The traitor FN-2187 – Finn, he calls himself now – has his hand on the small of Rey’s back. It’s a bitter shame Kylo hasn’t had longer to work on her. He’s grown achingly attached to the scent of her on his skin, to her warm smile, her sharp tongue, the softness of her body around and against and beside him, and just the thought of leaving her in someone else’s hands makes his heart clench. But he already knows what will happen if he tries to convince her to come back with him. Fate runs to a schedule of its own: you can see it coming, but you can’t rush its progress.

He’s not really needed here, and the sooner he gets back on his way, the better. In the far corner of the hangar his ship is waiting where he left it, docked at the end of a row of mismatched Resistance starfighters. Unnoticed, Kylo peels off from the welcome committee and crosses the floor.

The TIE silencer’s cold, smooth, laser-proof surface greets him like an old friend. She’s collected a little dust on her hull thanks to her time spent parked in a hangar that no one ever seems to bother to sweep, but other than that she’s as beautiful as ever. Fuck, he’s missed this ship.

There’s work to be done before he can fly out again. The TIE/vn make is an upgrade on the old TIE/ln engines, but no ship this size is optimised for long-range travel, and that last flight he made from his flagship to the Resistance base on Arda pushed the silencer’s stamina to its limit. Might as well start now. Kylo opens the hatch and climbs inside, and the noisy crowd across the hangar fades pleasantly into the background. For a few moments he just indulges himself, sinking back into the plush leather seat and resting his hands on the control yoke. Then he boots up the flight computer and runs a backup on the latest flight data.

While that’s going, he jumps back out with the idea that the solar collector arrays on the wings could probably use a clean to max their absorption efficiency. But when he hits the tarmac, someone else has already beaten him to it: Poe Dameron, who’s standing at ease and inspecting one of Kylo’s wing apertures.

“Your panels look a little scuffed,” Dameron says. “Want to borrow some Scratch-X?”

Kylo bristles. “They’re textured, not scuffed. I buff them after every flight.”

“Yeah, I would, too.” Dameron grins and pats the wing. “Sure I can’t talk you into letting me have that test flight before you take off?”
Kylo ignores this, and checks the panel Dameron was looking at. Maybe it does look a little scuffed. “Get me that Scratch-X,” he says.

After a moment’s rummage in a nearby locker, Dameron returns with a tank of polish and starts unwinding the hose. “You know,” he says, “any old monkey with opposable thumbs can do some damage if you give ’em a gunship like this. I wonder how you’d hold up as a pilot if someone took away your toy.”

It’s cheap bait, but Kylo takes it anyway. “I learned to fly on an old T-65B, Dameron. One time the wing joint gave out while I was three clicks up over Hanna City.”

Dameron snorts. He pulls the trigger on the spray nozzle and starts painting – up and down the panel in slow, straight, even strokes. Something inside Kylo relaxes. “Ah, man, those T-65s. Didn’t age well, did they? I used to know a guy who was obsessed with restoring them. I always asked him, why bother? Spend a fortune on spare parts and get maybe an extra year’s engine life for your trouble. But people are nostalgic.”

Kylo couldn’t agree more. Satisfied, for now, that Dameron can be trusted with the Scratch-X, he moves on to check the fuel tanks. Once he’s sure that everything’s tight and leak-free, he gets back in the cockpit to unplug the backup drive and start the system recompiling. Or tries to. His voice commands elicit no reply from the ship’s computer, and when he checks behind the cockpit, the reason is clear: there’s a major component missing from the chamber.

“Dameron!” Suspicion landing in the only place it can, Kylo sticks his head out of the hatch. “Where the fuck’s my droid?”

“Little black-and-chrome guy?” Dameron answers breezily. “Stubby legs, blunt head, shitty attitude? Couldn’t tell you, sorry.” Kylo’s glare doesn’t even make him blink. “No, seriously, I can’t tell you. He’s off with BB-8 and I had nothing to do with it.”

“He’s off with … huh?” Kylo’s M9-LX is a specialised astromech droid, programmed to support his starfighter from the back end. He logs coordinates, he maps routes, he keeps the navigational computer running smoothly. His personality subroutines are best described as minimalist. Making friends with other droids is way outside his operating parameters.

Dameron shrugs and keeps spraying. “Yeah, for some reason they’ve really hit it off. Droids, huh? I’ve hardly seen them apart since you and Rey took off.”

“He’s been running around outside the whole time I was gone?” in that time, in this environment, he’ll have picked up any number of useless and dysfunctional subroutines. Forget his usual memory wipe schedule, he’ll need a full factory reset before Kylo can take him anywhere again. Which means programming all his access codes and processing instructions back in from scratch. What a fucking hassle.

“Don’t be mad,” says Dameron. “He’s not a bad droid under all that First Order bullshit. I think he was getting lonely, cooped up by himself in your cockpit.”

“Droids don’t get lonely if you keep their code clean,” says Kylo. He’ll never understand idiots like Dameron who treat their droids as sentient creatures, and leave them unmaintained while they build up piles of useless emotional subroutines. Why inflict all those tangled feelings on a consciousness that doesn’t need them? A well-written droid brain enjoys all the advantages of organic intelligence with none of the obnoxious downsides.

Before Dameron can annoy him any further, Kylo retreats back into the cockpit and starts the
recompiler manually. It’ll take a few hours to run its cycle. There’s not much else he can do in the meantime.

“We’re throwing a party to celebrate our win at Taris,” Dameron tells him through the viewport. “The whole thing was your idea, so you might as well come along.”

“Taris wasn’t a win, it was basic groundwork for the real mission. You haven’t done anything worth celebrating yet.”

“Maybe not, but the beer’s still nice and cold. It’s that or sit here twiddling your thumbs.”

Kylo rolls his eyes. “I’d rather twiddle my thumbs than put up with a room full of rebel scum all evening.”

“Ren,” says Dameron, and for the first time a hint of weariness shows on his face. “I’m trying to reach out here. Just come and have a fucking beer with us.”

–

They’ve called their new warship the Organa, and it suits: there are eerie echoes of her presence in places on board where she never set foot. The main hold is in chaos, as off-duty crew cram in to shout and laugh and rub shoulders with the officers like they’ve never heard the word hierarchy. She always taught her people to treat each other like that. Not her, of course – for her, there was always respect and deference. But treating each other freely was fine.

It used to grate a lot. Looking back, though, Kylo can appreciate her nerve.

C-3PO patrols the floor with a tray of drinks held aloft. R2-D2, assigned to hors d’oeuvres, has chosen a more static approach: he’s parked off to the side with the tray balanced carelessly on one of his spindly attachments, letting partygoers come to him. LX and BB-8 are skittering around underfoot. A battered old holo-player oozes a steady stream of Republic-era pop ballads.

Across the hold, away from Kylo, Rey is surrounded by a jumpsuit-wearing crowd who can’t get enough of her. She’s laughing at one of Finn’s jokes, smacking him on the arm, beaming around at all her friends.

“So I’m banking my ship like crazy,” Dameron says, closer to home. He wipes a glob of beer foam off his mouth. “But this dumb SOB won’t drop my tail. I lead him right into the valley, through those huge-ass trees and everything, and I’m ducking and weaving and he’s ducking and weaving and I swear, I thought I was about to die.” A loud belly-laugh runs around Dameron’s circle of listeners. “But of course his wingspan’s bigger than mine, so he got caught between the trunks of two massive overgrown brylarks. Didn’t even blow up, just stuck there hanging in midair. I was home free after that.”

“You fuckin’ sick sleemo, Poe,” says a pilot with vacant eyes and a round, fat face. He seems to mean it as a compliment.

“Yeah, that was a good flight.” Dameron grins and takes another swig from his pitcher. “But c’mon, it’s someone else’s turn. What about you, Ren? What’s the craziest mission you’ve ever flown?”

All eyes in the circle turn on Kylo, wary but curious. He wasn’t expecting to be thrown into the spotlight like this, and he’s not much of a storyteller in the way Dameron and his friends all seem to be, and also most of his best stories are about taking out Resistance fighters like them. 

I’m trying to reach out, Dameron said, which was so suspicious that Kylo had no choice but to accept the party invite so he could monitor the situation more closely.
He casts around quickly for a story that’s easy to sanitise. “Uh … I once chased an A-wing through the Second Pii asteroid belt. That was kind of rough.”

“Shit, man, I bet it was.” Dameron’s grin widens. “Did you catch it?”

“Of course I caught it.” That’s the whole story, but the circle is still watching him, waiting for more. “I pulled extra power from the stabilisers and polarised my ion shields so the worst of the debris would bounce off. The A-wing was losing time dodging every rock in its path, so I overtook it easily.”

The members of the circle go quiet for a moment as they assess Kylo’s contribution. Then the fat-faced pilot speaks up. “Fuckin’ sick sleemo,” he says again.

The other pilots murmur their assent. Dameron punches Kylo on the shoulder. He’s given them what they wanted.

Rey and Finn are still talking to each other. It’s like they’re attached by some invisible membrane: when Rey gets another drink, Finn gets another drink. When Rey goes to the snack bar, Finn goes to the snack bar. When Rey turns to greet someone else, Finn turns too. She hasn’t spoken to Kylo all evening, but occasionally she casts a quick glance his way, as if to check he hasn’t lost control and started butchering fellow partygoers. She hasn’t spoken to Kylo all evening, but occasionally she casts a quick glance his way, as if to check he hasn’t lost control and started butchering fellow partygoers. He’s tried reaching out through the Force to see what’s going on – Rey’s mind may be shielded from him, a talentless ex-trooper’s not so much – but it’s too difficult to pick out a single thread of thought amid the general din and crowding. So he keeps an eye on Finn’s body language instead. The way he leans in when she talks. The way he keeps finding excuses to touch her. It’s a routine Kylo knows well, when it comes to Rey.

Her presence has a magnetic pull to it – the same kind of charisma that turned the Resistance into such a cult of personality while his mother was alive. Rey’s use of her appeal is less calculated than his mother’s, but the effect on her devoted followers is basically the same. Maybe Kylo shouldn’t blame Finn for getting caught up in it. But he does.

The awareness of how close they are is a sick pit in the bottom of his stomach, from which he is only partly distracted when Fat Face starts telling a new story about the time he outran a pirate cruiser in an old RV-2000 pickup.

The party goes on. New beer kegs are rolled out from galley. LX and BB-8 knock over a refreshments table and get bailed up by an irate 3PO. A group of officers sing along out of tune with the holo-player. A wary tech in a khaki jumpsuit offers Kylo a slice of cake. Time passes, and Kylo’s mood slips – from generally positive to weary and on-edge, as his eyes and ears and Force-sense start to tire from the barrage of everyone else’s enjoyment.

Someone has brought out a sabacc deck, and the pilots have given up bragging to cluster around the table. “You in, Ren?” Fat Face asks.

They’re all grinning expectantly at him, but he’s had enough. He wants to be alone. And – he almost forgot this for a moment – he doesn’t actually owe these people anything. “I don’t play,” he says, sacrificing his ego to the nobler cause of getting away smoothly. Of course he fucking plays. Even without the Force to help him, he could play these idiots into the ground. He knows how to slice a card-chip unnoticed and how to spot if someone else is doing it. He knows how to calculate odds in his head.

He’s been playing since he was a kid – started as soon as he was old enough to read the values on the cards. Learned it while he was hanging off the arm of a player who’d won half of his worldly possessions at sabacc. But thinking about that isn’t going to improve his mood.
So while Fat Face deals the circle in, Kylo slips away from the group and out into a narrow service corridor. Someone has rolled the empty kegs out here, blocking the path to the washroom, and as he passes by he makes inadvertent eye contact with a man who’s swearing profusely as he clambers out over them.

It’s Finn. Somehow, he’s found a way to peel himself off Rey for five seconds.

“Ren,” Finn says. He doesn’t sound thrilled to find himself alone in a confined space with Kylo, which is probably smart. But he also doesn’t sound afraid. “You leaving?”

Kylo doesn’t bother to answer. Muffled noise bleeds down the corridor from the party.

Finn clumsily vaults the last keg and straightens his jacket. He glances back towards the main hold – checking for witnesses? – and then sets his jaw and steps forward. Locks eyes with Kylo.

Sticks out his hand.

“When you left with Rey,” he says, “I wasn’t sure you ever planned to bring her back. But she told me what happened on Ord Radama. So … thank you. For looking out for her.”

It’s the same hand that’s been resting on Rey’s back for half the night. Is Finn trying to make some kind of point? Kylo looks him up and down coldly. He’s styling himself as a roguish freedom fighter now: his scruffy old pilot’s jacket is ostentatiously patched, and there’s a loose swagger in his step that would never have passed a unit inspection. But underneath he’s still the same unremarkable trooper whose performance reports all pegged him as best suited for sanitation duty. How little it’s taken to convince him that he’s someone special.

Under his glare, Finn falters. Lowers his hand.

“I didn’t bring Rey back for you,” Kylo says. “Whatever you think you have with her, I suggest you rethink it.”

Finn’s brow furrows. “Whatever I think I have with her? You mean a friendship?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I don’t,” says Finn, but the lie ripples in the Force. He’s annoyed, defiant – and ashamed, because he knows full well that his feelings for Rey aren’t what he pretends they are. He may have fooled most people. May have fooled even Rey. He’s certainly fooled that poor jumpsuit-clad girlfriend who moons around after his every step. But he hasn’t fooled himself, and he hasn’t fooled Kylo. “Maybe you should worry more about yourself, Ren. Rey’s got a good heart, and she tries to see the best in everyone, but there’s not much to see as far as you’re concerned.”

Kylo raises an eyebrow. “A second ago, you were trying to shake my hand.”

“A second ago, you hadn’t opened your ugly mouth yet.”

There are a lot of things Kylo could say to that, but none of them feel worth the effort. What he really wants to do is smack Finn right in his stupid smug face and choke all that hot air out of him. But that probably wouldn’t go over well with Rey, so instead he removes himself from temptation and walks away. Finn, to his very minimal credit, has the good sense to let him.

After so many hours of noise and clamour, Kylo’s cabin is blissfully quiet. It’s getting late by standard time, but he doesn’t feel like sleeping yet. Disjointed pieces of the evening are jangling around like loose coins in his skull: Finn’s hand on the small of Rey’s back. Rey’s glowing laughter.
Dameron and Fat Face and the other pilots, sharing stories and slinging insults almost like Kylo was one of their own. Rey stuffing her face with hors d’oeuvres, totally unselfconscious in front of her adoring audience of junior officers. LX crashing into a table while a group of engine techs cooed over him. Rey pulling a face as she reenacted some misadventure outside his range of hearing.

He needs to decompress. So he changes into a comfortable nightshirt, makes himself a cup of tea, and tucks into bed with mug in one hand and datapad in the other. It doesn’t stop the noise in his head, but it muffles it a little.

3PO taking pains to avoid bringing his tray of refreshments anywhere near where Kylo stood. Dameron clapping him on the shoulder. Finn trying to talk down to him in the corridor. A sabacc table, and No, son, the trick is never put down a card too early. Once it’s out of your hands, it’s out of your control. A room full of enemies all blithely unafraid of his presence. Rey’s fleeting little grin as she met Kylo’s eyes across the room.

Eventually the tea runs out, and he’s no further through the datapad than he was an hour ago when he started. Kylo turns out the light and rolls over on his side and closes his eyes.

He drifts a little, maybe, but before he can sink far he senses a presence out in the corridor. He knows she’s there before the hydraulic hiss of the cabin door alerts him to her arrival. Her barriers are down tonight. Her mood swirls like a gentle current through the room: tiredness, mostly. Subdued contentment. She’s had a nice evening: talked to all her friends, listened to the music, stuffed herself with party snacks like a scavenger whose next meal may or may not ever come. Kylo doesn’t roll over but in his mind’s eye he can see her, silhouetted against the light outside with her hair hanging loose around her shoulders.

She must know he’s awake, but she doesn’t say a word. Just closes the door behind her, strips off down to her undershirt, and clambers into bed beside him. There’s no room for her on this little bunk – Kylo only just fits on his own – but Rey fits herself in against him like a puzzle piece with her back to his chest, and pulls his arm around her middle to hold her securely in place.

And then she does nothing. Her ass is pressed back into him in a way that makes his heart race, but from the sleepy noises Rey is making, it’s not going anywhere right now. She came here for something else. So Kylo ignores his pang of want, and focuses instead on the gentle ebb and flow of her breathing and the soft, tender warmth of her body so close to him.

It feels good, in a way that Kylo doesn’t have a name for. He can feel her pulse. Feel her comfort. Feel…

Rey makes a happy little sighing noise and squirms back into him. “Don’t leave tomorrow until I’m awake,” she says.

Like she doesn’t have him trapped against the wall of his own bunk. “Yeah, sneaking off isn’t really an option.” But his heart isn’t really in the banter. The scent of her hair and the warmth of her skin are saturating his senses.

“How managed it just fine tonight,” Rey says. “You should have come and said goodnight to me.”

It honestly didn’t even cross his mind. She’d seemed so happily preoccupied, so uninterested in him. They don’t normally … well, on the Falcon, they were sleeping in shifts. Breaking at odd times. This, what they’re doing now, it’s new.

“You’re mine now,” Rey murmurs, and tightens her grip on his arm. “Don’t forget that. When you’re finished dealing with Hux, I want you back.”
Kylo’s heart skips a beat. She’s still facing away from him, and her fingers are like claws digging into his forearm. *You’re mine now.* “I’ll come back,” he promises.

He has no idea how it’s going to work. What’s going to happen when he returns to the First Order, or what she expects him to do about the fact that they’re both combatants on opposite sides of a bitter war. Kylo has never felt less like a combatant than he does with her body next to his. He’ll have to find a way to balance his commitments.

Because he already knows he won’t be able to leave her behind for very long.

His mind goes quiet, just like it always does when he’s close enough to Rey. Never mind Finn or Dameron or LX or C-3PO or any of them. In the silence, with his hand on her skin, the steady throb of her heart lulls him to sleep.

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Leaving was always the plan. It makes sense that it feels a bit strange: the Resistance has a way of sinking its teeth into you, and it hasn’t taken long for Kylo to get used to the understaffed chaos of the *Organa* and the groaning disrepair of the *Falcon* and the offbeat, easy good cheer of the crew.

The Resistance bites – but the First Order swallows you whole. As Kylo guides his silencer through the magnetic shield into Hangar One of the next gen mega-class flagship *Vendetta*, a familiar sense of awe engulfs him. He may wear the mantle of Supreme Leader, but the impossibly huge machine of the Order doesn’t truly belong to any one person. Even Snoke, in the end, turned out to be a replaceable part in its unstoppable workings.

Mech droids converge to secure the silencer. Crew members snap to attention. A guard escort materialises at his side without him having to order it. Everything is the way it’s supposed to be.

He’s home.

