When the Soul Lies Down

by mame_loshn

Summary

After the saber splits, Rey awakens first to find her world seismically altered. But she knows better than to leave Kylo behind in the hands of the First Order.

Canon-compliant until after the throne room scene in The Last Jedi: what if Rey took Kylo with her when she fled the Supremacy?

Notes

In my life, I am lucky enough to be guided not by a North Star, but by Pleiades. This, and everything I make with love, is for those women who have held, nurtured, challenged, and celebrated me throughout the years. In particular, this is for Anna, long may she reign, and for Rosie, who has been the sister of my heart since we were thirteen-year-olds spinning out Pirates of the Caribbean self-insert fic at theater summer camp. I love you both immensely, and thank you for midwifing this small pebble in the galactic mountain of glorious Reylo
trash.

Comments, suggestions, and constructive criticism heartily welcomed--I have a fair amount of content in various stages of completion, and would love to hear input as I shape it up.
“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I’ll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase ‘each other’ doesn’t make any sense.”

—Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks

Awareness blooms with the taste of blood and ash acrid in her mouth. Aches staved off by the adrenaline of battle light up the rest of her body, skin grittier than on any morning she awoke among the drifting sand dunes of Jakku. The ground is unforgiving beneath her, chill diffusing through sore limbs. It is another gray morning on Ahch-To, the sun not yet risen, and soon she will wrap her cloak in a cocoon around her and go to the wild seam between island and sea to watch the suns burst over the waves. She listens for the omnipresent sound of the tide, but only silence comes back to her.

Oh, hell.

Livid memory floods bile into Rey’s throat as her eyes snap open, and she clambers to her feet in a halting stutter of movement. For a few seconds, her vision swims and darkens, and her knees buckle. She bites back a hiss of pain as her wrists catch the brunt of her fall, and she freezes on all fours, muscles in spasm, cursing herself for each passing heartbeat of inaction. She doesn’t remember taking blunt force to her head, but a lump has risen at her temple, and its throbbing scatters her thoughts like X-wings in a dogfight. Out of the turmoil of panic and pain, one idea rises, monolithic.

Ben.

The final moments before the explosion that knocked her unconscious seep through her like corrosive acid, and an involuntary sob tightens her throat. A baleful prophecy echoes across her brain: this isn’t going to go the way you think.

Nothing since I left the Resistance base on D’Qar has gone the way I thought, she muses with bitterness. The silence filling the chamber is eerie. It pricks the hairs on the nape of her neck as she squats back on her heels, body still as though she is a bowl of water, intent on preventing anything from sluicing over her brimming edges. Where is he?

Her gaze strafes the room strewn with red-plated bodies like swatted insects. At last, through the hazy, shifting sheen of debris, she spots Ben—no, Kylo—sprawled motionless far across the floor. He’s curled as though asleep onto his side away from her, limbs loose, and falling ash is picking out strands of his dark hair in a macabre corona of gray. He is too far away for her to tell if his chest still rises and falls.

Her stomach twists to see him so still. Balancing on the tightrope of her breath, she forces herself calm, steady—to indulge panic would be a dangerous liability here among the smoking ruins of hope. As though punctuating this thought, her gaze fixes on the broken pieces of Luke’s lightsaber that lie between them, useless as the two halves of Snoke’s scabbed corpse on the dais. She draws in a sharp gasp as light catches the jagged edges of the snapped weapon, limns the dull pieces of the
kyber crystal within. It was this saber that had called to her on Takodana, whose touch had shocked her awake to the Force coiled in her veins. Here is a new rupture in a lengthening string of disappointments, her world contracting with loss even as it spills, fecund, beyond the barren meagerness of childhood expectation. The crystals within the sword are exposed to view like bones pushing through the flesh of a shattered leg. Rey aches as though she herself has severed a limb.

Despite the rich tableau of destruction before her, her eyes return again and again to Kylo. She swallows hard against the nausea building in her gut, fury raking sharp claws through each inhale until her lungs fray into fluttering tatters. She stares at his broad back, her heart clenching in time with the throbbing at her temple. Fresh tears track down her cheeks in the wake of old weeping. Since she left Jakku, it seems she has done little but fight and cry. Rey is so, so tired.

The sound of crashing and screams in the distance pulls her attention to the viewport. She can see the wing of the vast ship *Supremacy* amputated, bleeding flame and flotsam into the breathless black of space. Panic flares bright in her gut as time presses sinuous against her, and she swivels to stare at the entrance to the chamber. She doesn’t know how long she was unconscious. At any second, hostile hordes of First Order lackeys could stride through the door, begging an audience with the Supreme Leader now cooling in a heap.

That would mean a death sentence she cannot bring herself to imagine. She needs to find a way out as fast as she can.

Rey spits at the twisted corpse in one last, fierce gesture of defiance, hands trembling. Her body feels as held-together with spit and string as the *Falcon*, that close to internal collapse and ruin. She crawls across the floor, sucking in air through her nose to keep her stomach settled, and gathers up the fractured lightsaber. Her touch is as tender as though she were handling a wounded animal. With a final flicker of hope, she looks the weapon over, but the damage is beyond her skill to repair. As she stands, stowing the shards in her clothes, she notices a door previously obscured by the red drapery that has now vanished into smoking particulate ruin. She bites her lip, every cell in her body fizzing with apprehension. The hatch could be a dead end, but it’s a more appealing option than attempting to escape through the labyrinthine bowels of the ship.

After a few seconds of prodding, the unlocked control panel yields to her intrusion. The doors slide open, revealing a small, spotless hangar and a single *Upsilon*-class command shuttle. This must be Snoke’s private craft. Her eyes grow wide, and she breaths a deep sigh of relief. The promise of imminent escape propels her a few steps toward freedom before she halts and pivots to lean against the threshold of the hangar, wiping her nose on her sooty arm wrap. It is possible, of course, that Kylo is dead. She waits for a flush of hope to warm her at this thought, but it doesn’t come. There is nothing but the old familiar loneliness, a yawning chasm that for a moment had dissipated into a curl of brilliant joy when she had fought side by side with Ben. *You stupid ass*, she thinks, considering his limp body, tall frame small and pathetic with distance. She chews a lip, thinking hard through the fog of pain permeating her body. If he isn’t dead, leaving him here to awake with new resolve as the Supreme Leader of the First Order poses an intolerable risk. She cannot know for sure what his next move would be, but the consequences would almost certainly be devastating to whatever remains of the Resistance on the planet below.

Dead or alive, I have to know. The idea of touching him sends her heartbeat into an erratic tattoo, but as she crosses the room she thinks of unforgiving deserts, of sands that swallow star cruisers whole, and steels herself scorching to kneel and feel his pulse. Life jumps between the sturdy bones of his wrist, where she’s slid a finger under the edge of his heavy glove to graze skin. Alive. A painful tangle of emotions surges in her chest like something feral slamming against the bars of a cage, and her lips peel back from her teeth in a grimace. His eyelids flutter at the subtle electricity of her touch,
and she freezes.

She can finally see his face. His skin, whiter than the seafoam-hemmed tide, glows stark against the black of his uniform. The scar she gave him is purpled in the hazy light. The ghost of his final please haunts his slack mouth, and Rey twists her free hand in the hem of her tunic, rolling the fabric against her sweating fingers. For a moment she is possessed by the urge to grab one of the weapons strewn around the room and split Kylo again along that weal, opening his guts to the air, letting his hot blood glaze the floor before she flees. You lose. She could behead the whole damn organization twice over. Leave the First Order leaderless--for a moment, anyway. Rey can’t imagine that chaos would be permitted for long in those gleaming, airless corridors.

Do it, Rey commands her bruised body. Get up. Finish him. Her limbs play traitor as the precious moments tick on, measured by his quiet breathing. The dull pain flaring in her head recedes, and she realizes that her fingers still rest against his steady pulse. She pulls her hand back and balls it into a fist. Severing their physical connection brings the jagged headache roaring back. She wants to be filled with hate. She wants to be an unquenchable flame scouring this ship clean. But the sound of Kylo’s steady inhalation wets her kindling, smothers that righteous anger. You’re still holding on. To him. Let go.

“I am going to kill you now,” she whispers aloud. New tears of fury drip from her chin. In repose, the zealous light gone from his eyes and his lips softly parted, Kylo looks so much younger—as he must have when he was the boy Luke Skywalker awoke in the night, weighing the same choice that she did now. Rueful, she feels closer to Luke in this moment than she ever did sharing his lonely hermitage.

As she recalls the stern Jedi master, the Force shifts tumblers inside her, a lock trembling on the cusp of falling open. This nagging apprehension like grit gumming up her engines takes shape as a memory so vivid, it is as though Luke unfolds before her in the ruined hall. “It is time for the Jedi order to end,” he had said. “Their legacy is one of hypocrisy and failure.” The words hadn’t made sense to her at the time. It was difficult enough to try to reconcile the warrior risen from childhood myth with the flesh and blood man before her, gray salting his beard, his mouth a hard, implacable line. It is only now, watching Kylo’s chest rise and fall as her head throbs, that the pieces fall together, and she understands.

She had heard those sentiments before, of course. From another man with Skywalker blood, another man whose body bent the Force like a black hole bends gravity, bends light. “Let the past die. Kill it if you have to.” She marvels that those with the rich luxury of history should be so quick to shed it. Rey is a creature of the present moment, and of future longing. The past she knows is a series of scratched tally marks in the rusting metal of her husk of home. It is broken parts scavenged from someone else’s story, scrubbed and repurposed for survival by her clever fingers. She cannot kill what she cannot grasp. Legacy, like family, is a curious abstraction.

But Luke is not here, and Kylo—her lip trembles as she looks down at his body collapsed in sleep like a princeling bespelled—may never be ready to make the right choices. It is distinctly unfair, but it has fallen again to the scavenger to pull something salvageable out of the wreck of history. Whatever poison Snoke hissed about Rey’s lack of wisdom, she knows she can trust her instincts. They have kept her alive this long.

The sound of commotion echoing in the distant corridors of the ship grows incrementally louder. Rey sits on her heels, immobilized by indecision. She presses her fingertips into her browbone, feels exhaustion hovering at the edges of her body like a dim cloud. The wound sliced into her upper arm stings, but she ignores it.
“You win,” she says to Kylo. “But I can’t leave you here to destroy the galaxy with your tantrums, not if there’s any chance that the Rebel transports made it planetside.” She glances at the oculus, but it is blank and inert, taunting her. She sighs. She tries not think about battered bodies, wreckage. Surely she would have felt it if Leia had died. Even in the midst of battle, the Force would have resounded with the loss. Surely.

