Bless Me Father For I Have Sinned

by SulaRae

Summary

Our tale begins when intrepid reporter Rey Niima heads to church intent on confessing her sins as research for a story. She never suspects that her partner, the infuriatingly handsome and perpetually smug Ben Solo, is trapped on the other side of the mesh listening to Rey admit more than either of them bargained for. Through a series of mishaps and misunderstandings Rey accidentally confesses to Ben Solo (who was just looking for a place to hide!) and all hell breaks loose.

A modern Reporters/Vigilante AU where Ben and Rey are reluctant partners who have frequent run-ins with the covert Resistance group and Ben’s vigilante alter ego: Kylo Ren (who Rey has a raging crush on). When someone they love is threatened, Solo and Niima must work through their ongoing feud and excruciating sexual tension to expose the truth.

Notes

Welcome to my (hopefully) fabulous Modern Reporter/Vigilante AU!
This is meant to be a fun and spicy ride in the tradition of classic reporter tales and screwball comedies like "I Love Trouble," "Lois and Clark," and "His Girl Friday" so don’t be surprised if several elements of those masterworks pop up in my farcical romp. I’m fascinated by the idea of Kylo Ren/Ben Solo as a reporter with a vigilante alter ego who interacts with the leading lady (an idea I can attribute directly to the various incarnations of Lois and Clark over the years as well as a bit of Batman).

This universe is basically a standard modern universe with the faintest bits of sci-fi sprinkled in here and there. The one thing you do need to know before proceeding is that Kylo/Ben has some special abilities (you do eventually find out why in the story). He is generally “enhanced” meaning:

- He is much stronger and faster than the average human
- Accelerated healing and resilience
- Extremely heightened senses (touch, smell, sight, taste, and hearing)
- (think Captain America)

This story is rated Mature for various content themes and situations (honestly it’s very light mature – but I would rather be safe than sorry). I’m still actively revising so the rating may change or the rating of specific chapters may vary. Please mind any and all tags and warnings that may appear in future posts.

This is meant to be a fun ride with very little (but some light) angst and mostly hotness and humor. I hope you'll give it a chance! The story is almost entirely completed so my posting schedule should be pretty regular.

If you enjoy this bit o’fluff please consider leaving kudos and comments. They are the only compensation many of us fan fictioneers will ever receive. Please send some love. I am open to comments, suggestions, and questions of all types! (And I reply too!) I promise the responses and kudos-y goodness REALLY DO feed my creative energies and inspire me to post faster!

(Quick Trigger Warning: I saw on tumblr that people were asking for pregnancy or mention of pregnancy to be tagged or noted. Although it is not a focal point of this story, there is a pregnant character and references to her pregnancy occasionally occur in the narrative.)

See the end of the work for more notes.
“Bless me, Father for I have sinned. It has been...well. Never mind that. I’m here to confess.”

“......to what?”

“My sins! I’m here to confess my sins! You’re a priest. Don’t you know how this works?”

“...Of course I do... My child.”

“Excellent. The last thing I need right now is a substandard source.”

“S-Source?”

“Alright - so - since you’re a priest and sworn to holy secrecy, I’ll be straight with you. I’m working on a story.”

“I...Um...”

“The Confessional Killer. Ring a bell?”

“Uh - Yes?”

“The news has been all over it. A serial killer with a nasty habit of hacking into his priests right after telling them his dirty little secrets. He’s worked this district of Coruscant for the last two weeks.”

“Ok. I did hear something about that... Hold a minute - should I be worried?”

Rey rolled her eyes.

“Relax, Father, I’m a REPORTER. I’m trying to get inside the mind of this creep so I can find him.”

“Have you told anyone else about this? Anyone who might - I don’t know - worry if you were brutally murdered by an unhinged psychopath?”

“Ugh. You sound like my partner. I am a big girl and I have no problem stun-gunning any and all persons who appear to be of the unhinged psycho variety. I guess that should be my first confession... since - you know - carrying stun guns isn’t technically legal.”

“I know I’m going to regret asking this - but how - exactly - is confessing going to help you nail a murderer?”

“I want to understand the situation he’s in right before he breaks – and maybe discover what stimuli he’s adversely reacting to.”

“How far into this guy’s mind are you planning to go? I mean - I realize that this is merely the dust of
the earth I’m wearing here, but I’ve grown quite attached to it.”

Rey giggled. She couldn’t help it.

“No worries. I’m not that committed to the byline.”

“That’s... comforting.”

Rey took a deep breath, cracked her knuckles, and leaned back into the wooden seat.

“Alright,” she said. “Let’s get to it.”

There was a long pause.

“Ok then. I’m ready when you are.”

So... where to begin.

“I...am...relatively sure that I have broken all of the commandments. In fact - occasionally I’ve broken several at the same time.”

“I see.”

“I checked up on what exactly they were before coming here. I mean I knew them, but I needed to know them...and all. Anyways - the one about taking the Lord’s name in vain - Mitaka said it applies to profanity in all forms. So I break that one... on like a thrice daily basis...at least.”

“Let me get something straight before we continue. You claim to have broken ALL the commandments... and I seem to recall there being one about murder. I mean - I know there’s one about murder - I-I’m a priest.”

Rey shrugged.

“I haven’t committed murder – obviously. But I’ve thought about it and Mitaka said that’s almost as bad. I mean - not seriously - just in sort of a ‘wouldn’t it be nice’ kind of a way - and never about someone who didn’t completely deserve it.”

“Alrighty then - um - moving on.”

“I don’t have a father – or a mother. But I dishonored my first foster father - Unkar - often and deliberately.”

“Okay.”

“I’m not a thief, but there are times when I’ve... liberated certain items which might be pertinent to my story. It drives my partner absolutely crazy.”

“That’s probably a sin too.”

Rey wrinkled her nose.

“It is?”
“It should be.” The priest muttered. He seemed to remember himself after a moment and added “I’m sure your partner is simply trying to keep you out of trouble. A full-time job no doubt.”

“According to him it is. He seems to forget that – as a reporter – trouble is my job description.”

Rey thought she heard a muffled groan and the sound of a forehead banging faintly against the wall of the confessional.

Thrice.

“Father?” she called. “Everything alright?”

There was another long pause.

“Yeah I’m… I’m great. Just… so great.”

“Well… That’s good then… Moving on. I’ve definitely never coveted my neighbor’s wife. She’s a raging hag who is actively contributing to likely monumental therapy bills in all of her children’s adult lives. And I’m not married so I guess I haven’t violated the ‘no adultery’ rule. However, I read that messing around is sort of lumped together with that one so -”

“You’ve been messing around with someone?”

“What? No - I mean –”

“Fornication is a serious sin, young lady.”

“Oh – well - I –”

“I don’t recommend continuing any fornication you are currently involved in. And you should probably give me the name of the bastard- er – bad seed that has been leading you astray-”

“No! Father – I’m not fornicating – I swear. I haven’t in a while –”

“How long?”

“Does that really matter?”

“YES – No… Noo – IIII - think it just might be …helpful to talk to someone about …that. And I’m here to help.”

Rey let out a heavy sigh.

“It’s just been a while… I - I don’t want to talk about why – I mean I don’t really know why. Rose thinks it’s because –” She sighed again. “Never mind. Rose is delusional.”

“Wait – What did she say?”

“What?”

“Rose’s theory – what was it?”

“…I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“WHY!?... I mean... as-as you wish.”
Rey shot the screen a weird look, but pressed forward – eager to reach the end of this particular experience.

“I work on the Sabbath. I’m not sure exactly what day the Sabbath is - but I work all the time - so I’m pretty sure I’ve hit the Sabbath. And I think that goes with the whole idolatry thing. I mean it’s not like I feel work is more important than the Almighty or anything, but Mitaka suggested I throw it in there for good measure.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Eunice - that crazy religious fanatic who works in Copy - erm...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean ...I meant no disrespect to you.”

“None taken.”

“Well - Eunice said that the Kylo Ren action figure I have hidden in my desk at work is a graven image - and that it could send me to the ‘fiery depths.’ Personally, I think Eunice is whack - but I’m trying to cover all my bases.”

“...you have a Kylo Ren action figure in your desk...”

“Yes...I do.”

“About that idolatry clause.”

“Could we just - you know...”

“Uh...Sure.”

“Ok. I think I have lying and coveting left to hit.”

“Yes.”

“So I lied to Rose - about something - I think – maybe? It doesn’t matter. At some point in my life I have lied-”

“Have you ever lied to your partner?”

Rey snorted.

“Of course I have.”

“Really... About what?”

“I told him I wasn’t texting his mum about him. I am.”

“You’re doing what?!”

“She worries! He’s a total recluse sometimes and he never tells her anything. I’m just trying help and give her some peace of mind. That’s not a sin is it?

“Yes. Yes it is. It absolutely is.”
“Really?”

“Priest,” he reminded her coolly.

“O…K…”

“Any other lies involving your partner that you might want to get off your chest?”

“Um…Well –” Rey bit her lip as she debated revealing her latest deception. “I told him he looked terrible in black.”

There was a scrambling on the other side of the screen. It sounded like he’d smacked something.

“And does he look terrible in black?”

She gulped. Too late now.

“No… No not at all. In fact he looks fantastic in black. Phenomenal even… That’s the problem.”

“Problem?” The priest’s voice had gotten oddly high pitched.

Rey smacked her head against her hands. In for a penny in for a pound…

“It’s distracting! I’m trying to work and he is distracting in black. It causes my mind to drift to… things that are…” she cleared her throat significantly “…sinful.”

There was a deafening pause and Rey was preparing to question every last one of her life choices when she heard him speak again.