The process has been glacially slow, but Kylo has made some changes to the Order’s central culture since he took over. He’s not a hands-off leader like Snoke, lurking in his curtained throne room and refusing to let anyone see him in the flesh. Frail, shrivelled old Snoke had every reason to hide behind glamour. Kylo doesn’t. He has visited every part of this ship and seen the crew at work. His people know him; his top officials all report to him directly.

Because of those close ties he’s built, he can always count on knowing when something is wrong. For months he’s been pretending not to notice the network of spies that Hux has built inside the *Vendetta*. Mostly droids, but a few people as well. Second Lieutenant Tennix is one of them.

“Supreme Leader,” Tennix barks when he enters the bridge, snapping such a dramatic salute that she almost topples over. “Grand Marshal Hux requests an audience with you, sir.”

Of course he does. Tennix must have sent news of his arrival before he even climbed out of his cockpit. Kylo steps into an empty command room off the main bridge and approves the holo-link.

Hux is saluting as well, though nowhere near as enthusiastically as Tennix. It’s hard to tell over hologram, but it looks like all the treachery and subterfuge might be starting to take their toll on Hux. There are dark bags under his eyes, and his whole face looks gaunt and a bit grey. “Supreme Leader, I’ve been most concerned. Your starfighter dropped off our radar in the Eufornis system. I understand from Mordana Ren that you were on a pilgrimage in Mandalore, but we were unable to reestablish contact, and considering the present situation in that sector–”

“Hux,” says Kylo, cutting him off. “You don’t try to track my ship ever again.”
“As a matter of protocol, every starfighter in our fleet is connected to a central–”

“You don’t,” says Kylo, weighing every syllable, “try to track my ship. Ever. Again.”

“Yes, sir,” says Hux, seething with resentment. It took Kylo ages to disengage the basic tracker in his navigational array, and even longer to dismantle the second tracker that Hux’s spies had installed in secret. They’re approaching the end of this game of cat-and-mouse. It won’t be long now until Hux realises just how badly he’s miscalculated.

Kylo takes a seat at the head of the meeting table and kicks his feet up. He’d rather stay standing – he’s already been sitting for hours inside his cockpit – but he knows how much it irritates Hux to have to stand at attention while Kylo lounges. “You have a report for me?”

Hux works his jaw. “Resistance activity on the Hydian hyperway. It seems they’ve taken it into their heads to try and disrupt our trade routes. I’ve deployed forces to patrol every sector in their range, so it’s only a matter of time before–”

“I’m surprised your forces haven’t taken them into custody already,” Kylo interrupts again, for the simple pleasure of seeing Hux’s face change colour. If he’s ever disliked anyone as much as he disliked Hux, he can’t remember it right now. “Didn’t you tell me our trade routes are all protected by a network of your hand-picked security units? How can one lone Resistance ship have gotten through such powerful defences?”

He catches his slip the second it leaves his mouth. Of course, Hux hasn’t told him yet how many ships were involved in the attack. But he could have picked it up from someone else who’s been briefed on the incident. And Hux, too busy fuming at the insult to his forces, doesn’t seem to notice. “The Resistance are cunning, Supreme Leader,” Hux says, narrowing his eyes. “They have allies in all kinds of unexpected places.”

An interesting turn of phrase. Does he suspect that the Taris hit had inside help? It doesn’t matter if he does – his internal security crackdown will be one more distraction to keep him out of Kylo’s hair. “You know your job, Hux. I want every unit you can spare hunting them down. Don’t let them get away.” The more forces he can persuade Hux to send to patrol the Hydian, the less danger Rey and the Resistance will be in when they move against their real target.

There’s no shortage of tasks for Kylo to take care of now he’s back on board his flagship. But by the time he manages to get Hux off the line, his appetite for politics has passed sated and is inching towards nausea. He needs to be by himself for a while. Readjust.

The walk to his private suite is lined with saluting officers and battle-ready guards. But behind the heavy durasteel doors (blaster-proof, gas-proof, slice-proof and isolated on their own lock circuit, because you never know) his room looks the same as he did when he left it. Exactly the same except for the droid sitting out of place in the middle of the floor, who beeps a happy greeting at him. Kylo didn’t get a chance to wipe LX before leaving the Organa. His new friendliness is … odd, to say the least. Up until now, Kylo and LX have always coexisted in silence: Kylo pilots his ship and LX maintains the computer, with no need to talk except when issuing commands or flagging alerts. But company made the journey back here a little bit less dreary.

“You should be with the ship,” Kylo says, and really he should have wiped LX the first chance he got, because now that he’s gotten used to the new LX, a part of him doesn’t want to do it. Which is ridiculous.

LX lets forth a string of beeps that are mostly nonsense – he’s still getting the hang of conversation. But the general gist of it is easy enough to pull out. Data. Debrief. Sienar-Jaemus. He wants to give
Kylo the data he logged on the trip, so that it can go into his post-flight report to the manufacturers.

Normally, Kylo is diligent about his reports. The TIE silencer is still in prototype, and his feedback brought it forward leaps and bounds since his first flight. But he can’t exactly hand Sienar-Jaemus a flight log of his Resistance field trip. “Don’t worry about that,” he says. “Scrub the records.”

LX beeps shrilly. Data. Debrief. Sienar-Jaemus. Organa . Post-flight. When Kylo shakes his head, LX makes a sound that isn’t a word at all and flips the aperture on his holo-emitter. In flickering blue, Kylo watches Rey’s image cram an appetizer into her mouth and smile at something across the room. It’s a recording from the party. Why LX felt the need to log a moment like that, Kylo doesn’t know. And why he’s choosing to share it now is a mystery.

“I really need to reset you,” he says. But he doesn’t. Not quite yet.

Debrief, LX beeps, and plays his next hologram. It’s Rey again. Clinking glasses with one of her junior lieutenants.

“Were you just recording Rey the whole night?”

Sienar-Jaemus, LX squawks, and keeps projecting. At the very least, his conversational subroutines will definitely need some tuning soon. But Kylo thinks he understands the message anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience, guys! The next chapter will be up next Monday as normal. Comments are loved, as always. <3
Let’s pretend there’s nothing wrong with my direction
I’ll set it up inside you to watch you burn
Hate me, I’ll be the end that you deserve

Come Undone – The Used

The answer hits Kylo one morning as he’s cooling down from his workout.

He’s been back on his own ship for about a week now. The day starts well: he slept restlessly last night, but his dreams, instead of the usual loop of creeping horrors and angry ghosts, were mostly about Rey. The vivid impression of her body curled against him lingers long after he wakes. He spends a few shameless minutes jerking off with his nose buried in the cowl that has smelled like her ever since she borrowed it on Ord Radama. Honestly, it’s not something he does very often. For the last decade he’s been living with the knowledge that Snoke could at any moment be psychically spectating, which pretty much doused his sex drive like the world’s longest cold shower. Rey has undone years of damage in all of five minutes.

Touching himself is nothing like touching her, but it takes the edge off. Afterwards he washes his hands and splashes water on his face and looks at himself in the mirror, at the awkward mess of features and the jagged, disfiguring scar that cleaves him from forehead to chin. Kylo’s general attitude to his appearance is one of resigned indifference. He aims for intimidating rather than attractive, because intimidating is far more achievable. But the morning he left the Resistance, Rey kissed him goodbye and cupped his face and the look in her eyes made him feel almost … well. She didn’t look exactly intimidated.

When it becomes clear that his heart has no plans to stop fluttering anytime soon, he heads down to the workout centre to crush a few circuits and burn off some tension and make himself feel like fractionally less of a lovesick fool before his scheduled meeting with the war council later this morning.

As he drops the grav mill’s pace to a leisurely walk and pushes the sweaty hair out of his face, Kylo’s mind drifts down the well-trodden path of his current … situation with the Resistance. Now that he’s back in his familiar home environment, his memories of the last few weeks have a hazy, almost dream-like quality to them. But however impossible it seems from a distance, his bond with Rey is not a dream.

When he went to her for help, he was desperate. Grasping at straws. Barely thinking strategy at all, beyond the immediate need to eliminate the head of his army who was shortly planning to turn the galaxy’s biggest superweapon against him. Compromised by fear and stress and the visceral shock of feeling his mother’s light extinguish, a shock that to this day still reverberates somewhere unacknowledged inside him. He knew Rey would help him, because Leia had promised it with her dying breath. But he never expected her to commit to his gambit so wholeheartedly. He certainly never expected that the whole fucking Resistance, not just Rey but all her friends and confidants, would cast aside old grudges and start trying to embrace him as one of their own.

Killing them is off the table now. It’s not about what he feels, it’s not about mercy or conscience or some too-little-too-late respect for his mother’s memory. It’s a simple fact: light and dark aside, there is no version of Rey who abandons her friends.
But there’s his answer. Clear as day, and so blindingly obvious that he can’t believe it took him this long to figure out.

When Rey turns, she won’t leave the Resistance behind – she’ll bring the Resistance with her. It hadn’t crossed Kylo’s mind that turning all of them would be an option, because he’s still so fucking jaded from the memory of what happened after Luke’s betrayal. At the first taste of Kylo’s blood in the water, friends he’d known and trained with for years had drawn their weapons without hesitation to finish what Luke had started. He’d assumed the Resistance would do the same, but now he’s starting to suspect he was wrong.

Rey is different. Her friends love her, and her subordinates look up to her with a fervour that’s very nearly religious. They were willing to embrace a sworn enemy because Rey asked them to. When she asks them to follow her to the First Order and help her bring peace to the galaxy, who among them is going to say no?

The realisation makes his heart rev so hard that he pumps the grav mill back up and runs a few extra clicks to burn off the excited energy.

Back in his suite, Kylo celebrates his revelation with an extra large breakfast of poached eggs with greens and fermented marmal-fish. Marmal is one of those things Chandrilans love that make most other people gag – its mild, creamy taste is belied by its admittedly strong odour. He amuses himself for a while by planning how to get Rey to try some, maybe by covering it in sauce to mask the smell, or maybe just by daring her and letting her stubbornness and unstoppable appetite do the work for him.

He’ll have the chance soon. He won’t have to wait much longer now before she’s here to share his whole life with him, not just stolen moments.

He chats idly to LX as he scrapes his plate clean (Rebel scum, LX tells him earnestly. Data log. Overdue. Sienar-Jaemus. Debrief.) Then he takes a shower and dresses for the day in the usual black layers under an ankle-length greatcoat. He belts the coat and turns up the collar, and finger-combs his hair so that it covers his ears and at least a little bit of his scar. Once he’s satisfied that he looks imposing enough to deal with the wayward members of his war council, he takes the turbolift down to the bridge floor and his well-appointed ready room.

They’re all there early waiting for him. Novo, the Vendetta’s captain, who kept his position when Kylo claimed the enormous ship for his new mobile headquarters after the destruction of the Supremacy. Mattix and Corryn, seasoned veterans of the old Empire who hide their distaste for Kylo’s leadership behind stiff, prim masks of military discipline. Severt, the head of the Order’s loyalty division, whose enormous network of spies and surveillance cameras have somehow failed to detect Hux’s mounting coup. Tindal, who has detected the coup, but somehow hasn’t seen fit to report it. Hux himself, projecting in via hologram and cutting a large, unwelcome hole through Kylo’s telepathic coverage of the meeting. He still hasn’t mastered Snoke’s trick of penetrating people’s minds across a distance.

This is his inner circle. The elite team of military masterminds who, theoretically, Kylo is supposed to trust with his regime and his life. These are his friends and the Resistance are his enemies, except that right now the arrangement feels completely back to front.

Everyone snaps to attention, and Kylo takes his seat at the head of the strategy table and waves them back to theirs. “Let’s hear it,” he says.

Mattix launches into the day’s incident briefing. It’s nothing very interesting – fallout from Taris, mostly. Unfolding drama as Hux’s taskforce amass along the Hydian Way. Security scares. Wild-
eyed reports of Resistance sightings. The Taris hit has achieved exactly what Kylo wanted from it, which is to say, a whole lot of smoke and absolutely no fire.

But the council haven’t figured that out yet, and as Kylo listens to them push their arguments back and forth across the table, it strikes him how the energy in the room is almost the polar opposite of how things are with the Resistance. Rey’s friends are not the type to shy away from expressing their opinions, and their strategy talks can feel overwhelming at times with the sheer volume of heated input. But when it matters they somehow find ways to all get on the same page. Kylo’s council are subdued and proper and outwardly respectful, but he knows – because no matter how long they work under him, most of them never seem to fucking remember he can see their minds just as well as Snoke could – he knows if he gave them half a chance, any one of his trusty generals would gladly stab him and all the others in the back.

“Sir?”

Mattix’s creaky fossil voice cuts through his train of thought. “What?” Kylo snaps.

The admiral jabs an insistent finger at the holomap in front of him. “Again, sir, given the recent surge in rebel activity, I’m deeply concerned that our holdings along the Braxant Run are vulnerable to exploitation. Given the proximity of Bandomeer to Taris—”

Kylo raises an eyebrow. “Are you afraid that Hux’s taskforce isn’t equal to protecting Bandomeer? Speak your mind, Mattix. It’s okay. We’re all on the same side here.”

He’s careful not to look directly at Hux as he says it. From the corner of his eye, he can see Hux’s holographic jaw clench, and he knows he still needs to hold his cards close to his chest, but a part of him can’t help hoping the pointed comment hits home. Kylo never had much appetite for politics to start with, but the last few weeks have drained him of the very last of his tolerance.

Mattix clears his throat with a loud, phlegmy rattle. He’s old enough to have served at a fairly high level under Palpatine, though not high enough that the New Republic put much effort into hunting him down afterwards. “I have the utmost respect for the Grand Marshal’s taskforce,” he lies through his yellowing teeth. “What concerns me is the rebel warship still at large in the sector. Our surveillance network has picked up no trace of its flight path, and our tracking algorithms have been unable to generate a likely destination for it. Without that data, we have to assume that their next attack could come from anywhere, which is why my proposed defensive measures…”

“Are a waste of our Supreme Leader’s time,” Hux cuts in. His words say protective right-hand man but his tone says exasperated schoolmarm. “It’s quite clear his mind is—” Hux pauses delicately – “elsewhere today. You and I can work on Bandomeer’s security roster at our leisure.”

“Thank you, Hux,” Kylo says. From the look on Mattix’s face, it’s probably not a great idea for him and Hux to discuss so much as the weather without third-party oversight. But Kylo didn’t come here to play relationship counsellor. “What’s next?”

They breeze through Novo’s ship report, Severt’s loyalty briefing, and Corryn’s terse comments on the tactical imbalance that Hux has caused by pouring so many troops into the Hydian. Kylo only half-listens. It’s not that he takes the First Order’s security lightly – far from it. It’s just that, well. He already knows where the next blow is going to land. He doesn’t need to hear his council’s conjectures on the subject.

Their cold self-interest is hard to stomach, now that he knows there’s an alternative within his grasp. The irony isn’t lost on Kylo that everything he hates so much today – the hierarchy, the clashing ambitions, the general air of machine-like ruthlessness – is part of what originally attracted him to the
First Order. He used to thrive on the competitive energy. Now that he’s won their game, and ascended to the highest rung of the hierarchy, he ought by all rights to be basking in his victory.

But it all rings hollow.

Things are different now. They’ve been changing, if he’s honest, since Snoke’s body fell in pieces from his throne. His time with Rey and the Resistance has only poured fuel on the fire. Once Hux is out of the way, and once Kylo’s new allies are delivered to his side, he won’t need Mattix or Corryn or Novo or Severt or Tindal or any of them.

Kylo tunes back into the meeting just in time to hear Hux say: “And that’s why we need to pull Kinnet’s troops out of Oricho and move them to Ord Cestus. Wouldn’t you agree, Supreme Leader?”

It scalds Kylo to agree with Hux on anything, but the more initiative he lets Hux take on how to manage Taris, the worse it’s going to look when Ord Mantel blows up in his face. “Sure,” he says. “Do what you think is best.”

“Thank you, Supreme Leader,” says Hux with an ugly smirk.

—

Kylo generally takes his appointments in his ready room. But the Xhi have always been a special case.

Xhi. A long, rasping, guttural consonant punctuated by a short vowel that always comes out sounding something like a sneeze. It’s the best anyone has been able to do to imitate the sound Snoke’s strange alien allies make when they introduce themselves. The Xhi don’t seem to have vocal cords, as such. They communicate by manipulating the flow of air through the small, barbed mandibles that protrude like fangs from their mouths. Half the sounds that make up their language are outside the range of human hearing, and the other half are so grating that it would be better if they were inaudible too.

But what they sound like is less important than what they are. The Xhi homeworld is a cluster of planets in the distant Unknown Regions made entirely out of kyberite. Not the mines or scarce veins that the Jedi Order used to guard so jealously, but hulking masses of crystal formed around a series of molten kyber cores. In concentrations like that, the mineral has some strange effects on its surroundings. The whole natural world around it crackles with the energy of the Force. It flows through rocks and empty spaces and lifeless metal. It flows through everything –

Except the people.

They don’t feel it. They don’t understand it. It seems impossible, but somehow the explosive power that infuses the very air they breathe has passed them over completely. When Snoke arrived wielding the Force as a weapon, the Xhi reacted like primitives seeing fire for the very first time. None of their staggering technological advancement could have prepared them for the sight of a man lifting objects with his mind. In their eyes, from the first day he set foot on their soil, Snoke was a god.

A dead god, now, thanks to Kylo. His relationship with the Xhi has been awkward ever since.

The turbolift takes him to the reactor floor in the Vendetta’s belly, where a massive bank of corrupted kyber crystals feeds power to the weapons. To someone Force-sensitive, being this close to the power bank is a heady experience: the air is alive with dark energy that burns like liquor in the throat and has a comparable impact on the unguarded mind. It takes willpower for Kylo to keep his head on
straight and not let himself get drunk with it. But the atmosphere seems to make the Xhi feel at home, and it wards off the sickness that tends to hit them when they stray too far from their own home turf. No one else comes down here, other than the techs who clean and maintain the power bank.

The ambassador’s office is in a darkened room off the ventral chamber. Tall and thin with their features obscured by enormous hooded cloaks, the Xhi ambassadorial party greet Kylo with a ritual of bowing and swaying.

There’s the usual unpleasantness when the translator steps forward so that Kylo can enter his mind as a conduit. No matter how careful he is or how soft his touch, he can never stop the translator from cringing and wailing in discomfort. There’s no other way around it, is the problem. The Xhi don’t speak Basic, and Kylo physically can’t speak Xhi, so the psychic link is their only efficient way of communicating. But the Xhi find direct contact with the Force unbearably painful. Another mystery of their strange genetic makeup.

Forcing himself to focus through the background ache of the translator’s pain, Kylo addresses himself to the ambassador. “The new kyber shipment has arrived,” he signals with his thoughts, and the translator transmits the message through his mandibles. “We’re using it to refresh the eroding power cores in our Dreadnought fleet.”