*I’m not a Jedi, and I’m no one’s apprentice. Not for lack of trying, I suppose.* She looks around the room, glance sweeping over the bodies of the red guards slain in those glorious, wild minutes when she’d believed in the redemption of Ben Solo. *But I suppose you can’t both be wrong.* She stands and hunts around the room for the binders she’d worn up from the main hangar. She finds them, scuffed and filthy, in a corner, and snaps them onto Kylo’s wrists. Then, for good measure, she pulls Snoke’s ruined sash from his gown, and stuffs it roughly into Kylo’s mouth. His head lolls back, exposing the long column of his throat. Rey stares at the dusting of beauty marks along his jugular, imagines how his skin would give beneath her teeth.

“I hate you,” she tells him. The words are something she’s trying on, like *monster*. She remembers how Kylo considered that insult, how he had examined the wound she could scarcely believe it had made, and built something darker to shield the hurt. Perhaps it is this memory that gentles her when she reaches into his mind, unprotected from her intrusion. The immediacy of his emotions, unmitigated by distance or occlusion, slams into her like a blaster bolt. She gasps, bracing herself against his shoulder for balance amid the pitch and keel. Peering into his unconscious mind is like trying to make out a wreckage in a sandstorm: fragments of images and feelings shape themselves for a moment, only to be lost again in whirling static. The effect is dizzying. As she watches, the sand begins to settle, as though his slow return to consciousness imposes a form of order on the maelstrom.

*I’m not ready for you to be here yet.* Cautious, as though afraid of touching something deadly, she smoothes edges, and pushes back the horizon of his imminent wakefulness. The static of his mind clings to her, learning her shape, drawing her in with languid magnetism. Hurriedly, she extricates herself from his thoughts like brushing off cobwebs. The last thing she sees before pulling free is her own face, lambent in the firelight staining the stone hut on Ahch-To, one firm hand extended. She has to look away from the bright yearning in her eyes. The edges of the surfaced memory are strangely worn, as though over-handled into softness.

She is awash in the Force, an unanticipated wave that breaks and breaks over her as time fractures. Ben fuzzes in triplicate before her: damp cheeks and dark eyes wide and serious in the flicker of flame; sprawled inert among the wreckage at her feet; and then their future, solid and clear—

“Now you have me dreaming,” she mutters at Kylo as she pulls his body upright with the Force, a hot flush spreading over her cheeks. She cannot quite dispel an uneasy sense of violation, as though she has once more barged in on him semi-nude. She tugs him along in her wake, looking resolutely before her. His boots drag across the floor in a percussive juddering.

The toe of her shoe makes impact with Kylo’s discarded lightsaber, and it skitters across the floor in panicked flight. Rey watches its trajectory, palming the outline of the broken weapon in her shirt. Its metal shaft is cold against her skin. Again, a stab of loss sears through her, and the pain in her temple flares in sympathetic outrage. There is but this one functional saber left between them—the only one in the galaxy, for all Rey knows. When she lays a hand on the weapon to pick it up, a foreign sense memory blossoms between her mind and arm: the sword as an extension of her own body, fondness born of dedicated practice, a fierce and protective love. The Force binds together only living things, Luke had told her, but Rey could have sworn with Kylo’s lightsaber prickling in her hand that it was more alive than not. A wary sentience, watching her.
She looks between the lightsaber and Kylo, two fragments of the same fractured entity. His hair falls over his eyes as he dangles in the air, large hands limp at his sides. Reaching up on tiptoe, she hesitates for only a moment before she tucks a few locks behind his ear with her free hand to stare at the scar splitting his cheek. Her own face tingles as though the smooth skin puckers tight in an angry slash. Fascinated, she runs her thumb along the old wound, tracing the path of her stroke. Rey closes her eyes, seeing the flashes of blue and red in the frozen forest, hearing the hum and sizzle of laser blade against blade. Beneath the adrenaline and desperation of that fight she’d felt a tinge of surprise at how easily the saber sliced through Kylo’s flesh, as though he were something less solid than matter. As though it were nothing to mutilate another with his eyes locked on hers.

Don’t be afraid. I feel it too.

Rey hastily pulls her hand away from his face, and his hair slips free to obscure his sweat-dewed brow once more. She clips the sword to her belt, running a finger along the dorsal vents. It bangs against her hip with every stride.

Rey steps into the small fluorescent hangar containing Snoke’s gleaming black shuttle, its wings folded against the chassis like those of a sleeping bird. Her boots leave dull scuff marks on the glossy floor. The space is utterly devoid of the usual mechanical smells to which Rey is accustomed in shipyards and hangars, and the hairs prickle on the back of her neck at the antiseptic lack of chemical fumes and grease. Drifting behind her, Kylo’s head hits the doorframe with a loud thump. She winces at the sound of impact, terror-struck that pursuers have interrupted her escape. When she sees that they are still alone, she glares at him in annoyed relief before ushering him aboard. In haste, she collapses his body into a seat, and binds it with a knotted utility cable scavenged from a drawer.

It’s strange to touch him in this way, matter of fact and brusque. He is unexpectedly substantial under her hands: the Force-bond had rendered him both realer and more ethereal than flesh. She rests her weight against his muscled torso, bracing him in place as she twines the cable over a heavy arm. Her palms are clammy, slick as they had been during the descent from the Falcon in her tiny shuttle. The shame of hindsight curdles in her chest. Withering scorn blasts away the memory of her breathless hope at the sight of his face, twisted by a small smile, in the brief eternity before stormtroopers advanced. Now she’s handling him like so much cargo, just any other broken part stripped from the skeleton of an Imperial wreck.

“I hate you.” She means it more this time.

Collapsing into the pilot’s seat, she reaches a hand to begin the flight sequence and slip the First Order’s moorings. Limbs outstretched, the cloaked binary beacon she shares with Leia appears from beneath the edge of her arm wrap. Its flickering light casts shifting shadows across the controls. Rey pauses, hand aloft. Doubt springs up in the soft, dark furrows of her soul. Is anyone still alive at the other end of the connection? Did Finn even wake up after the battle with Kylo in the forest on Starkiller Base? Was he in one of the transports now shattered in a million pieces in orbit around the small planet below? The bodies and debris she’d forced herself to push away before return with a roar. The visages of the dead press around her. Among them, just beyond her range of sight, hover her parents in their paupers’ graves, waiting for her to stop running and face them. Her throat constricts with new fear and grief, and each breath drawn is a struggle against rising panic. There is a distinct possibility that she is but one fighter positioned against the whole engine of the First Order, about to kidnap their de facto leader.

“I don’t know where to go,” she whispers, voice hoarse. Hysterical desperation threatens to bubble up and overwhelm her, and half-instinctively she flings her tangled emotions at the planet’s surface, nearly begging.
Leia, are you there?

A few seconds of nothing, and then an upswelling of the Force rises in reply, a wave more feeling than words. It breaks against her fear, exerting a reassuring pressure on her mind like the warmth of a clasped hand. Safety. Sadness. Exhaustion. Apprehension. Hope. These emotions chase around in circles, appearing in her mind oddly like small crystal foxes snapping after each other’s tails. Yet another of the endless mysteries of this family she hasn’t the skill to parse, she supposes.

I don’t really know how this all works, she confesses. I don’t know how clearly you’re even receiving from me, or if I’m doing this right, so… The warm wave returns to wash over her again, and Rey releases a breath she hadn’t even been aware she was holding. The stars prickle like frozen blaster bolts through the open hangar’s containment field.

Finn? Rey asks, sending Leia her memory of her friend’s wide, genuine smile. An image of him returns, covered in grime but upright, determined. Rey sags with relief against the pilot’s seat. He had come back for her once before, gathering her into his arms in the close air of Starkiller Base. It seemed that he had done so again from the brink of death. A sob of gratitude chokes her. Rey has always been the one who waits: Finn was the first person in her life to actually return to her. Elation is short-lived, however, as the hum of the ship buzzes low in her ears, an ominous reminder of her precarious position.

Leia, she whispers. Leia, I have your son.

The resulting silence stretches on, and on. She remembers how Leia held her, wordlessly, when they met. Total strangers made familiar by shared grief. A bond deeper and more enduring than language.

I don’t know what the First Order is going to do next. We—well, he, really—killed Snoke, and I have him here with me now on a ship. Unconscious. She hesitates.

Leia, I can’t leave him here. I couldn’t convince him to turn, and he’s too dangerous, especially now that Snoke is dead, and he could assume power. Free, he’s more dangerous than any hardware they’re carrying. I thought to kill him, but… I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t kill him. A plan begins to take shape as she speaks into the listening silence.

I can’t take him down to you. It puts the Resistance at far too much risk to bring him inside our base. But Leia— Rey hesitates again, the sound of surf crashing in her ears, or perhaps just blood racing through her at high tide.

I’m going to take him to Ahch-To, where Luke is. The sacred island. The First Order won’t be able to find us, and—she swallows hard. Maybe Luke will know what to do.

Where there was silence scant seconds before, an extraordinary sensation of deep embrace envelops her, and tears prickle Rey’s eyes as though it were her own mother returned to Jakku at last to hold her. Leia’s encouraging face, more lined than ever with weariness and worry, flickers in her mind, and the General’s mouth silently shapes a single word. Go.

Rey grins. She chokes on a sound in her throat that is neither a sob nor laughter, and her chest fills with her first full breath in several minutes. She sniffs and smooths her flyaways back from her face with trembling hands, wincing as she brushes her aching temple. In this moment, it is enough to simply have a plan.

I’ll rendezvous with Chewie and be on my way, she beams, telegraphing her gratitude with her whole heart to the other woman on the planet below. Leia—thank you. The last sensation she feels before wheeling the ship off into the darkness is the idea of a ghostly hand on her cheek.
When she docks against the Millennium Falcon, Kylo still hasn’t awoken. A livid bruise is rising where his forehead struck the hangar doorframe. His face is soft and blank, vulnerable in repose. The effect is unsettling, and she closes her eyes to imagine that generous mouth twisted in rage, the brown eyes brittled with disdain. *A monster. Yes, I am.* When she regards him again, something in her chest has frozen like armor.

“You’ll have to wait here;” she says. “I have to make sure Chewie isn’t going to kill you on sight. Not that I’m entirely certain I should stop him....”

She steps onto the now familiar ship, redolent with its smells of ancient coolant, wet fur, and burning circuitry. Chewbacca lumbers down the corridor and sweeps her up into a crushing hug, warbling gaily. She buries her face in his rough pelt.

“I’m glad to see you too,” she says. Chewie examines her, and clucks disapprovingly over her bruised temple and sliced arm. Satisfied that she isn’t in immediate danger, he tugs her toward the cockpit, impatient to join the fray brewing on Crait’s surface.