“Define sinful.”

~~~~~~ a little earlier that day ~~~~~

Ben Solo was seriously out of breath.

His day started relatively well. Rey was in a good mood, which likely meant she was planning to do something that would no doubt endanger her life. But that didn’t bother him.

He intended to be next to her all day.

Well...

He had intended to be next to her all day.

A snitch called around 2:30 with information regarding the Confessional Killer. Apparently, the maniac was holed up in his girlfriend’s house on 7th. Ben told Rey he was out for pastrami and quickly disguised himself as Kylo Ren.

He had every intention of returning in an hour to break the story with her.

After all...
How much trouble could Rey get into in an hour?

*Three* hours later Ben managed to finally wrap up a memorable chase that included a trampoline, a clown, a swimming pool, three little old ladies, a pink Barbie car, and a half-naked serial killer in neon hot pants.

Frustrated and covered in clown paint, he managed to retrieve his normal clothes and trudge (still dressed as Kylo Ren) into a nearby church. He was wandering down the center aisle trying to locate the bathroom when he heard footsteps.

Ben was in no condition to explain himself to anyone at the moment, so he began frantically searching for a place to hide. Spotting a door off to the side he ran for it and dove into a tiny little room with a mesh screen.

*Well... this is infinitely better than pretending Kylo Ren is having a spiritual experience and being asked to speak with some televangelist.*

He tugged off his mask and cowl and was just preparing to button his shirt when a figure appeared on the other side of the mesh.

Ben suddenly realized where he was.

*Smooth Solo. Real smooth.*

He began gathering his clothes in preparation for a hasty (hopefully non-awkward) exit when he heard something that stopped him in his tracks.

“Bless me, Father for I have sinned. It has been... well. Never mind that. I’m here to confess.”

*OH. MY. GOD.*

Ben froze

*This cannot end well.*

For a moment he was too shocked to say anything other than:

“….to what?”

And then she was off. He was correct in his earlier assumption that she’d been planning to place herself in yet another potentially dangerous situation. He enjoyed a momentary flash of what her day planner must look like…

*7 AM: Arrive at work*  
*7:30 AM: Scare Mitaka*  
*9 AM: Complain to Luke*  
*10 AM: Throw self into path of mortal peril*  
*10:01 AM: Give Ben a heart attack... (again)*

“Alright let’s get to it,” she chirped briskly.

Ben gulped.
You have two options, Solo.

Option 1: You run away and hope to God she doesn’t find out you let her get this far.

…Option 2: She confesses to you and you get what no other man has gotten before – insight – not only into the dangerous female psyche, but to the enigma that is Rey Niima.

And you likely go hell.

…which is probably nothing compared to what Rey will do to you if she EVER finds out.

“Ok then. I’m ready when you are,” he heard himself say.

Hades here I come.

Well. This was it. His new low. He’d been reduced to disguising his voice and impersonating a man of the cloth in order to gain some ground in their ongoing struggle.

Technically they were friends. (Frenemies? It wasn’t really clear to anyone, least of all the two of them). They were definitely partners, a hair-brained idea of his crazy Uncle, Luke Skywalker - the chief editor of the Coruscant Chronicle where they both worked as investigative journalists.

Ben deduced that the woman was generally out of her mind prior to their illustrious partnership. But he had no clue exactly how far out until they were forced to work together. It was clear Luke was hoping that partnership would make Rey less likely to get herself killed in her relentless pursuit of stories.

It hadn’t.

It just made it more likely that Ben would get killed as he chased her through dark alleys, mobster bungalows, and opium dens. Rey had single-handedly doubled his workload as Kylo Ren. And, to make matters infinitely worse, she’d developed a ridiculous school-girl crush on his brooding alter-ego.

After all, Kylo Ren was always close by to assist in any way he could. Not like Ben who kept disappearing…

Honestly, he could understand her need for independence and self-sufficiency. She was a brilliant reporter and scrappy as heck. Seventeen years in the British foster care system ensured that she was a survivor… but she wasn’t much of a team player. And she was reckless – even more so since her dark knight in shining leather had appeared.

Ben was secretly convinced that she enjoyed tormenting him. Between their verbal sparring, never-ending one-upmanship, and vicious prank war there was very little peace in the bullpen. Not to mention she insisted on strolling into work dressed in perfectly tailored pencil skirts and smelling like a stolen fantasy - gawd – it was downright unnerving.

Ben shook his head. Not that he noticed what she smelled like... It was just rather hard to miss her distinctive perfume and sensuous undertones – especially when she was flirting shamelessly with Kylo Ren.

He clenched his jaw. Best not to go there or he would start pouting and he was a grown man.

A grown man pretending to be a priest.
Because of a girl.

*I am the worst.*

Truth be told, as much as she drove him insane (and she *did* drive him *absolutely* insane) he couldn’t help but admire and respect her. There was no one else like Rey. She was the only person he’d ever met who managed to be simultaneously adorable and terrifying; a glorious hurricane of sunshine, determination, and grit. The combination of it all in one cleverly put together woman was so…so…

*Provocative.*

He rolled his eyes

*Not helping.*

“I’m not a thief, *but* there are times when I’ve... *liberated* certain items which might be pertinent to my story. It drives my partner absolutely crazy.”

*I knew it. She has no regard for my sanity.*

“That’s probably a sin too.”

“It is?”

*Nope.*

“It should be,” he grumbled before quickly remembering his role. “I’m sure your partner is simply trying to keep you out of trouble. A full-time job no doubt.”

“According to *him* it is. He seems to forget that – as a reporter – trouble is my job description.”

Ben bit his finger to keep all manner of retorts from exploding in her direction, but it wasn’t working as well as he hoped so he ended up smacking his head on the walls of the confessional several times to soothe his frustration.

“Father?” she called. “Everything alright?”

*I actively want to drop-kick you. Not hurt you. But definitely drop-kick you.*

“Yes I’m… I’m great. Just… so great.”

He spent a moment aggressively massaging his temple, but his head shot up at-

“…However, I read that messing around is sort of lumped together with that one so -”

*WHAT?! Rey is messing around with someone!? I would know! She would tell me! Wouldn't she...? Finn would tell me! Rose would tell me! If Rose has been keeping this from me I’m going hide her computer... permanently. I wonder who he is? Probably some reject biker. She always goes for that type. I hope it’s not...Chad! That stupid travel editor! Just because he goes to Italy twice a year – Rey thinks he’s soo suave....grease ball.*

Luckily (for him) none of this came out of his mouth.

“You’ve been messing around with someone?”
“What? No - I mean –”

“Fornication is a serious sin, young lady.”

**WHAT am I even saying right now?!**

“Oh – well - I –”

“I don’t recommend continuing any fornication you are currently involved in. And you should probably give me the name of the bastard- er – **bad seed** that has been leading you astray-”

*It’s important that I know this. For... reasons. Kylo Ren definitely needs to know this... also for reasons.*

“No! Father – I’m not fornicating – I swear. I haven’t in a while –”

**Ha! Bite me, Chad.**

“How long?”

**Oh my God. I’m still talking.**

“Does that really matter?”

“YES – No... Noo – IIII - **think** it just might be ...helpful to talk to someone about ...that. And I’m here to help.”

*In more ways than one.*

Rey let out a heavy sigh.

“It’s just been a while. I - I don’t want to talk about why – I mean I don’t really know why. Rose thinks it’s because –” She sighed again. “Never mind. Rose is delusional.”

Ben’s mind immediately kicked into overdrive. Rose had been shooting the two of them weird looks lately. Ever since she caught him staring at Rey’s... assets.

**Stupid pencil skirts.**

“Wait – What did she say?”

“What?”

“Rose’s theory – what was it?”

“...I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“**WHY!??** MAYDAY MAYDAY “...I mean... as-as you wish.”

*Oh that was close.*

“Eunice - that crazy religious fanatic who works in Copy - erm...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean... I meant no disrespect to you.”

**Eunice?!**
Ben shivered. He’d been terrified of Eunice ever since he overheard her tell Frank the janitor that “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” was the best song to make love to…

“None taken.”

“Well - Eunice said that the Kylo Ren action figure I have hidden in my desk at work is a graven image - and that it could send me to the ‘fiery depths.’ Personally I think Eunice is whack - but I’m trying to cover all my bases.”

“...you have a Kylo Ren action figure in your desk...”

“Yes...I do.”

Ben rolled his eyes – not missing the irony of the whole ridiculous conversation.

*Rey* would have a Kylo Ren figurine in her desk. *Cheap toy probably gets more smiles from her in a day than I do in a month.*

“About that idolatry clause.”

He chuckled silently to himself when she abruptly changed the subject.

“So I lied to Rose - about something - I think – maybe? It doesn’t matter. At some point in my life I have lied-”

_Hmmmhhhhhhmm…_

“Have you ever lied to your partner?”

Rey snorted

“Of course I have.”

_Don’t do it, don’t do it, don’t do it, don’t do it-

“Really... About what?”

...you’re going to hell

“I told him I wasn’t texting his mum about him. I am.”

“You’re doing what?!”

*REY was his mother’s secret source!? Was NOTHING sacred?!*

“She worries! He’s a total recluse sometimes and he never tells her anything. I’m just trying help and give her some peace of mind. That’s not a sin is it?”

“Yes. Yes it is. It absolutely is.”

“Really?”

“Priest,” he reminded her coolly (feeling less guilty about his masquerade now that he knew she was snitching on him to his mother).
“O…K…”

“Any other lies involving your partner that you might want to get off your chest?”

“Um... Well... I told him he looked terrible in black.”

Ben’s mouth dropped open. He silently indulged in a ridiculous victory-dance-fist-pump that no one would ever see.

*I KNEW IT!*

“And *does he* look terrible in black?”

She gulped audibly.

“No... No not at all. In fact, he looks fantastic in black. Phenomenal even… That’s the problem.”

“Problem?” Did his voice just crack?

“It’s distracting! I’m trying to work and he is *distracting* in black. It causes my mind to drift to…*things* that are…” she cleared her throat significantly “…sinful.”

Suddenly he couldn’t think straight. There was a faint ringing in his ears and a voice that couldn’t possibly have been his said

“Define sinful.”

*Going to hell – Going directly to hell – Do not pass Go – Do not collect $200.*

On the other side of the screen Rey considered for an instant. This was something she’d never told anyone – ever. And she *did* want to get it off her chest… Rose would never let her live it down. Finn would probably have a heart attack and die… Telling the priest her dirty little secret might be just the ticket.

Her eyes drifted close. She took a deep steadying breath.

“I-fantasize-about-my-partner,” she squeaked.

There was a loud choking sound. Rey (mercifully) couldn’t see Ben on the other side of the screen trying to recover from nearly swallowing his own tongue.

“Father? Father is everything ok?” she asked – her voice dripping with concern.

“-Duh-I- yea-yes? – uh hu – what?”

“I asked if you were okay? You were coughing-”

“Oh – I’m… I’m just... please continue.”

Ben’s voice was a solid two octaves higher than his normal tone, but Rey was too busy unburdening herself to notice.

“I mean,” she bit her lip, “did you want me to tell you about them?”

Ben’s eyes actually rolled back in his head.
“Please…” he managed breathily (hoping to God it didn’t sound like he was begging).

“There’s one… in the elevator.”

Suddenly his collar felt extremely tight. He tugged at it mindlessly.

“The elevator?”

“Yes… You see we ride the elevator together at work… everyday… And everyday he comes waltzing in with that smug smile and we travel 25 floors in that tiny little box. All the way up to the central offices of the Coruscant Chronicle… 25 floors is a long time to think about… things.”

“Things…”(*gulp*)“…like what?” Breathing was becoming difficult. Was it hot in here?

Rey flushed as a knowing smile slowly crept over her face.

“Just some… wall action… stuff. Look I - I guess I should just come out and say that… I’ve thought about… interludes with my partner – at my job… a lot.”

Ben desperately tried to control his pulse. It would probably blow his cover if he lost control, dove through the screen, and begged her to accompany him to the nearest elevator.

“And what does your partner think about all this?” he rasped.

He thinks ‘riding in the elevator’ has just been drastically redefined

Rey giggled. Oh Ben… What would Tall-Dark-and-Broody say if he discovered his starring role in her healthy fantasy life? She shivered.

Honestly, she wanted to drop him out the nearest window half the time… It was the other half that caused her problems. The flashes of confidence – that wicked grin - his lips.

She shivered again.

And then there were those moments… Moments when she suspected she wasn’t the only one indulging in some very inappropriate thoughts. His eyes would find hers. Her breath would stick in her throat as her heart rate skyrocketed…

But those moments always passed… and sometimes it was as if they never happened.

“Ben doesn’t know. Not at all. And he never will.”

“Is that so…” Ben himself croaked.

“It certainly is so. Maker – if he ever discovered the effect that cocky grin has – oh – I’d be mortified. I’d probably go back to Jakku.”

“Surely not Jakku?”

“You’re right. Jakku is not far enough away. The People’s Republic of China might be better.”
He chuckled deeply. Rey felt the sound dance sensually over her skin.

_This is bloody ridiculous_, she chastised herself mentally. _You start talking about fantasies and now you’re reacting improperly to a priest. You really _should_ see a therapist._

The ‘priest’ in question cleared his throat.

“Ah – well. Is there anything else you’ve been keeping from this Ben individual that you’d like to… share?”

“You mean besides the smutty fantasies and the fact that I’d become a communist if he ever found out about them?”

“Um – Yes?” he chuckled again. Rey suppressed a shiver – again.

“I suppose just that… I have this nearly desperate desire to really _dishevel_ him – you know? Usually when he fixes me with that 1000-watt stare and starts droning on and on and on about _responsible this_ and _risks that_. Honestly, I swear if his eyes weren’t so unfairly pretty I’d poke them – right after I flicked his ears.”

She heard a snort.

“You do flick his ears.”

Rey rolled her eyes

“Oh course I flick his ears! They’re so big and adorable that I -”

She stopped suddenly, realizing with dawning horror what ‘the Father’ had just said.

“... _How_ did you know I flick his ears?”

Ben’s eyes widened as he realized his fatal error.

_My life is over._

“It was…” _Think fast! Think fast! “…God?”_

_WHAT?!_

“It was _GOD?”_ she shrieked.

_Oh now you’ve done it. You colossal moron._

“…yes…God.”

There was a long pause. A horrible twisted suspicion began to form in Rey’s brain.

_No… It couldn’t be._

Ben made the rapid journey from panicked to frantic in under 2 seconds. He quickly finished buttoning his shirt.
“Does God know what I’m thinking now!?” Rey snarled.

“He’s becoming less forthcoming by the moment,” a distinctly guilty voice replied.

Rey’s fingers clenched to fists. Her mind was suddenly overwhelmed by a truly terrible realization.

She sprang from her seat inside the confessional. Movement could be heard from the other side of the mesh.

Oh no you don’t.

Seizing the handle, she ripped the door open.

“…Hello Rey.”

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this piece years ago as a Smallville cannon-verse comedy…

But it was plagiarized, and I stopped posting it as I was both hurt and angry that someone had taken credit for my work.

This is my favorite story that I’ve ever written and coming back to it after so many years (and much more experience) has been a lot of fun. Recently, I have been getting back into writing and I began to realize how well this wild tale would suit the characters of the Star Wars universe…

I had to do some extensive editing (I am – thankfully – a better writer now) to tailor the personalities and the story line to my new players (after all Lois, Clark, and the Justice League are a bit different than Kylo and The Gang), but I am very happy with the end result. I hope you enjoy reading this story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Finally I want to give a shout out to the sexiest beta in the biz, my very own Tall-Dark-and-Broody. I love you, babe. I wouldn’t be sacrificed on the altar of marriage with anyone but you.

(Please let me know what you think! I would LOVE to hear from you!)
The Path of Least Resistance

Chapter Summary

Ben and Rey cause quite the commotion in the bullpen.  
Office furniture can fly.  
Luke just wants to do his job.  
Someone needs to save Rose.  
No one knows which is thicker - the newly introduced plot or Ben Solo's head...  
And the Resistance ships it...sort of.

Chapter Notes

I am bloomin' thrilled with your responses to this story. I hope to keep you laughing, smiling, and feeling all the way through. Your comments and kudos mean the world to me so - THANK YOU - all of you - from the bottom of my reylo-lovin' heart.

Shout out to my beta-boo. Nothing screams "soulmate" like listening to the 10th revision of that same paragraph without smothering me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“…Hello Rey.”

For a moment they just stood there – frozen in place by a potent blend of shock and mutual mortification. Rey with her jaw hanging down and Ben looking as though he’d merrily run into the flames of hell if it meant escaping her.

“You … Son of a-”

She slammed the door in his face and began marching down the aisle at a breakneck pace.

“Rey!”

She didn’t even acknowledge his voice as she left the church and hailed a driver.

Ben rushed after her; bursting through the door in time to see her pull away in a taxi. Flagging one of his own, he collapsed inside and growled;

“Follow that cab!”

Rey huddled into the backseat with her head in her hands.

He heard! He heard everything. That arrogant bas-

“We’re at the Chronicle, Miss.”
Her eyes flew up. She fled towards the steps without a backward glance.

“Rey! Wait!”

Ben was closing in on her.

She kept going till she reached the elevator. Turning she saw him stumbling towards her.

“DON’T you DARE get in this elevator with me, Ben Solo!”

He stopped at the look of animal rage and watched as the doors closed over her. As soon as she was out of sight, Ben made a beeline for the steps – not caring that he was using his enhanced speed to chase his partner up a building in broad daylight. Barely winded, he burst onto the 25th floor and positioned himself in front of the sliding doors. She glanced up as they opened and immediately narrowed her eyes.


“Rey – we need to talk.”

“We’ve done enough talking.”

“Rey –” He reached out and grabbed her arm. She whirled and smacked him square on the jaw.

“I deserved that.”

He received no response other than a piercing glare.

“Rey - please – I’m sorry-”

Her eyebrows shot up.

“You’re SORRY?!”

They heard a sharp gasp and abruptly realized that the eyes of the entire 25th floor were boring into them.

She took a deep breath.

“You wanna talk? Fine.” Rey grabbed his collar and yanked him into San Tekka’s old office. She pushed him against the empty desk and slammed the door before turning to him with a dangerous snarl.

“Talk.”

~~~*~~~*~~~*~~~*~~~

Bodhi Rook watched Rey drag a struggling Ben into the vacant room near the corner of the bullpen. He didn’t even attempt to hide his grin.
“What’d I tell you, Pava? One day soon Niima and Solo are gonna stop playing ‘tiptoe through the tension’ and get down to some serious interpersonal relations.” He cracked his knuckles. “Looks like Niima finally snapped. She just pulled him into the spot.”

Jessika Pava leaned back to poke her head around the corner of her computer.

“San Tekka’s office? You’re kidding…”

“He’s not.”

They turned to see (a dejected) Bazine Netal gazing longingly at the old assistant editor’s door.

“What does she have that I don’t!? I’ve been trying to get him in there since San Tekka left!”

The two columnists were saved from responding when a loud crash erupted from within the office in question.

Pava’s eyebrows shot up.

“Oh…my…”

Across the bullpen, Kanan Jarrus (politics) leaned over to Hera Syndulla (foreign policy).

“And I thought we were loud…” he whispered.

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Ben dove - narrowly missing the desk lamp.

“Rey! Let’s just discuss this rationally-”

“What’s to discuss!? You impersonated a PRIEST! They used to hang people for that!”

“I didn’t impersonate a priest-”

“Really!? Were you ordained between 2:30 and 5?!”

“Ok - so I technically impersonated a priest – but I didn’t intend to!”

“Oh? That just makes it allllll better!”

He met her eyes with a helpless look - one that made him appear unbelievably adorable.

How dare he make me think he’s cute right now!

“OhHHH!” she screamed as she shoved the desk at him.
Pava jumped as an impassioned cry tore out of the corner office followed by the unmistakable sound of a desk hitting the wall.

“Gawd…”

Bazine pouted.

“This is so unfair.”

Bodhi turned back to Jess.

“Come on… Niima and Solo are heatin’ up in there. Maybe let me take you out to dinner-” (Another crash cut him off. He grinned facing her again.) “– and a movie.”

“I swear I never meant for it to go that far!”

Ben peeked out at her from his hiding place behind the file cabinet. She appeared to be searching for another object to throw at him.

“Rey. Its no use. You’ve already sent everything – including the desk – hurling in the direction of my face. It’s all here on my side of the room now.”

Suddenly the office chair came flying towards him. Nose diving under the coffee table, he avoided it by inches.

“Apparently I was wrong.”

He chanced another glance outside the safety of his makeshift barricade.

“How could you!?”

“I was looking for a good time to slip out! I just got a little caught up-”

By this point, San Tekka’s office had gathered a crowd. Jess was writing her number down for Bodhi.

“How can we be sure that’s what they’re doing?”

“-RIGHT THERE, BEN!” Rey screamed from behind the door.

Rook waggled his eyebrows suggestively.
“How much proof do you need?”

“Proof of what?” a new voice asked.

They turned to see the travel editor, Chad Fortuna, strolling into the bullpen.

Bazine eyed the young man up hungrily.

Didn’t he have a thing for Rey? She smiled. No reason why we both can’t enjoy a good consolation prize.

“How much?” she cooed sympathetically as she stroked his shoulder, “I know this might be hard for you to hear -”

“What is THIS?!”

Luke Skywalker stepped out of his office to get some water and stumbled across a convention.