Filtered through the translator’s ears, the answering high-pitched hiss becomes a stream of comprehensible words. “Leader Ren,” the ambassador says gravely. “That was not the plan. That shipment was reserved for the core world outpost you promised us.”

Aside from their religious fixation on Force users, one of the Xhi’s main motives in supporting the Order is that the Order can move their precious kyberite for them. Xhi physiology has evolved to rely on the presence of kyber in massive quantities, and they’re using the Order’s manpower to enrich the soil on several planets so they can safely build their first ever inner world colony.

Kylo doesn’t love the idea of the warlike Xhi setting up a clubhouse right in his own backyard. But the deal was put in motion by Snoke years many years ago, and if it falls over, the First Order will lose its main and only source of the kyber crystals their whole machine relies on. Half their fleet would literally grind to a halt. And the ambassador knows it. Ever since Snoke’s death, he’s been squeezing the import bands tighter and tighter.

“I’ve told you,” Kylo says, trying to keep the you-fucking-idiot out of his tone. At least through the translator’s borrowed mouth there’s an extra layer of distance between his audience and his seething frustration. “We can’t defend your outpost if we don’t have enough crystal to keep our ships moving. You need to lift your trade restrictions or we can’t give you anything.”

The ambassador clicks his mandibles. “Our Grand Treasurer fears that the old trade deal no longer serves our interests. Until you can show us a stable government, we cannot justify putting our most valuable resource at stake.”

It’s the same argument every time, round and round in circles. “I can’t stabilise the government if I don’t have the basic fuel to do it,” Kylo snaps. His rising anger flows through the translator, who squeals in pain.

“Hush, Xrrrrr,” the ambassador orders the translator. “Leader Ren, the Grand Treasurer cares nothing for the politics of your organisation. You must earn his confidence before we lift our trade restrictions. And in the meantime, you must continue to develop our outpost.”

Kylo counts to ten in his head. The translator lets out another pained sob.
Back in his ready room, Kylo stands by the viewport for a while and looks out at the vast expanse of space. There are no inhabited systems nearby: secrecy is no longer a part of the First Order’s survival strategy, but it’s still worthwhile keeping an air of mystery to their movements as they solidify their hold on power.

With no urban pollution or traffic interference, the stars outside shine like brilliant diamonds on black velvet. The nearest ones look almost close enough to touch. If Kylo stepped out to meet them, the vacuum would suck the life from his body and he would no longer have to care about council room politics or fucking kyber trade restrictions.

But then, who else would keep the Order running? The Force chose Kylo for a reason. It’s hard to remember that sometimes. Breaking away from the siren song of the void outside, he sits back at his desk and puts a call through the secure transceiver to Mordana Ren.

It’s nice, after a morning in the snake pit, to hear another person say his name with something other than fear-streaked malice. Even if that something is profound and unchecked irritation. “For fuck’s sake, Kylo,” she says before he can finish the second syllable of his hello. “Do you know what kind of mess you left me here to deal with? Hux was nagging me for *days* trying to get a lock on your location. I actually had to send my entire security detail on a wild bantha chase to Mandalore to make it look like you’d gone there for real.”

Kylo rolls his eyes at the glowering hologram. “I’m so sorry to have put you out,” he says sarcastically, even though in truth he is a bit sorry. Most people in the galaxy would be aghast to come face to face with an angry Mordana Ren – dark Force warrior, iron-fisted Outer Rim dictator, legendary slayer of countless enemies. But maybe that’s why she and Kylo get on so well. To him she’s just Meg, snappish and smart and devoted almost to a fault. “Do you want me to send you an apology bouquet?”

“Just tell me you kicked that Rey girl’s ass for the stunt she pulled.”

“I … we had a discussion,” says Kylo. Not a lie.

Meg huffs. He’s caught her at an awkward time – her hologram has dripping wet hair and is wrapped up tight in what looks like a bathrobe. But she must have genuinely wanted to take the call, since she’s clearly not in a mood to humour him with manners. “What do you want now?” she asks bluntly.

“Nothing.” Also technically not a lie. He considered trying to contact Rey, but the only line the Resistance gave him is an all-purpose one to their bridge, and odds are he’d miss Rey completely and end up having to explain to some po-faced junior officer that no, really, he just called up for a quick chat. Meg is a lot less complicated. “I wondered how you were. And how your apprentices are coming along.”

“Oh.” The topic warms Meg a little, and she starts chatting away about the strength her new recruits are gaining in the Force, requiring little more input from Kylo than the occasional ‘Hm’ or ‘I see’. Which is, and probably always will be, his favourite kind of conversation.

“This has come at a good time,” he tells her, when she pauses to gather her thoughts after an extended tract on her favourite teaching methods. “The aliens are going cold on our deal, so it’s good if we can show them that Snoke wasn’t the only Force-wielding god figure in our arsenal. They don’t seem to think my powers count.”
“Those guys creep me out,” says Meg with a shudder. “But if that’s what they really think, then they’re idiots. You’re stronger than me and all my students put together.” She’s flattering him, but that doesn’t stop Kylo’s inner peacock from preening its feathers at the compliment. “Whatever. If the aliens want a new Sith army, we’ll give them a new Sith army. Want me to bring them to you?”

“Yeah,” says Kylo. And then, “No. Things are volatile here, and I don’t need a bunch of rookies getting underfoot.” He hesitates a moment under Meg’s intent gaze. “I’ve been thinking, though. I wonder if it’s time for you guys to come back to the fold.”

When Kylo took over for Snoke, one of the first official decisions he made was to appoint the other Knights of Ren as overseers to the sectors that needed oversight most. They were about the only people he could trust to stay loyal without direct supervision, and he desperately needed agents on the ground to enact his new objectives without trying to push their own. But the Order’s hold on power is much stronger now, present drama with Hux aside. A lot of the work that needs doing these days is back here at headquarters, where the only people around to do it are the ones Kylo kept less for their qualifications and more because he needed them in his sights.

It’s no way to run an empire long-term. He’s realising that now.

“I already told you I want to come back,” Meg says at once. “I miss the seven of us working together. Well … six of us, anyway. I don’t think you should bring Callan. He’s more use out here in the sticks.”

Callan Ren is the one Mordana’s been waging her private war against. The war so badly planned that it almost caused an incurable rift when Kylo thought she was plotting to overthrow him.

“What do you have against Callan?” he demands. Somehow, that detail got left out of her whole rambling confession about the incident. “Has anything actually happened, or are you just making trouble? I can’t afford to throw away a trained Force user just because you don’t like him.”

Meg sneers. “He called me a power-hungry Twi’lek mutt.”

“Well,” says Kylo reasonably, “you are a power-hungry Twi’lek mutt. You don’t mind when anyone else says it.”

“Callan’s different. He talks down to me.”

“Everyone talks down to you. You’re the baby of the group.”

“Funny,” says Meg, “that’s not what I remember you calling me on those nights we spent together.”

Ah. It was only ever a matter of time until that came up again. Kylo was hoping he’d have longer to come up with something to say. He has no idea how Meg will react if she finds out what’s going on between him and Rey. It’s not as if … of course he likes Meg, fuck. But she’s not Rey. And it was all such a long time ago. Snoke would never have tolerated any kind of tryst between his underlings, so the chemistry Kylo and Meg brought with them from Luke’s temple was a decisive non-starter. “You’re changing the subject,” he deflects.

It works, for now. “He’s an asshole, Kylo,” Meg says, heating up. “I don’t trust him and I don’t think you should either. And for that matter—” She’s hitting a stride, nostrils flaring – “I don’t think you should trust half the people you trust at the moment. What’s the deal with you and the Resistance, now that you’re back home? How do you know they’re not going to—”

“We’re not talking about the Resistance,” says Kylo firmly. From the Resistance, they’ll end up talking about Rey. And from Rey…
Mordana juts out her jaw. “I just think–”

“No.”

He gets his way. They’re friends, sure, but that doesn’t mean this is a fucking democracy. Meg scowls and sits back from the holo-emitter. Her wet hair clings tightly to her scalp, revealing the short twin tails she usually works so hard to keep hidden – the half-formed lekku she inherited from her Twi’lek mother.

A moment of tense silence follows. Meg’s the one who breaks it in the end. “You know,” she says, pulling her robe closer around her shoulders, “I miss the way things used to be. Life was so much easier when all we had to worry about was hunting down Snoke’s enemies and watching each other’s backs. I wish you hadn’t gone and killed him.”

It feels like a century since Kylo’s life was that simple. But no matter how hard the change has been, he doesn't regret killing Snoke. “I miss it too,” he says. “But we’re not doing this for fun.”

Meg twists her mouth ruefully. “Guess we’re not,” she says. “Kylo, listen, I need to tell you–”

That’s when the alarm goes off.

–

The bridge is abuzz like an angry hive when Kylo arrives. One young officer nearly crashes into him as she hurtles down the corridor, and then smacks herself in the face trying to show him her salute.

Keeping his pace deliberately slow, Kylo strides over to the comms bay where the summons originated. “Talk,” he says.

“Sir,” says Mattix. “Reports of an armed and unregistered warship heading for our installation at Ord Mantel, sir. Long-range scanners have picked up a signature that matches our data from Taris. We’re getting the Grand Marshal on the line right now.”

Fuck. Kylo’s heart drops into his stomach as he reads the screen from over Mattix’s shoulder. With all the cloaking he put on the Organa, it shouldn’t have been possible for any regular scanner to pick them up. But there it is, clear as day, blinking at him from the black-and-red screen. The surveillance crew would have had to be running a targeted decloak – but why, when they had no reason to expect an attack anywhere near Ord Mantel? When all eyes were on the Hydian Way in the wake of Taris?

Hux’s hologram flashes to life by the console. His cap is askew, and there’s an indecent look of excitement on his face.

Kylo barely hears the conversation as the generals bring each other up to date. His thoughts are travelling at lightspeed through his head.

Everyone will expect him to say something.

“I want them captured alive,” he says, and a dozen heads and one hologram all swivel to face him. “Ord Mantel is a classified installation, and I want to know how they found out about it.”

Hux curls his lip. He’s an awful lot bolder when he’s out of range of Kylo’s powers. “I imagine,” he says, in a dangerously soft voice, “they must have had an inside source.”

“Preposterous,” says Novo. In contrast to Hux, he’s almost bellowing. “Ever since the last security incident, all weak links have been preemptively stamped out at intake. There are no traitors in our midst. It’s quite impossible.”
“I envy your positive outlook, Novo,” says Hux. “At any rate, bringing in the rebels alive shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll be very curious to hear what they have to say about their source.” His eyes lock with Kylo’s as he speaks.

He knows. Somehow – fuck – but there’s no time right now to anguish over how this could have happened. Kylo needs to warn Rey. Every second he wastes, she and her friends are hurtling closer to the jaws of death. They need to pull back now. Forget Ord Mantel and drop off the grid, before Hux’s forces have a chance to catch up to them. He’ll figure out another way to deal with Hux. He can't put her at risk for this.

Everyone’s talking at once. Novo is shouting about internal security; Hux and Mattix are discussing intercept tactics over the top of him. “I leave it in your hands,” Kylo says, hoping desperately that practice and muscle memory will infuse his words with cruel intent towards the Resistance that he absolutely does not feel. “Report every development to me. I want to know the instant you lay hands on the rebel ship.”

It takes every ounce of his self-control to walk rather than run off the bridge. This isn’t the end of the world. Thanks to the Taris scare, Hux’s forces are thin around Ord Mantel – he’ll need time to marshal an intercepting force, and by then the Resistance will have disappeared to safety. Once Rey is out of harm’s way, they can regroup and figure out a new approach. If Hux knows (but how?) then it changes the game. Kylo will have to move faster, but he also won’t have to take as much care to stay under the radar. If Hux already knows, then it’s time to go to war.

Except that when he reaches his private suite, something is wrong – wronger even than it was a few minutes ago. There’s nothing visibly out of order, because Kylo never leaves anything lying around to get disarranged. But someone’s been in here, someone who wasn’t a service droid or a domestic. He can sense it.

And when he closes the door behind him, before he can touch the control panel, a light flickers on of its own accord. A hologram, glowing blue atop the table in the centre of the room.

“Ren,” Hux says. “I thought you and I might have a private chat.”

Chapter End Notes

There'll be no new chapter next week, because I will be too busy getting married to write it. I'm so truly sorry to break off on a cliffhanger like this, but I hope you guys will agree my excuse is a good one!

Tentatively let's say I'll be back on Monday 30 April, but if I'm still burned out from the wedding by then, I promise I'll be back with a new chapter on Monday 7 May at the latest. Thanks so much to everyone who's supported this fic so far - my life has been crazy hectic these last couple of months and sticking to the weekly update schedule has been hard, but hearing from you guys and knowing that people are invested in the story makes it so incredibly worth the effort.

In the meantime, I'd love to hear your thoughts on this chapter. You're also welcome to drop by my tumblr. I'm always happy to answer any questions or, you know, chat about how your day's going or whatever. <3
“Ren,” Hux says. “I thought you and I might have a private chat.”

A sick weight drops into Kylo’s stomach.

 Somewhere behind a thick blanket of clouds, the sun is rising over the temple. It nudges back the shadows and bathes the earth in dim grey light. They’ve been sitting out here on this rock for more than an hour now.

“There,” says Uncle Luke, breaking his marathon silence. “You see? This is our lesson for today.”

“I think it’s going to rain,” says Ben.


“I’m just saying – there’s a lot of cloud cover. And the air feels sticky.”

“I don’t think you’re applying yourself to the exercise.”

At this hour, the only thing Ben really wants to apply himself to is his pillow. But Uncle Luke has always said the pre-dawn hours are best for meditation practice. Fresher mind, fresher air, less distraction. Jedi training hasn’t turned out quite the way Ben thought it would. “No,” he says, “I get it. The sun rises every morning.” Even if you can’t see it through the fucking rainclouds.

“The sun rises every morning, exactly. It doesn’t matter how dark the night gets, it only takes that first touch of light to drive back the darkness completely. The Force has always been about balance. You can’t stop the night from falling, but you’ll always win if you just wait it out. Do you understand that?”

“Oh-huh.”

“Good.” Uncle Luke unfolds his legs and stretches them out in front of him. “Because I think you’re right about that rain. We should get back inside before it hits.”

The walk home takes them through the east forest track. Here, they’re back in darkness: the day’s feeble sun hasn’t yet penetrated the canopy of leaves. Uncle Luke walks ahead, collecting bits of underbrush on the hem of his cloak. Ben treads carefully behind him. He can hear birdsong, and the tramp of their footsteps, and nothing else. Experience has taught him that questioning Uncle Luke rarely goes well, but he just spent an hour of his life meditating on the existence of morning while his
feet went numb beneath him, so surely by now he’s earned the right to speak his mind. “Actually,” he says, “I don’t really understand.”

Uncle Luke doesn’t stop, but he slows his pace a little. On this narrow path there’s no room for the two of them to walk side by side. “Which part don’t you understand?”

“You said it’s about balance. The sun always rises, but it sets again, too. So why do we talk about the light winning? It only really wins for half the day, when you think about it.”

Uncle Luke sighs. “Not this again, Ben.”

“Why not? Light and dark exist together – you can’t separate them. You keep telling me to respect the balance, but then you tell me our job as Jedi is to serve the light and, and prevail over the darkness or whatever. It doesn’t make sense. How can we do both? If we’re serving the light, who’s serving the darkness?”

“Believe me, there’s no shortage of people serving the darkness.” Uncle Luke stops in his tracks and turns around, and the look on his face is the same look Ben has seen his mother wear too many times to count. Somehow, no matter how deeply he thinks or how carefully he picks his words, Ben’s questions are always the wrong questions to ask. “Look, kid, you’re absolutely right. For the balance to work, the dark side has to exist as well. That’s a fact of life the Jedi have been grappling with for millenia.”

He looks Ben dead in the eye, and Ben experiences the strange, invasive sensation of his uncle’s gaze passing over his face straight through to his soul. His flawed, rebellious, inadequate soul that’s always full of anger and doubt and the contraband urge to do something with his power besides just sit around at stupid hours watching the underwhelming daybreak.

“The dark side exists,” Luke says again. “A lot of things exist, and we don’t have to be all of them at once. We choose who we are.”

“And we choose the light,” says Ben. The same rote answer every time.


But it’s not that simple. Light comes from a lot of places other than the daytime sun, and the things it illuminates aren’t always the things Uncle Luke wants Ben to see.

Light comes from the stars and the moon that bathe the inky sky in a soft, soothing glow on nights when the dreams make it too hard to sleep.

Light comes to him in visions, reflecting off the golden robe of a calm and wise and powerful man who doesn’t believe there’s any such thing as wrong question. Because – as the robed man says, with a smile that promises salvation – the only people who fear questions are the ones who lack for answers.

Light comes from the plasma blade that flares from out of nowhere and cleaves the fabric of his life in two.

Light comes from the temple as it goes up in flames.

They talk about the light side and the dark side as if the Jedi own everything that’s bright in the galaxy. Uncle Luke’s light is a bleak, blinding thing that shines too harshly on a soul like Ben’s, on
the anger and hurt and fear and need and selfishness that make up the ugliest parts of who he is. But
the firelight shows a different picture. The world burns and the boy Ben Solo burns with it, and the
man who steps out of the inferno sees the damage clearly for the first time in his life.

Uncle Luke taught that the dark side was about hate. But it was the Jedi doctrine that taught him to
hate himself, to see his hot blood and his natural power as flaws to be reined in and suppressed.

Uncle Luke taught that the dark side was about pain. But no wound can match the pain of trying so
hard for so long to be somebody his family can value, and meeting only rejection and disinterest.

Uncle Luke taught that the dark side was about fear. But when he kneels at Supreme Leader Snoke’s
feet – when the Supreme Leader bids him rise, and the First Order opens its ranks to embrace him –
Kylo Ren has never felt less afraid.

The volcanic surface of the planet Mustafar never rests for long. Billowing smoke makes Kylo’s eyes
water, and searing heat dries them before they can leak, and the Supreme Leader’s tortured gait turns
their walk across the threshold into a long, laborious trek. It’s rare that Leader Snoke steps off the
Supremacy, but as he inches his way across the cracked floor, he smiles and says, “My dear young
apprentice, I wouldn’t miss this moment in your life for anything.”

Years ago, this towering obsidian castle was home to Darth Vader. The chosen one. The scourge of
the Jedi. Kylo’s grandfather. The truth of his bloodline was just one of many secrets that Kylo’s
family tried to keep from him, a sticking point in the litany of lies that Leader Snoke is helping him
unpack. Somewhere deep beneath this planet’s crust, a locus of the dark side fills the air with the hot
sulphuric tang of its power.

“Do you feel it?” Leader Snoke asks.

It’s so potent that Kylo can barely feel anything else.