“Chewie, wait. I didn’t come alone.” She opens the door to Snoke’s craft, and Chewie boggles at Kylo bound and gagged within. Before she can object, the Wookiee draws his bowcaster and aims it at Kylo’s chest, braying a warning. She steps into the doorframe to block his shot and raises her hands in supplication. He cocks his head, teeth bared.

“He killed Snoke, Chewie,” she says in a rush, imploring. “He could have killed me. He killed Snoke instead.” Chewbacca darts a look in her direction, a question he can’t even voice shining in his blue eyes. It breaks her heart to disappoint him.

“No, I mean...well, he didn’t do it for the Resistance. I misjudged his choice. Snoke’s death was about killing his master for power, not about helping us.”

*It was about me,* a voice within her whispers. *He did it, in part, for me.*

Not that this fact means much of anything at all, especially not to Han’s old co-pilot. Chewie’s face is impassive, but his massive shoulders sag a fraction of an inch.

“I didn’t bring him with me because he’s our ally, or because I’m hoping for anything. It’s just—honestly, would you rather he was here, a hostage, or out there marshaling the First Order for an attack on our people?”

Chewie continues to glare at the inert body, but the muzzle of his bowcaster begins a slow descent to the floor.

“I thought I’d take him to Luke’s island,” she continues. “My visit there alone didn’t do us much good, but maybe Luke will see this differently—”

<< You don’t have to justify it. I understand. Really, I do. >> Chewie steps closer to Kylo, pushes the young man’s hair away from his forehead with a tenderness Rey wouldn’t have imagined possible in his enormous paw. He sighs, a huge exhale that ruffles his fur and warms Rey’s face. << May I live to regret this weakness and all those that came before it again, and again, and again. >> He intones the words like prayer.

She remains silent, fighting a sense of intrusion on an intimacy she doesn’t understand. Perhaps this is how one is absorbed into a story: you stand at the threshold, knocking, peering through windows, until someone invites you in. At last, Chewie looks up at her.
"So what’s our plan?"

“They need our help on the planet below. The Resistance is down there, but I watched the First Order murder hundreds of them in the escape from their cruiser. If we keep him away, Kylo can’t step into Snoke’s place and help the First Order regroup. I don’t imagine they’ll allow the power vacuum to prevent them from attacking the base, though, not with so few of our people left.” Her voice is bitter.

"I can go with the Falcon, see what I can do," Chewie says, striding out of Snoke’s ship. His eyes are already faraway, plotting logistics, imagining flight maneuvers. "R2 and I will miss your help on the guns, but we’ve faced worse odds." He turns, nods to Kylo. "Get him out of here. He’s only a liability until you do."

Rey nods, and skitters down to the bunk to retrieve her quarterstaff, strapping it to her back. When she reemerges, she launches herself against Chewbacca, hugging him tightly. Even pouncing on him with her full body weight doesn’t cause him to stagger a single step, and he roars, hugging her in return. Her feet dangle above the ground, and for a moment, love pierces her, pinning her to the world.

“We’ll see each other soon. Thank you for everything,” she says, pulling away, talking as much to the Falcon as to Chewie. She trails a hand over its stained wall before she reenters the sterile black gleaming of the command shuttle. He nods, and they separate to their respective ships, the darkness between the stars swallowing them whole as they speed away.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

After the saber splits, Rey awakens first to find her world seismically altered. But she knows better than to leave Kylo behind in the hands of the First Order.

Canon-compliant until after the throne room scene in The Last Jedi: what if Rey took Kylo with her when she fled the Supremacy?

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Chapter Two: Luke comes to Leia on Crait, as he once did many years before on the Death Star.

Deep in space as Rey steers them toward Ahch-To, Kylo Ren finally wakes up. After years of estrangement, he and his uncle come face-to-face.

Chapter Notes

Comments, reviews, suggestions, and constructive criticism heartily welcomed! Let me know what you think, and where you’d like to see things go.

As ever, thanks to Anna and to Rosie for their enduring friendship, as well as their thoughtful and loving readership/editing skills.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You will not be spared, nor will what you love be spared.

A wind has come and gone, taking apart the mind; it has left in its wake a strange lucidity.

How privileged you are, to be still passionately clinging to what you love; the forfeit of hope has not destroyed you.

Maestoso, doloroso:

this is the light of autumn; it has turned on us. Surely it is a privilege to approach the end still believing in something.”

—Louise Glück

When Hux enters the empty throne room, the smoky air singeing his lungs with each inhale, he grips
his blaster in its holster, convulsively, involuntarily (Kylo will never know the true tally of those who have stood above him contemplating his death while he drifted in dreams), though there is no one left alive to shoot.

When he recounts this moment later, to Phasma, to subordinates, to the formal inquest into the Supreme Leader’s death (there are forms to fill out in triplicate documenting every act carried out by the bureaucratic machine of the First Order), Hux will cast himself as decisive, statesmanlike. He will never tell a soul about the panic that chewed through him at the sight of Snoke’s body, how a part of him wanted to sit down on the gritty floor in his freshly pressed trousers and cry. Hux has been preparing for this moment his entire life: the First Order is his inheritance, his birthright. He was a child when he learned savagery as discipline, and a child still when he taught it to others in turn. Yet somehow he cannot stop from feeling as though the roof has blown off of his house (well, a reasonable part of his brain reminds him, as he watches the plumes of destruction wafting off the Supremacy into space, it actually kind of has) and he is staring through the wreckage up at a sky whose constellations he does not know. Hux has given hundreds, thousands of orders in his life—but he has always taken them as well, and here in the throne room, with Snoke dead and that sulky twat Kylo Ren vanished, there is no one to tell Armitage Hux what the hell exactly he is supposed to do.

“Wouldn’t put it past Ren to have done it himself and run off with that desert trash back to mummy,” Hux grumbles to himself, flicking ash off his uniform from where it has begun to settle in flakes like gentle snowfall. It feels comforting and normal, when everything else is going to every possible kind of shit around him, to be able to gripe about the younger man like it is any other day.

He realizes with a small rush of intoxication that he has never spoken so freely in front of Snoke before. It doesn’t really matter that the man is dead; it takes Hux a few seconds to roll the words around his mouth, tasting their flavor, before he says (somewhat more loudly than he had originally intended), “I detest Kylo Ren.” He considers the corpse made almost comical by the onset of rigor mortis. “And I didn’t much care for you either, come to think of it.”

He straightens his uniform again and adjusts his posture. Already the panic is dissipating. Hux will tuck the momentary weakness somewhere deep within him, as though it never existed in the first place. With Snoke and Ren gone, the victory he will achieve on Crait will be fully military, fully his, without the mystical nonsense whose employ usually leads to Hux feeling disgruntled and bleeding from the face. Now that he is beyond the reach of their supernatural wrath, he wonders if Force-sensitives might not make an excellent target for eradication after he mops up the pathetic remains of the Resistance.

“Yes. Yes, quite right,” he says, this time to himself, and turns thoughtfully on his heel to head back to the bridge, and glorious revenge.

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Even amidst the chaos of battle, Leia can sense Luke’s approach before she sees him step out of the gloom, pushing back the hood of his cloak. There’s something fuzzy about the edges—not around what she can see, of course, but in the way he takes up space when she reaches out to him with the Force. It isn’t until he leans over to kiss her forehead, beard and hair inexplicably dark and youthful (when she cries for his loss later, alone, it is the memory of this small vanity that makes her laugh and laugh until the tears have long since dried up), that she realizes what it is truly costing him to be here, at the end of everything. Her lips part in wonder, in pain, in gratitude.

“I’ve come to face him,” Luke says with solemn resolve. Leia knows his intentions are good, have always been good, but she’s a general, not a monk, and wise enough to understand the difference between tactics and penance. She shakes her head, leans heavily on her cane.
“My son is gone,” she says, thinking of the small craft speeding both toward and away from Luke, a bizarre paradox.

“No one is ever really gone,” Luke intones, and slips the little linked dice into her hand, the ones that had dangled for so many years in the cockpit of the *Falcon*. It’s a small tenderness of the kind they’d shared in the thousands before he’d disappeared, and for a moment Leia doesn’t know if he means Han, or Ben, or if Luke himself is the ghost haunting her.

“No, Luke—” she struggles to hold back a grin, because it’s the wrong moment, because so many are dead, because of what it costs Luke every second to stand here solidly before her—but it’s a joke the way Han would tell it and with the dice in her hand, even the projection of them, her husband feels impossibly close, like if she were to just look over her shoulder—

“I mean, he’s not with the First Order forces. There was a fight, and Snoke was killed. Rey took Kylo prisoner in Snoke’s personal craft. They’re heading for you as we speak.” Luke stares at her for a moment, aghast, before his composure shatters.

“She’s bringing him where?” his voice cracks, and Leia raises her eyebrows. *You’d think he’d have grown out of that at some point*, she muses to herself. *You’d think he’d have grown out of that at some point*, she muses to herself.

“*To you. Away from the epicenter.*” She gestures around the dank, dusty room thick with fear and the smell of scorched metal clinging to her nostrils. “So you may get that confrontation after all, brother dear.” Luke sighs, and Leia imagines that his breath ruffles the few stray strands of hair that have come loose from her twists. *I changed my hair, did you notice?* She almost says, but doesn’t.

“I really wish she hadn’t done that.” He fixes his sister with an accusatory glare. “Was it her idea?”

“Yes.” Luke’s suspicious expression doesn’t change. “It was! I gave her my approval, but the idea was all hers. She seems to think…” Leia sighs. “She seems to think you might know what to do with him.”

Luke’s mouth turns grave, and he shakes his head, slowly. “Have I ever known what to do with him? I can’t save him. She should know that.” He scoffs. “And besides, she’s already brought him there, once before.” He rolls his eyes. “I must say, I handled it very well.” Leia furrows her brow in confusion.

“How could she—”

“Long story,” Luke interrupts. He turns to look at the ragged hole burned into the heavy door of the stronghold. “Well, since I’m just killing time until they show up—I guess I have work to do.” He grasps Leia’s hand one final time, and brings it to his forehead. She marvels at how substantial his touch feels, how if she ignores the slight fizzing around the edges in her mind, she can believe that her own beloved brother is standing before her. With a final look, Luke turns away from her and walks with a heavy gait toward the flaming ruins of their fortress door. For a single instant, he is framed in a salt-reflected light so pure, so blinding, that she has to avert her gaze. When she looks back, he is gone.

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A few scant parsecs from their destination, Kylo Ren wakes up.