“What are you people doing? This isn’t a Christmas Party!” He began to walk towards the cluster of guilty looking reporters. “Now someone is going to tell me what’s going on or I’m going to –”

“Rey PLEASE!” Ben’s voice exploded clearly into the heavy silence.

Luke’s eyes widened

“Kriff.”

~~~*~~~*~~~*~~~

“RIGHT THERE, BEN! As soon as you heard somebody on the other side, you should’ve left right there!”

“I understand – I was just –”

“Just what? A little surprised to hear me!? Imagine how I felt when I got a good look at who I was confessing to!”

Ben took a deep breath. This had to stop.

Now.

He quickly formulated a plan.

Rey started when she saw Ben leaping towards her from behind the pile of office furniture. Before she could react, he wrapped an arm around her waist, covered her mouth with his other hand, and shoved her up against the wall. Outraged she began to struggle against his iron grip.

“Rey, please!”
She stopped writhing, but the anger raging in her eyes did not dim. She was livid…though that didn’t prevent her treacherous body from warming at the feel of him full against her. She groaned inwardly. Fury and arousal were divided by a very thin line.

Ben felt her breath catch. He knew his tactic would throw her off guard. He only hoped she would be distracted long enough for him to say what he needed to say.

“Rey…” he began slowly.

Hazel fire blazed back at him scattering his pulse. He pressed forward, nonetheless, desperately trying to regain control of the situation.

“This is neither the time nor the place to discuss this. You deserve an explanation - an apology. But we’re on the clock. Someone may have noticed us come in here and gotten the wrong idea.”

Ben paused to take another steadying breath.

“You and I are both professional enough to get through the next few hours and then I promise…we will work this out.”

He cautiously removed his hand from her mouth and, after a moment, she responded.

“I’m not even sure –” You sound a bit breathy. Get ahold of yourself, woman! “- that I ever want to speak to you again. Let alone ‘work this out’…”

It was a lie. She knew it was a lie even as she said it. But she also knew that he was going to pay. Dearly.

Starting now.

“Rey, please just consider what you’re saying. Up until this point we’ve had a…” Friendly? Tense? Verbally Abusive? “- strong relationship. If only for that, I’m asking you to give me a chance to make up for this. To fix it.”

She glared at him for a long moment before slipping from his embrace.

“I’ll give you a chance,” Rey whispered tightly as she made her way to the door.

Ben absently noted that, at some point during their heated (and dangerously physical) argument, the top three buttons of her shirt had come undone and her hair had broken free from its loose bun.

She looked unbearably sexy.

He gulped and deliberately ignored the spike in his heart rate. Looking down it became obvious that Rey’s appearance wasn’t the only casualty of their conflict. Repeatedly diving and dodging various airborne office accessories had left his tie and collar buttons open and his jacket askew.

He brushed a dark curl out of his eyes before letting out an ironic chuckle.

His hair was also a mess.

Ben moved to follow her into the bullpen, but stopped when she abruptly turned to him, seized his tie, and yanked him down till they were nose to nose.
“I said I would give you a chance - and I meant it.” She moved her face even closer so that her lips were almost brushing his “But I wouldn’t hold my breath.”

With that, she grasped the knob and yanked the door open.

Fifteen pairs of eyes – including those of a very bewildered Luke Skywalker – stared back at them.

Rey gulped.

“Hey…guys…”

Luke ran an errant hand through his salt and pepper hair.

This had all seemed so much simpler 10 minutes ago.

“Niima… Solo.”

The two reporters met his flustered gaze with sheepish gulps and wide eyes.

“There’s an assignment that I was planning to give you two…I thought.”

Rey quirked an eyebrow.

“Any assignment up for grabs goes to me. I’m the senior reporter.”

“Oh by two lousy months-”

“I don’t recall asking for opinions from the porg pen.”

“I don’t recall you being smart enough to figure out – ”

“ENOUGH!”

Rey and Ben jumped back to their original positions at Luke’s sudden outburst. The editor took a long deep breath.

“I don’t recall telling either of you that you could decide who I gave a lead to – AND,” he paused meaningfully, “- despite your endless bickering - and that chicken you left in Ben’s desk on Tuesday.” (He shot Rey a look and she suddenly became preoccupied with her nails) “-the last time I checked, Niima and Solo were the only team at the Chronicle who hadn’t aired their dirty laundry for the entire bullpen to bear witness to! But Maker - when you two decide to put it out there you really don’t hold back! San Tekka’s office looks like the site of a police raid and you both came stumbling out looking like you’d treated each other to a good frisking!”

Rey’s mouth dropped open.
“You mean - they thought...that we ...!”

She turned to Ben whose eyes had glazed over a bit.

“I can’t believe you!”

He gulped as she advanced on him.

“You even managed to foul up being yelled at! Is there anything else you’d like to do to me today? Set my apartment on fire? Frame me for murder? Admit you’re Kylo Ren?”


“Now Rey. Why...Why would I admit I’m Kylo Ren?”

“Oh I don’t know - probably because that’s the only thing I can think of that’s WORSE than confessing all my sins to you, finding out I’ve confessed all my sins to you, and dethroning Bazine Netal as office hook-up queen!”

She paused mid-rant to take a fortifying breath and then continued with gusto.

“It would be JUST, BLOODY. PERFECT if - after all the times that obscene fantasy of a man has pulled me from the jaws of death - he would turn out to be YOU!”

The editor watched the exchange with morbid fascination and not a little amusement. Ben seemed genuinely unsettled by a woman half his size. A situation made all the more ironic by the fact that – as Kylo Ren – he could literally throw a car.

“Alright you two...I don’t know why in heaven’s name you were confessing your sins to Solo -” Rey opened her mouth to answer but Luke waved her off “ - and frankly I don’t care. This assignment is going to require working in close quarters for an extended time. If you agree to it, then you leave in two days for Canto Bight. If not...then I’m giving it to Pava and Rook.”

“Pava and Rook?!”

“But Chief! Jess and Bodhi haven’t even been on staff a year! They’re hardly qualified-”

“They’re very qualified – and they’re not dancin’ around each other like twelve-year-olds. I want your answers by 8 tomorrow and not a minute later. Either you’re both in or you’re both out. I can’t afford this nonsense.”

He paused for a moment. The pair of them seemed distinctly uncomfortable even being the same room together.

Might as well begin prepping those rookies.

“I know you two are responsible enough to give me the right answer. Now get out of my office. I don’t want to hear another word about it till tomorrow.”

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
Rose Tico waddled precariously up the steps.

*Being pregnant is NOT for the faint of heart.*

Heaving dramatically, she managed to unlock her office and wobble to her chair before collapsing in a graceless heap.

“*My don’t you look radiant.*”

She didn’t even jump.

“*What do you want, Ben.*”

His familiar form could be seen lurking guiltily in the shadowy corner of her spacious office. Being the head of technology for an international publication did have its perks.

“*Now Rose – what makes you think I-”*

“I’m seven months pregnant. The only man who thinks I’m hot is my husband – and we all know what a nut he is. Logic follows that dodgy people like yourself calling me radiant and hanging around my office at–” she glanced down at her watch- “7PM obviously want something. I’m too pregnant for the niceties, Ben. Spill it and let me gestate in peace.”

He smiled.

“I’m here for some advice. I’ve…made a bit of a mess of things.”

“I told you I was one hundred percent done helping you with this ridiculous prank war. I don’t care how many geese are in your car –”

Ben rolled his eyes.

“No. It’s Rey. I really – genuinely - messed up with Rey.”

Rose arched her eyebrow.

“Well I’m always up for a little bloodshed,” she snorted. “What’d you do this time? Lock her in a closet?”

“No. Worse.”

“You saw her naked again?”

“That was an accident! And I didn’t even get to see anything. If you recall she slammed the door in my face and broke my nose. Anyways…it’s still worse than that time.”

“You've killed BB8?”

“Rose!”

“What!!? I can’t think of anything you could’ve -” her eyes widened. “Oh no! She found out?! Oh my word – how did she find out?! Did you forget to take your cape off again?”
“NO... Its -in many ways - it’s even worse...than that.”

“Ah. You got her pregnant - didn’t you.”

"Geez No - ROSE! I pretended to be a priest- and she confessed all her sins to me – and then she caught me and threw office furniture at my head!”

Rose blinked.

“Would you...like to run that by me again.”

“I pretended to be a priest-”

“This is a joke, right?”

“I couldn’t make this up!”

“Please tell me you’re lying and you actually did get her pregnant. That would be so much easier to compute.”

Ben dropped his head.

“Oh Maker…” Rose reached across the desk and began dialing theatrically on her landline.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m calling my friend Joe in Witness Protection. Maybe he can move you to Milwaukee. Don’t worry. I’ll get you out of here. No doubt she’ll look for you, but these people are the best. You just hide out for a year or so and when everything settles down-”

“Rose!” He grabbed her hand. “Obviously I don’t need Joe in Witness Protection. I just... need a little advice.”

She took a deep breath...and then slapped the back of his head as hard as she could.

“YOU PRETENDED TO BE A PRIEST?!”

“...it was an accident?”

“Ben. Getting hit by a car is an accident. Pretending to be Rey’s confessor is a felony.”

“I know! I KNOW! I just – well…”

Rose cocked her head.

“Were you on drugs?”

“I was changing my clothes after a chase -”

“In a confessional?”
“I was hiding.”

“-and changing?”

“Yes.”

“…How does this end with Rey Niima believing you’re a member of the clergy?”

“Look I’m not proud of what I’ve-”

“ROSE!” Rey’s voice interrupted them from across the hall. She was heading towards the office.

“Oh dear…”

Ben’s eyes widened.

“What do I do?”

“I don’t know, genius! Run away!”

“-But I still need to ask-”

“-Then hide!”

Ben managed to shut himself in a cabinet just as Rey burst through the door.

“You are NOT even going to BELIEVE what I’m about to tell you!”

Rose spun around in what she hoped was an unsuspicious manner.

“Really? Try me.”

Rey opened her mouth to do just that, but paused for a moment in confusion.

“Did I… hear you talking… just now?”

She shot a nervous glance towards her cabinet.

“I was… talking to myself. You know how it is when…um…when you’re pregnant! Pregnant people do odd things.”

Like lie about a grown man hiding in their file cabinet.

Rey gave her a strange look before continuing.

“I was tracking that priest murderer this morning, and I thought it might help to go to confession – so I did – and I confessed TO FATHER BEN SOLO!”

Ben winced and Rose plastered on her best ‘surprised face.’

“Nooo!”
“YES!”

“How did that happen?” Really she was dying to know.

“He probably followed me again in another one of his misguided attacks of chivalry. Likely clubbed the normal priest and is off somewhere comforting himself in the knowledge that he did it all for my own good.”

Ben had to stifle a loud cry of indignation and Rose abruptly succumbed to a violent ‘coughing fit.’

Still – ever the optimist – she determined to make the best of the situation and attempted some damage control.

“Girl, I know this is a horrible violation of your trust and of your partnership and you probably feel absolutely exposed and taken advantage of –”

Rey nodded in furious agreement.

Inside the file cabinet, Ben was having a coronary. His eyes bugged out as he emitted a quiet wheeze of betrayal.

*Gee, Rose. Thanks for helping me out, buddy. Let me just go find someone to dig this knife out of my back.*

But Rose wasn’t finished.

“Still... it’s not end of the world. I mean – how bad could it be, right? The worst thing I’ve ever seen you do is steal chocolate out of Luke’s desk. Surely –”

Rey gripped her friend’s wrists and interrupted with a frantic shake of her head.

“You don’t understand,” she gulped. “I confessed to-” Rose leaned forward expectantly and Rey felt her nerve deserting her. “You know all those fantasies I told you about? The ones I said were about Chad.”

Ben huffed.

*She didn’t confess that! I can’t believe she lied to a priest... to me...Well she thought I was a priest.*

Rey fidgeted. Rose’s eyes widened dramatically.

*Just say it, Niima!*

“They were actually about Ben. All of them! And I told him!”

Ben made a mental note to somehow discover what ‘all those fantasies’ entailed. Not that he cared… or anything. It was purely academic curiosity.

Rose rolled her eyes to heaven. No wonder she’d thrown furniture at his head.

Rey was still babbling.

“- and - if that wasn’t enough – everyone thinks we had battle sex in San Tekka’s office and Luke is sending us to Canto Bight for a story in two days!”
Ben arched an eyebrow.

*Battle sex? That sounds interesting.*

“Battle sex?”

“I’ll explain later. Rose, I need your help… I want that story, but I only get it if Ben goes. And if Ben goes I can’t guarantee his safe return. What would I say to Leia?”

“*Sorry I murdered your son. He deserved it.*” *That’s exactly what I’d say.*

Rose shot another covert glance at the file cabinet before deciding her next move.

“You know what? I think you and I should go out for drinks - or - you should go out for drinks while I sip orange juice on the rocks and discuss this.”

Rey nodded miserably and Rose began maneuvering her towards the exit.

“Meet me at the car. I have a filing issue to take care of. I’ll be down momentarily.”

After the door closed, she heard Ben climb gracelessly from his hideaway.

“I’m not taking the story,” he whispered before heading to the back door. “I’m heading to the Castle to sort through this. I can’t … This is such a mess – and it’s my fault.”

Rose closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead.

“Ben!” she called after him.

But he was already gone. She sighed before turning to follow Rey

*Why me?*

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Rey threw back her 4th straight shot of Tequila.

“…and then I told him about wanting to have m’way with him in the elelator.”

“I see. Actually you mentioned that…two shots ago. You were just explaining battle sex…which apparently involves destroying an abandoned office and a good deal of screaming.”

“But NOT in eggstacy.”

“Not in ‘eggstacy’ indeed.”

“Izall about throwin’ things.”

“Should I be taking notes?”
Rey rolled her eyes.

“Why would you have baddle sex?! It’s not real!”

“I...see?”

“I got NOTHIN! ...And he got even less,” she snickered.

Rose hid a laugh in her orange juice and wisely changed the subject.

“So about the story?”

Rey sobered somewhat.

“I don’t know, Rose. This has…caused problems. I’m so embarrassed I can barely look at him, and so angry that if I do I’ll probably box his ears.” She shook her head “Even if I did take it…He really feels bad. He might not want to go…or worse he might go -” she hiccupped, “ - and spend the week hoping I don’t find the key to his chastity belt. ”

Rose took a long deliberate swig of her drink. She was seriously going to damage Ben as soon as she got her pregnant paws on him. Hormones were a fabulous get-out-of-whatever-free card after all.

“Maybe letting Jess and Bodhi take the story isn’t such a bad idea. I mean there are thousands of stories all over… Coruscant that…”

Rose trailed off when she spotted a familiar figure waving her down from the opposite corner of the restaurant. She groaned, but had trouble completely suppressing her smile.

“You know what, Rey - I’ve got to go.”

“You do?”

“ – to the bathroom. I’ve got to go to the bathroom.”

“You just went - ”

“Pregnant,” she chirped as she struggled out of the booth.

She was almost to the area where she’d spotted her mischievous husband beckoning when she found herself suddenly yanked into a tiny storage closet.

“Hello, Gorgeous.”

“Hello, Grabby.”

He smiled, pulling her in for a slow kiss.

“You like it when I’m grabby.”

“Yes. We all have proof don’t we,” she murmured, lightly bumping him with her swollen tummy.
Finn grinned and leaned in for another kiss, but she stopped him with a finger to his lips.

“I told you I needed to talk to Rey tonight - and besides - I’m way too big to properly manage one of those kinky interludes in a restaurant closet –”

Someone cleared their throat loudly.

“Please,” said Poe as he materialized from the shadows, “let me stop you there.”

“Poe!” Rose squeaked and jumped out of her husband’s intimate embrace.

Finn sighed.

“Dude, I said five minutes.”

Cassian Andor and Jyn Erso emerged to stand next to Poe. Jyn quirked an eyebrow.

“You’re lucky you got five seconds. I haven’t eaten all day and Cassian got to pick the music on the way over. I wasn’t staying in there a moment longer than necessary.”

Finn coughed.

“How long were you guys standing back there?”

Cassian snickered. “Long enough, Grabby,” he drawled in his distinctive Latin accent.

Rose groaned.

“What does this have to do with me?”

“We've reason to believe that there are four Senators involved in selling secrets related to our missile defense systems to terrorists.”

Rose’s eyes widened as she opened the file and began to review the evidence while Poe continued.

“Three weeks ago we received strange information from a source on Capitol Hill which led us to further investigate the matter. Once we started looking…evidence became available at an alarming rate.”

“I don’t understand. What does this have to do with me?”

“We need Ben… and Rey.”

“Why?”

“Luke Skywalker offered Niima and Solo a story in Canto Bight based on an anonymous tip regarding a potential war council between the Hutt and Black-Sun crime families. The meeting is scheduled to take place five days from now in the Royal Suite of the Grand Gungan Casino. Now - that tip was provided by the Resistance. This war council appears to be linked to the illegal traffic in
government secrets... Ben needs to find out how and why. He’s the only one I could ask to place himself in the middle of two rival mobs and international espionage. Not to mention, as a well-known reporter, he already has the perfect cover.”

Poe’s eyes dropped significantly.

“Besides... once he found out - there’d be no stopping him anyways.”

“Once he found out what?” Rose narrowed her eyes. "What aren’t you telling me? Why am I here?”

Finn slowly approached his wife.

“We know Rey and Ben had a fight and Luke is considering handing the story to another team. We can’t have that happen. With situations like this... the less the Resistance is directly involved - the better. We need Kylo Ren to be in Canto Bight as Ben Solo; reporter for the Coruscant Chronicle. Kylo’s ties to the Resistance are too well known. The snag is - if Rey won’t go - we’ve lost a considerable ally. Her investigative skills could prove invaluable. Not to mention that - if she refuses - the story will be reassigned.”

“Have you told Ben all this?”

“That’s... the other snag. We can’t find him. His phone is off. He’s not been seen all night – and according to our sources at the Chronicle, Luke gave them an 8 AM deadline of acceptance. We need to talk to him now.”

Rose began to look through the evidence in her hands. She sighed

“I know where he is... but I’m not sure he’ll be up for it. He’ll insist on going alone – as Kylo Ren. In fact, at this point, I think he’d do anything to avoid being confined in a hotel room with Rey.”

Poe shook his head.

“Kylo Ren being in Canto Bight will draw attention to the Resistance – a hitch we really can’t afford. He needs to be Ben Solo. Nothing can be seen as out of the ordinary... besides, now that you can tell us where he is, its Rey we need you to guarantee.”

Rose nodded as she thumbed through the pictures of the Senators suspected of treason.

“Amilyn Holdo - I voted for her.” She flipped to another picture. “Wedge Antilles – didn’t see that coming...Calaman Raddus?” Rose let out a frustrated breath “I still don’t understand what makes you so sure that Ben will take the story.”

Poe met her eyes with a troubled expression. Jyn looked as if she wanted to say something, but wouldn’t. Cassian dropped his head to avoid her questioning stare.

It was Finn who finally gave her an answer. Without a word he flipped through the pile of evidence and handed her the photograph of the last accused Senator.

Leia Organa

Rose’s jaw dropped.

“What?! Have you taken one too many crash landings in that ship of yours?!”
Poe rolled his eyes.

“You think I don’t know this is completely unbelievable! But what am I supposed to DO, Rose! Evidence is evidence and right now - all of it points to her!”

“We’re talking about Leia Organa!” She lowered her voice, “The woman stood toe to toe with the Empire during the last Civil War! She’s the founder of the New Republic Party! She started.”

“-the Resistance?” Poe finished for her. “Now you see why it’s complicated.”

He took a deep breath and Cassian picked up where he left off.

“The truth is - despite the considerable body of evidence against them - there’s several things that don’t fit. This move is …shockingly out of character for all four of the Senators. Holdo’s pet causes are gun control and victims of land mines in third world countries. I can’t tell you how many times that ridiculous picture of Raddus in 69’ with ‘Make Love – Not War’ painted on his chest has surfaced in the papers. And Wedge Antilles is right next to Senator Organa every time there’s a chance to champion education reform.”

Rose shook her head.

“The whole idea doesn’t add up. Why would these four Senators be involved in anything together? They’re not on any military or defense committees. They’re not even in the same party. Antilles is a Democrat – Leia is NRP – Holdo and Raddus are both Independent.”

Poe sighed.

“I understand what you’re saying – I agree with it. But we can’t just ignore everything we’ve uncovered because one of the accused happens to be…Her. We gotta find the truth, Rose. My gut tells me she’s being set up. – that they all are. But we have to prove it. I know Ben can do this – especially if he has Rey. Hopefully we can orchestrate the flow of information, but even if Solo ends up being the one to break the story – there’s nothing suspicious about a man trying to clear his mother’s name. With Kylo’s abilities he can make sure the evidence is airtight.”

Silence hung heavy in the air following Poe’s statement.

Rose stared down at the photo of Leia. The picture was taken the day she’d been reelected to the Senate. Han and Lando were standing behind her wearing identical grins. Tears of anger began to burn her eyes.

It couldn’t be true.

It wasn’t true.

“Tell me what I have to do."