“This place should have been yours,” says Leader Snoke. “Just a small part of your inheritance. At
the height of its powers, the Empire held sway over every system in the galaxy. It was a time of
peace and prosperity, where technology and innovation flourished, where the weak served the strong
and the strong in turn protected the weak. Perfect balance. Nature’s justice brought to bear. And
ruling over the system were those wise few chosen by the Force to deliver its will to the masses.
Those who understood the Force in all its aspects, who had the courage to embrace the full extent of
its power. The Sith Lords, our fathers in darkness. The great Force warriors in whose footsteps you
now tread.”

Kylo isn’t alone on this new path. There are the others: Mordana and Callan and Titan and Jex and
Orian and Zaya, newly turned and newly christened, each named from the pages of the sacred texts
of Malachor. They’re loyal allies. Valuable assets. But, as Leader Snoke has made very clear, none
of them have the blood of Vader running through their veins. Don’t fall victim to dependence,
Leader Snoke has warned him. They’re your friends now, yes. But look how quickly they turned on
Skywalker. In time, I will teach you to see their minds so you can judge their loyalty for yourself.

Inside Vader’s castle, the volcanic rumbling fades away and the air is cooler and more breathable.
Somehow, Kylo’s feet know the way to the inner sanctum. He’s seen this place before. Dreamed it.
The floor used to be polished stone, but now it’s covered by layers of ash and dust. The sanctum is
empty except for a bacta tank that faces out the enormous window to the vast, scorched terrain of
Mustafar.
“Can you feel it?” Leader Snoke asks again.

Kylo places his hand on the bacta tank and almost recoils. It’s old, but enough of the bacta survives inside, its cells imbued with the memory of the tank’s last inhabitant. “Pain.”

“Pain, yes. Your grandfather lived with agonising injuries, inflicted by the Jedi master who betrayed him. There are many who believe his chronic pain is what fueled his power and enabled him to master the Force in ways undreamed of. What else do you feel?”


Leader Snoke lays a hand on his shoulder. Kylo starts. Absorbed in the tank, he hadn’t realised the Supreme Leader was so close. “Regret,” Leader Snoke echoes. “Deep, bitter regret. Your grandfather was a great man. He accomplished things in his life that the galaxy believed impossible. But even as all his dreams lay within his grasp, he was thwarted by a cancerous weakness he never quite managed to excise from his soul. A weakness that Luke Skywalker saw and exploited. Do you know what it was?”

Luke’s name is a sharp blade that lance through Kylo’s chest, as if in sympathy with the lingering ghost of his grandfather’s tortured existence. “Tell me, Supreme Leader.”

Leader Snoke leans in close. His breath rustles Kylo’s hair. “Darth Vader’s fatal weakness was sentiment. In a moment of misplaced compassion, he allowed family bonds to overrule his better judgement. The mistake claimed his life and brought the whole glorious Empire crashing to its knees. You, my young apprentice, must never make the same mistake.” Leader Snoke steps around so that they stand face to face, and tilts Kylo’s chin up with a papery hand. “Your will is iron, your word is law, and your destiny is manifest. Sentiment has no place in your life. With my teachings, you will find the strength to do what Darth Vader himself could not.”

If Kylo’s heart beats any faster, they’re going to need to throw him in the bacta tank. No one in his life has ever looked at him the way Leader Snoke looks at him.

“Come,” Leader Snoke says, and a faint smile plays around the corners of his mouth. “Enough dramatic speeches. I have a gift for you.”

In a small room off the inner sanctum sits a shrine. It’s a new addition to the castle, or at least one that someone has taken the trouble of maintaining. On a plinth overseeing the room sits a black helmet. The metal is twisted and flame-ravaged, but there’s no mistaking what it is or who it once belonged to.

“I didn’t choose you out of idle preference,” says Leader Snoke. “I chose you because the Force chose you, and my greatest act will be to help you finish your grandfather’s work and bring lasting peace to the galaxy. Your path will not be easy. Your pain will fuel you, the way it once fueled him. But in the end you will not live with his regret. In the end, you will stand transcendent.”

—

“Ren,” Hux says. “I thought you and I might have a private chat.”

Hux’s hologram steps out from behind the table. With the holo-emitter fixed overhead, his field of motion is limited – but he makes full use of it, striding forwards until he’s close enough that Kylo could reach out and run a hand right through him.

A sick, familiar weight drops into Kylo’s stomach. He doesn’t need access to Hux’s mind to see what’s happening: Hux knows. The fight is over. The plan has failed.
As understanding dawns, Kylo braces for the inevitable tidal wave of emotion – rage, fear, humiliation, frustration. But it never hits. His world has narrowed down to a single focal point: he’s not the only one Hux has cornered. Somewhere out there in the space around Ord Mantel, Rey and the Resistance are flying into a trap. They’re there because Kylo put them there. And he needs to get them out.

With focus comes purpose, and with purpose comes calm. “LX,” Kylo says. “Are you in here?”

He can’t see his droid anywhere, but a tinny rattle draws his attention to the cupboard under his personal console. He crosses the room and opens the door, keeping sight of Hux in the corner of his eye. Sure enough, LX is in the cupboard. He’s scuffed and dirty and one of his photoreceptors is broken.


Fuck. Kylo has no idea if LX’s subroutines are capable of processing the current situation. He can’t even tell if LX is consciously trying to communicate, or if he’s just blurting keywords again. “Yeah,” he says, willing it to be the former. “Rebel scum debrief, right now.” Please let him understand.

Hux snorts. “It won’t matter, you know. The droid’s already served its purpose. What possessed you to bring that thing back to the Vendetta with a full catalogue of your treachery stored on its memory bank? If I didn’t know better, I’d almost think you wanted to get caught.”

Kylo turns back to study Hux’s hologram. What was it Snoke always used to say? Distance is an artificial construct made to comfort mundane minds. Through the power of the dark side all things are possible. If you can sense it, you can touch it. He can sense Hux, sort of. A smug, unwelcome presence in the periphery of his awareness. A snag in the tapestry of the Force. By now, Snoke would have had Hux’s body prone and bleeding on the floor from anywhere in the galaxy. But Kylo can’t touch him. Even on a good day that skill mostly eludes him, and today is not a good day. The anger still won’t come, and without anger his power is barely a flicker of its full potential. His field of control doesn’t extend outside this room.

“By all means, keep glaring at me,” says Hux. Kylo has never heard him sound so jubilant. “How did you think this was going to end? I’ve been training as an officer since I was in the cradle. I have the whole corpus of battle tactics at my fingertips. I know every detail of the First Order’s history, every word of its ethos, every intricacy of our weapons systems.” His lips curl into a sneer. “But you. You, Ren. You showed up at Snoke’s feet like a craven beggar, waving your oversized glowstick and thinking a few mind tricks made you fit to command an army. When you started plotting to discredit me, I was almost too amused to be angry. The very notion that you, of all people, could think to outsmart me. You’ve sealed your own fate, and hand-delivered me my moment of glory.”

“A moment you’re too frightened to attend in person,” Kylo says. He’s never shared Hux’s enthusiasm for giving speeches. LX has rolled back into the console cupboard and is doing something with the comms array that looks promising. Of course, even if he does manage to get a message to the Resistance, there’s no guarantee they’ll be able to make sense of it. “So what’s your plan now, Hux? Are you going to send your men to arrest me?”

“Always the unsubtle approach,” says Hux, which is a bit rich coming from the man who blew up the Hosnian system for a spectacle. “No, there’ll be no need for a dramatic arrest. As we speak, all central holo-channels across the entire fleet are broadcasting the footage I took from your droid. Soon there won’t be a soul left in the whole First Order who doesn’t see you for the snivelling traitor that you are. And since you so graciously funded my second Starkiller for me, there’ll be no question of who steps up once you’ve lost what few shreds of credibility you ever had as a leader.”
The words wash over Kylo like static engine buzz, and nothing seems to land. There’s a dark vacuum where his anger should be. LX is still working in the cupboard. They need more time. Luckily, Hux loves to talk. “What if you didn’t have the droid footage? What was your grand plan then?”

“Oh, the footage is just optics. I had plenty of evidence to work with – you’re not exactly masterful at covering your tracks. How do you think your loyal generals will feel when they learn it was you who killed Supreme Leader Snoke?”

At this stage, asking how he knows is a moot point. “So you knew I’d target the Starkiller programme,” Kylo says.

“Obviously. I’ve been running continuous full-spectrum scans so I’d know the moment you breached my perimeter. My patrols—”

Kylo only half-listens. He’s watching LX emerge from the console cupboard, his one remaining photoreceptor glowing brightly in his head. “Rebel scum debrief,” the droid beeps.

It’s the best he’s going to get. And now that he’s contacted Rey – hopefully – Kylo is out of ideas. That was the first and only step in his crisis management plan. “Hux,” he says, “I don’t give a fuck. You want to run this asylum, go ahead.” The words come out with no thought or reflection, but he thinks a small part of him might actually mean them. All this time he’s been hanging onto power by the skin of his teeth, and for what? What’s any of it worth, if he’s too busy fighting his own system to achieve the change he wants? The galaxy is still burning. People are still living in chaos and disorder. You can’t fix anything with broken tools. “But if you lose me, you lose the Force and you lose all hope of restoring balance to the universe. Without the power of the darkn—”

“How brainwashed are you?” says Hux, so incredulous that he forgets to hold his sneer. “This has never been about the Force, Ren. We’re not restoring balance, we’re taking control, and your mystical nonsense has been holding us back for long enough. Who would care about the myth of the Jedi if you and Snoke weren’t constantly trying to suppress it? Who would care about feeble old Luke Skywalker if you hadn’t torn holes through the galaxy to hunt him down? Who would care about an orphan girl from Jakku if you weren’t so obsessed with her? You’ve elevated her to the status of legend and given the Resistance their greatest weapon against us. It’s time for the First Order to move beyond your archaic religion. Getting rid of Snoke was the only good thing you ever did for us.”

At long last, anger swells. Kylo feels it like a fire searing through his veins, and with the heat comes strength, and with that strength he seizes hold of the Force and suddenly Hux isn’t so far away anymore. He bears down with absolutely everything he has, lets his hatred come alive, and countless light years distance away Hux chokes for breath and falls to his knees.

The room spins. Hux is already recovering, pushing himself up onto his knees, and there’s no way Kylo has the strength for a second attempt. But it doesn’t matter – he’s made his point. “You don’t know anything about my archaic religion,” he snarls. “The First Order is nothing without the Force. What resource powers our weapons? What shared faith holds our regime together? What fear brings our enemies to their knees? If you think you can do this without the Force, you’re not just an idiot – you’re a traitor to everything the Order stands for.”

“Me, a traitor?” Hux splutters. “Look at yourself, Ren! Which part of what the Order stands for means colluding with the Resistance to destroy one of our most secret and expensive assets?”

“I only had to do that because you were planning to overthrow me—”
“Just like you overthrew Snoke—”

“—and you wouldn’t have known about it in the first place if you weren’t spying on me, which last time I checked was a direct abuse of your rank and more than grounds for a court martial.”

“Then why didn’t you court martial me for it, instead of cooking up some ludicrously over-elaborate plan to discredit me? No, Ren.” Hux’s hologram stands up straight and gives Kylo a look of sneering disdain. “You know the truth. I’ve always been a better and more credible leader than you, and given half the chance my troops would have turned their backs on you years ago. If you’d tried to challenge my loyalty to you, the whole Order would have laughed in your face. You had to make them think I was a threat to their security or they’d never have gone along with it.”

“Like I said,” says Kylo. “Go ahead and enjoy yourself for as long as you can hold onto power. I don’t give a fuck.”

“I think you do,” says Hux.

“Are you listening? I just said—”

In a corner beside the console, unnoticed and temporarily unoccupied, M9-LX records the exchange between Grand Marshal Hux and Primary Operator Kylo Ren in line with his memory storage protocols. Grand Marshal Hux is showing signs of extreme aggression and distress. So is Primary Operator Kylo Ren, even though M9-LX has done his best to address the source of trouble by warning the rebel scum about the data breach that has compromised their security.

Minding his primary operator’s feelings isn’t strictly part of M9-LX’s programming. It’s a new subroutine he acquired from BB-8, and he hasn’t finished integrating it yet, but his calculations based on general probability and specific knowledge of Primary Operator Kylo Ren’s temperament suggest the new skill will prove valuable.

For instance, Primary Operator Kylo Ren will probably not be happy about the fact that Unit 3 Punishment Corps has recently been dispatched to his location according to the ship’s command logs. M9-LX has tried to tell him, but his communication subroutines don’t integrate well with organic speech systems, and also, Primary Operator Kylo Ren is currently arguing with Grand Marshal Hux at a volume that exceeds M9-LX’s audio output capacity.


M9-LX’s audio sensors detect footsteps outside in the corridor. Unit 3 Punishment Corps has arrived. Finally, Primary Operator Kylo Ren stops arguing with Grand Marshal Hux and turns to listen. Simultaneously, Grand Marshal Hux exhibits a shock reaction as something moves on his end of the holo-link.

The door slides open. Standing outside are Captain Severt (clearance level one), Admiral Mattix (clearance level one) and Vice-Admiral Corryn (clearance level one, provisional). All of them are members of the war council, and all are capable of accessing any area of the ship, including the private quarters of Primary Operator Kylo Ren.

“Kylo Ren,” says Captain Severt, breaking with standard form-of-address protocol. He stands in the doorway with Admiral Mattix and Vice-Admiral Corryn behind him. Unit 3 Punishment Corps are arrayed behind them in tactical formation. “By my authority as head of the First Order’s loyalty
division, you are under arrest for sabotage and high treason.”

Primary Operator Kylo Ren draws a deep breath. “For fuck’s sake, Severt, not you too.” M9-LX isn’t sure what not you too means in this context, but he knows for fuck’s sake from repeated in-flight exposure. Usually, for fuck’s sake means that Primary Operator Kylo Ren is about to blow something up, but without access to his ship’s weapons array the words do not take effect on this occasion.

“Language,” says Severt, curling his upper lip.

Admiral Mattix expels a phlegmy cough. Organic medicine is well outside the scope of M9-LX’s programming, but it doesn’t sound healthy. In fairness Admiral Mattix is advanced in years according to the average lifespan of his species. “I regret that it’s come to this,” Admiral Mattix says. “We meant to resolve the issue without causing a scene, but the matter has been taken out of our hands.”

“What are you yammering on for?” says Grand Marshal Hux. “Seize him!”

M9-LX’s audio sensors detect no input for a moment. Then, along with a fresh burst of shouting, his one remaining photoreceptor registers motion on Grand Marshal Hux’s end of the transmission. Two black-helmeted stormtroopers from the elite division step into the emitter’s range and seize Grand Marshal Hux by the arms. “Armitage Hux,” Admiral Mattix says, again breaking with standard form-of-address protocol, “you are also under arrest for intention to commit a coup. You will be brought aboard the Vendetta to answer for your crimes.”

“What?” Grand Marshal Hux stares back and forth between his captors, with an expression that suggests a severe processing malfunction. “Gentlemen, I order you to stand down at once! This is your Grand Marshal talking! Your authority does not extend to–”

“I assure you that it does,” says Captain Severt. “Believe it or not, Grand Marshal, I am rather well versed in the laws and traditions of the First Order, and the Empire before it – traditions for which you young ones have never made time. Legitimate rule: that’s what we promised the people of this galaxy. Legitimate rule, and a stability that the corrupt New Republic could never provide them. I am authorised by the highest authority of our constitution to act against any individual who threatens that stability.”

“This place has been going to the dogs,” says Vice-Admiral Corryn. “We served under Palpatine. Between the three of us, almost two centuries of honourable service, only to see the fruits of our labour squandered by bickering children. Hux, your underhanded treachery has threatened the cohesion of our ranks and you will be brought to account for it.” He turns to Primary Operator Kylo Ren. “Ren, your desperation to hold onto power has thrown the highest office of our government into disrepute. Lord Vader would have been ashamed of you.”

“Traitors,” Hux says at high volume, but Primary Operator Kylo Ren is frowning at the three intruders.

“I can’t see your minds,” he says. “Why? None of you has the skills to resist me. But I can’t see anything.”

“That,” says Vice-Admiral Corryn, “is thanks to our sponsors.”

“You sponsors?”

“The Xhi, of course,” says Vice-Admiral Corryn, a split-second after M9-LX’s probability
calculations return the same answer. “That poor translator you’re always tormenting, he’s been advocating on our behalf for months now. The Xhi have developed the most marvellous technology to shield against the power of the Force. It’s quite selective, too. They’ve been able to hide our plans from you without touching anything else that might raise your suspicion.” He curls his lips in an expression M9-LX recognises as a human smirk. “But enough of this. We’ve had too much trouble from you young upstarts as it is. Both of you will come quietly or face the full extent of the legitimate First Order’s wrath.”

Grand Marshal Hux makes a sound like a broken steampipe. “Oh,” he says, “I beg to differ. “You see, while you have been fraternising with the Xhi, I have been building a top secret network of agents right under your–”

Primary Operator Kylo Ren moves without warning. In doing so, he gains a tactical advantage. A surge of power from Primary Operator Kylo Ren overrides the mechanism on the reinforced durasteel door, which slams closed on Captain Severt’s fragile organic chassis. A second surge of power sends it flying backwards off its rails, knocking over Admiral Mattix and Vice-Admiral Corryn and an unconfirmed number of Unit 3 Punishment Corps personnel.

“Get moving, LX,” Primary Operator Kylo Ren instructs. He doesn’t offer any get moving parameters, so M9-LX interfaces with the holo-emitter and shuts off Grand Marshal Hux’s transmission to reduce the number of input sources he has to process. This is important, because the remaining Unit 3 Punishment Corps personnel have begun firing blaster bolts at random into the room and M9-LX’s self-maintenance subroutine requires him to prioritise avoidance above all other inputs.

Luckily for M9-LX – although possibly not for Primary Operator Kylo Ren – the Unit 3 Punishment Corps personnel have not received orders to target any droid. Their fire is directed at Primary Operator Kylo Ren. M9-LX is able to follow at a minimum safe distance as they move in the direction of the turbolift, circumnavigating fallen Unit 3 Punishment Corps personnel and benefiting from Primary Operator Kylo Ren’s blaster-deflection capabilities. This is the best he can do, since his subroutines do not allow for combat participation.

But Primary Operator Kylo Ren has another tactical advantage: the corridors in the living quarters are narrow, and there are a great many Unit 3 Punishment Corps personnel and only one Primary Operator Kylo Ren. He disables the attackers in batches while they compete for a clear view of their target.

They reach Lower Hangar 4 having sustained a moderate amount of damage. M9-LX’s remaining photoreceptor is flooded with all the laser-fire input, and Primary Operator Kylo Ren has suffered multiple blaster bolt wounds and is perspiring heavily. Lower Hangar 4 has also sustained damage. Stormtroopers are engaged in intra-unit combat, a toppled fuel canister has ignited, and Unit 4 Fighter Squad personnel are attempting to stop Unit 3 Fighter Squad personnel from launching their starfighters.