Even if his awakening weren’t accompanied by a Force-ripple that rakes Rey’s mind like fingernails across a metal hull, setting her teeth on edge, she would have known it from the angry squawking imperfectly muffled by his gag.
“How kind of you to join me at last,” she says, keeping her voice airy and her eyes on the starlines of hyperspace. “Nice nap?” She doesn’t turn to look at his expression, but the enraged shrieking and struggling in her peripheral vision grows more pronounced.

“We’ll be landing soon, but if this display of yours continues, I’ll leave you tied to that seat for however long suits me.” She swivels in the pilot’s chair and looks him in the eye. “Do we understand each other?”

Meeting his gaze is like looking into the heart of a shorting-out power breaker, and for a second she is tempted to look away. His disbelief and indignation roll across her, buoyed by a growing inventory of physical discomforts. She resists the urge to massage a mushrooming soreness in her shoulder. Dark eyes overbright with unshed tears bore into her own, reproach palpable. He is still, so still, as immobile as he had been sprawled prone on the floor of Snoke’s chamber, but this is not repose: this is the utter rigidity of a man holding himself together with the force of will alone. She matches him stare for stare, but cannot stop herself from trembling, as though his eyes are burning into all her cobwebbed, unswept corners, peering with singular intent at every private shame and banality. His proposal hangs in the air between them: a could-have-been, a rebuke, a prayer.

He would have the absolute nerve to look betrayed right now, she grouses.

“You are not the wounded party here, Kylo,” she says, spitting his name like a slur. “I think it’s very nice of me to take you on a trip, considering your earlier disregard for my friends’ lives.” She’s baiting him, and the sheer spitefulness of it feels delicious. Some small voice inside chastises her for it, but, for the moment, she has lost all interest in fairness when it comes to Kylo Ren. When she tries to push the small reproving voice away, it clings with unexpected tenacity, and she realizes with an unpleasant jolt that it is the now silent Kylo, trying despite his bondage to influence her mind. She jolts out of her seat, snarling.

“You will stay out of my head,” she growls, inches from his face. “You have forfeited any right you may have falsely believed you had to me or my thoughts.” She backs away to return to the pilot’s chair, though she does not shift her wary gaze from his reddening ears. “You and I are going to practice some rules about kriffing boundaries. And I don’t want to hear or feel another thing from you until we land. Is that clear?”

Rey knows his sullen silence isn’t really acquiescence, but she’ll take it regardless. She fiddles with the controls, and deep in the Unknown Regions, the ship drops out of lightspeed. The vast blue of Ahch-To explodes into view beneath them. The sight of it steals her breath: such quantities of water seem gratuitous, even obscene, after a life clawed out of the arid dunes of Jakku. She wonders if she could ever charm the caretakers into helping her draw a hot bath from the huge stone cisterns of rainwater dotting the slopes. What it would feel like to be once more completely submerged, as she had been in the dark grotto beneath the island.

Kylo is silent as they begin their descent to the island, but she can feel him fuming beneath his restraints. She ignores him, apprehension building about what Luke’s reaction will be when he sees his nephew—trussed up and weaponless, yes, but the last time Kylo had made any kind of appearance here, it had ended with her lightsaber in Luke’s face.

If Leia saw wisdom in this idea, perhaps I can convince Luke as well. The cheerful optimism of this thought rings false even inside her head, and she rolls her eyes. Maybe I can just tie them both up. They won’t see that coming.

She brings the small craft down on the same patch of flattened, slightly scorched grass that had served as landing pad for the Falcon. Chilly sunshine pours through the viewports, tracing brittle patterns across the polished floor. Rey stares across the wind-whipped hills and weighs which
restraint of Kylo’s is wisest to loosen first. She dreads the approach, dreads entering the crackling field of anxiety and rage that percolates around him. He is making no effort to hide his emotions from her, she is sure of it. An untapped vein of yearning wends beneath the broader currents of fear and distress. She doesn’t need to mine that lode for a flush of warmth to spread through her chest, and when she speaks, her voice cracks slightly on her words.

“If you think you can be civil,” she tells him, still sitting a careful distance away, “we need to talk.” He curls his lip around the gag, baring his uneven teeth, and raises his chin in challenge. There are tears on his cheeks, though whether they signify frustration or grief, she cannot tell. Rey stands, twisting her hands together. The color has returned to Kylo’s face in spots of red on his cheekbones, dulled under the grime of sweat and battle. His Force signature is frenetic, barely leashed, snapping at her fingertips. Her pulse pounds in her chest and temple as she reaches out a shaking hand toward his face. His eyes never leave hers, and she turns her head to the side, blushing, to avoid meeting his gaze. Rey takes a deep breath and gingerly tugs Snoke’s sash from Kylo’s mouth. It falls into his lap, covered in scorch marks and soaked with spittle. A dribble of saliva remains on his chin, and he ducks his head to wipe it on his shoulder, coughing. The muscles in his throat and jaw jump beneath the skin as he stretches out stiffness. Rey quickly retreats to the pilot’s seat, relieved to put even that minimal physical distance back between them.

Kylo coughs again, and rolls his head to iron out that damn crick in his neck. Rey grits her teeth at the sensation. His hair falls into his eyes, and he flicks it away with an impatient twitch. “Am I your prisoner?” he croaks. She blinks.

“I—no. Not a prisoner. That’s your thing, not mine.” Her voice is stiff, almost prim. She doesn’t recognize the sound.

“Funny about these restraints, then.” Kylo twists against the utility cable and handcuffs, but they hold firm. “So, I’m your...guest.” He smiles, though Rey doesn’t find the memory of their early encounters quite so amusing. His eyes flicker over the cockpit, taking in the forbidding austerity of the gleaming shuttle. “I see our transportation is courtesy of Supreme Leader Snoke himself.” His voice is even, but a tendon stands out in his neck as he speaks the name of his former master. His eyes snap back to her, and she shivers. “Where have you taken me?”

“Can’t you feel it?” Rey is taken aback. “Where we are?” Kylo’s gaze unfocuses as he reaches out, and he groans.

“Luke? You brought me to Luke fucking Skywalker?” She can see rage beginning to build in his face. The tang of his fear, metallic and bitter, seeps into her mouth. “So not a prison—either a sermon or an execution.” He groans again. “Probably both.”

She shrugs, determined to retain the upper hand, words nasty and sharp crowding against her teeth. They burst sour on her tongue, tasting like you chose this, like unforgiven. “Well, you could elect to see the irony in the situation, given the singular intensity with which you sought his location—” Kylo cuts her off with a roar.

“Skywalker. Rey, how could you, after everything—”

Rey has had enough of his remonstrations, and of the sudden guilt roiling her gut. She stands up, seizes him under the jaw, and shoves the sash back into his mouth. His teeth scrape against her knuckles, raising angry red welts. He tries to kick her and misses, breathing hard through his nose. His nostrils flare delicately as he gasps for breath against the charred fabric.

“I brought you,” she hisses, “to a sacred place. Where the Force is strong, and where you can’t hurt anybody with your delusions of grandeur.” She steps back, and her next words flow out like
pleading, though what she is asking him, she cannot tell. “This is Ahch-To. I was here, the night we…” Her voice rasps and dies in her throat. Kylo’s eyes are huge and luminous over the dirty gag, and another tear trickles down his damp face. That awful rigidity creeps back into his shoulders, as though the instincts of training take hold of him, pour durasteel down his spine. She wets her lips and looks away, pushing off the memory of desire. “That last night we talked.”

Unbidden, unwanted, electricity arcs between them again, a searing jolt, just as it had when their fingers grazed through the Force-bond. Rey drags in a ragged breath, and wills her body totally still. She waits for the open door to swing closed, as though she is hiding from something large and fanged hunting her near enough to follow her breathing. The connection crackles and dissipates, but not before a dissonant note of true distress clangs beneath Kylo’s simmering rage.

Kylo works his jaw, and spits the gag onto his lap. He looks as though he is about to weep in earnest. He closes his eyes, and she can feel his desperate attempt to center, to control. To hem himself into something small enough to hold between his cuffed hands.

“Don’t…put that thing in my mouth again. Please.” His urgent sincerity unsettles her. His lips tremble, as though he is chewing back words, too full of emotion to trust himself to speak. She picks up the stained sash, turns it over once in her hands, and tosses it into a corner.

“I won’t.” Her spite is running out of her like pus from a lanced infection, and she feels a modicum of shame rising in its wake.

I wish I had let you take the saber and kill me. Better than to be delivered to Luke in chains.

Rey’s eyes widen as though Kylo has spoken the words aloud, but he is gnawing his lower lip into chapped shreds, lost in his misery. His head falls forward as his body slackens against the bindings. She reads his inner turbulence in the curve of his neck, his face a scrying pool into the emotions beating against the inside of his ribcage like tiny birds. For a second, before she slams the window of their connection completely shut, she is a mass of fluttering wings, seared by a pain her own, and not her own. She opens her mouth, unsure of what she is going to say, waits for words to fill her.

“I don’t want you dead,” she says. “I haven’t wanted that for a while now.” It is a meager truth, and feels almost insulting as it leaves her mouth, but she has little else that’s real to offer him. Kylo says nothing, only watches her, waiting. The purple hollows around his eyes seem to deepen, and a muscle jumps under his skin. Tears he has not blinked away cling to his eyelashes. She moves toward his bindings, but hesitates at the stiffening of his hands into fists at her approach. “Can I trust you?” His mouth purses, and the skin splits where he has chewed himself raw. He sucks his bottom lip into his mouth. For a fraction of a second, Rey thinks she can taste his blood, and trembles.

“I won’t try to hurt you. And I probably won’t run,” he says. “If that’s what you’re asking.”

Rey nods, kneels, and begins to unravel his restraints.

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Luke. Leia’s voice filters through to him as though he is at the bottom of a deep pool, and she is calling him from dry land far above. He is liminal, split, doubled: the old man, sweating and straining alone on his island, and the projection, crunching through the salt crust though he leaves no footprint behind. He is running out of energy. He is running out of time.

Luke. His sister rustles through his mind like a warm breeze troubling a dense, verdant forest. The sensation is pleasant, even though for his doppelganger Crait’s chill is primarily an intellectual concern, and not a physical hardship. There’s one last thing. Just one last thing. Please come.
Panting, Luke traces the retreating gaggle of Resistance fighters through the winding tunnels of the abandoned base. The clamor of the First Order’s penetrating forces echoes in ominous percussion at his heels. When he finds them, Poe Dameron is kicking scree in a fit of pique at the bottom of a collapsed rock wall. Luke catches Leia’s eye, and laughs.

“Lifting rocks?” He asks her. “Really?” She shrugs, unfazed.