~~~*~~~*~~~

“Bartender!!!”
“…Miss Niima?”

“Another!”

“Miss Niima, this will be your sixth –”

“How nice. Go get me my drink -”

The bartender sighed irritably as he went to fetch her more tequila.

“Here you go, Miss Niima. Shot number six.”

Rey grabbed the man’s sleeve.

“Sparky – did you know – that I’m a complete mess?”

“My - my name’s not-”

“I came here with my best friend. She was supposed to guide me through my booze – I mean …my issues. But then she had to go to the bathroom – HA!”

“Um... Miss Niima, if you could just-”

“What a JOKE! I knew that look! That pregnant fiend is off in some dark corner feelin’ up her sexy husband-”

“Please, Miss-”

Rey yanked her captive closer and whispered.

“Not that I’m attracted to ‘im mind you…but I’m not blind either. I’m attracted to my partner – but no one’s suppos’d to know that…I don’t even know that.”

“I see… Madam, I hate to be rude –”

“Oh but you DON’T see Sparky-”

“- My name is not Sparky-”

“- I am gettin’ DRUNK alone because my PARTNER knows I’m attracted to him - even though I don’t - and my FRIEND was suppos’d to fix it – but she’s gettin' laid!…Which is...kind of redundant considerin' she’s already pregnant.”

“You have my deepest sympathies – really - but I-”

“She’s PREGNANT! And Ben is a goody-two-shoes who wants to be a priest! Every other man in that office asks sme’out and I fantasize about the one who doesn’t like sex!” She sniffed, shaking her head desolately, “…I didn’t even know he was Catholic.”

“Rey… Please let the nice bartender go.”
Rose interrupted what she could only assume was a drunken kidnapping in progress. The man looked as if he’d very much like to run away, but was prevented from doing so as Rey currently had his sleeve in her clutches and was showing no sign of loosening her hold anytime soon.

“We were just havin’ a chat. Which was what YOU were suppos’d to be doing– but you abandoned me in my time of need.”

Rose chuckled and set about freeing the hapless server who wasted no time escaping to the kitchen once he was rid of her colleague’s death grip.

“Bye Sparky!”

Taking a deep breath, Rose paused a moment to consider her next move. After a few tense seconds of painstaking deliberation, she elected to simply overload Rey until she broke.

After all, the infamously voracious reporter already wanted that lead.

…It was just a matter of inflating her sense of entitlement enough to override her wounded pride and sexual frustration.

“Rey.”

“Rose.”

“I think you should take the story.”

Rey paused before peering into her empty shot glass

“I must be drunker then I thought… I could've sworn you were listin’ aaaall the reason I shouldn’t take the story before you left to paw your husband – excuse me - before you left to use the facilities… for twenty-five minutes. You know - if you weren’t doing whatever with Finn - then we should get you to a hospital. Twenty five minutes is just not normal.”

Rose ignored Rey’s (partially true) insinuations.

“You are Rey Niima!”

“Last I checked-”

“Rey Niima does NOT let some entitled Senator’s son cheat her out of a story that could win her a Pulitzer!”

Rey’s eyes widened. Rose knew she had pretty much cinched the deal with that statement alone, but when it came to the Niima – Solo partnership…

There was no such thing as overkill.

“How would you feel if Jess Pava – a first year rookie - nabbed the story of a lifetime while you drunkenly attacked waiters at the local pub?!”

By this point Rey was shaking her head vehemently.

“When you see Ben tomorrow, you tell him you are taking that story whether he likes it or not!”
To clarify a few things - just in case:
Luke knows who Kylo Ren is.
Finn took Rose’s last name when they married because he was an orphan assigned a last name by the state and he had no real connection to it.
Rose knows who Kylo Ren is because of her relationship with Finn and her history with the Resistance... and other reasons...
(That will all become very important later.)
Rey is not a member of the Resistance currently - but she has had run-ins with them (as an organization) before.
Rey is not aware that several of her close friends are members of the Resistance.
Rey has been working at the paper for 2 months longer than Ben - which technically makes her senior to him (a fact she never lets him forget - even though two months don't really mean much.)
Rey is 22. Ben is 29
More of the connections between characters will be revealed in coming chapters.

I was nervous about this update because it features a chunk with neither Rey nor Ben...but I hope you guys still enjoyed it, because I do fancy hanging out with the gang every once in awhile...

I would love to know what you think! Its not just questions, comments, and kudos that I ravenously crave and shamelessly beg for. I'm also very open to suggestions and ideas. The story is mostly written, but I can definitely work a few things in here and there if there are any requests or proposals that fit.

You guys are awesome.
A Castle of Complications

Chapter Summary

Some history is no longer a mystery.
Connections are revealed.
Finn makes a wise choice.
Rose retires.

And Ben and Rey ride in the elevator.

Chapter Notes

THANK YOU for your ongoing support of this story with comments, kudos, and hits. I am humbled and small-child-at-Christmas excited every time I see that someone else has read or provided feedback. I really love writing this and the more I edit my existing work, the more I discover about the story itself. This thing has a mind of its own, so I hope you enjoy the ride. There are some Easter eggs for Star Wars fans who have been around the block awhile... I love Easter eggs.

For those of you wondering what will happen when Ben and Rey finally get into the same elevator... You're about to find out.

Lotsa Love to my beta reader bae; the only man smart enough to take me to a bookstore on our first date. Obviously I had to marry him after that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Why is the Skywalker family so freakin’ weird?” Finn groaned as he dragged himself up the 200th step of Chandrila Castle “Their ancestral home looks like it escaped from an Edgar Allen Poe novel.”

Rose shrugged.

“I heard old Edgar actually stayed here once – back when the original Lord Vader was alive.”

“Must be why he wrote Fall of the House of Usher.”

She laughed at that. “Probably.”

Truth be told, Rose had a distinct fondness for Chandrila. It did resemble an unholy cross between a monster citadel and a gothic cathedral, but it was filled with so many memories...

She remembered seeing for it the first time twenty-two years ago; her tiny shaking body holding tightly to the neck of Lando Calrissian as Paige gripped his hand and followed beside them.

She was 4 and her sister was 8 when Lando found them starving in a dulcium mining camp. He’d stolen something from Gaius Hutt and was trying to outrun a pack of distinctly unsavory thugs.
The mine wasn’t on any maps. He discovered it by mistake and ran into one of the dilapidated worker shacks looking for a place to hide. What he found was two filthy orphan girls burrowing in a heap of trash to stay warm.

They hid him under the scrap pile. Their adorable little faces never betrayed his location…even when one of the Hutts offered them food if they would only tell them which way the ‘bad man’ went.

The Tico sisters saved Lando’s life. And in return, he saved theirs.

After three days of hiding in the shack (if it could even be called that – it was more of a hovel) and watching the girls leave each dawn only to return battered and weeping at sundown, Calrissian snuck out of the mine and appeared a few hours later on the steps of Chandrila Castle with a pair of wide-eyed kids hanging on his arms.

No one came looking for them. No one ever would. Their parents had been smuggled into the country illegally and were forced to work in the mines as slaves. Paige and Rose had been born there.

Their parents had died there.

Lando gave them a new life and a future. He legally adopted them (Leia made it happen. No one questioned how.) and hired a tutor to prepare them for school and a world outside the mines. A simple act of kindness had changed their destinies.

In the beginning, the sisters stayed in various locations depending on what Lando was involved in at the time. They didn’t know they’d been rescued by one of the original members of the Resistance…

Their new lives were spent in happy chunks of time; crashing on Maz and Chewie’s couch, chasing their broody ‘Cousin Ben’ around Chandrila, climbing trees (and breaking bones) with Poe outside of Kes and Shara Dameron’s airfield…

Lando wasn’t really cut out to be a father. He never pretended otherwise. He wasn’t great with affection and his work (which sometimes took him away for weeks) wasn’t ideal for raising kids. But he made sure they always had food to eat, clothes to wear, toys to play with, and dozens of unofficial aunts, uncles, and cousins to spoil them.

He loved them. They loved him.

And they were a family.

As they grew older, Paige spent more and more time at the airfield. She was obsessed with planes and all her dreams centered on becoming a world class pilot. Rose, on the other hand, discovered her penchant for computers and technology early on and tunneled into the digital world.

She tapped into the local library server when she was 6 to get more ebooks on her tablet.

She reprogrammed the sprinkler system of her elementary school (to spray a teacher who’d been mean to Paige) when she was 7.

She hacked a local bank and transferred 10,000 dollars into Crix Madine’s account after she found his son Dax crying because his father lost his job. (She was 8.)

It wasn’t until she decoded an encrypted message between Lando and Leia (and innocently asked why they needed so much information about that silly socialite, Carise Sindian) that her new family realized the extent of her abilities.
Those were simpler times.

… before Ben disappeared and sent their lives spiraling into chaos.

That’s over now. Rose reminded herself again. He’s home. He’s safe. Snoke is dead. No one could have survived that explosion.

It was a mantra she still ran over and over in her head from time to time. Like lines of code programmed to attack a virus.

Finn’s voice pulled her from her thoughts.

“Are you sure you know where you’re going?”

“Of course I do! It was three left turns after the portrait of General Binks, then a right at the statue with three nostrils…” She paused to look around for a moment. “Have we passed the armory yet?”

Her husband shook his head, clueless.

“I don’t know. Every hallway looks completely different and yet – somehow - they all manage to look exactly the same... It all really blends together after the 4th floor.”

Chandrila Castle was truly an architectural and cultural marvel. No one actually lived there…but officially the entire extended Skywalker- Organa- Solo family was ‘in residence.’ The main building was built over two hundred years ago by the first Skywalker to settle the area, Malak Skywalker, Lord Vader. The family never used that (or any other) title, but it was one of many they held… Technically Ben was a prince.

Malak named his towering mansion Mustafar House. It became a bit of a family tradition to add a wing (or something equally extravagant) and rename the building every time a new generation came of age.