When M9-LX tries to interface with the ship’s central computer, it rejects his connection request. But nearby auxiliary systems provide enough data to explain the situation. The problem has come from the top secret network of agents right under your that Grand Marshal Hux spoke of building. Prompted by Captain Severt’s arrest attempt, Grand Marshal Hux’s agents have moved to secure control of the Vendetta and are now at war with local command.

Primary Operator Kylo Ren’s TIE/vn space superiority fighter is almost in range. M9-LX finds himself airborne in another one of Primary Operator Kylo Ren’s source-unknown power surges, and he drops into the cockpit with a problematic screeching sound from his damaged chassis. But then
Primary Operator Kylo Ren cold-starts the engine, and M9-LX has no processing cycles to dedicate to chassis damage or anything else because he needs to prioritise the immediate flood of system error notifications.

The docking link breaks and they exit Lower Hanger 4 into open space. M9-LX has not yet received navigational input, and going by his rate of breathing, Primary Operator Kylo Ren may not have capacity to provide it.

“Coordinates,” M9-LX prompts through the wall between the droid slot and the pilot seat.

Nothing. More heavy breathing.

“Coordinates,” M9-LX repeats. His protocols require primary user authentication for all navigational processes. His self-maintenance protocols are urging him to put distance between the TIE/vn space superiority fighter and the Vendetta, but he needs approval to proceed.

Primary Operator Kylo Ren pants for breath. There’s a shuffling sound as he moves himself around in the pilot seat. “We need … need to find Rey.”

*We need … need to find Rey* does not match any of M9-LX’s standard-format authentication triggers. But this is another subroutine he learned from BB-8: flexible interpretation. “Rebel scum?” he prompts, just to check he has understood correctly.

“Yeah,” says Primary Operator Kylo Ren. His voice has dropped several decibels. “Yeah, rebel scum, LX. Can you get us to them?”

M9-LX calculates. He can contact the rebel scum through a secure channel and ask them for coordinates. He cannot pilot the ship by himself, but as long as Primary User Kylo Ren continues to give basic executive input, he can activate auto-navigation and maintain a steady course for them. M9-LX’s systems have sustained damage and will need repair, but that is less urgent than his current directive, which he has just now extracted from *Can you get us to them?* using BB-8’s flexible interpretation subroutine: get Primary User Kylo Ren to safety.

“Rebel scum,” M9-LX confirms. He wants to add more, but his communication subroutine restricts him again – until an innovative solution occurs.

He scans his memory banks. Grand Marshal Hux’s recent data raid didn’t damage them, and he is able to access exactly what he needs: footage of rebel scum Rey, which M9-LX collected while he was waiting on standby in Primary Operator Kylo Ren’s bunk room on the night before they left. He transmits it now at full volume.

“You’re mine now,” says rebel scum Rey’s recorded image. “Don’t forget that. When you’re finished dealing with Hux, I want you back.”

From the pilot’s seat, Primary Operator Kylo Ren makes a strange, quiet sound that M9-LX’s audio sensors can’t interpret.

Chapter End Notes

I’m so touched by all you guys’ well-wishes. I’m kind of still recovering from the wedding madness, but I wanted to push through and get an update out this week to say
thank you. Shoutout to my new husband for taking it so well when I got home from our honeymoon, half-unpacked my suitcase, and then immediately disappeared into my laptop.

As always, I'd love to hear your thoughts on the chapter!
Rey pulls back just enough to look at him, tipping her head up to meet his eyes. “You look like shit.”

“Thanks.” She looks … radiant, just like she always does. Her eyes are tired and her hair is pulled back in messy bunches, and her clothes look like she’s slept in them a couple of times. None of it even makes a dent in the warmth and brightness that hangs around her like an aura.

You guys I am SO sorry for the unannounced delay in posting. Life got tough these last couple of weeks and I dealt with it the good old-fashioned way: by switching to low power mode and ignoring every single one of my non-vital commitments. I will try very hard not to do it again.

A few more words about my update schedule in the end notes, but for now, please accept this extra-long E-rated chapter as an apology.

Can you hear the silence? Can you see the dark?
The higher I get, the lower I'll sink
I can't drown my demons, they know how to swim
*Can You Feel My Heart?* - Bring Me The Horizon

When the tractor beam of an armoured extraction shuttle locks onto his hull, Kylo doesn’t have the strength left to put up a fight.

He’s been drifting in and out for hours that feel like lifetimes, buoyed along on a current of pain from the plasma burns to his limbs and torso. All of them hurt – blaster bolts tend to leave a lasting sensation at the best of times – but the real threat is the shoulder wound that hit at the last second as he was boarding his ship to escape. The bolt struck a glancing angle that spread its damage from shoulder blade to sternum, searing deep into his flesh and effectively disabling his lightsaber arm. The sick spread of heat from the site suggests a growing infection. Blood loss and shock have left him barely able to stay alert. Without the help of the Force, flowing through him and drawing on the dark energy of his pain, he probably wouldn’t be conscious at all.

And maybe that would be a mercy, because he’s at the rendezvous coordinates, and if a First Order extraction craft is here and Rey isn’t then it means the worst has happened. The Resistance didn’t make it out of Hux’s trap.

The tractor beam carries him inside the shuttle hangar, where the lurching impact of a docking clamp shakes loose his grip on consciousness. He resurfaces on a stretcher as a cohort of med droids rush
him to the treatment bay. Of course. They’ll want him alive for the execution.

He should fight. He needs to fight. He’s already fought so hard. He–

“Patient shows signs of acute distress,” notes one surgical droid, as the others converge to strap Kylo’s good arm to the stretcher before he can get in a proper hit. “Recommend sedative injection.”

“No,” says Kylo. “No, don’t–”

“Allergen profile unknown,” says another droid. “Standing by for blood test analysis.”

Kylo thrashes. He can’t get his left arm free. He can’t move his right arm at all. He tries to kick, and a pair of heavy robotic hands pin his ankles to the stretcher. “Patient shows signs of acute distress,” the surgical droid repeats. “Recommend–”

And then the fever from his infected wound takes hold, and Kylo slips into delirium. That’s the only explanation for the next voice he hears, close by his ear but just outside his range of vision. “Do try to calm down, Master Ben. This is all for your own good, you know.”

The world tilts. “3PO?”

“Blood test analysis complete,” says one of the medical droids. “No known allergens. Sedative injection approved.”

Then everything goes dark.

–

Next time he wakes, he’s wrapped from the neck down in a flexpoly bacta suit and there’s no pain at all. A med droid hovers overhead, monitoring his vital signs. None of his limbs are shackled. When he moves, the bacta suit moves with him, and he sits up in bed and waits for the blinding rush of dizziness to pass.

“What’s happening?” he asks.

The same voice answers again, and he’s definitely not feverish this time. Drugged off his face, maybe. “We are on our way to Mordana Ren’s capital. You have not been cleared to move yet, Master Ben, so I suggest you lie back down and wait for that bacta to finish its work.”

As the dark spots clear from Kylo’s vision, the shuttle’s interior comes into focus. It’s a small emergency carrier, built to lift wounded officers off the battlefield. Fully equipped for triage and short- to mid-term vital support. Staffed by a cohort of medical droids with strict pacifist protocols. Not the kind of craft you’d use to transport a high-risk prisoner of war.

Carefully, Kylo swings his feet over the side of the bed and braces himself to try and stand. “Where’s Rey?”

“I will have you sedated again if you keep trying to move,” 3PO warns. He’s standing by the bedside with his hand on the emergency buzzer. The sight of him – the sight of any familiar face at all, after everything that’s happened – makes a sharp lump rise in Kylo’s throat.

He doesn’t have time for that now. “Tell me where Rey is or you’ll wish I was sedated,” he snaps.

3PO tuts. “Always such a temper. Miss Rey is on her way to the Western Reaches to activate a standby Resistance cell, for which your assistance is most certainly not required. She has appointed
me her official ambassador to Ord Radama, a responsibility which I intend to–”

“Ambassador?” Kylo’s head spins, and standing up is going to have to wait for later. Even without the drugs there’s something disorienting about being inside a bacta suit. There’s a sensation of sinking into viscous liquid, like he’s neck deep in one of the old submersion tanks, but he can also feel the firm surface of the bed beneath him. “Go back a few steps. Why are we – Ord Radama? Western Reaches?”

“Oh, I suppose you wouldn’t know,” says 3PO, infuriatingly smug. “You’ve been in an induced state of unconsciousness for the last several days. Well then, allow me to fill you in. The Organa was intercepted on its way to Ord Mantel by a heavily armed First Order battle fleet. It was a difficult situation, but we were able to escape with the unexpected help of a scout vessel that had tailed us to the sector under orders of your friend Mordana Ren. The scout crew informed us of the schism in the Order’s ranks, and pledged Ord Radama’s forces to the fight against them – pending your approval as Supreme Leader.” 3PO tuts again. “I was specifically ordered to include that clause, or else I wouldn’t. Personally, Master Ben, I think this whole mess demonstrates that you are quite unfit to call yourself a leader of any kind, let alone a supreme one, and if my princess were here I’m sure she would–”

“The story, 3PO,” says Kylo tersely. His head still feels heavy from sedation, and the barrage of words is hard to hold onto. He needs this in dot points.

“That was the story,” says 3PO. “When your distress call came through, Mordana Ren’s scouts insisted on sending this shuttle so they could bring you back to Ord Radama to regroup. As a compromise for letting you go, Miss Rey sent me along to represent the Resistance and formalise our new alliance against the warring factions of the First Order. A wise decision on her part, if I may say. Why, as former protocol droid to the chief negotiator for the entire Manakron system, and long-term aide of the royal Organa family, I consider myself uniquely well qualified to execute such a delicate diplomatic mission…”

And he’s off. There’s no point trying to stop him, and even if there were, Kylo has heard what he needed to hear. Rey’s safe. Meg’s safe. The fight isn’t over, he hasn’t lost everything, and there are still people left who’ll follow his lead.

Which means the first priority is figuring out where the fuck he’s going.

Two factions. Three if you count his. Four if you count the Resistance as separate, but right now that line is so blurred that Kylo’s bleary eyes can’t make sense of it. From what 3PO’s saying, both Hux and the Imperials are still in the game, which means their sights will be fixed on each other by necessity. The Imperial faction have the bulk of the Order’s forces, but Hux – Hux wouldn’t have come out in the open if he didn’t have an army to back him up. He also has his fourth-gen Deathstar that Rey’s team weren’t able to knock off the map. So that’s two major powers locked in battle, with room for a smaller, nimbler force to take advantage of the gaps. Asymmetrical warfare. After all the time he’s spent chasing the Resistance, Kylo appreciates more than most people how much those little bites can hurt.

But is more pain really what he wants to achieve? Maybe it’s the fatigue talking. Maybe it’s the effect of the bacta, soothing his nerves and healing his wounds after the white-knuckled agony of that flight away from the Vendetta. It’s not that Kylo is afraid of pain. There’s no bravado in it – you don’t come as far as he has along the dark path if you don’t learn to embrace a part of life that most beings shy away from instinctively. Used right, pain is the most powerful tool in his arsenal.

It’s also, ironically, his comfort zone. He’s been betrayed before, often enough that at this point his response is rote: hit back. Hard. Fast. Single-minded. Make them hurt as much as he can, then
regroup and wait for it to happen again.

And it always does seem to happen again.

The thing about pain is that it’s a means to an end. He’ll inflict it when he needs to, he’ll endure it to the brink of his limits, whatever – if it gets him where he needs to go, it’s worth it. But from where Kylo’s sitting right this second, his course looks less like a straight line and more like a circle.

He tries to stand up again. The floor of the shuttle lurches beneath him, and the med droid chitters and 3PO says, “Master Ben, I really must insist!” and Kylo sits back down very quickly.

Fuck. Maybe this isn’t a strategic breakthrough he’s having – maybe he’s still just high off all those sedatives.

“3PO,” he says.

The droid gives him a suspicious look. “Yes?”

The words come from nowhere. A lot of things in his head right now are coming from nowhere. “Did Rey say anything else before you left? Other than that stuff about the Western Reaches?”

“As a matter of fact, she did.” 3PO’s demeanour seems to soften. “She said I was her most reliable droid, and the only one she could trust with such a difficult and dangerous—”

“I meant about me.”

Despite the fact that his face is made of static metal, 3PO somehow contrives to give Kylo a withering look. “Self-absorption is not an admirable trait,” he says primly. “I was just getting to the part about you. Miss Rey said I was the only one she could trust to help her honour Princess Leia’s final wish of keeping you safe. She also said…” 3PO sighs his disapproval. “She said I should remind you of her parting words, but she neglected to mention what they were, and my highly sensitive etiquette protocols prevented me from enquiring further. I’ll have to trust that your memory isn’t completely addled from all that time in a symoxin coma.”

You’re mine now. When you’re finished dealing with Hux, I want you back.

“No, I … I remember,” says Kylo.

“Good. Because we’ll be arriving in Ord Radama very shortly, and once we get there I expect I shall be far too busy navigating the diplomatic landscape to babysit you.”

Kylo lies back. The bacta suit cushions his descent, and he has the strange sensation that he’s floating in a thick, cool ocean with only his head above the surface. It’s not the worst idea to try and get some more rest while he can. His body is still telling him loudly to sleep, and the only thing he’ll miss out on if he gives into it is hearing 3PO rattle on about the paramount importance of his diplomatic mission, which is no great blow. He can use this last little window of time to shore up his strength.

Symoxin hangover or not, he’ll need to be firing on all cylinders once they make planetfall.

If only Rey were here. As he closes his eyes, through the drug haze and fatigue, he almost imagines he can feel her here with him. A quiet, steady presence in the Force, close and yet too far away to touch.

—
Ord Radama is on lockdown. The planetary shields are up, and the perimeter is eerily quiet: no trade ships, no ferries, no bustle of commerce. A small fleet of warships is in orbit, headed by a single Star Destroyer that casts a dark wedge-shaped shadow over the city far below.

One Star Destroyer is better than no Star Destroyers, but not by much. Kylo is out of the bacta suit now. He’s up and dressed and his wounds are all more or less healed, though the treatment came too late for cosmetics – his right shoulder is a mess of scar tissue, purple-red and angry, a brand new volume in the library of mistakes written on his skin. The drugs have worn off. So has the sense of revelation he enjoyed just a few hours earlier. He’s tired and sore and angry, and fuck, one single Star Destroyer. When Hux shows up, Ord Radama’s combined forces might hold up against him for a good five minutes, maybe even six if they play their cards right.

He’d trade the skin off his back for a Dreadnought. Assuming there’s enough skin left.

On the very slender upside, there’s no sneaking in via the cargo bay this time. The shuttle takes Kylo down to the main compound entrance, and the airlock is barely halfway open before Meg comes into view, flanked by a trooper guard squad with her face hidden under her heavy black battle helmet. It doesn’t matter. With the help of the Force he can see her anyway, the ashy pallor of her skin, the bloodshot eyes from too many sleepless nights, the half-formed lekku drawn tight to cover the base of her neck. In her mind and his, Meg gives in to a tidal wave of relief and rushes forward to pull Kylo into a frantic hug.

In physical space, she bows her head respectfully and says, “Welcome, Supreme Leader. I apologise for the state you find us in. I hope my blockade didn’t slow your descent too much.”

As Kylo casts around for words, the airlock ramp creaks and 3PO steps out from behind him. “Your security task force is admirably thorough,” the droid says. “Although if you don’t mind my saying so, I’d argue that last ballistic scanner was a bit redundant. Time is credits, you know, especially in a crisis like this, and my probability calculations show that the likelihood of the third scanner detecting any ordnance that escaped the first two–”

“And a warm welcome to you too, ambassador,” says Meg, not a second too soon. “Please, come inside. My best mechanics have prepared an oil bath for you in your own private maintenance bay. I’m sure you must be very stiff after such a long journey.”

“Well, I … that is most considerate of you, Governor Ren.”

Only once 3PO is out of the way does Meg drop her pandering act. “War council,” she says, low in Kylo’s ear. “Before the droid gets back. I’ve gathered everyone who still seems loyal, but you’ll be a better judge than me.”

Kylo’s track record says otherwise. “Wait,” he says, as Meg turns to lead the way to the council room. There’s another emotion churning inside her along with the relief, one he hasn’t got a lock on yet, and he’s not ready to face the whole group with this many variables lining his path. He has an awful feeling that he knows what he’s going to have to say when he gets inside the council room. It’s going to be hard enough as it is. “Who’s everyone?”

Meg hesitates. She shoots a masked glance at her trooper escort, who retreat back to a non-invasive distance. “Zaya. Orian. Jax on holo-link. I couldn’t get through to Titan, and I’ve already told you I don’t trust Callan. But we’ve also got Captain Corvo – from the Interceptor, you know her? She’s the one who got Jax off Kuat before it blew up yesterday.”

“Before it – what?”
“Do you want the full brief out here in the corridor, or would you like to come to the nice secure council room I set up specifically so we could have this conversation?”

There it is: resentment. Not anger, not quite, but a simmering bitterness that right now Meg doesn’t care enough to bury. “I don’t know what kind of situation you’re walking me into,” Kylo says, adopting what he hopes is a reasonable tone. “You want me to stand in front of the last few scraps of my army looking like I don’t have a clue what’s going on?”

“You don’t have a clue what’s going on,” says Meg, her voice low and gravelly underneath the vocaliser. “And I’ve been working day and night to salvage whatever I can from your latest fucking trash fire, so scraps are what you’re going to have to make do with.”

Trash fire is probably a fair call. That doesn’t make it more pleasant to hear. “Why help at all, then?” Kylo snaps, setting reasonable aside for the moment. What Meg’s offering him, deliberately or not – it’s so tempting. He could make it simple. Lose his temper. Take her bait and use it to siphon off a little of the pressure that’s building inside him. “You expect me to thank you on my knees just because you didn’t betray me. If you don’t like being here, why not go running to Hux? Everyone else is doing it.”

“I wish I could,” Meg snarls back. She doesn’t mean it, he knows that perfectly well. But a small part of her wants to mean it. She’s in the same boat he is – tired and frayed and looking for an outlet. Is that all it is? Temptation or not, Kylo should end the fight now. He’s good at ending fights. The problem is that all his usual techniques are far, far heavier than he wants to use on Meg.

“What kind of game do you think we’re playing?” Meg ploughs on as he wavers. “For the best part of a decade the Knights of Ren have followed in your footsteps, doing all the wetwork while you take all the glory. We’ve killed for you. Tortured for you. Followed your word to the letter. Everyone who hates you, they hate us just as much. Now your whole empire’s fallen apart, and there’s no place left in the galaxy for those of us who threw in our lot with you.” Her gloved hands are balled into fists. “But you’ve done just fine for yourself, haven’t you? You’ve got the Resistance to look after you, so you don’t give a fuck what happens to the rest of us. That girl – that Jedi – she thinks these scraps belong to her now. She’s your right hand, your most loyal servant, she sends droids to spy on me—”

Ah. So that’s it.