“Call it dramatic irony, I don’t know. Can you get us out?” Luke closes his eyes and traces his shape in his mind, smoothing the edges, nailing his double more firmly to this sliver of space and time. Unbidden, Yoda’s words come back to him: young Skywalker. Always looking to the horizon. Never here! Now! At the need right in front of your nose!

“I can try.”

“Hey, Poe,” Leia calls to the young man now attempting unsuccessfully to pry the stones free from the fissure to the outside world. “You want to take a step back?” Poe looks up, his face smeared with oil and blood. He spots Luke and looks abashed.

“Oh! Oh, sure.”

Luke can feel all of their eyes on him, their collective breath held. He tries not to notice how few of them there are. He tries not to let his heart break. On a planet far away, sweat drips down his forehead, and the taste of salt fills his mouth. He hears the heavy thud of a cane beside him, and turns to see Leia approach, wrapped in her cloak. Time and grief have scrawled new lines on her face since he left for Ahch-To, but their effect has added gravitas and wisdom to her beauty. He devours the sight of her, the loss of his years in self-imposed exile suddenly falling on him as heavily as the pile of boulders in front of them. Perhaps this is what Yoda meant. I was never very good at being in the world.

She takes his hand. He can almost feel her touch.

“I'll help you,” she murmurs, and closes her eyes. At once, Leia’s power flows crackling through him, and the strain of maintaining his projection eases. “I know you can do it.”

Luke imagines he is a young man again, turning headstands in a swamp, running for miles with Yoda cackling on his back. He imagines Leia as he first saw her, blue and white and flickering in R2D2’s hologram. He imagines sitting in companionable silence with his old master, watching the first—and last—Jedi temple burn. Time is nothing. He raises his free hand, and the fall of rocks begins to quake.

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In the end, Rey leaves Kylo cuffed, though she releases him from the confines of the utility cable. She keeps her blaster muzzle trained on his back as they exit the ship, sharp sea air slapping their faces pink. Ahch-To blossoms wild around them, the terrible starkness of sky and water and rock. They march single file up the winding, uneven steps seaming the island, Rey steering Kylo toward the slate beehive dwellings in near silence. Only the sound of their breathing, ragged with the exertion of the climb so soon after their last battle, passes between them. Her staff, slung over her shoulder by its worn strap, occasionally thuds against the stone, punctuating their labored ascent. The caretakers are nowhere to be seen, and with the wind whistling mournfully over the shaggy hillside, the island has an air of abandonment and neglect.

Kylo’s heavy tread slows in front of her, and Rey nearly collides with him, the muzzle of her blaster centimeters from his back. She teeters on the rough edge of a step, desperate to prevent her body from slamming into his.
“What?” Her tone is more peevish than she intends, and he turns enough to throw his face in sharp profile against the rustling green-gray grasses. A distant wave crashes.

“That wound at your temple is giving me a headache.” Rey narrows her eyes, grinding her teeth against each other. They have never before verbally acknowledged the mutual circuitry of sensation between them that seems to be deepening by the minute, in defiance of the responsibility Snoke had tried to claim for it. To finally broach this particular facet of their intimacy in such a casual manner is as jarring to Rey as though Kylo had uttered some filthy epithet.

“How terribly sorry I am that you’re inconvenienced by my injuries,” she grits out, prodding against what she hopes is his kidney with her blaster to spur him up the hillside. He turns forward and continues to climb, but does not increase his pace. “Why don’t you just shut me out, then, if it bothers you so much.”

“I could do that.” His deep, resonant voice purrs below the keen of the wind, curling in her chest like smoke. “Or you could take care of it yourself. I imagine you’re capable of it.”

It is Rey’s turn to stop short in sheer disbelief. As the sound of her ascent quiets, Kylo pauses a few steps above her and turns. The breeze tosses strands of hair across his face. To Rey’s increasingly annoyed eye, he seems unfazed by the sheer ridiculousness of his suggestion.

“You’ll have to forgive me for not rooting through that shuttle for the medkit.” Rey says, syllables clipped and frigid. “I had other things on my mind than the bacta supply.”

Kylo knits his brow in what appears to be mild confusion.

“That’s not what I was talking about.”

Rey wonders if she hit her head harder than she originally thought. She quells the urge to probe the aching bruise at her temple.

“Then what the kriff are you talking about?”

The lines of concern wrinkling Kylo’s brow deepen for a moment, and Rey has the unpleasant sensation that she is being evaluated and found wanting; it is becoming routine, to discover yet another thing about the galaxy she missed during a lifetime of subsistence on a remote desert world. Not that I care either way what he thinks of me. She pushes a ripple of this defiance at him through the Force, tipping her chin up. For a moment, it almost appears as though a smile threatens to break across his face, until a door behind his eyes slams shut.

“I...nothing. Don’t worry about it.” His gaze flicks to the blaster in her hand, still trained on his torso. She gestures tersely up the long, winding stair. Kylo sighs, and turns back to continue their climb.

When they arrive at the ring of crude beehive huts, Kylo scans the courtyard with supercilious disdain. “The man could hide anywhere in the entire galaxy. He could become anything to avoid detection, and he chooses to moulder in some ancient graveyard.”

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“It’s a place sacred to the Jedi,” Rey says, reprovingly. She gestures him toward a hut with her blaster. Best to keep him contained until she can locate Luke and explain somehow, though the idea of returning to close quarters of rough stone with the man looming at her side sends a frisson of adrenaline through her body intense enough to wake pain in her chest.

“So you said.” He answers her, but his attention is elsewhere, deep in some engrossing puzzle. His expression is twin to the one he wore aboard the Supremacy when Rey first appeared before him, a slender flame of rage and accusation: he is all polite curiosity, gaze resting not on people or objects
before him but on some horizon further away.

“I can feel Luke’s Force signature, but fuzzy. As though he’s here, and not. Out of focus.” He turns to Rey, but his eyes look through her, a crease forming between his dark eyebrows. “What is he doing?”

“I really wouldn’t know.” Like I’d tell you if I did.

“What am I missing?” He asks, stepping toward her. She retreats, fumbling to ascertain that the blaster’s safety is disengaged. He takes no notice of her unease as he scans their surroundings. His focus rests on nothing for long, momentarily tracking the flight of a family of porgs as they wheel overhead. Rey can feel his mind troubling the Force like a school of fish splashing through a current, dappling her with droplets. She firms her grip on the blaster, aiming it more directly at his torso, but Kylo is beyond notice. Lost in himself, jaw slack, his whole being tunes to Luke like a receiver satellite. Despite the blankness of his expression, his shoulders are tensed like a drawn bow, ready to release a nocked arrow. His eyes flutter shut, and he turns in a slow circle on the spot. “What is he —”

Kylo’s head whips around in the direction of the meditation rock, the cavern with the mosaic pool. His nostrils flare, and his pupils contract as understanding floods him like a sudden rainfall. He isn’t bothering to guard himself, and Rey, unused to his moods, catches his thrill of realization like a punch to the gut.

“Oh, I see,” he says, so softly Rey can barely hear him over the whipping wind. “No, I don’t think that will do at all, old man.” His voice pitches lower in his chest, almost a growl, and despite her apprehension, a tendril of heat curls deep in Rey’s body at the sound. He tenses, a predator about to pounce. “And besides—I’m right here.”

In one fluid motion, he leaps for her, using his cuffed wrists like a bludgeon to knock the blaster spinning from her grip. She yelps in indignation and scrabbles to maintain her purchase on the weapon. Before she can dive after it, Kylo hipchecks her lightly aside and kicks the fallen blaster, which tumbles down the slope and disappears among the boulders and undulating grasses. Rey stumbles at the collision of his massive body against her slighter frame. To keep her balance, she swings her staff down from her shoulder and jams its end into the ground, bracing against the impact. She stares at the spot where the blaster vanished, shocked into immobility at this outright betrayal. Satisfied that she is disarmed, Kylo turns and runs up the rocky hillside, elbows tucked into his sides to accommodate his bindings. For a moment Rey is torn between searching for the blaster and leaping after him. Precious seconds of pursuit grind by in her indecision. Even with his awkward gait, Kylo is far ahead of her by the time Rey makes her choice and bounds off in his wake, cursing herself for naivete and foolishness. Even handcuffed and unarmed, Kylo has the advantage of surprise over Luke—particularly if the Jedi is still holding himself at a remove from the Force, unable to sense intruders in his sanctuary. Should anything happen to Luke before she catches up with Kylo, Rey thinks, gulping air in ragged gasps, the fault will lie with no one but her. Fear leaks like engine coolant into her veins, and she does not know if it is the Force or her own terror that feeds her renewed burst of speed.

Kylo’s heavy boots crunch over the loose gravel ahead as he pelts through the twisting passageways, panting like a rancor at the growing resonance of Luke’s Force signature. Rey’s muscles burn as she strains to catch him, throat raw. The lump at her temple beats a nauseating tattoo. I hope you can feel that, sleemo, she thinks, beaming the pain with grim savagery at his retreating back.

She skids out onto the promontory, gulping air as she curls against the stitch in her chest. Time bloats and distorts, and as the passing seconds curdle around her, the world falls into high relief. She can
feel the Force thrumming and snapping like a flag in a high wind, a maelstrom swirling around the two men at the edge of the outcropping. She’s dizzied by the miasma of Kylo’s fear and rage rolling across her, Darkness unbridled and pulsing. Even in the heat of battle on Starkiller or aboard the Supremacy, she has never felt him so unhinged. She sucks in deep, shuddering breaths against the cramp in her side, and the salt air stings like spent grief in her mouth.

As Rey forces herself upright, she loosens the quarterstaff she’d recovered from the Falcon and raises the weapon above her in a one-handed high guard, twisting her body to the side. At first, all she can see is Kylo, a dark, ragged void carved into the sunset. His back is to her, and his attention focuses laser-like on his uncle. Framed against the cloudless sky, Luke hovers above the meditation rock as though seated on an invisible cushion. Suddenly he gasps, and his body collapses to the ground, limp and spent. The Force ripples as though a taut string has finally been released, tension dissipating back into the currents of the universe.

“What did you do to him?” She shrieks at Kylo. Her throat constricts as though claws compress her airway, but she does not relax her grip on the quarterstaff braced overhead to strike. The younger man barely turns his head to address her, his eyes fixed on Luke heaving weakly on the earth.

“Nothing. He’s been up to quite a lot all by himself.” Kylo watches as Luke struggles to haul himself upright, nearly overwhelmed by the exertion of dragging his body to rest against the rock face. The Jedi master has not yet acknowledged either intruder. Instead, he faces the double sunset sinking into the vast ocean of Ahch-To. His complexion has an ashen pallor beneath the luster of the sky’s brilliant orange glow, and he breathes in short gasps. There are tears watering the furrows of time and care on his cheeks. Rey’s brow creases in worry and she tries to catch Kylo’s eye to telegraph her concern. Surely he cannot mean to fight Luke in this state, collapsed and broken. For once, he doesn’t spare her a glance. The entirety of his attention is trained on his uncle. “A more interesting question is what I’m going to do to him.”