During construction of the East Hall, it was Tatooine Park.

A literal river was created to run through the South Wing when it took the name Alderaan Manor.

After spiraling towers were erected around the four corners of the great courtyard and an artificial lake was installed on the grounds, it became Naboo Estate.

Leia added a half-acre solarium and rechristened it Chandrila Castle when Ben was born.

The current structure was a sprawling amalgamation of tastes and ambitions; a complicated tribute to a brilliant and extravagantly wealthy dynasty – one that managed to disrupt the course of world events on a fairly routine basis.

Rose was mentally retracing her steps when she remembered something crucial.

“Oh my gosh how could I have forgotten!?”

Han Solo had no patience for chasing down his family members in the giant maze of Chandrila. Before cellphones, a person could literally wander for hours though its winding halls and never find who or what they were looking for. Han’s solution was to wire the entire complex with an intercom system.

It had taken approximately no time at all for adolescent Ben, Poe, Paige, and Rose to begin abusing
said intercom for their own nefarious purposes…

Their abuses included (but were not limited to):

- Screaming into the speakers at 3 am for absolutely no reason.
- Using the “whole house” function to broadcast bizarre requests (which ranged from silly to – when they were older - downright lewd).
- Reading a lurid bodice-ripper romance novel aloud to 300 esteemed guests and family members during a garden party celebrating the Solos’ 20th wedding anniversary.
- Convincing at least 3 foreign dignitaries that the house was haunted by Lord Vader.
- Trick[ing old Senator Gunray into believing that the booming voice of God (Poe) was personally condemning him for being a “morally bankrupt corporate stooge.”

The intercom became redundant after the family acquired cell phones, but Ben had turned his phone off after leaving the Chronicle…and he’d been an idiot so...

He deserved what was about to happen.

Rose cleared her throat. Stood up straight. Took a deeeeep breath. Pushed the intercom button and-

“Paging His Royal Highness, Benjamin Antilles Naberrie Skywalker Organa Solo, Crown Prince of the Noble Nation of Alderaan - ”

A loud crash sounded vaguely to the southwest followed by a violent stream of intelligible curses.

Rose grinned and kept speaking.

“ - Grand Duke of the Blessed and Right Honorable Duchy of Naboo, First Knight and Esteemed Defender of the Most Holy Gungan Armed Forces-”

Several doors began slamming in succession. Something shattered.

“-Lord Protectorate of the Mighty Tatooine Provence, Scion of the Exalted House of Vader -”

Now there was screaming. And stomping. And it was definitely closing in.

“-Baron of Greater Chandrila and all of its Lesser Commonwealth Alliances, First Son of the Illustrious Corellian-“

“STOP!”

Ben crashed through the door with a crazed expression.

Finn immediately dropped into a ridiculous curtsy.

“Oh there you are, Prince-Duke-Lord-Baron Ben. We’ve been searching the entire kingdom-”

Ben ignored him to glare at Rose.

“You know I hate it when you do that.”

“And you know I hate it when you turn off your cellphone and force me wander around this gothic nightmare lugging Finn’s child. So I guess we’re even. Besides – the Kenobi Study was empty and I got lost trying to find your room again. Where were you?”

“The gym.”
“Which one?”
“Gemini.”

(One particularly cracked Skywalker ancestor had added 12 workout rooms to the complex – each themed around a zodiac.)

Finn made a sound of approval. “That one is nice. I really like the whirlpool.”
Rose clapped her hands in quick succession – causing both men to jump.

“Focus!” She turned to her adoptive cousin. “Now that you’re here, I need you to come with us.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m hungry – I’m pregnant - and I’m on a mission. So you boys are going to take me home NOW and get me some orange juice and french fries,” she paused thoughtfully, “- with pickles - and then we need to talk.”

No one was brave enough to contradict the hungry pregnant woman.

An hour later the three of them settled in the Tico living room. Rose immediately headed toward the kitchen to break open a jar of pickles leaving the men alone on the couch.

“Finn… What’s that smell?”

“What smell?”

“The overpowering aroma of…” he sniffed, “-is it sage?”

Finn rolled his eyes.

“Oh – that … yeah. About two weeks ago she stormed in claiming that our auras needed cleansing and what not. She apparently met a spiritualist guru at the one birthing class I missed and the next thing I know my apartment’s been attacked by the New Age. Crystals, candles, music – the works.”

Ben shook his head sympathetically. He knew his cousin very well.

“Shouldn’t have missed that birthing class.”

“Yes. I gathered that was her point.”

“So…” Ben said, changing the subject. “What’s this all about?”

“Two things.” Both men turned to see Rose enter the room munching happily on a pickle.

“Thing number one: Rey,” Ben squirmed, “I am DONE with you two. Every month – at least once a month – I have to run damage control and pretend like I haven’t heard this tired song and dance number before. Now - I admit – you trapping Rey into confessing her sins to you was certainly a new twist. I never thought you’d top the time she caught you tailing her on that date with Steven –”

“Hey! He was a very suspicious looking individual!”

“He was a veterinarian,” Finn whispered.
“Veterinarians can be suspicious.”

“THE FACT of the matter is—” Rose continued – cutting them both off, “I’m retiring – as of now. From this point on, you and Rey can either get drunk and harass waiters together or pout like hermits together in the Castle … or,” she popped another pickle slice in her mouth, “you can sit down and discuss your disagreements like all the other big kids.”

Ben huffed irritably and turned to Finn for support, but his friend held up his hands.

“You seriously want me to side with you against my wife? There be the path to many lonely nights upon the couch.”

“Don’t try and recruit my husband into whatever secret society of denial you belong to. I give him sex and I’m carrying his child. You have no chance whatsoever.”

“I wasn’t gonna put it out there like that,” Finn mumbled “- but yeah.”

“What happened to brotherhood?”

“Fall in love. Get married. Then come talk to me.”

Ben rolled his eyes. “Traitor”

Rose giggled. Her cousin let out frustrated groan and ran his fingers through his hair.

“Look. It’s just not that simple… or safe. May I remind you that we’ve tried the whole discussion thing. To say ‘it ended badly’ would be putting it mildly. Between the flying desk chair and the sex we didn’t have -”

“Maybe that’s your problem-”

“What?”

“The sex you didn’t have-” Rose smacked her husband’s bicep. “Ouch! Hey! It was a logical suggestion! Anyone who’s seen them-”

“Moving on -”

“Wait – what’d he mean by that-”

“Your mother might be selling government secrets to terrorists.”

There was a loud silence.

“………Excuse me?”

Rose and Finn exchanged significant glances.

“Evidence has been cropping up for the last three weeks implicating her along with Senators Holdo, Antilles, and Raddus. The Resistance didn’t want to tell you until they were sure…”

“This is all very funny Rose but-”
She sighed.

“This isn’t funny at all, Ben. Your mother’s really in trouble… And unless you find something to contradict Poe’s findings, she’s facing jail time and public disgrace.” Rose pulled a manila envelope from under the couch. “This proves she’s guilty of treason.”

Ben was silent for a long time as he slowly processed the evidence in his hands. Finally he shook his head and raised his eyes to meet their unsettled gazes.

“This isn’t possible. My mother would never sell out her country. She would literally die first. It has to be a frame.”

“That’s what we were thinking…but - we don’t know WHY someone would want to frame Senator Organa - especially in connection with any of the others. I mean - they’re politicians - they all have enemies – but none that are capable of something like this. This is a quality job - the work of a meticulous planner. It takes resources and connections and money on a scale that is beyond most of our usual suspects... Which is where you and Rey come in.”

“Me and Rey?”

Finn shifted.

“Yeah. The resolution of your little conflict may have just become a matter of national security.”

(Ben wrinkled his brow in confusion.) “The story you were offered this morning – in Canto Bight – was courtesy of the Resistance. Not even Luke knows that – and seeing as he’s Leia’s brother - we’re not going to tell him. Poe wouldn’t even want you near this if you weren’t Kylo Ren.”

“What’s in Canto Bight?”

“Four days ago, Jyn and Cassian discovered a link between the mounting pile of evidence and the Hutt and Black-Sun crime families. There’s a war council going down in the Grand Gungan. You need to be there.”

“But Rey-”

“Rey has been handled. You just... go in tomorrow and agree with everything she says.”

Ben arched a wary eyebrow and Rose rolled her eyes.

“Surely – you can do it just this once if it means saving your mother.”

Finn snorted.

“Yes! – Okay – I’ll take the story… but Rey – I’m assuming – doesn’t know about all this. It’s going to be difficult –”

“You can tell her as much as she needs to know. Just leave out some key details and everything should be fine. Rey will do anything for Senator Organa – including put up with you for however long it takes to clear her name.”

They spent the next several hours thoroughly reanalyzing the contents of the manila envelope and debating the best courses of action. Rose offered to do a little “in depth” research on the Senators’
activities for the last 18 months and see if anything turned up. (After all, she’d been hacking for the Resistance since she was 11.)

When Ben left at 3 AM, Rose crawled across the couch and snuggled into her husband's arms.

“Do you think he can do it?” she whispered, allowing her nerves and fears to surface for the first time.

Finn smiled as he stroked her hair.

“Of course I do. He’s Kylo Ren. I saw what he survived under Snoke. He’s got this.”

Rose bit her lip.

“But – when he’s with Rey – he gets… so stupid sometimes. And so does she - I’m worried. The two of them have been getting worse the last few months – I don’t-”

“Hey… hey,” he cut her off and pulled her more securely into his arms “You know better than that. Rey and Ben may want to kill each other – but they have always respected each other in their own bizarre way. They’re not going to let this compromise the investigation; especially not now when it’s so important.”

Rose nodded and soon they drifted to sleep; curled into one another, their fingers laced together over their child.

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“It’ll be simple. Just nod your head…and everything…will be …ok,” Ben reassured himself for the twelfth time in as many minutes. “Think of Mom.”

Bracing himself, he walked through the doors of the Chronicle just in time to see the elevator begin to close. He quickly rushed inside... only to discover that he’d dropped into an extremely awkward moment.

“Good Morning… Rey.”

She nodded stiffly

“Mr. Solo.”

“…How did you sleep?”

“I didn’t.”

“Oh…”

There was a long pause.

“I’m taking that story.”
“Good. So am I.”

“Good.”

Rey shifted uncomfortably. The elevator was the last place she wanted to be with her partner.

Ben turned to see her blushing furiously and felt concern begin to rise … until he remembered what she’d confessed about elevators - and him.

He squirmed.

Rey snapped. She jumped forward and slammed her fist down on the STOP button.

“Let’s just get one thing straight right now.”

Ben nodded his head as planned.

“I am taking this story because it is a potentially career-making lead-”

Ben nodded his head.

“NOT because I want to be around you AT ALL – for any amount of time – EVER.”

Ben nodded his head.

“I don’t even want you to COME, but Luke said it was all or none and I’m too good for your games.”

Ben gritted his teeth… and nodded his head.

“Furthermore - I might add - that I received NO explanation for why you were hanging out in a confessional. Am I to assume that you have a secret desire to take orders?” She paused. “…There IS an explanation, right? You weren’t just …loitering around St. Windu’s hoping that someone would want to bare their soul?”

Ben’s eyes widened. He felt a twitch coming on… and he nodded his head.

“That’s good. Because I would HATE to think that you just followed ME there to hear MY confession. There are easier ways to die you know. Not to mention, you could’ve just asked me about certain things – and others – you …should disregard. It was all part of a theatrical ruse I created in order to really get into the spirit of confessing... I - I made most of it up.”

Ben arched a skeptical eyebrow…and nodded his head.

“I’m glad that you’ve realized how wrong you were,” she continued – heedless of her partner’s rapidly climbing blood pressure. “ - and if you’d like to tell Luke that you’d rather not take this story but still want me to work on it – I have no objections.”

Ben nodded his - wait WHAT?!

“There is NO way I’m letting you take this story all alone.”
“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“Number one - because Luke said we BOTH needed to be on it. And number two- because – as you said – it’s a career making lead.”

“I’m sure if you explain to Luke that you’re too ashamed of yourself –”

“Ashamed of myself!??”

“You deceived an innocent young woman -”

“Innocent!??”

“- and completely undermined a sacred religious practice -”

“Rey – let’s not mince words here. You need me.”

Rey’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. Ben gulped. That hadn’t really come out right.

“ - in Canto Bight – as a _partner_ – I mean -”

“Why you ARROGANT-"

“I was referring to-”

“- SELF-ABSORBED -"

“ - our professional partnership -”

“ARGH!! The only thing I NEED is to find myself a partner who isn’t so self – involved that he can’t see past his nose!”

“Well GOOD LUCK finding another partner who can survive a DAY with you! Since we’re being straight with each other, I won’t bother sugar coating this. As partners go - you aren’t exactly a stroll through the daisies! In fact – you’re more like a waking nightmare!”

“So I should just thank the fates for sending me such an UNDERSTANDING partner who STALKS me while I’m CONFESSING!”

“I WASN’T STALKING YOU!”

“AND I DON’T NEED YOU!”

“FINE! But I’m STILL taking that story!”

“FINE! But when we get back – we’re breaking up!”

“We’re not even _together_!”

“That’s irrelevant! We’re still breaking up!”

“Wonderful! I’ve wanted to break up for a long time!”
“Well you’ll get your wish!”

They both reached for the RESUME button on the control panel. Their hands collided sending an unexpected shock down Ben’s spine and causing Rey to shiver.

Not good.

“Don’t touch me.”

“I wasn’t touching you.”

“You just did!”

“I was reaching for the panel!”

“- and there was touching!”

“Yeah? Well it could have been you touching me.”

“Oh. Dream on.”

“I wasn’t touching you,” he poked her shoulder, “THAT is touching you.”

Rey let out an indignant huff.

“What?! How old are you? Seven?” She smacked his arm with her notebook.

“I believe you just touched me.”

“No. I didn’t. My notebook touched you.” She shoved him against the elevator wall and indulged in a smug smile. “NOW I’ve touched you.”

Not to be outdone, Ben pushed her against the opposite wall.

“This is not touching. Its shoving.”

“No. Its invasion of personal space.”

Rey grabbed his collar and forced him onto the other wall. She stood on her tiptoes to get in his face.

“You really need to get your terms in order, Mr. Solo. You’re a writer, after all.”

Ben seized her hips and pressed forward until her back was against a solid surface once more. His fingers dug mindlessly into the soft curve of her waist.

“I’ve got all my terms in order, Miss Niima. We were shoving. This—” his left hand brushed up the side of her body while his right slipped beneath the hem of her shirt, “—is invasion of personal space.”

Rey gripped his biceps and forced him backwards.
“Wrong again! *That* was a *pathetic* attempt at groping.” She pressed her body into his and raked her palms over his massive chest before fisting them in his hair. Bringing his lips mere breaths away from hers, she taunted, “If you’re going to do something like that – at least call it by its proper name.”

Quick as a flash he turned her around, reversing their positions and hoisting her off the floor. Rey’s legs came up around him instinctively. She barely registered the action.

“*Believe me,*” he whispered in her ear as his fingers began to trace torturous little circles in her abdomen, “if I ever decide to grope you –” his hands slid down to grip her thighs possessively. Digging in, he pulled her full against him “*you’ll know.*”

Rey legs tightened. Her grip coiled in his hair to draw him forward while her other hand latched to the back of his neck.

“As if I’d *ever* let you close enough.”

“We’re pretty close now,” he goaded.

Her eyes locked into his. Pure sensation and a dark wicked heat suddenly flooded her awareness.

Each point of contact raging beneath the surface abruptly flared across Ben's skin. His mind blanked.