“It’s not like that,” Kylo says.

He gets it now. As soon as she says the word Resistance he gets it, and his anger clears like smoke after a missile bombardment. Meg looks at him. He can feel the intensity of her gaze through the mask.

“You’ve been with me since the start,” he says. “You’re the only ones who have. And Rey – she’s not my servant. I’m actually pretty sure she thinks I’m her servant.” The way things are going, she may or may not have a point.

“I heard that last bit,” says Meg. Her mechanical voice sounds small and choked.

There’s no point trying to deceive her. Even if there were, Kylo’s not sure he could stomach it. This is what it’s come to: his whole life’s work hangs in the balance of a fucking love triangle, like an off-brand holodrama.

“I’m sorry,” he says. Meg doesn’t reply. “It’s not … I didn’t plan it to be like this.” Still nothing. “But you’re wrong that I don’t care. You’re my oldest friend. It’s almost like we’re fam—”
“I will cut you,” says Meg, “if you finish that sentence.”

Fair enough.

A short way down the corridor the stormtrooper guard are standing by, rigid in their armour. They’re far enough away not to have heard the whispers about the war council, but there’s no chance they missed all that shouting about the Resistance. It probably doesn’t matter at this point. They’re either loyal or they’re not.

The silence stretches out, and just as Kylo’s about to give up hope of ever hearing Meg’s voice again, she tosses her head and exhales a ragged breath and says, “It’s not like I don’t already know how you feel. And for the record, I’m not asking you to thank me on your knees because I didn’t betray you. I’m asking you to thank me on your knees because I saved your stupid girlfriend from getting blown up by Hux, even though her death would have served my interests better in the long run, and even though it wouldn’t have been my fault and would never have come back to bite me. I think that was very noble of me.”

It really was noble. And noble isn’t the first word people usually associate with Mordana Ren. “What are you getting out of it, then?”

“This may be hard for you to believe,” says Meg, “but my whole life doesn’t just revolve around you. What we’re doing is important. The galaxy needs us, and that hasn’t changed just because you’ve let some treacherous junk rat collar and leash you.” And then she shrugs, and wraps her arms protectively around her middle. “Besides, it’s like I said. The rest of us don’t have anywhere to go. There’s no way we’d ever be safe with Hux, or … Mattock, or whatever his name was.”

“Mattix,” says Kylo.

“Yeah, I’m still not so clear on how he got involved in this.”

Kylo draws a deep breath. Feels his lungs expand and collapse, feels the scar tissue on his shoulder stretch. “Do you want the full brief out here in the corridor, or would you like to hit up that nice secure meeting room?”

It must say something about him that the argument with Meg has helped calm him down so much. Maybe it’s a matter of perspective. For most of his life Kylo has worried about two things: himself, and the galaxy at large. He’s never paid much attention to the part in the middle. The part where there are other people who rely on him, who care about him, who need him to be the person they think he is for their own sakes as well as for the good of the entire universe.

He’s trying not to think about Rey too much within Meg’s psychic earshot, but Kylo has a fairly good idea where his uncomfortable new sense of duty has come from. Snoke taught him to look down on the Resistance for their tribal loyalty, their irrational in-group devotion, their willingness to sacrifice strategic ground for the sake of friends too weak to save their own hides.

And yet here they are. The Knights of Ren, minus two truants and plus an unexpected newcomer, together as a group for the first time since Kylo ascended to power. When it mattered most, they all came back. He pauses in the door of the council room and takes in the sight of them. Jax and Corvo’s hologram is staticky, like it’s being broadcast from who-knows-where on rusty old equipment. Orian is standing to attention, helmet on and uniform crisp like an uptight cadet. Zaya is seated, legs sprawled wide and arm slung loose over the back of her chair in a calculated posture of who-gives-a-fuck. Kylo looks at her. She looks back at him, blinking slowly, eyes bright with defiance.
Confidence is returning again. It ebbs and flows like a tide, but it’s bolstered now by a new sense of purpose. He knows what he’s about to do. It’s not what he planned at the start, and it’s not what he told Rey he planned. It’s closest to what he had in mind in the midst of his drug haze on board the extraction shuttle, and fuck, he’d go for another shot of symoxin right about now. Because what he’s about to do? It’s impulsive. Terrifying. Fucking stupid. But if he can make it work, it will balance all his conflicting priorities and give everyone the best chance they have of escaping this fight alive.

He knows what he’s about to do, and the knowledge of it threatens to tear him apart before he gets across the threshold. Half of him wants refuse – to call it not a revelation at all, but a moment of madness brought on by exhaustion. The other half of him wants to sink to his knees and cry from relief because at least now he knows what happens next.

He ignores both halves and concentrates on the task at hand. “Zaya,” he says by way of greeting, “stand the fuck up when your leader enters the room.”

Zaya’s lips curl, baring a long row of sharp, jagged teeth poking out from ink-black gums “Oh, my leader,” she snaps back, voice dripping with scorn. In the corner of his eye, Kylo sees Orian stand up even straighter as if to compensate for Zaya’s attitude. “Forgive me, your Magnificence, but my legs can’t bear much weight at the moment. I got shot in the spine while I was escaping Hux’s rebels, you see. Which totally isn’t your fault or anything, O Great and Supreme One.”

“Feel better now that’s out of your system?” Kylo says.

“Much better.”

“Good. Then stand up and show Mordana some fucking respect.”

Silence crashes down on the room like a falling hull plate. Kylo regrets the words the instant they leave his mouth, but it’s too late now. He’s taken the plunge and there’s nothing for it but to keep on swimming. “Forget my spine,” says Zaya after a long, excruciating minute. “How hard did you get hit in the head?”

“Hard enough,” says Kylo, mostly to himself. He steps further into the room, leaving Meg framed in the doorway. Meg, who’s so thunderstruck that she seems to have actually stopped breathing. “This isn’t complicated, guys, I don’t know what you’re all staring at. I quit the First Order. I’m out. I … what’s the word? Abdicate, that’s it. I abdicate.”

More silence. “You … you can’t abdicate,” says Orian, sounding scandalised.

“Oh? And how are you planning to do to stop me?”

“Coward,” Zaya snarls.

She’s on her feet now. Technically, that means Kylo has won this round. He doesn’t feel very victorious.

“You can’t handle it, can you? You were happy enough to sit on the throne while you could put your feet up and lord it over the rest of us.” Zaya’s hands are shaking, like they did on that night at Luke’s temple when Kylo knocked her weapon aside and said, I know your heart’s not in this fight. Don’t die for him. “But look how fast you change your tune the moment anything real’s at stake.”

Kylo shakes his head. He feels hollowed out. Weightless in a way that makes his head spin and his blood run cold. He doesn’t know how to explain this – he’s barely figured it out himself.

“How do you think this story ends, Zaya? You said it yourself: I’m the reason it’s all blown up. If we
win this fight, if we knock out every challenger and put me back on the throne, then what happens? I promised the galaxy order, and I brought them chaos and civil war. No show of force is ever going to heal that damage. Our whole regime will be tainted by it.” He stops to draw breath, and holds his hand up when Zaya goes to speak. “I’m not walking away from the fight. But the First Order needs a leader they trust, and that’s not me anymore. While I was bleeding out in my escape ship, Mordana was rallying forces and organising a rescue. While I was in a coma, she was gathering you all together. She has a schoolroom of apprentices all primed to follow her lead. She has a fleet of warships airborne and ready to defend her territory. I can’t force any of you to obey her, but I also can’t fix this by clinging to a plan that’s already failed. If we’re going to survive, we need to adapt. I’ve made my decision. Now you need to make yours.”

“This…” Zaya shuffles her feet. Orian is staring back and forth between her and Kylo. Jax and Corvo are so still that he’s not so sure the holo-emitter hasn’t frozen. “I mean, I was just mouthing off. I wasn’t saying you should step down.”

“I know,” says Kylo.

“So … what are you going to do now, then? Where are you going?”

“I know where he’s going,” says Meg.

Kylo turns. She’s still standing there in the doorway behind him, exactly where he left her. She hasn’t said a word through this whole exchange. In fairness, he hasn’t really given her the chance.

“You never even asked me if I wanted this,” she says.

“It’s not about what anyone wants.”

“Yeah,” says Meg. Her voice is a grinding mechanical flat, but behind the mask, he can feel all the emotions she’s hiding as clearly as if they were his own. “I guess not.”

In the privacy of his guest room, Kylo stops before the mirror and stares at the bloodless face reflecting back at him. There’s so much in his head right now. Strategies and inventories, a sprawling mental map drawn from hours of tense planning and discussion with his – with Meg’s people. The sheer volume of information should have long since buried the emotional aftershocks. But it hasn’t.

Whoever he’s looking at now, it’s not anyone he knows. It’s not Snoke’s devoted apprentice. It’s not the master of the Knights of Ren. It’s not the Supreme fucking Leader.

Here’s the hard lesson Kylo has learned about inner conflict: right or wrong, you don’t solve anything just by making a decision. You do the best you can, and then you brace yourself and try to cope with the flood of doubt and remorse and what-if-I-hadn’t. The decision is made, and he doesn’t feel relieved and he doesn’t feel vindicated. Mostly he just feels empty. But it’s out of his hands.

There’s something with him in the Force. He felt in the council room, where he had no time to explore it, but it’s creeping up again and this time there’s nowhere left to hide. There’s one last person he has to face.

He breathes in, and the feeling grows. It’s nowhere, it’s in the Force, it’s all around him – a thrum like a heartbeat, a breath that isn’t his, a shiver that starts somewhere deep inside and spreads through his bloodstream to every extremity. There’s no effort to it. No technique. Kylo shuts his eyes and he’s alone in his palatial guest suite with crystalline walls and a ray-shielded window, and then he opens them and suddenly he’s not.
All this time dreaming and yearning and planning, and in the end, he doesn’t know what to do. He looks at Rey. Rey looks at him. A year since Crait when she locked him out of her mind and her heart, and now the bond has blown open and it might has well have never left. She’s here with him. Here in a way that transcends all rules of matter and geography.

And then, before Kylo can persuade his vocal chords to produce sound – before he can spare a thought for what she’s here even means, or how it works, or where it ends – Rey simplifies the issue. She surges forward and throws her arms around his neck.

Kylo’s heart stops beating and it doesn’t even bother him. Nothing he’s ever read or learned about the Force captures what this feels like. He can feel the heat of her skin. He can smell her hair. All the fear and shock and doubt from the last few hours fades away to nothing.

“You’re safe,” Rey says. “Oh, Kylo, I’ve been so worried.”

He wants to hold her forever.

There’s so much he needs to tell her. It’s over now. I’m coming back to you. I just threw my whole life down the compactor chute and now I’m no one and I can’t take it back and I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. But he’s been talking for so many hours and the thought of finding more words now, with her arms wrapped tight around him, is impossible even to contemplate.

Maybe she already knows. He wouldn’t put it past her.

Rey pulls back just enough to look at him, tipping her head up to meet his eyes. “You look like shit.”

“Thanks.” She looks … radiant, just like she always does. Her eyes are tired and her hair is pulled back in messy bunches, and her clothes look like she’s slept in them a couple of times. None of it even makes a dent in the warmth and brightness that hangs around her like an aura.

“How are your wounds? 3PO said you were out for days.”

“Yeah, well.” Kylo can feel his cheeks flushing pink and it’s not the time, it’s not the fucking time. A part of him is half-expecting the bond to shatter at any second, and drag her off into the aether away from him. “That’s mostly 3PO’s fault. If I’d woken up any sooner, I’d have had to listen to him rattle on about his diplomatic mission the entire time.”

“Perish the thought,” says Rey, chuckling. Her hand moves to his right shoulder. “Let me see.”

She knows exactly where to look, somehow. “Why?” Kylo asks, resisting the little shiver that runs through him at her touch. The bacta has already done its best, and she’s not going to achieve anything more by staring.

“Because I want to.” She unfastens his tunic at the front, and then scowls when she meets an undershirt with no convenient opening. “Ugh, why do you always wear so many layers?”

Resigning himself to his fate as a medical exhibit, Kylo shrugs off his tunic the rest of the way and pulls the undershirt over his head. His arm hurts when he lifts it too high, a painful twinge that starts at the wound site and travels all the way to his fingertips. He hides his wince – but Rey doesn’t, once she sees the scarred mess his shoulder has become.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Kylo lies. “It’s my own fault, anyway. I was careless, I could have blocked the shot if I’d just—”

His breath catches in his throat.
Still holding him gently by the shoulders, Rey has leaned in and is tracing the tender lines of the scar with her lips.

“–paid more attention,” Kylo finishes weakly.

He’s so much taller than her that she still has to tilt her head up for her mouth to even reach. She follows the scar from shoulder blade to sternum, breath coming in soft little puffs against his skin. “I really missed you,” she says, nuzzling his collarbone. She’s … she’s smelling him. It’s such a strange, animal gesture, made all the stranger by the fact that Kylo probably just smells like bacta residue and anxiety sweat. And yet. Somehow, suddenly, the events of the last few days feel laughably unimportant compared to the way Rey’s hands are drifting down to settle at his hips.

Who cares what his position is or what other people are going to call him now? Rey’s only ever thought less of him for all of that. She’s going to be so glad that he’s stepping back.

That thought, more than anything, helps him overcome his speechlessness. “Rey,” he says, speaking to the top of her head because it’s easier than stepping back to face her. “We need to talk. I’m leaving the Order.”

“I know,” says Rey, with a smile that spreads from ear to ear. He can hear it in her voice, even if he can’t see it on her face. “I felt the shift in the Force.” She kisses the spot where his shoulder joins his neck, and then nips, and all of Kylo’s careful retort – he’s not turning, he’s not abandoning the dark side, this isn’t the uncomplicated thing she wants it to be – gets lost. “Let’s talk about it later.” She’s kissing her way up his neck now, standing on tiptoes, stopping to nip and nuzzle as she goes. “I’m not sure how long this connection is going to last.”

“Are you…” Deciding it’s in his best interests to cooperate, Kylo sets aside the issue of his Force-ordained destiny for the minute and cups her head, combing back loose strands of hair that have fallen out of their ties. “Is this some kind of positive reinforcement thing?”

Rey snorts against his skin. She sounds happy. Giddy. “Do you want it to be?” Her voice is full of laughter, and she doesn’t wait for an answer but sucks hard on a patch of skin under Kylo’s jaw. Several organs turn to liquid inside him, like his heart and his stomach and kind of also his knees.

He’s not sure it’s even a sex thing, with Rey. Being with her, being touched by her – it changes something in the balance of the galaxy, and makes him ache in a way that he can’t find a name for and isn’t entirely sure he wants to. It’s like all common sense and reason go out the window when it comes to her. Like he’s only half complete, and all he wants is to hold her close until they fuse together into the single life-form they were meant to be. Like he’d give up anything just as long as he gets to be with her.

Anything. Including, apparently, the whole fucking galaxy.

But then Rey sucks another spot on his neck, hard enough to leave a mark, and reaches between their bodies to palm the front of his trousers, and – okay, it’s definitely also at least partly a sex thing. Kylo’s eyes flutter closed and his fingers tighten against Rey’s scalp. It feels like a million years since she touched him. He grabs her bun as a handle to tip her head back so he can kiss her, deep and hungry and urgent, barely breaking contact with her lips when he pulls back and says, “Maybe I do.”

If they make it a game then he doesn’t have to think about the freefall terror of what’s happening to his entire life right now. He can just focus on the rhythm of their banter and the heat of her body and the way she’s rubbing his erection through the fabric and oh, okay, yeah, that’s – that takes priority for now.
Rey snorts again, amused. She bites his bottom lip and slips her hand down further, right between his legs to cup his balls in a way that’s both really hot and kind of menacing. “So that’s where we’re at now, is it? You show up demanding favours whenever you do something slightly less evil than normal?”

Kylo goes still. Fuck. “No, I didn’t – I don’t mean–”

“I’m teasing.” Rey breaks the kiss and pulls back to look at his stricken face, obviously suppressing a laugh. “Don’t start a game if you don’t want to play.”

Heat is rising to Kylo’s cheeks now. How is it that she always puts him this off-balance? Whole worlds tremble before him, and in front of Rey he’s a fumbling wreck. “I do want to,” he says, much too quickly, which is another piece of his dignity that she’s now going to own forever. “I just don’t want you to feel like I’m pushing, or, or like you have to do something that–”

“Kylo,” says Rey patiently. “Stop worrying. I know what I’m doing – probably better than you do.” She leans in again to plant a little kiss on the side of his mouth. “I’ve read plenty of books about this.”

This time it’s Kylo’s turn to suppress a laugh. It’s something about the way she says it, her boundless confidence, like there could be no higher qualification than having fingered herself to a few smutty datapads. “Fine, then, O wise one. Maybe you should teach me.”

He’s expecting some kind of snappy retort. He’s not expecting Rey to drop to her knees and press her mouth to where her hand was just a few moments ago.

Her lips are softer than her hand and can’t feel much more than vague, warm pressure through his clothes, but the effect it has on him is way out of proportion to the actual physical impact of the gesture. His breathing stops. He’s had this daydream before. Privately. Furtively. Never for a minute expecting it to cross over into reality. He stares down at Rey, his eyes wide and lips parted, and she nuzzles her face against the fabric and then peeks upwards, rubbing her hands up and down the outside of his thighs. She smiles when she sees his face.

“Positive reinforcement, right? I’ve always wanted to try this.”

“Really?” It wouldn’t have been on the top of Kylo’s list. Well, not from the side of it that she’s on. But Rey is unfastening his trousers to expose his cock, and so he doesn’t have much headspace left to wonder about her motives.

And then her mouth is on him and he doesn’t have headspace left for anything at all.

She starts slow. Not tentative, because Rey never does anything tentatively – but curious, feeling her way into it, trailing her tongue over the tip of his cock and then taking the head into her mouth. Kylo forces himself to breathe again. Into his lungs and then out. His eyes keep trying to scrunch closed but if he lets them then he won’t be able to see her, and fuck, he wants this image in his head forever. Her dark lashes fanning her cheeks. Her soft, wet lips open and stretched around him. Her hair falling loose from her bun in strands. He settles his hands on her head again, stroking it back, and Rey makes a happy little noise and –

And swallows him deeper, fuck, and Kylo’s second-main worry is that the Force bond could break at any second but his real main worry is that he’s not going to last long enough for Rey to hit her stride. Her mouth is so warm and so wet and she’s had the idea now to work her tongue on the underside of his cock and he still can’t believe that she’s doing this, that she wants to do it, that the greedy, slurpy little sounds she’s making are for him and no one else.
He’s trying to stay calm and in control, but he almost wants to cry when she pulls off him. There’s a fine string of saliva from his cock to her mouth and she’s such a gorgeous fucking mess and he has no idea what he ever did to deserve her. “How am I doing?” she asks.