You thought that you sought the last Jedi to bring hope to the galaxy, a treacherous voice within her whispers. But all you really wanted was to force yourself into a story that doesn’t concern you. In the end, all you have done is brought death to his doorstep, brutal and unforgiving. The uplifted quarterstaff trembles, and her furious stance decays into crumpled misery. You should have stayed on Jakku, and let yourself disappear into dust. How else did you think this foolish plan would end? She clenches every muscle in her body as tightly as she can, holds her breath until lights swim across her vision. She wants this voice to be Kylo’s, even the long-dead Snoke’s, but she knows too well the mouthpiece of her deepest shame and loneliness. The voice speaks to her from some ancient well within, an old darkness curled around the roots of her soul.

Luke closes his eyes and fills his lungs with sea air. He smiles, small and secretive, before he finally turns to acknowledge his nephew, throwing his arm casually over the rock.

“Hello, Ben.”

“What is this?” Kylo demands, his hands flexing into fists within his cuffs. “Did you order her to bring me here? What have you done to my army?”

Panting, Luke struggles to his feet, bracing his body weight against the rock. It looks to Rey as though he is barely able to stand on his own.

“No, I think you’ll find Rey always acts entirely of her own volition, regardless of the advice of Jedi masters. In this respect, she is not unlike myself.” He glances back at her, eyebrow raised, and she blushes. Despite everything, there is grudging respect in his voice, and even a shade of affection. This is meager comfort, but from Luke, it feels like lavish praise. “As for your army, I wouldn’t worry. Your toys are safe for another day’s play. As well as the remains of the Resistance, I’m sure
you’ll be pleased to hear.” His voice is light, easy. Rey closes her eyes against his pallid complexion and red-rimmed gaze to imagine his body as strong as that voice.

Kylo growls low in his throat. “Then why am I here, Uncle? To save my soul?” Rey can feel that he intends his words to slice and bite, but the sarcasm is belied by the tremor in his tone. He’s terrified, she thinks. He’s been waiting for this showdown for years, but now that it’s here, he’s terrified.


“Liar. You’ve always been a liar.” Kylo’s body is taut, humming with suppressed energy. Rey looks at the younger man and sees the fatal fragility of an object about to shatter. “You’ve grown so old. And I’ve become strong through the Dark Side. Stronger than you ever were.”

Luke shakes his head, and sighs. His breath is ragged, quickly fraying apart in his chest. Rey is fully conscious for the first time of his presence in the Force, energy swirling around him like a dense star pulling in matter. Here, at last, is the Jedi master, the legend. She senses his power, incredible power—but it is ebbing away in a retreating tide back into the eddies of the universe. Each time his presence touches her awareness, the blow is more glancing. Her chest constricts. Unbidden and sinister, words Kylo once spoke to her through their Force-bond surface in her mind. You’re not doing this. The effort would kill you.

The sound of turbolaser fire and TIE fighters screaming through the atmosphere echo across Rey’s brain. A barren planet, its white surface scarred by red gouges. A fall of rocks. Leia’s hand.

Rey’s heart goes colder than a comet’s tail. Her tongue is leaden in her mouth, and the pain at her bruised temple spasms light across her vision. The staff drops from her nerveless fingers with an enormous clatter, but neither man spares her a look.

He can’t be dying. Not now, when we need him so much. He would have known it was a death sentence to project himself so far for so long. The silence that echoes back in her mind in brutal rebuttal is deeper than the dark calm of an endless, lonely desert night.

“I failed you, Ben. I’m sorry.” At these words, Rey stares at Luke, her jaw falling slack. He doesn’t look at her, keeping his gaze locked on his nephew, but for an infinitesimal moment, she feels a disembodied clutch at her hand like gratitude, like benediction. Her vision blurs again and she raises fingertips to her temple. It takes her a moment to realize that it is not the fog of injury but tears swimming in her eyes. She tastes salt: the buffeting sea breeze intermixed with her streaming grief. She touches her tongue to her lip, and wills herself present.

“I’m sure you are.” Kylo’s voice is tinged with hysteria. Saliva flecks his mouth, and his knuckles are white as he clenches them into fists within his handcuffs. For a moment, Rey barely recognizes him, so violent is the twist of his snarl. He has never looked at her this way. She has never before seen true hatred on his face. Luke spreads his empty hands wide, Jedi robes billowing.

“If you strike me down in anger, I'll always be with you. Just like your father.” Kylo bares his teeth and hisses, the slow expulsion of air building to a scream as he launches himself at Luke with cuffed, open-palmed hands. Too far away to intervene, Rey realizes with a sick swoop of fear that Kylo means to shove Luke off of the cliff to his death on the jagged sea rocks far below. She cries out a warning, but the Jedi master has long anticipated the attack. Right before Kylo’s hands slam into his tunic, Luke sidesteps his nephew neatly. Kylo trips, and scrabbling to catch himself properly, he goes sprawling out over the cliff edge. His chin and hands scrape against the rock as he falls, and his momentum propels his skinned face and arms out into empty air. He lies winded from the impact, dark eyes wide at the sheer drop beneath him. He is bare inches from toppling forward to his death. Luke sighs, genuine regret seeded with amusement playing across his features.
“See you around, kid.” Luke steps back to face the orange sunsets, but not before he winks at Rey. An expression of extraordinary peace settles onto his gray, lined face as he lowers himself heavily onto the boulder worn smooth by millennia of meditating Jedi. The same peace legible in Luke blooms inside Rey’s chest, and though she knows she is merely catching the reflected glow of his emotions like a bit of glass hung in a sunny window, she allows the contentment to saturate her like desert heat.

Kylo awkwardly pushes himself up from the crumbling outcropping and looks over his shoulder just in time to see Luke’s edges begin to fade. As the Jedi master vanishes between them, Kylo and Rey are left staring at each other through the space blood and bone and flesh had occupied seconds before. A thick trickle of blood runs down Kylo’s chin and into his collar where it struck the rock face. Rey reaches out a deft hand to grab the cloak fluttering in the breeze, the only remaining evidence besides the dissipating glow in her chest that Luke was ever there at all.

Her gaze drops to the weatherstained garment in her hands as Kylo begins to howl, full-throated, a cry of impotent rage echoing off the sea cliffs tossed and amplified by the wind. He smashes his cuffs and already bleeding hands against the ground, pummeling the rock. Sprays of indignant porgs take flight at the sound like droplets of spume from the waves breaking themselves below. From up here, the sound of the tide is thin and thready, like a faltering heartbeat. When Kylo is exhausted, his fury spent, he collapses back to the gravel, breathing hard. She stares at his broad, heaving back in fascinated horror, twisting her fingers in Luke’s cloak (there is no one left. He was the last, and he stood between the Resistance and annihilation, and I repaid him with Kylo Ren on his doorstep. He’s gone, and with him goes hope, and it’s my fault, my fault, my fault.)

She has brought Kylo here, and now, they are utterly alone.

Chapter End Notes

The methodology that Kylo obliquely suggests Rey employ to heal her head wound is Force healing.

"Sleemo" is Huttse for slimeball.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

A dream. Several small confrontations. A begrudging domestic truce.

To no one's surprise, Kylo is peevish about roughing it.

Chapter Notes

For Anna, who keeps asking with thinly veiled impatience when the smut happens, and for Rosie: see if y'all can pinpoint the sentence where she left the comments "i cannot believe you. how dare you. how COULD YOU" in the margins of this chapter's draft.

Apologies for the delay in updating! This was originally part of a longer chapter that just kept growing and growing, so I amputated it here in order to keep masochistically rearranging the second half. Hopefully, this means I'll have the next part up in a more timely fashion (ha HA ha ha).

As ever, comments, reviews, suggestions, and constructive criticism heartily welcomed! Let me know what you think, and where you'd like to see things go (and help me feel accountable to a larger audience than just the aforementioned Anna and Rosie, who will love me regardless of my update schedule, thank goodness).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It was a time
of waiting, of suspended action.

I lived in the present, which was
that part of the future you could see.
The past floated above my head,
like the sun and moon, visible but never reachable.

It was a time
governed by contradictions, as in
I felt nothing and
I was afraid.”

—Louise Glück

In the before time, before her awakening, her dreams were largely unpeopled. She would fall from light-crusted heavens, her body glowing as though starlines swarmed beneath her skin, toward the blue planet with its island freckles. When she came to rest on the shore, she would sit cross-legged in the tide as it rushed around her, soaking her to the waist (at first, she lacked the words for it, this
waste of protean waves, and when she asked Plutt for the water’s name, the Crolute in desert exile from his aquatic home sneered ‘vocabulary lessons are worth one quarter portion,’ and she’d slunk away, biting the inside of her cheek until her mouth flooded with blood). Some nights this was enough to shove her off from her toehold in the submerged sandbar between waking and dreaming, and she’d arise in the morning with the call of seabirds caught like dust in her throat.

Other nights, she’d walk the crags on her rangy legs, clambering up rocks and bellowing back into a wind that howled like some nameless sibling of R’iia, the deity whose exhale coaxed the dunes of Jakku to rise and blot out the sun. When she arrived at the barren tree on the northern slopes, its branches raised in an eternal shrug, she’d scale it like wreckage and curl up in its hollows.

Her parents never came to her, not once, regardless of how many times she meditated on what wisps of memory remained as sleep overcame her. She was alone in her dreams, as she was alone in waking, though sometimes she thought she could see figures in her peripheral vision, people who vanished as soon as she spun to confront them. She grew to know them as splotches of color: the orange and white of a Togruta woman; a sandy-haired man with heavy-lidded eyes and an imperious mouth; and sometimes, a dark-haired boy, his narrow face pale and sullen. She would call out to them in frustration, imploring them to stay—who are you? Why are you here? Where is this place? But as soon as her gaze alighted upon them, they would wink out, swept away from her by some mysterious force.

Not yet. It’s before your time.

Now that the island consumes her waking hours, her dreams teem with faces, all of them eager to greet her. They clasp her hands between theirs, chuck her beneath the chin, pull her in close to whisper in her ear (the warmth of their breath on her skin is matched only by the warmth of their tone). But no matter how hard she listens, their speech never resolves into intelligible language. When they open their mouths—Luke so young, his eyes full of laughter, hand in hand with a beautiful woman whose cascading curls toss in the wind—all Rey can hear is the rushing of the tide. Something inside me has always been there. But now it’s awake, and I’m afraid.