For an instant they were lost.

The air charged around them like a restless current straining against the silence. His mouth hovered the slightest movement away from hers. Their breaths mingled intimately in the scant space between.

Rey bit her lip. Ben’s eyes went black-

And the doors slid open.

“Oh! *Oh my - I…*I am so - *so* sorry. The young lady said the elevator was stuck – and I was nearby. I - I just overrode the -”

Rose slowly peered out from behind the stuttering service janitor - and for an instant – ceased to breathe.

Jessika Pava chose that particular moment to stroll by and toss a careless glance at the elevator.

She dropped her coffee mug.

The sound of shattering ceramic spurred everyone into motion. Ben and Rey dove apart as if on fire, Jess quickly stooped to collect the broken mug shards, the janitor ran away, and Rose seized the arms of both stunned reporters; dragging them out of the lift and into an empty break room.

Slamming the door shut, she turned on them - wielding her tablet like a vengeful monarch waving a scepter.

“I – Don’t – Care – What Happened. I don’t care *why* it happened. And I certainly don’t want to know *how* it happened. But if you two don’t march up there and tell Skywalker that you are taking that story – so help me - I will *drop* you where you stand.”

Ben looked like he’d seen a ghost. Rey’s hands clenched and unclenched. Her gaze darted chaotically.
“I don’t... I -”

Rose held up her hand.

“Rey, you have to take that lead. Both of you... There are more important things in play here than this – er - moment.”

Rey drew in an unsteady breath.

“Like what?”

Rose glanced meaningfully at Ben.

“My mother,” he whispered.

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Several hours later Rey ambled into Rose’s living room and collapsed on her couch.

“What did Luke say?”

“The usual. ‘Be careful’ - ‘this is dangerous’ - ‘don’t blow it’... He kept looking at us like we were a time bomb about to detonate. I think he knew something was up.”

“Well... you and Ben dashing out of his office without a word to one another - for the rest of the day - might have tipped him off.”

Rey groaned.

“How did I get into this mess? And now this whole thing with Leia...” She placed her palm over her forehead in a fruitless attempt to calm her racing thoughts. “I don’t believe for a minute that Senator Organa is a traitor. I mean - I know what people say…about her father. But she risked her life to stand against his work. Why would she switch sides now? Her party has never been stronger.”

Rose was silent and Rey knew what she was waiting to hear.

“I don’t want to talk about him.” She said in a small quiet voice. “I need to focus. This is a woman’s career we’re talking about - more than that. It’s her whole life. She’s always been so kind to me… I can’t talk about him when I need to be there for her.”

Rose walked over and folded her friend into a tight hug. The lay there silently for a moment before Rose finally spoke.

“I don’t know what to tell you about Ben. To be honest… I think its best if you two just put all of this – the confessional – the elevator – the office… Just put it all aside for right now.” She turned to look Rey in the eye, “But ONLY while this story is going down and not a moment longer.”

“Rose... I – I have no idea what’s going on with him. I don’t know what I want... Well - I want to make him suffer for that stunt he pulled - that I’m sure of but... I don’t know why we’ve been so at each other lately. We can’t go five minutes without verbally swiping at one another – ”
“Just focus on the story. I KNOW you can do that.”

Rey nodded her head.

“…And Ben?”

Rose snorted.

*Ben is the undisputed heavyweight champion of avoiding uncomfortable realities.*

“I’m sure he’s…professional enough to do the same. This is his mother after all.”

Rey hardened somewhat.

“When I find out who did this—” she shook her head. “I want this lead because I want to see the look on their faces when I destroy them.”

Chapter End Notes

Will Rey and Ben be able to pretend that none of this ever happened?

(Spoiler Alert: Nah..)

Chandrila Castle is literally the most extra and ridiculous architectural love child of ADHD and Pemberly on acid. So if that's what you were picturing - Yes.

The kudos and feedback so far have been amazing. I cannot tell you how much I genuinely appreciate you taking a moment to speak to me about my work. Whether its praise or questions or thoughts or ideas...It matters so much. Thank you. You're a patron of the art in my heart.

Further Notes:
Rose and Paige kept their last name in honor of their parents
Although they are not blood related, Ben and the Tico sisters consider and refer to themselves as cousins.
The ‘country’ everyone keeps defending or potentially betraying is not America - but it is similar to America and has a history that looks very much like the canonical progress of galactic events in Star Wars.
Canto Bight is basically Vegas.
Jyn and Cassian are 26 and 33 respectively. They have been aged down for this story.
If you’re wondering why the Resistance exists and what exactly its purpose is. I promise all of that will be addressed in later chapters.
The titles held by Ben and his family are (mostly) ceremonial (at least during the time period the story is set in). However, some of them are important in various ways to various people...(you'll see).
Brightest Daze and Darkest Knight

Chapter Summary

The past is not what it seems.
Almost no one is who they say they are.
Rose tells a story.
Rey falls in love... sorta.

Oh. And we meet Kylo Ren (Rey is about it.)

Chapter Notes

I cannot tell you how much the continued support for my story THRILLS ME. Your kudos and comments drive me to write. So HERE is a massive update!

It includes: REY’s FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH KYLO!

This chapter is jammed with backstory, romance, and intrigue. I don't really do angst... but the intensity is there (hopefully).

SLIGHT TRIGGER WARNING (Just in Case)
At one point in this chapter Rey is kidnapped and drugged. There is no mention of how or with what drug, but I wanted to be careful. Also there is some violence in this chapter, but it is not overly descriptive.

FINALLY:
All the lovin’ in the world to my one and only beta. I am very sorry I told you your doctor appointment was tonight when it was actually next week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Rey spent the evening on Rose’s couch pouring over evidence, strategizing, and figuring out tech for her upcoming assignment. After hours of staring at computers and schematics, she deflated into the cushions with a heavy sigh.

“Ugh...Rose. My eyes hurt. My head hurts. My brain hurts.” She shot her friend an impish grin.
“You know what would make it all better?”

Rose snorted, “All better? Really?”

“Well - somewhat better.” Rey grabbed several pillows, stuffed them under her chin, and fixed Rose with the most pleading and pathetic puppy face she could muster. “Tell me something nice...and distracting.” She leaned forward in anticipation. “Tell me the story!”

Rose laughed.
“You’ve heard the story. Like a bazillion times!”

“I know! I know...but I never get tired of it. And I know you like telling it.”

Rose arched an eyebrow before her friend’s schmoozing caved her completely.

“Oh - Alright.” She took a moment to remember the version she always told Rey. Some of the details needed to be changed for obvious reasons.

Rey didn’t know about what happened to Ben... or about the Resistance... or what Finn’s job really was when they first met… or anything that remotely resembled the truth.

The truth was buried deep beneath red tape, gag orders, and debris.

Rose began her story; reciting events as they officially played out.

But the truth drifted through her mind as she spoke...

***************************
About 6 Years Earlier
***************************

Ben was gone.

He’d become distant. Lost contact for months at a time.

And then he disappeared altogether.

No one had seen him in over two years.

Leia was a mess. Han was in denial.

But they were all helpless.

For 24 months the Resistance, the FBI, and the best private investigators money could buy searched frantically for him.

They found nothing. Not a single clue or hint.

The family released several statements…

Ben was traveling. Ben was finding himself. Ben was under the weather. Ben was unable to attend.

Every statement avoided saying it.

Ben was gone.

And, after two years, the people who loved him began to believe that he was never coming back. They began to lose hope.

Rose looked for him every day. Sometimes for hours. Sometimes for minutes. She ran programs and facial recognition software… Scoured the deep web for mentions of his name… Sent hundreds of
coded pleas into the digital void.

Nothing.

Until one afternoon, her virtual net caught a single phrase buried beneath a strand of useless binary:

*Posey looking for Crow?*

She gasped. Her fingers flew over the keys.

*Location Crow? Posey is looking.*

A moment later, GPS coordinates flashed across her screen.

Rose couldn’t tear out of her office fast enough.


Chewie bought Poe walkie-talkies for his 12th birthday. They made up call signs… Paige was Pigeon. Poe was Cockpit…

Rose was Posey.

*Ben was Crow.*

No one else knew. It was *top secret*. They were so excited to keep their little game under wraps. It was more fun because the adults were clueless.

They swore never to reveal their special code names to anyone.

It was *him*. It had to be him. *It had to be.*

She and Poe were aboard a transport in under an hour. Poe fired off a message to the Resistance, but they didn’t bother waiting for a response.

They knew Ben would be there when they reached the coordinates.

Except it wasn’t Ben.

It was FN-2187.

“Who are you?” Poe snarled, gripping the stranger’s lapels and dragging him forward. Rose was numb. She couldn’t even bring herself to speak.

The man’s voice cracked as he responded. Fear radiated off him in waves.

“The Knight sent me. He told me how to get that message to you. He said you’d come.”

“WHO is the Knight!?” Poe’s hold tightened.

FN’s head shook frantically. “I-I don’t know. I don’t know his name. He’s just Knight. He said he could help me leave - that he could get us out .”

“Out of *where*?”

“The First Order.”
Rose paled.

“Solomon Snoke?” Her throat suddenly began to close. She lunged.

“WHERE IS HE!?” she screamed, raining frantic blows on the man’s chest and shoulders. “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO HIM!?”

Poe was forced to release FN and restrain Rose who was still shouting.

“Is he still there!? Did they inject him!?” She broke free and leapt toward the stranger again, but this time he was expecting it. He caught both her wrists and twisted her back to him. His arm circled her throat in a locked hold.

The move was precise. Military.

Poe’s eyes filled with rage and he moved to charge, but the younger man cut him short.

“I could break her neck before you had a hand on me,” he warned. Poe froze. “I don’t want to do that. I swear I won’t hurt her. I … I understand why she’s freaking out. I promise - I do. But I’m here to help. The Knight gave me a message. I don’t understand it, but he said you would.”

“Go on then,” Rose bit out, “deliver your message.”

“He said ‘there’s a hole in the TIE department. Bring Cockpit.’ … Does that mean anything to you?”

Poe frowned.

“Half of it means something. I don’t know what the kriff a TIE department is -”

“It stands for ‘Technology Innovation and Engineering’… It’s the First Order’s experimental aviation program. There was an accident last week - a pilot was killed. They assigned me to recruit a new one.”

After a moment, Poe’s face began to twist into his trademark grin. “Now it means something to me.”

~~~~*~~~~~~*~~~~~

Poe named him Finn. He refused to call him FN-2187.

“Sounds like an item code. Like something I’d order when my landing gear jammed” Poe shook his head. “You’re a person. Not an engine part.”

Finn let out a cold chuckle.

“According to the First Order that exactly what I am. I’m their property. They raised me – invested in me. The First Order gives me everything I need and in return I’m supposed to give them everything I am. I don’t have an identity. I have… a duty.”

“Then how did you end up here?” Rose asked.

“Because -” Finn clenched his jaw, “I also have a conscience.”
Technically he had a name too...

But he hadn’t been called Felix Needham in years.

Felix Needham was born February 1st, 1987 to a 16 year-old Jane Doe who died in childbirth. No family members could be located.

The doctor who delivered him was Felix Morgenstern. The hospital was Needham General. Thus his useless, meaningless name.

He was in foster care until the age of ten…And then he died (at least officially).

In reality he (and several hundred children like him) became ‘sick’ somewhere between the ages of 9 and 12. Their symptoms would worsen until they were hospitalized and - after a few days of unsuccessful treatment - they would quietly pass away.

…And then they would wake up in a training compound.

The Stormtrooper Program: the vile mechanism behind the First Order’s ruthless private army.

FN-2187 was a talented asset. He was quick. Intelligent. Deadly.

His rapid ascent through the ranks led to several promotions and commendations. He was given top secret clearance and assigned to one of Snoke’s most valuable properties.

What he witnessed there tore him apart.

The Knight caught him throwing up one day after an incident. Finn braced himself for retribution – or worse – reconditioning

He was offered redemption instead.

~~~~*~~~~*~~~~

“So!” Poe rubbed his hands together in anticipation, “I go in – pretend to be the new pilot – grab you and Ben -and then we leave. Right?”

Finn laughed.

“Yeah - No. We’d all die. Maybe not at first – but eventually – we’d all die. That plan won’t work. If the First Order isn’t crippled, they will hunt us down – and put us down - like dogs. Snoke has more resources and connections than you could possibly imagine. If you want to get your friend out, its going to take more than just a smash and grab.”

“Alright then,” said Rose, “what’s the real plan?”

Finn cracked his knuckles and began laying out schematics.
“The real plan is to begin dismantling the First Order from the inside out. Poe, you’re not gonna *pretend* to be the pilot. I need a pilot and I’m hiring you – or – a version of you - to do the job.”

Poe nodded. “Alright... But I need some clarification; is Ben this Knight you keep referencing?”

Finn rubbed the back of his neck nervously.

“I honestly don’t know. I’ve never seen his face. He wears a mask and no one ever calls him anything but ‘Sir’ or ‘the Knight.’ He told me that he could help you recover what you lost and he gave me the message to send, but... I don’t know anything beyond that. Your friend could be contacting him – or it could *be* him...but I couldn’t tell you for sure.”

“Is –” the words caught in her throat. Rose drew a steadying breath. “The Knight... Is he enhanced?”

Finn’s jaw clenched. He nodded sharply. Once.

Rose felt her heart contract painfully. Fear gripped her.

*Focus,* she told herself. *What's done is done. Even if it is Ben... it's done.* Resolutely she pushed her churning emotions aside and forced herself to listen.

“There’s another position – a nurse. We need someone in medical and the Knight -” Finn gulped, “the Knight created an opening. I vet all the new hires, so I can get an operative in.” He paused to look up at them. “Do you know anyone with medical training who could do it?”

Rose nodded.

“Kaydel.”

Poe tensed immediately.

“I don’t think she’s right for this.”

“Why not? She’s a nurse and a 6th level Krav Maga black belt.”

“She’s just a kid.”

“She’s 22.”

“Jyn can do it.”

“Jyn barely passed field medic training and I’m pretty sure it was only because Cassian was her instructor.”

“Kaydel doesn’t need to be anywhere near the First Order.”

Rose frowned.

“Poe – *what* is your glitch right now? She’s literally the best person for the job. I know she doesn’t have a very high opinion of your -”

“It’s not about -”

“And – *yes* – she has implied that you’re an incorrigible man whore on several occasions -”
“Now that’s just rude –”

“It’s also accurate. Sorry. You know I love you-”

“Clearly -”

“I realize you’re sore about losing those last three bets to her –”

“Rose. That is not what’s going on –”

“But she has always had your back. She always comes through. I don’t understand why you’re being so petty right no-”

“He’s in love with her.” Finn interrupted them both with his matter-of-fact announcement.

Poe facepalmed and Rose’s eyes widened.

“No…” she breathed – even though the truth was rapidly dawning.

Poe groaned and refused to look at her.

“Oh my GOSH! You are!”

“Now, Rose-”

“That makes so much sense! I can’t believe you’re hung up on the only woman in the world who won’t give you the time of day!” She frowned. “Wait – You told FINN before you told me?! We’ve known him for 72 hours! How is that –”

“He didn’t tell me-”

“I didn’t tell him!”

Finn and Poe spoke at the same time.

“Then how did you know?”

Poe was still not speaking and deliberately not looking at anyone, but Finn continued as if he wasn’t casually revealing one of the pilot’s most embarrassing secrets.