“Guh,” Kylo says. What he really means is *fuck you’re amazing please don’t stop I need this I need you* but that’s way too many complex syllables for him to handle right now and anyway, Rey seems to get the message. She puts her mouth back on him, swallowing deeper again this time, and Kylo’s trying so hard to stay still for her but his hands are tightening in her hair and his hips are arching into her and he’s fast becoming powerless to stop himself.

Rey, by contrast, is never powerless in anything. He feels the warning graze of her teeth on his shaft, and it doesn’t help at all, because *that’s* a vulnerability that never even crossed his mind and the realisation of it is a surge of dark, fear-tinged want that pulls him in like a void. He tugs her hair again because he knows she’ll retaliate, and she does, digging her fingers like claws into his hips and scratching hard. But she doesn’t pull away. Not when he rocks forward again into her mouth, and not even when his cock hits the back of her throat and she gags and spasms around him.

She does draw back a little bit, though, after that, and sucks on the head of his cock while her hand comes in to wrap around his shaft. He can’t keep track of what she’s doing anymore. All he knows is how good it feels, and how fast the sensation is approaching unbearable as everything inside him tightens.

“Rey, I’m – *fuck* – so close.”

“Mm.” She doesn’t adjust at all – doesn’t speed up, doesn’t slow down. She curls her tongue and works it over his head, digging into the slit and sparking an electric jolt of pleasure that runs from his groin right down to his toes. He really is close. Rey’s mouth is like a firebrand and he’s ready to take back every disparaging thought he ever had about her smutty book collection. Whatever she's been reading, it fucking works.

He holds out as long as he can because he doesn’t want this feeling to end. But it has to, and when Rey recovers from the gagging and takes him a little deeper again, it’s the absolute limit of what he can stand. “Rey,” he manages to gasp, but that’s all he can do by way of warning and she doesn’t pull off him and so he comes in her mouth, so hard his voice stops working altogether, and his mind is wiped blank and his whole body spasms with the force of it.

When it’s over, he sinks to the ground. Very quickly, but definitely in an affectionate let-me-join-you-down-there way and not at all like a collapsing heap of boneless flesh. Rey’s face is doing something new: she’s gagging again, but she’s also grinning widely, and the result is a kind of twisted grimace that in Kylo’s hazy afterglow state looks like the most beautiful sight he’s ever seen.

She wipes her mouth on the back of her hand. “I think that went well for a first time,” she says. She swallows, reaching up to massage her throat. “Ugh, I need something to drink, though.”

“I can, uh.” Can he? She feels so real and solid, but he’s not sure this Force-bond thing extends as far as sharing their whole environments like that. The small part of his brain that’s still working perks up with curiosity. But the rest of him doesn’t follow its lead. He kisses the corner of her mouth. Runs his thumb over her slightly swollen lips while his free hand traces a lazy pattern on her thigh. He’s not thinking much at all beyond the simple need to keep his hands on her.

But Rey shakes her head. “No, I’ve – I’ve got work to do here,” she says, sounding deeply reluctant. “Our ship’s not far from the hidden base now. I just really wanted to see you first.”

“I always want to see you,” says Kylo. The words tumble out before he’s even aware of thinking
them, and they’re immediately followed by a hot rush of blood to his cheeks. He sounds like such a needy fucking idiot. She just sucked his brain out through his dick and now she’s going to leave before he pulls it together enough to even reciprocate.

“Lucky you.” There’s another one of her ear-to-ear grins. He’s never met anyone who smiles as much as Rey does, or who means it so sincerely. “When you come back to the Resistance, you’ll get to see me all the time. And the sooner I get things sorted here, the sooner that’ll be.”

Once her presence has safely faded, Kylo’s face declares independence from his brain and cycles through a set of expressions he’s pretty sure he’s never worn before in his life. His cheeks ache and his eyes sting and he’s nowhere near as good at this as Rey is, but it doesn’t really matter.

For a while, just a little while, the clamour in his head falls silent.

–

The post-Rey warmth sees him through the first few hours of the night undisturbed. At some point he wakes, with his mouth dry and his fears dancing their familiar war dance in his head, but he breathes slowly and blocks them out and tells himself to go back to sleep. For once it actually works.

Kind of. He drifts in and out for a while, not really awake and not really asleep, watching pinpricks of light dance behind his eyelids like a miniature galaxy. The day’s events keep trying to replay themselves, and he keeps batting them down and taking deep, slow breaths. For a while the bed’s too soft and then it’s fine again; for a while the room’s too cold and then it’s fine again. He phases out lying sprawled on his stomach and phases back in curled up in a ball on his side.

And then he’s as wide awake as he’s ever been in his life, and there’s someone else in the room with him. A presence he’d know anywhere. Which means he can’t be awake, not really, because – well. She’s not here. She can’t be.

The room is pitch dark. His eyes are closed. A cool hand comes to rest on his forehead and a voice says, “Don’t wake up.”

Kylo’s immediate kneejerk reaction is, Don’t tell me what to do. He wrenches his eyes open, and he’s not in his guest suite on Ord Radama and it’s not pitch dark after all – he’s in the well-manicured back garden of the senatorial homestead in Hanna City, Chandrila, with a bright morning sun shining overhead. There’s a sandpit nearby strewn with the wreckage of a small-scale model X-wing battle. Three wicker chairs are set out on the lawn, grouped around a small tea table.

He can still feel her ghost-hand on his forehead. He checks – there’s nothing there.

Slowly, as unsteady on her feet as she was the night she died, Leia Organa lowers herself into one of the lawn chairs. “I always missed this house, you know. Our family was so happy here.” She gazes serenely around the garden and smiles. “Come on, Ben, don’t look at me like that. Humour a dead old woman and sit down for a bit.”

She pats the chair beside her. Kylo ignores it, and he also ignores the third conspicuously empty chair that’s positioned to look out over the sandpit.

His mother smiles and pours three cups of tea from the teapot. One for her. One for him. One for the third chair.

“He won’t come,” Kylo says, before he can stop himself. Either this is a Force apparition – in which case Han Solo doesn’t have the power to make himself appear – or it’s a dream, in which case Kylo isn’t going to fucking let him. He doesn’t need this. Not now. Not after everything else that’s
happened today.

But Leia’s gentle smile doesn’t falter. “What are you talking about? He’s already here. Do you want sugar in your tea?”

Now he knows for sure it’s just a dream. Dreams can’t hurt him. He takes the seat. “Since when do you let me add sugar to anything?”

“Well, it always made you so jittery,” says Leia, shaking her head. “But I won’t try to tell you what’s good for you. It’s time you made the decision yourself.”

What a stupid fucking metaphor. What a stupid fucking dream. Kylo resents every part of this, from the too-hot tea that burns his fingers when he lifts the cup, to the placid expression on his mother’s face. So many worry lines and yet she looks more at peace than she ever did in life. But most of all he resents the fact that he can’t seem to wake up. Doesn’t really want to try.

“Sugar?” Leia prompts. “Milk?”

“It’s fine how it is,” says Kylo, and takes a sip that scalds his tongue.

Leia nods. She pours a splash of milk into her own cup, and her dark eyes contain the wisdom of ages. “Ben,” she says. “I’m so sorry I can’t be there with you. This is going to be the hardest thing you’ve ever done – yes, harder than that.” He doesn’t look at the third chair. He’s not going to look at the fucking third chair. “Because you’re going to have to face it. All of it. And it’s going to hurt, and every part of you is going to want to fight it, but you can’t. It’s time. You’ve known all along that this was coming.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Am I? Well, it has been known to happen. But there’s an easy way to prove it.” Still that serene smile. “Kill me.”

She says it like she might say Have some more tea, or Make sure you take a coat with you. Kylo looks down at his hands, and he’s not holding a teacup after all – it’s the hilt of his lightsaber, pointed right at where she’s sitting, and his thumb is on the emitter switch.

“You couldn’t do it on the bridge,” says Leia. “You couldn’t do it on Crait. And you can’t do it now. You think I don’t know the man I raised? You’re as stubborn as I am, Ben, and twice as proud, but as soon as I said the Resistance would help you, you came running to us like a frightened boy.” For the first time since she appeared, the smile drops from Leia’s face and she leans in towards him – towards the lightsaber. Her eyes bore into his. “You’re tired and you’re scared and you want it to be over, and it can be, Ben, it can be. All you have to do is stop lying to yourself. It’s as simple as that.”

And then, while he watches frozen, she covers his hands with both of her own. Grips him as he grips the lightsaber hilt. Finds the emitter. Presses it.

Kylo opens his eyes.

For real this time.

They’re wet, and blurry, and the darkened bedroom is lit up by a single source of light. His lightsaber is in his hand, ignited, snatched up from the bedside table in the throes of his dream – but something’s wrong. The frequency has changed. The blade is wavering, not at its usual pulsing rate, but so fast that his eyes can hardly track what’s happening.
There are tears on his cheeks. Soaking into his pillow.

Panic is rising in his throat, fighting to claw its way out.

And the temperature of the light is shifting. Rising up through the centre of the plasma blade, spreading straight from the crystal at its core, a vein of pure white is wiping away the red.

Chapter End Notes

So the thing is, I've bitten off more than I could chew with the weekly update schedule. It's been creeping up on me for a while, and I've been trying to ignore it because I really don't want to let anyone down, but I also really don't want to burn out like this again.

I'm going to start updating this fic every other week. That'll give me some downtime to work on the other things I also want to write, and to let myself have the odd recovery weekend where I say, fuck it, I'm too tired to be creative right now. I know WIPs are a leap of faith for a lot of readers, so please rest assured I am absolutely, 100% committed to finishing this story. I just...can't do it at quite the speed I wanted to.

If you're still with me at this point, thanks so much for your support. You guys are the best readers a girl could ask for. <3
quickly they subdue

So quickly they subdue the sky
Our fascination costs human lives
Now I’m alone with you
Warning Signs – The Anix

There are faces on the Organa’s bridge that Rey doesn’t recognise. After all their frantic recruitment work, this is what they’ve arrived at: a flagship packed to capacity and two auxiliaries parked nearby in wedge formation. After so long hiding in splintered pockets of space, having all their forces together sets off loud danger sirens in Rey’s head. Gathered like this they’re a perfect target to be picked off at will.

But times have changed. The galaxy is at open war, and survival is no longer their most pressing directive. Two First Order armies are now rampaging through the wilds of space, seizing whatever territory they can hold and scorched whatever they can’t. The colonies are filling up with displaced Core World refugees. For a movement that calls itself a Resistance, this might actually be their last chance to resist.

A large group of officers are clustered around the comms array, none of them on duty but all of them anxious not to miss the next update. Rey pushes her way through the crowd to the navigation console, where Connix – who, unlike most of the bridge’s occupants, actually is on duty – has her eyes trained on the proximity scanner.

“Nothing yet,” Connix says, before Rey can open her mouth to ask. “When he gets here, I promise you’ll be the first to know about it.”

“Good,” says Rey, and folds her arms to stop herself from fidgeting with her hands. “Of course. Thank you.”

She runs her thumb over the lump of a small plastic rod embedded in her inner arm. The flesh around the implant still feels tender and a little swollen, but the med droid who inserted it assured her it was the least unpleasant solution available. “And you’re lucky you didn’t find that out the hard way,” the droid said as it wiped an antiseptic swab over the entry site. “You organics are always courting trouble with your overactive mating urges. If you ask me, all sentient beings should be tagged with a contraceptive implant as soon as they reach adolescence. But parents are always so irrationally sure that their offspring aren’t engaged in that kind of reckless behaviour.”

Setting aside its condescending tone, the med droid had a point. Long-term consequences weren’t at the forefront of Rey’s mind that night the Falcon went down and stranded her alone with the galaxy’s most eligible autocrat. And even if they were, the chance of an unwanted pregnancy would have been so far down the list of potential disasters that could have come out of it. The way things have turned out now, she’d like to be able to say it was part of a larger plan. That she knew what she was doing all along. That the risk she took was deliberate and reasonable. She’d like to have a good excuse for why, despite all the chaos and the very real chance that they’re all going to die soon, Rey is finding it hard to suppress her flutters of triumphant joy as she glances again at the proximity scanner.

On the one hand, none of this is really about her. She knows that. But the thing is, on the other hand – in the end, at the final hour, after everything that’s happened and everything that’s still to come – Rey was right. She was right when no one else was, right when everyone else thought she was crazy. The risk she didn’t mean to take has paid off in a way she’d almost given up hope it ever
could. It’s a pretty good feeling.

In a place that used to be a vortex of darkness, the Force is lit up like a beacon to guide the Resistance home. This isn’t like the time in the throne room when Rey leapt to assumptions and paid a bitter price for it. This is real. It’s tangible. For the first time in as long as she can remember, hope is alive again.

It’s not just her. The others may not be attuned like Rey is to the balance of light and dark in the Force, but in their own way they feel it too. Chewie is on his way back from Kashyyyk with a small but warlike Wookiee separatist band who’ve agreed at the last minute to throw their support behind the Resistance cause. Poe is flat out processing the mixed bag of cocky recruits and emboldened engine-room staff who are suddenly all claiming to be trained fighter pilots. People who once fled in terror from the might of the First Order are standing to fight.

And somewhere not too far away, in the folded nether-realm of hyperspace, Ben Solo is on his way back to her.

His image is so clear in Rey’s mind that it almost feels solid. She can see him arriving, luminous in his redemption, standing tall to right the wrongs his fear and anger have inflicted on the galaxy. She can see him smiling – not a twisted Kylo Ren smirk, not an awkward half-suppressed curl of his mouth, but an open, earnest smile filled with the joy and gentleness she knows he’s capable of somewhere under all that cold bravado.

They’ll be able to train together, and study together, and talk about the Force together, and Rey won’t have to worry about him seeding their every discussion with toxic Snoke-isms. Ben was a Jedi before he fell – he was a Jedi before Rey even knew the Jedi were more than just a myth, and he understands the lore in a way that’s vibrant and vivid and alive, so different from the relics Rey salvaged from the old Ahch-To library. She won’t have to rely on a pile of dusty old books anymore. They can forge a new path for themselves together.

She turns back to Connix. “Have you checked the–”

“I’ve checked every frequency,” says Connix. “Why are you so jittery? He’ll get here when he gets here.”

Rey used to be so good at waiting. A lot has changed since she left Jakku. “I’m going to go check on the fighters,” she says. “Call me on the comlink as soon as you get news.”

“I will,” says Connix, sounding bored.

–

She doesn’t.

The first Rey hears that Ben has made it through safely is when a harried-looking engine mechanic rushes past her in a corridor, muttering something about “those fucking touchy TIE motivators, beats me how no one’s ever told the First Order how to install an artesiatic dampener.”

Heart leaping into her throat, Rey rushes back the way the mechanic came and jumps into the turbolift that links down to the hangar. She pounds the floor button the whole way down, and as soon as the door opens she rushes out to meet–

Shouting. Lots and lots of shouting.

“–don’t happen to keep spare parts on hand for advanced Sienar-Jaemus prototypes,” another
frazzled mechanic is saying, complete with furious finger-jabbing. “But I’m not a fucking wizard, so if you want me to do jack shit for your ship, you’ve gotta let me get that engine open.”

“Wizard? You’re barely a fucking mechanic!” growls a voice that Rey would know anywhere. He’s facing away from her, but she can tell from across the room that he’s livid. The balled fists and raised voice are something of a giveaway. “All I’m asking you to do is get me a replacement A-2 servomotor, and if that’s too hard for you then you can go back to grubbing around in your rustbucket X-wing and stay the fuck out of my engine.”

“Oh, I’m not walking away from this. If your motivator overheats and blows a hole in our container field—”

Neither of them has noticed Rey’s footsteps as she rushes across the hangar towards them. “What’s going on here?” she demands, raising her voice over the top of the sputtering mechanic.

Ben whirls around, and his face is nothing like the smiling icon of hope that Rey’s been dreaming of. His angry eyes are bloodshot and framed by dark, bruise-like bags. His skin is paler than usual beneath a thick crop of overgrown stubble. His hair hangs lank and unwashed about his face. He’s wearing the same five million layers of black clothing as usual, with an extra black cowl wrapped close around his neck as though he’s somehow freezing inside the temperate hangar. He looks about as wretched as she’s ever seen him. Including that time on Starkiller Base when she slashed his face open with his family’s legacy lightsaber.

“Rey,” he says. For a moment he just stares at her, like he can’t quite fathom how she got there. Then he turns back to the mechanic and says, in what might be his version of a conciliatory tone: “If you don’t have an A-2, I’ll work with another servomotor. Pull something out of a droid if you have to. Just get me the part.”

“Just get me the part,” the mechanic mimics, and stomps off muttering under his breath.

Something cold and heavy has dropped into Rey’s stomach. This isn’t the reunion she planned, and all her warm thoughts of celebrating Ben’s return dissolve into thin air. “Is … is everything alright?” she manages.

“Uh … yeah,” says Ben. “Fried the motivator, I’m sorting it out.” And then, kind of lamely: “Hi.”

It’s like seeing double. In the Force, Rey can still feel the shift – the change in the balance of his power, the new brightness in the energy that surrounds him. But in front of her eyes she sees nothing. No change. The exact same man she’s used to seeing, only careworn and volatile and grumpier than ever.

“I thought you would have come in a bigger ship,” she says, looking behind him at the TIE silencer that’s causing such a stir among the hangar crew.

He shrugs. “I wanted my hands on the yoke for a while.”

“Well it’s no wonder you’re having engine problems. That fighter wasn’t built for long-haul travel.”

“Don’t you start too.”

His tone is so sharp that Rey flinches, and then wants to slap herself for it. She’s long past the point of getting intimidated by his moods. “Fine,” she snaps back, “I won’t. Don’t let me distract you from your poor fried motivator.”

She turns to go. “Wait,” Ben says, but no apology follows – when she looks back at him he just
shrugs, shaking his head, holding out his hands in a helpless gesture. “Look, it was a long flight.”

*I can tell,* Rey almost says, taking in his dishevelled appearance. She wants to tell him to go wash his hair and change into something that makes him look less like a creature of the void. She wants to tell him he could bypass the broken servomotor completely with a bit of creative circuitry work. She wants to tell him how much she’s missed him. How high her hopes were. How hard it is right now to swallow the lump of disappointment in her throat.

But he looks so exhausted that all she ends up saying is, “Where’s 3PO?”

“He’s on Ord Radama. You named him ambassador, remember?”

“Only while you were there. You were meant to bring him back with you.”

Ben’s lips twitch, and she knows before he makes a sound that it’s going to be another mean-spirited joke. “The wheels of history are turning, Rey. Who better to forge a path to peace than the former protocol droid to the chief negotiator for the entire Manakron system?”

Rey doesn’t want to be laughing at 3PO’s expense. What she wants is … too much, apparently. She should have known better than to get her hopes up so high. “I’ll sort out your ship, Ben. You go get settled in, then meet me on the bridge so we can – really?”

At the sound of his birth name, he’d cringed as though she trod on his foot. “Really?” Rey says again.