It isn’t until tonight that Ben fully appears at last in her island dreams. She sits in the surf as she did as a child, digging her fingers into the swirling sand, staring out at the storm-fogged horizon beyond the cove. Suddenly, she is aware of a presence behind her, furtive like the specters that once haunted the corners of her oneiric vision.

Are you really here, or am I only dreaming you? Her lips do not move around her words, but she knows he hears her all the same.

The presence shifts its weight, but does not speak.

It doesn’t matter. I would know you anywhere. I would know you if I were nothing but bleached bones buried in a drift of sand. We have always been arriving here, together.

Someone moves tentatively forward to kneel behind her, resting on her shoulders large hands pocked with white scars left by a saber’s crackling quillions. He curls against her back, tucking his face into the crook of her neck. Eyes on the rushing sea, she raises her hand to stroke his cheek, feels the ridged lip of the scar scored into his face.

This is where I marked you. Did we choose each other, or were we chosen?

Ben’s breath hitches against her pulsepoint, and his fingers dig painfully into her shoulders. She can feel the blood vessels rupture under her skin, bruises like petals unfurling. Two stars locked like
lovers trace across the sky at double-time, leaving trails of light across Rey’s vision even after she closes her eyes. Even when they are resting like this they’re dancing. Or no, that isn’t right—even when they’re resting like this they’re circling each other, preparing to feint or parry or wound. The skin of her shoulders like bruised fruit (sweet, bursting) will fade back to desert gold in time, but he has scored deeper marks in her than those that lie across flesh.

“Why did you leave?” A spoken voice. The first one to breach the fragile membrane of the dream. But it isn’t Ben’s: his mouth is very still and warm against her neck. He begins to tremble. “Where were you when I needed you?” The words are bitter, acid-etched with sullen reproach. They sear her like a brand, like bare skin laid against the blazing metal of a starship sunning its old dead bones in an arid wasteland. Indignation floods her. These are her questions, the ones she has been asking for as long as she can remember, and she will brook them from no one else. Rey shifts as though to turn and confront the speaker, but Ben envelops her, immobilizes her against his chest, and moans in fear.

“Don’t turn around,” he whispers. The waves rush in to swirl around their bodies, and residual clots of foam cling to their clothes.

What are you afraid I’ll see? He shakes his head, clinging to her.

“Together, you and I could have ruled the galaxy. Made things the way we want them to be.” The words are so familiar, it is as though time has looped around to knot itself into the web of her dreaming. They twist within her, laden with the echoes of Ben’s febrile convictions, his longing. Rey is suddenly aware of the chill of the eddying water, and how her drenched clothes cling to her like seaweed. The cold seeps inward, piercing her to the bone.

“No. You’re going down a path I can’t follow,” Rey murmurs. She digs her hands into the sand, grounded by the Force and the shifting grains alike. “I made a choice.” She utters the words with perfect calm, as though she has rehearsed them. They are automatic in her mouth, rising as they do from some shimmering depth of memory and instinct.

“You were selfish. You abandoned me. You failed me.” This recitation is petulant, almost childlike. A perverse variation on the monologue of a thousand empty nights on Jakku, the whispers of a small girl crushed by loneliness. “Do you know what I’ve become?” The voice distorts and unravels into a harsh, guttural moan. A beat of silence. The drag of breath across a ventilator. Ben gasps against her neck, and she nearly misses his words fluttering moth-like against her mind under the susurrus of wind and surf and mechanical inhale.

Just a child in a mask.

At these words, Rey wrenches free from the vise of his embrace to turn and face straight-on the malevolence that stalks them. Righteous indignation crackles in her chest, rage building at the intrusion into her sacred place as much as the voice’s awful presumption. Enough. You have no power here.

As she breaks free from him, Ben cries out as though Force lightning lances through his body. His pain echoes throughout time and space, nerves alight with every blow that has ever landed on his back. He arches against her before tumbling back onto the wet sand, the arc of his fall slowed and stretched by dreamspace. The stench of decay fills Rey’s nostrils for a moment, though it is gone by the time Ben makes stunned contact with the ground.

The stony shore behind them is empty.

“What was that? What was it doing in my dream?” She demands. She falls to her knees and grabs him by his shirtfront, jerking his torso off the earth toward her with a strength she does not possess in
waking. “What do you want from me?”

I want to be free of this pain.

His face is turned away from her, full lips pursed tight against whatever threatens to burst out of him (fear rage sobbing). Gray light beads along the exposed expanse of his jaw and neck, highlights corded tendon. Despite his attempt at restraint, tears spill over his cheekbones to drip onto the wet sand below: they disappear into the endless salt sea as libations. As sacrifice.

Rey sighs, and lowers him to the ground. His hair fans out over the shore, curling in soft tendrils where it is dampened by the water. She leans down. Her lips brush the shell of his ear, and he shudders. When she opens her mouth to speak, trying to shape words, only the sound of the incoming tide emerges from between her lips. The terror in Kylo’s eyes softens by degrees as he returns to the present, slipping free from the grip of his haunting. He reaches up to her, and fingertips less substantial than flesh touch her lips, run down her throat. She tips her head back to allow his hand to splay over the arches of her clavicles. Skies bruised purple and yellow and blue at the setting of the twin suns fill her upturned vision, and stars begin to effloresce in clusters until she would fall into them like a field of flowers were it not for the anchoring hand now spanning her sternum.

I'll come back for you, sweetheart. I promise.

Rey rolls over in her sleep, one bare leg protruding from under her blanket. Moonlight striates her body lustrous through tiny gaps in the stonework. She sighs, and the dream sloughs off of her into the night, a shed skin that will leave no trace of itself behind come morning.

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Dawn has barely begun to wash the rim of the horizon with light, and a deep morning chill lies across Ahch-To. Half-asleep, Rey reaches out a hand to skim the irregular wall of the stone hut, and notices dew for the first time in her life. She rubs it between her fingers, in love with the widening of the galaxy around her, the new words that fall freely from her mouth, how her understanding of the Force and everything within it rushes away from her in an ever-vanishing perimeter. Dew.

A cacophony of bangs and bellowing shatters the stillness, tearing the caul from the crowning dawn and cracking open her solitary reverie to the world beyond. The noise is jagged and violent, nothing like the typical morning hum of the caretakers on their domestic rounds. Rey squeezes her eyes shut as tightly as she can. She tries to will herself back asleep to avoid the confrontation she knows must come, until she can no longer pretend not to recognize the voice punctuating the screech of metal against metal. The racket can only be Kylo’s, and something has displeased him.

“I can still kill you, you know,” she says to the shadowed ceiling. “You’re not making it a terribly unappealing choice.”

Sighing, she kicks off her blanket to arch her back in a luxurious stretch against her nest of bedding, wincing at muscles stiffened by overuse and injury. One of her buns has come loose from its tether, and, sitting up, she shakes out her hair to drag rough fingers through the worst of the knots. The sounds carried like spores on the breeze have not abated. Swallowing against a rising lump in her throat, she forces her pace to a casual stroll as she ambles out of the hut down the steep stone stair slicing into the slope. I am calm, I am easy. She counts the steps of her descent, using the dull regularity of the numbers to fence out the memory of Kylo’s face as she last saw him, raw and seething and alien. Setting her jaw in dispassionate resolve, she arrives at the landing to find Kylo heaving himself against the shuttle in a frenzy of rage. The mass of dread in her throat swells as adrenaline courses through her, countered by the dull relief of rising irritation. Her lip curls.
“What the kriff are you—”

“What DID YOU DO TO IT?” He advances on her, eyes wild, his face a mass of scrapes blooming around the long stem of his scar. His nose is bright red, and drips with morning chill and suppressed sobs of frustration. He doesn’t bother to wipe away the mucus. “WHY CAN’T I GET IT OFF THE GROUND?” Unbidden, laughter bubbles up within her until she can no longer contain it, shoulders shaking.

“Kylo. Did you really think I was going to leave it in flight-ready condition after I brought you all the way here? That I’d just leave the only available ship free for the taking by even a mediocre pilot like you?”

Kylo falls quiet and still, stunned. From around the edges of the craft, the amphibious-looking Lanais gather in twos or threes, muttering disapprovingly into their wimples and pointing at Rey. She purses her lips into a scowl. I can’t believe I’m being blamed for this.

“Fix it. Now.” His voice is low and menacing. “I’m tired of this game.”

Rey laughs, harder this time. There is no mirth in her, only something hard and glittering that curls over her chest in a protective carapace. It is the closest thing she has to a mask.

“You mean you couldn’t figure out a solution on your own? Didn’t notice which components I’d removed? Don’t tell me you’re one of those crack pilots who’s always had someone around to make his repairs for him.” The words tumbling from her mouth slice and cauterize before she can even test their sharpness. “Tell me—even if I gave you the missing parts, would you have any idea what to do with them?” She scoffs. “You’re nothing but a spoiled child.” She braces for his riposte, but he is caught by a preternatural stillness, breath hitched tight in his chest. His eyes track her like wary prey scenting the looming shadow of death.

(Ben Solo sees the faces of the the dead that trail him in silent rebuke—uncle, master, father, grandfather—and he grows so, so cold.)

The sun is finally breaking over the horizon, and in that quivering moment of silence Rey fully looks at Kylo Ren for the first time since the previous night. She’d slipped away without a word after Luke’s disappearance, leaving Kylo to grovel in the dirt and gravel of the promontory. Quietly, she’d collected her fallen blaster from the rippling grasses, and removed Kylo’s lightsaber as well as a few strategic parts from the gleaming ship. It had taken some pleading for the caretakers to safeguard them for her (they looked at the greasy collection of objects like she was offering them an active bomb), and so by the time everything was secreted away, full night had fallen. With no sign of Kylo evident, Rey had jammed her door against intrusion and slipped into a slumber troubled by disturbing dreams that evaporated by morning, leaving only a slick of unease (should have killed him/should have run) behind.

Kylo’s eyes are bloodshot, and his black uniform is wrinkled and covered in dust and dirt. The deep circles beneath his eyes betray a sleepless night. She realizes with a small stab of guilt that he is still handcuffed.

“If you’ll stop bellowing, I’ll take the binders off you,” she offers.

“Oh, how good of you,” he spits. “I wouldn’t want to labor under the delusion that I’m your prisoner.” Despite his rancor, he steps toward her, linked wrists outstretched in supplication. She sighs, and releases him. The cuffs fall to the ground, and in one swift motion Kylo kicks them over the small drop to splash into the frothy sea. He runs his hands over his skin, rubbed raw from bondage, and winces.
“Hey!” Rey strides toward the cliff edge, indignant, but when she passes him her pace slows as though she is sinking into the ground with each step, the earth claiming and burying her. The watching caretakers scatter in a cloud of starched aprons and unintelligible chirping.