“How did you not know? Apparently, she’s ‘perfect for the job’ and he desperately wants to rescue his friend – yet he doesn’t want the woman who is ‘perfect for the job’ – a woman who always comes through – going near the First Order?” Finn shrugged. “It’s the only explanation that makes sense. He’s in love with her.”

Poe coughed. “So you’re going to hire us.” His voice cracked as he forcibly changed the subject. “Then what?”

Finn grinned.

“Then we take’em apart. Piece by piece.”
It started small.

Rose unleashed viruses and spyware into the First Order mainframe. She crashed servers. Leaked information. Stole money… The higher ups couldn’t figure out how the hacker kept getting access to their system, but every time they reset, she found a way back in.

Kaydel introduced a profoundly unpleasant, but non-lethal virus into the ranks of the soldiers and employees during the mandatory vaccination cycle. Security was forced to a skeleton staff as half the organization was bed-ridden.

There were containment leaks in several of the major labs. The EPA got involved.

Several lucrative First Order designs appeared on reddit before the patents were approved; rendering them basically worthless.

Six senators on the payroll of the First Order were exposed in the Coruscant Chronicle and resigned.

…So it went for nearly 18 months.

Poe, Rose and their small band of Resistance operatives unleashed chaos within the First Order. Initially the damage was negligible, but after a year-and-a-half, Snoke’s corporate empire was hemorrhaging money and influence at an alarming rate…

The plan was working.

Rose couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment she fell in love with Finn.

She found herself watching him in odd quiet intervals when he was working …or paying attention to him even if he was speaking to someone else. She absently catalogued the difference between his polite smile and his real one. She could tell just by the tone of his voice what mood he was in. Sometimes she knew what he was thinking before he said a word…

Rose could vividly recall the first time she’d gotten jealous of women Finn paid attention to.

She was dropping off some replacement fuses at the safe house near his barracks and nonchalantly inquired if he was around… The petite little red head manning the switchboard blushed and stuttered… and then one of her coworkers leaned over to tease the girl about ‘her little flirtation’ with that ‘Hottie of the First Order.’

Rose immediately registered two things; nausea and an overwhelming urge to smack someone. (Preferably the redhead.)

He hugged her once after a particularly difficult mission. One minute she was crying and the next she was enveloped by the strong arms and clean unmistakable scent of Finn.

Her entire body had purred. There was no other word for it.

Sometimes her mind would drift to him of its own accord… She could picture the tilt of his head and
the slope of his shoulders almost as if she’d memorized them… Her thoughts made her shiver with anticipation.

And filled her with a strange new heat.

But she didn’t truly comprehend what was going on... At least not until the day he saved her.

Rose was supposed to meet Finn and Kaydel for a drop. The First Order techs managed to contain her latest malware, but she had a fresh cocktail for them to plug into the mainframe. The contact point was an abandoned railway station near the historic district of Coruscant. She showed up a few minutes early…and walked into a drug deal.

The buyer ran, but the seller pulled a gun.

Rose’s finger itched to grab her taser, but she was frozen. The dealer apologized. Told her it was nothing personal.

She tried run then. It startled him. There were halls and pillars everywhere. She found cover quickly.

But not quickly enough.

His body slammed into hers and the impact of concrete connecting with her chin sent white hot pain crashing through her skull and spine.

The telltale click of the dealer’s gun sounded against her temple.

Her eyes opened to take their final look at the world-

And suddenly the world was Finn.

His rage exploded around them like an avenging angel. The sound of raw fury tearing from his lips was near inhuman.

The weight of the dealer’s body disappeared.

“Get her out of here,” she heard Finn snarl in a voice that sounded nothing like his own.

Kaydel’s hands gripped her shoulders. Rose was vaguely aware that she was covered in blood… and that it was probably hers. She could hear screams… but she couldn’t figure out who was screaming.

“Stay here,” Kaydel whispered as she dragged Rose into an old purser’s office. Then she turned and ran back to Finn.

There was more screaming… but Rose couldn’t really hear it now... The world was beginning to blur around the edges. One thought coiled clearly through her rapidly fading awareness… Memories of the last few minutes flashed chaotically and she knew...

I’m in love with him.

The instant she accepted that she was going to die, her mind and heart narrowed to a single desperate desire.

Finn.

When she opened her eyes to see him roaring toward her, it was moment of almost transcendent awareness; a recognition of a bond that she felt but had failed to acknowledge.
Now she would live the rest of her life unable to deny it.

His name whispered softly across her lips as the sounds and sights before her faded into nothingness.

Finn made himself scarce in the weeks following her attack. He was always exiting any room she entered. Leaving places just as she arrived. Logging out of the feeds as soon as she logged on.

He basically avoided her like the plague.

Rose finally caught up to him one night after a briefing. He was heading out of Poe’s office at the safe house and she chased him to his car.

“I never got to thank you!” she called after him.

“Don’t mention it,” Finn mumbled before tearing out of the driveway. He hadn’t even looked at her.

Rose quickly learned that the pain of her injuries was nothing compared to the pain coiling tightly in her chest every time she endured Finn’s cool demeanor.

She shouldn’t have been surprised. He never gave the slightest indication that he wanted her as anything more than a coworker. After proving herself to be a liability, he didn’t even want that.

It was strange to feel so hollow and twisted inside. She tried to pretend it was nothing.

That she didn’t love him.

But the truth ached within her like an abscess. She could not ignore it, no matter how she longed to.

Almost 3 months after the attack in the train station, Rose was assigned to another mission with Finn. The scar on her chin was fading and she found herself foolishly hoping that Finn’s ire had faded as well.

It hadn’t. Apparently.

He barely spared her a glance during their briefing. (She’d gazed longingly at him practically the entire time)

*This is literally pathetic.*

Hot tears burned behind her eyes, but she brushed them away and forced herself to focus.

The mission was simple. They were breaking into a First Order dulcium refinery and facilitating a containment leak. The factory was far enough away from major water sources that no one in the community would be harmed, but bad press and financial losses were guaranteed.

Poe, Kaydel, and Finn dressed in protective suits. They would be briefly exposed to a potent haze of toxins (if all went to plan) and the suits were designed to shield them as much as possible.

Rose was stationed outside in an unmarked black van. She remotely disabled the security systems to allow the others to slip in undetected and monitored their progress from the mobile command center.
The first stages of the mission went exactly to plan. But halfway through something unexpected occurred.

A real containment leak.

...and not just a minor one like they’d planned.

A critical breach.

Sirens and flashing lights blazed to life as the entire facility flooded with a deadly smog of dulcium toxins.

Rose heard screams echoing over the comm. Her breath stuck painfully in her throat as she searched the schematics for a quicker way out.

Poe was near the exit - but Kaydel and Finn were inside the main refinery chamber.

Her eyes flew to the security feed she’d been tapping. The metal safety doors began slamming into place around the two of them. They would never make it out in time -

Suddenly Finn surged forward and grabbed Kaydel. In one swift motion he threw her as hard as he could through the last door.

When the final seal clicked into place, Kaydel was safe on the other side, but Finn was locked in with the breach.

“Finn!” Kaydel was screaming, “Rose! Override the door! FINN!”

Rose was pounding through the system, but nothing was working. It was a manual seal -

Finn was going to die.

No. NO.

Her eyes sped over her surroundings until they lit on the small device tangled under the front seat.

Rose burst out of the van; her hands gripping a manual override console as she charged into the compound. The remote system couldn’t open the doors. But she could force them at the access point with the tech she carried.

“Rose...”

Finn’s voice whispered faintly over the comm.

“Finn?” she sobbed. Her legs never stopped moving.

“Rose I’m not going to make it.”

“No!” She staggered up the first flight of stairs.

“Poe... He gave me a name - gave me a …chance. He’s the first friend I ever had. I couldn’t let him... lose Kaydel. I got her out.”

“You did - You did, Finn - she’s safe. You did so well!” She vaulted the last set of stairs and kicked through the gate barring the entrance to the containment level.
“Rose ... I need to tell you something.”

“You can tell me when you’re out of this. Save your strength.” Her boots pounded down the corridor leading to the primary chamber.

“Rose,” he chuckled weakly. “My beautiful Rose-“

She stumbled and crashed into the safety door

“-we both know I’m not getting out.”

Rose ripped the control panel out of the wall and jammed in the connections to manual override.

“Yes you are,” she promised. Tears rolled freely down her face as she started the opening sequence. Ten tries to get it right.

“It was always ....you, Rose.” Finn’s voice was fading now. “I think I loved you from the moment I met you. You were... so fierce. So passionate... I was ...so impressed.”

Rose was shaking. Two attempts failed.

“I couldn’t tell you...I knew - ...knew you weren’t for me. I’m nothing... I don’t even have a real name.”

She keened in frustration. Three more attempts failed.

“But I have a heart...” he whispered, “...and it’s yours.”

Another attempt failed. She smashed her fist against the wall.

The comm was silent.

“Finn! FINN!” Her screams echoed through the complex.

There was no answer.

Suddenly the door wrenched open and Rose scrambled into the haze.

Finn lay unconscious near the center of the chamber. His suit was never meant to withstand this level of contamination. He was fading fast.

Rose had no suit. No protection. But she never hesitated.

Fueled by desperation and pure adrenaline, she dragged Finn’s dead weight towards the exit. She could feel the haze burning her skin; leeching her senses and energy with every step.

One final heave carried them both through the open door. Rose mustered just enough momentum to reseal the chamber before she blacked out entirely.

~~~*~~~*~~~*~~~
Chandrila Castle boasted a functioning hospital wing (courtesy of matriarch Shmi Skywalker who commissioned it during World War II). The Resistance kept the facility fully staffed with at least one doctor on call at all times. The usually sleepy corner of the residence had been thrown into chaos after Finn and Rose were brought in nearly a week ago.

Finn's condition improved quickly. The suit he was wearing did its job even better than expected. After a few days of rest and treatments to purge the contaminants from his system, he was well on his way to a full recovery.

Poe was next to him when he woke up. The younger man’s eyes darted chaotically around the room.

“Where’s Rose?”

Poe tried to smile. Finn paled

“Rose saved your life...but she didn’t have a suit-”

Finn’s hands latched onto the pilot’s sleeves and he yanked him closer with a wild look in his eyes.

“Where is Rose?”

Lando flew in on the red-eye from New York. Han met him at the airport.

The gambler’s usually sparkling eyes were bloodshot and dull. He looked like he hadn’t slept in hours.

It took days before someone could get him to eat. Han stayed next to him the entire time.

Poe reached out to Black Squadron in an attempt to find Paige, but she was flying a dark mission in Guatemala and no one could get ahold of her.

Senator Organa brought in specialists and experts from all over the country. Lando spent countless hours harassing them for updates. Eventually he had to be sedated.

Kaydel resumed her work in the First Order Infirmary almost immediately. She spent her first days back fabricating medical records to explain Finn’s prolonged absence.

“Nurse Temple, I require your assistance.”

She bit back a shriek. ‘Nurse Kadence Temple’ was her cover and she was accustomed to hearing the name, but the foreboding presence of the speaker unsettled her even on the calmest days.

The Knight loomed over the admission desk of the infirmary. Although she could not see his face, he seemed expectant somehow. It took her a moment to register that he was bleeding.

Kaydel shook herself and stumbled into action.

“Of - of course, Sir.”

The wound was a clean cut near the top of his right arm; just deep enough to need stitches. Treating it would require leaning down close to his ear.
Which was the whole point, really.

“Where is FN-2187?” he rasped tightly while Kaydel stitched. “I haven’t seen him in days.”

The nurse’s face remained impassive.

“There was an accident at the refinery. A real containment breach. He and Tico were badly injured.”

The Knight froze.

“Rose?” he breathed.

Kaydel drew back.

For a moment his voice sounded… different. She’d never met Ben Solo, and even after all this time, no one was sure if Ben was the Knight…

Until now.

Kaydel was never more sure of anything in her life.

“Ben…” she whispered

There was no answer. But his pain was palpable.

“Rose saved Finn’s life,” Kaydel tied off his final stitch, “- but she suffered considerable exposure to dulcium toxins. Finn is awake. Rose is - … We’re still waiting to see what will happen.”

A roar of anguish spit into the room. Kaydel flew back in terror. She’d heard of his legendary temper, but she’d never seen it ignite. Her eyes flew shut as she braced for the worst-

Suddenly he was gone. Crashes and shouts traced his progress down the hall.

Kaydel felt her heart break all over again. She lowered herself onto the floor and touched her forehead to her knees. Then, as silently as she could manage, she let a week’s worth of pent up tears flow down her face.

Poe watched Rose and Finn from behind the hospital glass and quietly considered the scene before him. Kaydel moved to stand beside him and held out another cup of coffee.

It had been three days since Finn regained consciousness. Rose still hovered precariously close to death. The army of doctors and specialists all shared the same opinion:

If her body could fight off the contamination, she would make a full recovery.

If not...
Finn hadn’t left her side once. He hadn’t slept. He hadn’t let go of her hand.

“He’s in love with her,” Poe said solemnly.

Kaydel was silent for several moments.

“Yes,” she whispered, “he is.”

“How long have you known?”

“Since the train station…” Her gaze lowered as she slipped into the memory. “We were still pretty far off when we heard her scream. And he knew right away that it was Rose. He took off running… When I got there, he’d thrown the guy into a wall…” She sighed. “I grabbed Rose - made sure she was ok - but I kept hearing screaming so I went back…”

Kaydel paused to take a deep breath.

“I thought he was going to kill him. I’ve seen Finn angry - upset... furious even ... But that night, he was enraged. I had to pull him off. It was like he couldn’t even hear me shouting at him to stop.”

She turned again to look at Poe.

“I never said anything to him - and he never acknowledged what happened. But I knew.”

Kaydel let her hand drift absently to the glass, slowly tracing the outlines of her friends.

“I didn’t know, however, that she loved him until the refinery.”

Poe swung his head to her, shock clearly written on his features.

“You think that’s why she did it? Even knowing she might-” He stopped, unable to finish the sentence.

The nurse merely offered him a sad smile.

“What would you do to save the one you love?”

Poe’s gaze locked into hers for a long moment. Suddenly it seemed as if he were answering another question entirely. She found herself - irrationally - holding her breath.

“Anything,” he spoke with conviction, his eyes never leaving hers, “I’d do anything.”

Kaydel felt her heart stagger precariously in her chest. She opened her mouth to say something (she wasn’t even sure what) - when Finn’s screams shattered the moment.

“Poe! POE! She’s moving! Guys SHE’S MOVING!”

Poe tore off down the hall to find Lando (Han and Chewie had forcibly removed him after 48 hours straight and demanded that he sleep and eat again). Kaydel coughed out a sob of joy and collapsed on a nearby chair.

In the room, Rose let out a pitiful moan and began to fidget in her bed.

Finn immediately leaned forward and gathered her into his arms.
“Rose...” he brushed a wisp of hair out of her face. She opened her eyes and managed a weak smile

“You're here,” she breathed before her eyes fluttered shut again.

Suddenly her friends and family flooded the room. Exclamations of happiness and relief erupted around her. She opened her eyes once more - searching for the first face she’d seen - the one she desperately needed to see again.

But Finn had disappeared.

~~~*~~~ 3 Weeks Later ~~~* ~~~

Finn trudged into the safe house near his barracks and collapsed on the cot. He hadn’t stopped working since he left Chandrila. He could barely move. He was only here now because the Knight sent him on a ‘special mission’ to rest off base.

“You didn’t send me a get-well card.”

He sprang up immediately, but couldn’t bring himself to face her.

“Rose....”

“In the flesh,” she grinned.

Finn shook himself. “How did you know I was here?”