“It’s a lot to get used to,” Ben says miserably.

He’s never cared before. Honestly, it never occurred to Rey that he would – it seemed so clear-cut to her. After severing all his bonds with the Order, she assumed he’d be eager to move past the Kylo Ren phase of his life. “I mean … if you’d rather I didn’t call you–”

“No, who am I kidding? Call me what you want.”

“Okay,” says Rey. Trying to sound a little less angry now. Mostly succeeding. Maybe.

Through the haze of her own disappointment, it’s starting to sink in that something about Ben is more off than usual today. He’s strained. Worn down. Oozing unhappiness through the Force and through every fibre of his run-down body. But – that isn’t how it’s supposed to work. Coming back to her is supposed to be a happy choice. *Not being evil* is supposed to be a happy choice. Ben looks like he just got home from a funeral, and not only because of all the black.

“I’ll sort out the ship,” she says again. “You go take your stuff up to your cabin.”

“Yeah,” says Ben. But he doesn’t move. He’s back to staring at her, with a slightly pitiful look on his face.

They’ve done this all wrong. Unfairly, Rey blames Connix a little bit: she wanted to be down here to welcome Ben when he first arrived, and maybe that would have changed the vibe of the whole thing and she wouldn’t now be dealing with the strange, awkward feeling that the wrong person climbed out the hatch of that silencer. What was she expecting? He’s right: this whole thing is a lot to get used to.

Forcing herself past the hesitance, Rey steps forward and opens her arms. “Hey,” she says, and she can’t quite bring herself to kiss him but maybe that’s not what matters right now. Instead, she pulls him into a hug. “Welcome home.”
She has no idea how stiff Ben is until the tension bleeds out of him in her embrace.

—

“So this is it,” Ben says. “This is the cavalry.”

They’re standing around the holoboard in the chief ready room, Ben and Rey and Poe and Finn and the whole suite of senior Resistance officers who are all, Rey knows, hanging out for some kind of hint as to where Ben now sits in relation to their hierarchy. Rey has kept it to the basics: he’s left the Order and he’s going to be working with the Resistance now. If Ben has anything to add to that assessment then he hasn’t seen fit to come forward with it yet. He also hasn’t made any visible effort to blend. Since Rey took over for him in the hangar he has freshened up – apparently opting for the sonic shower, since his hair is both dry and a little less greasy. He’s shrouded in another of his seemingly endless collection of black cloaks and he hasn’t quite gotten as far as shaving.

Other things that haven’t changed include his prickly temper, his disdain for the Resistance chain of command, and his general assumption that he personally should be in charge of any conversation that happens within his range of earshot.

He surveys the holoboard and runs a gloved hand over his face. “Three ships,” he says, voice hollow with disbelief. “Eight hundred crew total.”

“Eight hundred and four,” says Poe.

“That’s including all your fighters and all your engine-room lackeys.”

“We prefer to call them maintenance technicians,” Poe says patiently. “It’s more respectful of their expertise, see.”

“We’re going to die,” says Ben. “Everyone in this fleet is going to die.”

“I know, right?” says Poe. “Don’t worry, pal, you get used to it.”

Rey’s glad Poe has stepped up to play orientation buddy, because her own patience is waning fast. In some ways, the odds they’re facing now are the best they’ve had since long before Crait. It’s definitely been longer than that since they enjoyed this kind of staffing surplus. Ben has no idea how lucky he is. “We’re still working out our strategy,” she says. “Right now the First Order is hellbent on tearing itself apart, and we’re hesitant to stand in the way of their good work. But our intel says that Hux has got his new Starkiller up and running, and that’s a situation we can’t ignore. We need to find a way to disable it before we end up with another Hosnian Prime.”

“No,” Ben says flatly. “If you wipe Starkiller off the map, Hux goes down with it.”

“I thought you wanted Hux gone.”

“Oh, believe me, I do. But right now the chaos is working in our favour. If we let the Imperials take control of the First Order, there’ll be no shaking them. We need to hit both factions at once.” He frowns, staring at the holoboard. “We need–”

“Hold up,” says Finn. “Before we get stuck into the details, let’s deal with the big shitting bantha in the room. Who’s we?”

As annoyed as she is by his disagreement, Rey honestly tries to step in – but as always, she underestimates Ben’s quick draw. “Try to keep up, FN-2187,” he fires back before she can open her mouth. “What do you think I’m doing here?”
“I don’t know.” Finn curls his lip. “But when you show up and start telling us not to stop your maniac ex-general from blowing up planets, it kind of sounds like you’re not on the same page as the rest of us.”

Ben gives Finn a look of disdain he would never have dared turn on Rey. It would probably be more impressive if his red-rimmed eyes and general air of sad dishevelment weren’t making him look like he just crawled out of bed after a multi-day crying jag. “I’m glad you’re not wasting your academy training, trooper, but open fire on the first target you see isn’t how things work up here in the command room.”

“Okay, boys,” says Poe loudly. “Finn, back off, this isn’t helping anything. Kylo, buddy, I get that you’re having a bad day but I’m going to sock you in the mouth if you keep taking it out on Finn.”

“Fucking try it, Dameron.”

“Push it any further and I will. As it happens, strategically speaking I’m on your side. Sorry, Rey, but we gotta think bigger here than ‘Ooh big scary superweapon’. Because that’s what Hux wants us to think and we already played right into his hands by trying to take it out last time.”

He has a point. Ben, improbably, has fallen silent. He’s looking at Poe with a kind of stunned respect that’s either due to the vote of support or the threat of violence, and Rey doesn’t really want to think about which. Finn’s teeth are gritted, but he sucks in a breath and says, “Okay, fine, but Rey’s got a point too. We can’t just sit and do nothing while Hux uses that thing to blow holes in the galaxy.”

“It’s not a question of doing nothing,” says Poe. “It’s a question of timing. We only get one first move, so let’s take our time and get it right.”

He sounds so calm and confident. Despite herself, Rey is struck by how much strength it must be taking him to walk this tightrope. Even without any answers to offer, Poe’s words have a ringing authority that makes it hard to want to keep arguing. He’s changed a lot in the year since Rey first met him, and there’s a core of durasteel beneath that easygoing outer skin. In a strange way it reminds her of –

Well. Leia was the one who taught Poe, after all.

Finn clears his throat. “There’s also still a trust issue here. I’m sorry, but Kylo fucking Ren shows up and says he’s a good guy now, so everything’s forgiven and now we’re taking orders from him? Because I’m not so sure I’m on board with that.”

“I never said I was a good guy–”

This time Rey’s ready for it. “You stop trying to help,” she tells Ben, whisking the shovel out of his hands before he can dig his own grave any deeper. She only has one card to play here, and the way he’s been acting since he arrived, she almost doesn’t want to play it. She’s trying so hard to remind herself that the Hydian wasn’t built in a day. To show a little patience and not let her disappointment get the better of her. Years of bad behaviour aren’t going to disappear overnight. “Finn, this is one of those Force things that I don’t have a good way to explain. But it’s also not the kind of thing that can be faked. Trust me, Ben’s on our side.”

“Can I talk yet?” says Ben.

She’s trying, but he’s really not making it easy. “Do you absolutely have to?”

“It’s just that I might have a solution,” he says. “To the war, I mean. Not to Finn’s trust issues. That’s what I was trying to say before.”
All eyes turn on him. “Alright,” says Rey, after a weighty silence in which it becomes clear that Ben actually is waiting for permission. Whether in good faith or whether to annoy her further, it’s impossible to say. “Let’s hear it.”

--

The alarm sounds right as they’re finally wrapping up their long and gruelling strategy session. Ben’s on his way to the hangar faster than anyone except Poe, and it’s the first time today he’s shown anything approaching enthusiasm for a task. Rey can hear them shouting at each other all the way down the corridor.

“You launch with us, you follow my lead. That’s how things work here.”

“I’m not your fucking 2IC, Dameron. I fly how I want to fly.”

“You fly in formation with the rest of us, Ren, or I swear to fuck--”

The bridge door slides shut behind them, cutting off the rest of what’s sure to be a scintillating debate. Rey takes over the comms bay from the lieutenant who received the distress call. “Still okay out there, Chewie?” she says into the transceiver.

There’s a lot of loud Wookiee howling in the background, but Chewie’s voice comes through clear over the top of the racket. “It’s going to be fine,” Rey translates for the anxious lieutenant. “It’s not the First Order who’ve cornered them, just a band of marauders by the look of things. And they’re nearly in range of our fleet now. If Poe’s starfighters can’t handle them, the Organa’s laser turrets definitely can.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” says the lieutenant.

Realistically, there’s not much for Rey to do here. The pirates may have numbers, but they can’t have much in the way of brains if they’re picking a fight with a Kashyyyk warship less than a parsec’s distance from its fleet of armed allies. But it’s good practice for some of the less experienced new recruits, so they’ve gone to emergency protocol anyway and engaged the Organa’s systems for combat. Over the static roar of the cannons charging up, Rey joins Finn by the helm viewport and watches the light outside dissolve as the Organa drops out of hyperspace onto the battlefield. The Ninka II and the Intrepid follow close behind them. As soon as the aftershocks settle, the hangar opens and a squad of Resistance fighters surge out into the open, bolting across open space towards where the Wookiee ship is being harried by a dozen or so flashy but none-too-agile gunships.

In among the swarm of standard X-wings and RZ-2s, Rey picks out the distinctive twin-dagger shape of Ben’s TIE silencer. So far, Poe seems to have won the argument about who flies in front of who. It remains to be seen how long that’ll last in the heat of battle.

She can feel the eyes boring into the side of her head. “I know what you’re going to say, Finn.”

“Bet you a week’s dessert rations you don’t,” says Finn.

Rey snorts. “You know I can read minds, right?”

“Right, yeah. Well, maybe I’m just trying to be generous. You look like you could use the extra comfort food.” But then Finn shuffles his feet, and out of the corner of her eye she sees him stuff his hands in his pockets. “You don’t though, right?”

“What?”
“You don’t read my mind.”

Rey forces her eyes off the battlefield and looks at Finn. “No, I don’t,” she assures him quickly. “I mean, I can’t help overhearing flashes sometimes, but I never listen on purpose.”

“Good,” says Finn.

“I still know what you’re going to say.”

Finn shakes his head. Outside the viewport, a burst of fire lights up the void as one of the pirate ships explodes. “I don’t want to fight about Kylo Ren. Honestly, the less I hear about your weird thing with him, the happier I’ll be. But we do need to talk about this plan of his. Rey, I was stationed out in the Unknown Regions for years, and I never heard anyone say anything about a mining planet.”

So far, so repetitive. “We talked about this in the meeting, Finn. Ben says it was above your pay grade, and I know he’s not lying. Like I said – I can feel it when people lie.”

“It’s too clean, Rey. This whole plan is way too clean. Like, oh, no, we don’t have to worry about fighting the First Order head-on, we can just sneak into the Unknown Regions and blow up the mines where they’re sourcing all the kyberite to power their weapons.”

“It’s a little more complex than that,” Rey points out. “For one, we have to navigate the Unknown Regions without getting picked off by a First Order patrol. Then we have to find a way to blow up a entire planet-sized mine.”

“Yeah, well, Ren should be good for that. Blowing up planets is one of his specialties.”

“This isn’t like that. We’re talking about attacking a resource, not extinguishing a population.” Rey runs a hand through her hair, wishing she’d just tied it back like usual this morning. She’d wanted – it seems stupid now. She’d wanted to look pretty. “He’s turned, Finn. I know it doesn’t make sense to you, but he’s turned and that changes everything.”

Outside, the pirate fighters are being pushed back towards their looming cruiser. The Resistance have formed a protective circle around the Wookiee ship, escorting it towards the safety of the Organa’s shield perimeter.

Most of the Resistance have formed a protective circle. One distinctive ship has broken formation and is pelting headlong at the pirate cruiser. From one of the comm bays behind them, Rey can hear the muted squad channel surging to an angry crescendo: come back … already in retreat … an order damn it Ren…

As she and Finn look on, the lethal black streak of a TIE silencer disappears underneath the cruiser’s belly. A second later, a terrific explosion fills the whole viewpoint with searing light and flying debris.

“Name one example of what’s changed,” says Finn flatly. “Because all I see is the same self-righteous, bullying asshole who thinks the fate of the whole galaxy is his call to make.”

That hits a little too close to home. “I thought you didn’t want to fight about Ben,” Rey snaps.

“And I thought you were interested in having a conversation, not trying to berate me into liking your stupid murderer boyfriend.”

After fighting half the morning with Ben, the last thing Rey wants to do is fight with the one person she can normally count on to be in her corner. Disgusted, she turns her back on the carnage outside
“I tried to be the bigger person,” Finn calls after her. “I tried, Rey, I really did. I offered him a truce and he told me to get fucked. So if you’re so mad we’re not getting along better, maybe you should take it up with him instead of me.”

Rey stops in place. “He – what?”

She must sound furious still, because Finn winces a little when she turns back to face him. Determined not to let her anger at Ben spill over and poison anything else, she takes a deep breath and forces her expression to soften. “I’m sorry–”

“No, I’m sorry,” says Finn. “I’m not trying to hound you, Rey. I get it, you see a side of him that the rest of us don’t. But bear in mind that the same thing’s true the other way around. That back there in the ready room? That was Ren on his best behaviour like he always is when you’re there watching. He wasn’t quite so keen to make nice when it was just him and me.”

After her conversation with Finn, Rey excuses herself from the bridge and takes refuge in the empty mess hall. She sits down and puts her head in her hands and takes stock of everything that’s happened since Ben came back on board the Organa. Annoying as his snippiness was, it didn’t strike her as anything truly serious. But that’s the thing. Rey isn’t scared of Ben: she can match him in banter and she can match him hand to hand, if it comes to that, and his jabs and nasty jokes are never more than a passing irritant to her. But that’s not true for the crew members Ben could choke to death with an effortless wave of his hand. It’s probably not true for Poe, who despite their nightmarish history together is making a truly heroic effort to ease Ben into the fold. It’s certainly not true for Finn, who built himself a life outside the First Order from scratch, and who doesn’t the constant reminders of what life was like when he was under their thumb.

To a point, knowing that it’s not all about her makes things easier to deal with. But only to a point. For the first time since Ben’s vortex sucked her in, Rey wonders if she’s truly made the right decision. Ben Solo – whatever she calls him, whatever he answers to, he’s only ever going to change as much as he wants to. And today he’s sent her some fairly clear signals.

But her sanctuary doesn’t last long. She hears the returning pilots before she sees them, all talking over the top of each other and broadcasting their manic post-flight energy from all the way down the corridor and oh, Rey doesn’t want to deal with this right now.

“–technically a demotable offense,” she hears Poe say. He doesn’t sound remotely angry about it, and his good cheer is a jarring clash with Rey’s lingering tension from the bridge room and her built-up temper after a whole day of letdowns and soured expectations.

“Lucky I don’t have a rank, then,” says Ben, laughter ringing in his voice. “Come on, Poe, admit it. That was an awesome shot. Right up the ventral exhaust pipe.”

“Poetic cinema,” says Poe. “Doesn’t mean I want you setting a bad example for my – hey, how’s it going, Rey? You missed a hell of a fight out there. Not that we needed you.”

Distantly, Rey hears herself saying something about unfinished jobs and getting out of their way. She doesn’t want to sit around listening to the fighter squad brag about their prowess, any more than she wanted to hang out on the bridge arguing with Finn. But of course she doesn’t get very far away from the mess hall before Ben catches up to her, bright and excited with his cheeks lightly flushed from post-flight exhilaration. She registers what he wants from her about a split second before he catches her arm and pulls her aside into an alcove off the corridor. “Hey,” he says, and there at last is the smile that Rey spent so long looking forward to, except that now instead of filling her with
contagious joy it makes her want to slap him in the face.

She doesn’t slap him. But when he pins her to the alcove wall and tries to kiss her, her hand almost itches with the temptation.

“Stop that.” She plants her hands on his broad chest and shoves, and he doesn’t even budge because of course he doesn’t, but he looks down at her and blinks and she can see the gears turning as his adrenaline-drunk mind recalibrates.

His expression cycles: first annoyance, then frustration, then concern. “What the fuck, Rey? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” She shoves again, and this time he steps back, expression darkening. “Don’t just grab me out of nowhere, that’s all.”

“I just thought…” Ben furrows his brow. “Fine. Forget it.”

“I already have.”

“Fine.” She slips past him back out of the alcove, but she only get a few steps down the corridor before he says: “No, wait. Why are you so angry? You’ve been seething ever since I got here. You barely want to look at me.”

She doesn’t stop. He’s following her again, long legs keeping step effortlessly with her hurried stride. And Rey is angry, but it’s starting to dawn on her just how much hard work it takes to sustain this kind of anger for any length of time. Already she’s threatening to burn through her supply of it, and underneath the anger, something far more painful is waiting to take its turn.

It was all supposed to be different than this. Ben was supposed to be different than this. All the stories Rey has read, she knows what a turning point looks like – and she and Ben have already had theirs and Finn’s right, nothing has changed. He’s not even happy to see her. It took blowing up a pirate ship to make him smile.

“I don’t want to do this right now,” she says, because she doesn’t know how to put her feelings into words and she has no idea what’s going to come out if she tries. “Can you please just give me a little space, Ben?”

“Space from what? We haven’t even seen each other. You’ve had nothing but space for weeks.”

He’s not going to let it lie. This is what Ben always does: any sign of conflict and he doubles down and starts digging trenches. Rey’s not entirely sure he knows what giving her space would even look like. Resigned to her fate, she stops and turns to face him. “Space from you being awful,” she says. “All you’ve done since you got here is snap and snarl and bully people. The Resistance is giving you a chance and you’re putting in the bare minimum of effort for it. You could be grateful, you could be humble – but no, we’re just lucky to have you at all, aren’t we? The great Kylo Ren has changed his mind, and now the whole galaxy’s supposed to fall in line around you.”

She knows she’s being harsh. Ben’s face has frozen into an expressionless mask, but she can the shockwave of her impact through the Force, hurt and anger and … fear. Ben has gone cold all over. For a second, she thinks he might have stopped breathing.

“I am trying,” he says at last, and for such a large man his voice sounds tiny.

And Rey regrets her outburst almost at once, but she also knows that she can’t back down now. Victimhood is Ben’s comfort zone. If she apologises, this whole fight is going to be all her fault and
he’ll be off the hook for the bad behaviour that pushed them to it. “Try harder,” she says, hating herself a little bit for it, and hating herself even more for letting guilt get to her. “You can start by apologising to Finn, and that poor mechanic from this morning who was just trying to do his job, and then anyone else you’ve shouted at who I don’t know about. This is not an unconditional thing, Ben. If you want a place in the Resistance you need to earn it. And if you want me—”

But she’s run out of words. Long after she turns the corner and leaves the sight of Ben behind, she can feel his emotions churning up the Force like a bottomless maelstrom.

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