“You will retrieve the parts and fix the ship.” Kylo’s words are sinuous with Force-suggestion, a plucked string that vibrates through her body. A small voice in her head implores her to listen, to be reasonable, to do as he says. Though the strange voice is calm, its edges are sharp, and cut into her resolve.

Rey knows what to do when faced with a knife. She gathers herself inward, imagines she is distilled to everything sure and quick and sharp, that she is burrowed tight beneath what a blade can slice into a self deeper than language.

Then, she lets herself go.

The concussive wave of power she releases sends Kylo tumbling boots over ass, and for the second time in twenty-four hours, he lays on the ground, stunned. A trickle of blood runs from his nose onto dry, cracked lips. Rey approaches him, bends on one knee to bring her mouth close to his ear. She hasn’t been this close to him intentionally since they disembarked on Ahch-To, and she can smell the blood and sweat souring on his skin. A fine sheen of perspiration glows on his forehead. He tenses as she draws near, bracing himself against a strike that doesn’t come. His frustration and humiliation roil the Force into such choking disarray that the flavor of it coats her tongue, metallic and bitter. He gutters around her like ragged candle flame, searing her lungs. She is almost near enough to bite him.

“I will keep telling you with whatever means at hand that you are not permitted in my head without my invitation,” she murmurs, “until I am satisfied you have heard me.”

He sneezes, and blood sprays down the front of his increasingly soiled tunic. Rey begins to laugh anew, the vestiges of fear finally leaving her body as though steamed away in the morning light, drying up with the dew. I belong here. I belong to this place. It has been waiting for me all along.

Kylo springs to his feet, shaking. He stalks away from her, tripping slightly over the grassy hillocks in his haste to put distance between them. As he rises, she can see his lower lip trembling as though her laughter, more than any threat or blow, had wounded him to his core.

****

“I’m a very good pilot.”

Rey turns. Though the leaves of the few tenacious shrubs clinging to the stony earth have begun to brown with changing seasons, the weather on Temple Island has stayed mercifully sunny and mild. Taking advantage of the cloudless morning, Rey has been running through training exercises with her quarterstaff for hours in the shallow saddle of land at the top of the stairs. By mid-afternoon, she is sweat-soaked and hungry, too focused on the bond between body and weapon to notice his approach.

“Okay?”

It’s the first time she’s physically seen Kylo in days, though she’s sensed him gusting around the island like a foul storm. After a lifetime on Jakku, Rey is accustomed to a modicum of filth and misery; despite this, she is taken aback at the abject gloom of his appearance. His hair shines with grease and is pulled back from his face in a number of messy braids. Dark circles smudge his eyes, and his nailbeds are caked with dirt. Exposure to the sun after years enclosed in the stultifying shadows of mask and warship has crisped his skin a furious red. As though he can feel her
appraising his appearance, he self-consciously tugs on the front of his tunic, trying with little success to smooth out the wrinkles. His mouth wobbles, belying the casual tone of his voice.

“You called me a mediocre pilot the other day.” He scratches his scalp beneath the braids, winces. “Just thought you should know.”

“I—all right?” Rey waits for him to say more, but he is silent, still. Just watching her.

“Kylo, what—”

“You’re good with that thing,” he says, pointing to her staff. “Different than a lightsaber, obviously, but I can see how the technique is transferable. For someone who’s largely self-taught, you’ve come an enormous way even from when we fought on Starkiller Base. And you held your own against the Praetorians.” He pauses, chewing on the inside of his cheek. “You're very good.”

Rey is now sweaty, hungry, and terribly confused. A tremor ripples through the Force eddying between them, and she quells the vicarious urge to scratch at her hairline.

“Um...thank you?” There is another beat of awkward silence.

“I’m really kriiffing hungry,” Kylo bursts out, looking as though he hates himself for every treasonous syllable. “I have no weapons to hunt with, and there are no ‘freshers—this place is downright primitive—and I'm really hungry, and sunburned, and—” he fidgets inside the heavy black uniform, and the ripe aroma of his body assails Rey like a bludgeon. “I’d really like to wash. I feel like I’m brining.” He eyes Rey, mistrustful. “Those little fish nuns hate me.”

“They’re the Lanais. The island’s caretakers. Have been for generations. Can’t blame them for good sense.”

He shrugs, unbothered by the gibe. “Far as I can tell, they hate you more.”

Rey throws up her hands. “I’ve apologized a hundred times, what else do they want me to do?”

“Apologized for what?” Kylo quirks an eyebrow, for which Rey rewards him with sullen silence. He shrugs. “So you can’t make them like you. Must be eating you alive, not to be everyone’s golden girl.”

Rey rolls her eyes and sets her jaw. She turns her back on him to resume her practice, eyes on a distant whitecap rolling toward the island. “You’re free to think whatever you like, Ren.”

“Wait.” She keeps her back to him but pauses. For a moment, she can hear his thoughts as clearly as though he is speaking aloud: a profound wish, not for the first time, that he was a spirit or a droid, something without the hideous inconveniences of human corporeality. He sighs, a sound of deep resignation. “Could we...have lunch?”

****

For two people warped by years of isolation, discovering a domestic rhythm together is a slow and painstaking process. When it becomes clear that Rey and Kylo are on Ahch-To to stay, the caretakers begrudgingly show them which plants are safe to eat, how to dig up the fat roots set stubborn in the thin soil against the constant buffeting breezes, the best ways to prepare the greens to leach out their bitterness. That nascent relationship experiences a minor setback when Rey and Kylo stumble upon some small but well-tended vegetable plots near a northern cove. A bilingual shouting match ends in Rey dragging Kylo away by the back of his shirt as he continues to hurl invective at the scandalized and unrepentant Lanais. That was the day she took him to see Luke’s enormous
harpoon, and set him the task of spearing dinner from the precarious ledge (she could hear him
laughing and hollering for an hour amid enthusiastic splashing, and when he came back, two dead
hycander triumphantly leaping through the air toward her in Force-borne arcs, she hid her smile and
set about stripping the scales).

Rey takes a particular savage joy in teaching him to milk the lowing, musky creatures perched on the
crumbling cliff-crusts, noting with interest the violent shade of pink he turns at the sight of their
engorged nipples (“Honestly, Kylo, where do you think milk comes from, a droid? Just put your
hand here and push, and I'll hold the bucket.”) Despite any initial reservations, the greenish thala-
siren milk is sweet and frothy and filling, quickly becoming a staple. They learn to bring a bucket or
two daily to the Lanais, who exchange it for a variety of cheeses wrapped in dried seaweed. At
Kylo’s suggestion, they clamber up cliff faces to collect porg eggs, careful not to denude any single
nest, and tuck their stolen goods into the flickering embers of the fire to harden. Rey giggles when
Kylo drops a raw egg destined for the hot ashes, and he swears at the splattered yolk in Huttese. His
spine goes rigid at the sound of her mirth, and when their eyes meet, the laughter dies on her lips,
smothered by the billow of heat in his gaze that he cannot quite extinguish. She goes to bed early that
night and stares at the corbelled arch of the ceiling in the darkness, flesh tingling as though licked by
flame.

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The ship has sat largely untouched since the explosive confrontation that rocked their first morning
on Ahch-To. For a while, Kylo sleeps in its well-appointed passengers’ quarters, until a nightmare
rips through him with such ferocity that his abject terror awakens Rey across the island. For a
moment, the ghost of pain floats through the halls of her body, though whether or not the sensations
root in her own memory, she can’t say. She feels dirty, skin slicked with something rotten and
permeating. *Snoke.* She reminds herself that she has seen the creature’s corpse herself, was present
when he died. *He’s gone. Anything that remains of him is just echoes inside us.* Dread ossifies in her
chest, twisting every shadow into the threat of lurking danger. The bond rustles in the darkness like
mice in the walls. Unbeknownst to them both, separated (*just*) by the rim of the hillside, they only fall
back to sleep when the rhythm of their breathing falls into synchronicity.

The following night, Kylo lingers by the wall of her hut, gazing at the jutting fingers of rock that
protrude from the roof to point the way to constellations neither of them can recognize or name. The
muddle of conflict that surrounds him at all times like the clinging sheen of an oil spill knots in Rey’s
gut, and she squares her shoulders, gently pushing his emotions away from her, holding them at bay
beyond some safe perimeter.

“Star-gazing?”

He stares up at the sky in silence as though inspecting the wild rim of the known universe, plotting
some escape route among the scattered seeds of light.

“I’m going to sleep up here with you tonight, if that’s all right.” His tone is abrupt, clipped with an
impersonal military precision she can’t imagine he ever actually possessed aboard a First Order ship.
She reaches out in tentative exploration through the bond, but a seamless stone wall encircles his
nightmares.

“With me?” The words are out before she’s even aware of the short circuit between her brain and her
mouth. His eyes flicker in her direction, and a vibrant pink visible even under the pearly sprays
of stars stains his cheeks. Rey can feel a similar flush rising in her own face, but she keeps her gaze
trained on him, daring him to acknowledge her entendre.

“In the village, I mean.” He’s already backing away from her, dignified posture in tatters, half-
tripping over his feet. “In my own hut. Far away. I just didn't want to alarm you.” He draws himself up to his full height with a haughty tilt of his chin, as though recalling too late that he was once a waking breath away from ruling the galaxy. “I’m not asking permission. Merely offering a courtesy, since you’ve marooned me here with you.”

Rey holds in a sigh of disappointment. *Anger. Of course.*

“Sleep where you like. You’re not my prisoner.” She moves to duck inside her hut, turning her back to Kylo, his reddened ears, the strange, illegible stars wheeling overhead.

“You can’t make that true simply through repetition, you know!” But no reply comes back to him from the lightless depths of Rey’s quarters, and after a long, tense moment, she hears him stomp away into the dark, muttering under his breath. When all evidence of him has faded into the quiet desolation of night, she tugs Luke's cloak free from her nest of bedding and pulls it over her head, shutting out everything but her own heartbeat. The Jedi master’s scent lingers in the wool. Rey breathes in what remains of the old world, and allows herself to weep.

**Chapter End Notes**

Apart from the obvious callbacks to language in TFA and TLJ, the dream sequence at the beginning of the chapter features (in some cases slightly altered for grammatical purposes) dialogue between Anakin and Padmé from their confrontation on Mustafar at the end of ROTS, and between Anakin and Ahsoka Tano in the *Star Wars Rebels* episode *Shroud of Darkness.*

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