Her eyes began to glow.

“Ben.”

Finn’s head spun around quickly at that.

“Ben?! How-” he paused as realization dawned. “Ben is the Knight.” Rose was beaming now. His eyes narrowed. “…And he sent me to you on a silver platter.”

Rose squared her shoulders and positioned herself directly in front of him. There would be plenty of time to discuss her cousin later. She’d waited long enough for this moment.

“They said you never left my side. They all tried to get you to go home - to sleep... but you wouldn’t.”

He didn’t answer. Instead he retreated to stare blankly at the wall. Rose lost her temper. She felt unwanted tears begin to blur her vision.

“Why did you leave when I woke up?! All wanted was to see you - to know you were ok - but you left!”

He darted farther away from her and leaned his forehead up against the mantle. Rose slowly followed him, feeling a familiar stinging pain cut through her.

“What did I do? … I never expected anything. I knew you were dying... and you probably just
wanted to make me feel better—"

Finn couldn’t take it anymore.

“Don’t you get it?!” he exploded. “You could’ve DIED! I confessed because I wanted you to know how I felt and it was my last chance! I had known for a second that my stupid rambling would pull you in after me - I would have died, Rose! I would have happily died and never said a word!”

Tears began to stream down his face. He was shaking. Rose reached out and drew him to her. Slowly she brought her hands to his jaw; tilting his head so she could look him in the eye.

“How do you know where I was when you told me that you loved me?” she whispered.

Finn nodded.

“You were in the van.”

“No… No.” She shook her head. Now she was crying too. “I was right outside the safety door - two attempts into a manual override.”

His fingers gripped into her arms. She kept going.

“I was already there, Finn. I would have come for you anyways.” His forehead rested softly on hers. “I’ll always come for you.”

They stood there like that for a long time; lost in the sheer magnitude of her words…

Rose quietly drew away.

“Did you mean it?” she asked. “Everything you said to me... Did you mean it?”

“Rose, I thought I was dying… I never expected anything from you—”

“Finn.” Her voice was unsteady now, but her gaze never wavered. “Was it the truth?”

He had to surrender then. He would never be able to hide from her

“Yes.”

Suddenly, Rose Tico - the woman Finn had dreamed of since the day he first saw her - was kissing him with such intensity that his legs nearly buckled from under him.

Several hours later, she lay in his arms idly tracing her fingers over his chest as he smiled down at her

“I never thought that would happen,” he chuckled “I mean - I prayed it would...but I never actually believed that I’d get to hold you like this…” His eyes suddenly widened with panic. “Oh my God! You can’t tell Ben!”

Rose threw her head back and laughed.

“I’m glad you find the thought of your cousin slowly dismembering me so amusing,” Finn huffed irritably.

She grinned and planted a soft kiss on his lips.
“You’ll just have to marry me then. He can’t kill you if you’re family.”

Finn’s eyes lost a little of their light.

“And what would they put on the certificate? The name of a dead boy? An item number?”

Rose shook her head, letting her nose brush playfully against his.

“I love you. I don’t care what your name is…” she kissed him deeply, “as long as you’re mine.”

Finn’s face broke into the most breathtaking smile she’d ever seen. He surged forward and flipped her under him so he could gaze down at her. She giggled and sighed seductively.

“I love you, Rose Tico.”

******~Back in the Present~******

Rey let out a long dreamy sigh.

“I love that story... but I still can’t believe you risked your life staying by his bed when he had that highly contagious and deadly disease...No wonder you were so sick afterwards.”

Rose just shook her head trying not to laugh.

The ‘official’ version of events (the version Rey always heard) played out like a maudlin daytime soap opera in all the papers, all over the internet, and on every tv news channel.

It went something like this:

Wanderlust Ben Solo sustained a head injury while traveling in Prague and contracted amnesia. He then spent several months working minimum wage jobs in the city’s seedy underbelly - never realizing he was literally a lost prince. (Cue swooning from anyone who possessed even a smidge of romance in their soul.)

The outbreak of the richtuus icorus virus in Prague (a real event that became the backdrop of the entire tall tale) brought Finn (who’s fabricated backstory placed him in the Peace Corps) to Prague where he stumbled across Amnesia Ben during a relief effort and recognized him.

Peace Corp Finn reached out to Senator Organa who sent Concerned Cousin Rose and Childhood Best Friend Poe to investigate.

Tragically, Amnesia Ben didn’t remember his cousin or his childhood best friend. However, before they could leave and bring more proof of his true identity, the city was shut down in an emergency quarantine (another event that actually happened and lent credibility to the narrative).

Amnesia Ben became gravely ill, but the fever broke quickly and ‘somehow’ allowed him to regain his memories. Finn, Poe, Rose, and Ben stayed in close quarters for months during the quarantine (the real Prague quarantine zone was like a Purge movie; so details were hard to confirm if anyone went digging).

Peace Corp Finn still saved Rose from a drug dealer in this version, but instead of dulcium exposure,
Tragic Hero Finn contracted *richtuus* and declared his undying love for Rose whilst in the grips of fever. Romantic Rose bravely nursed him back to health (eventually contracting *richtuus* herself and causing Tragic Hero Finn to experience the corresponding guilt meltdown).

After the quarantine was lifted, Cured Ben, Deeply-in-Love Finn and Rose, and Childhood Friend Poe returned home and they all lived happily ever after.

Rey loved that story.

The world loved that story.

It just wasn’t the truth.

Rose stretched and turned back to Rey.

“But if I left him, then I wouldn’t be so deliriously happy now.” Her face took on a dreamy, faraway light “I had to stay with him. I loved him. And I knew that if I lost him a part of me would be missing forever. Risking my life was nothing in the face of that.” Her hand came to rest tenderly on the child she and Finn created together. “I would do it again in a heartbeat.”

Rey smiled as she began to gather her bags and move towards the door. She was almost all the way out when she stopped and turned to Rose again.

“Do you think I’ll ever find somebody who loves *me* like that? Someone who... I’ll love like that?”

Rose held Rey’s gaze for a long time. This was a rare moment of uncertainty for her friend and she debated whether to voice the suspicions she’d buried over the past years.

“I *know* you will.” Her tone left no room for argument.

Rey smiled before shaking her head

“Goodnight Rose,” she whispered as she closed the door.

Suddenly there was a loud scrambling from the corner of the house. Rose turned around to see her husband diving for her.

“Whoa there, Cowboy!” she laughed as he hoisted her into his arms. “Where’s the fire?”

“It’s right here.” He shot her a naughty grin and began carrying her to their bedroom.

“Were you back in the kitchen the whole time?”

“Yes. I love it when you tell that story. Though –” His grin became – if possible – even naughtier, “you left out the interesting bits.”

Rose pulled him down to the bed.

“I think you should refresh my memory.”

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
Rey’s sleep was restless.

In the quiet darkness, her mind often drifted away from her…

To him.

*Kylo Ren.*

She still remembered the first time he saved her. The first time he’d saved anyone really…

She was his debut.

It was a Wednesday and a lead came in late afternoon… Ben had taken a personal day. He told her to call him if something came up, but she didn’t bother. They had only been partners a couple weeks. She just charged in…

Same as always.

Except this time was different. This time everything went wrong.

She’d been discovered. They drugged her - threw her in a closet… Her awareness was fading, but she heard them discussing what to do with her on the other side.

It wasn’t good.

They took her primary phone, but missed her back-up. Rey always kept it strapped to her thigh. Her fingers were heavy as she fumbled the device up from between her legs.

Her vision began to lose focus. She tapped the screen several times; hoping against hope that she was calling someone – anyone -

“*Rey*?”

A voice called her name. The tone was muffled; like it was coming from underwater. She didn’t recognize the speaker.

“Help…me,” Rey whispered.

“*Where are you?*” the voice demanded.

Her mouth wasn’t obeying her. She tried to form words, but nothing was happening.

“*REY!*”

The voice sounded desperate now. The intensity was jarring enough to draw out a small sliver of clarity.

“Takodana Building … 25th and Main,” she managed.

Her eyes closed. In the last few seconds of consciousness, Rey thought she heard the voice speak one final time.

“*I’m coming.*”
It could have been minutes later or hours later. Rey couldn’t tell.

Rough hands pulled her from the closet and bound her wrists. She was conscious again, but barely; the sights and sounds around her were distorted and disjointed. It wasn’t until the bright light of the sun momentarily blinded her that Rey discovered she’d been taken to the roof.

The loud whir of an engine split the air. She moaned and turned her eyes toward the disturbance.

A helicopter.

Suddenly they were lifting her inside - strapping her to the seat. She tried to struggle - tried to protest - but it wasn’t working. Even as panic pierced the fog in her brain, her traitorous limbs remained placid beside her.

The doors slammed shut and the craft began to climb. Rey felt the inevitability of her fate wash over her. She closed her eyes and prepared to -

The entire helicopter jolted and froze in midair as if it had snagged on something.

Rey’s eyes flew open. She looked down –

And knew she was hallucinating. Because what she saw was impossible.

A man - an enormous man - stood on the landing pad below with his fist closed around the skids.

The pilot was screaming and jamming the controls, but the man continued to hold them there with one arm like it was nothing.

Rey leaned forward. Her palm pressed into the glass as she strained to get a clearer view of the remarkable stranger.

He was dressed head to toe in black leather. A long obsidian cape billowed back from his shoulders, and a hood draped rakishly over an odd looking mechanical mask - concealing his features entirely.

Rey gasped when he finally turned to face her. The mask covered his expression completely, but she knew he was connecting with her stare. Fixing on her as she had fixed on him.

An odd slash of awareness spiked beneath her skin. It was as if she was being unraveled by the gaze of a man who’s eyes she could not even see.

The helicopter jerked again as the man yanked it viciously back to earth. The screams of terror intensified around her, but Rey felt an unnatural calm overtake her body. She didn’t scream. She didn’t move.

Her drug addled brain considered that perhaps the stranger had frozen her in place with the sheer force of his existence.

She wasn’t afraid. She wondered if she should be…

Suddenly the door flew off its hinges with a sickening keen. (Rey absently registered that the man
had ripped it off). Her captors were fumbling for their guns, but the dark phantom dispatched them
with a deadly precision that defied typical human ability.

The next several minutes were a blur. Rey could feel the air hum unnaturally around her even as the
roar of the engine died.

Unconscious men and mechanical wreckage radiated from her position in all directions. The drugs
were still lacing through her system. She wasn’t entirely sure how everything had ... ended up this
way...

She only knew that he was the one responsible.

The man who stopped helicopters with his hands. The man who could do the impossible.

She lifted her eyes to meet his gaze once again.

*The man who saved her.*

He was still now; poised and motionless only a few feet away, but his focus was heavy upon her.
She could feel it wrap around her limbs; holding her in place like phantom grip.

Slowly - very slowly - as if he was deliberately trying not to startle her - he took a small step closer.

“Are you hurt?”

The voice was mechanical and precise, but the modulators in his helmet couldn’t entirely conceal the
rich baritone of its speaker.

Rey was too tired, too stunned, and frankly too confused to fight the effects of the drug any longer.

She felt her body fail beneath her as the last shreds of consciousness tore away.

…She did not see him catch her before she ever hit the ground.

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Rey (along with the entire world) saw the rest of the story on the news.

The spectacle of a man snatching a helicopter out of mid-air had activated every camera phone
within a half-mile radius.

She could view her daring rescue (and its mortifying aftermath) online at any time (and from about
75 different angles).

After Rey collapsed (or *SWOONED* as several publications who didn’t care about facts insisted) *he*
had swept her into his arms like a dark fairytale knight rescuing a fallen damsel.

And THEN he proceeded to *bridal carry* her out of the building and deliver her tenderly to an
ambulance.

Ovaries exploded world-wide.
Several women claimed to have gotten pregnant simply by watching the footage on the internet.

The front-page picture of the Coruscant Chronicle (an impossibly romantic shot featuring its very own Rey Niima draped poetically in the arms of a leather bound superhero) became instantly iconic. They had to run 17 extra printings before noon the day it came out.

Fan sites, fan fiction, and fan made merchandise flooded the newly obsessed masses at a nearly miraculous rate.

And Rey Niima ...for the first time in her strange and unlikely life ... fell a little bit in love.

She spent countless nights afterwards wondering who he was.

She had hoped (ridiculously) that he would come to check on her in the hospital… But the first person she saw when she opened her eyes was her irate partner, Ben Solo.

(To be fair, Poe, Finn, and Rose were there as well, but the guys had gone to grab water and Rose was sleeping in the corner)

Apparently, Ben was the person she called while trapped in the closet. He’d taken the personal day to visit his friend Poe who was on leave from the Air Force. They were together when Ben’s phone went off and they called the police as soon as she told them where to find her.

According to Poe (who she met for the first time that day), he and Ben headed to the Takodana Building as soon as they could, but ended up trapped in the crowd below watching her fantastical rescue alongside the rest of Coruscant.

Ben and Poe’s story was her sole clue to the mystery savior’s identity.

Only someone connected with the police department could have arrived on the scene that quickly. After all, they were the only ones who knew she was in trouble.

It wasn’t much, but Rey had broken leads with less...and something told her that, after years and years of searching, she had finally found it:

The story of a lifetime.

Chapter End Notes

As always I would deeply appreciate feedback of any sort! I always answer! It means so much for authors to hear that their work was appreciated - or even critiqued!

I realize that Finn, Rose, and Poe were a huge focus of this chapter. This IS a Reylo centric story, but I do love to write the others occasionally and there was some important backstory to establish. Most updates will consist primarily or entirely of Reylo. Still... I hope you enjoyed this installment and will continue to follow this fic.

Additional Notes:
The mask that the Knight wears is not mechanical and only covers the bottom half of Ben's face.

Kylo’s mask IS mechanical and his costume is similar the one he appears in on Takodana (with the hood) - NOT a robe though.

There is a lot more about the First Order (and what happened to it) in later installments.

Ben's powers are the result of something the First Order did to him (that is a gross oversimplification ... but I didn't want anyone to be confused)

Poe's cover is that he is in the Air Force.

Yes there is more to the story of Rey and Kylo Ren. Yes it is coming...
“You’re Rey Niima, aren’t you?!”

Rey turned to see a star struck teenager chasing her down the street. She opened her mouth to respond but then -

“You’re Kylo Ren’s girlfriend.”

Her eyes widened.

“No -” I wish “- I am his press liaison.”

The girl quirked a saucy eyebrow.

“I know what liaison means, Ms. Niima.”

An incredulous laugh bubbled up from Rey’s throat. Is this really happening right now?

“That’s – That’s great for you.” She leaned forward. “Someone as clever as yourself must also realize that there is more than one definition of liaison.”
The girl rolled her eyes.

“‘Yes. I know. But I’m more interested in why Kylo picked you. There are hundreds of reporters and bloggers in Coruscant. Why you?’”

“Well, I was his first rescu—”

“I think it’s because you guys are secretly liasoning.”

_Twould that it were so_ Rey mused wistfully.

“It’s _because_ I was the first person he saved. I am also a reporter, so he gave his first official interview to me. There’s really nothing more to—”

“But why does he _keep_ saving you?”

“Well he saves lots of people—”

“He saves you the most.”

Rey tugged at her collar.

“Do you have like a data spreadsheet on that claim? Maybe some numbers I could look at—”

“Its common knowledge. Do you have any insight as to why Kylo Ren is constantly saving you?”

“Wha- Uh - That really depends on who you ask. My partner, Ben—”

“Ben _Solo_?”

“Yes – er- how do you know that?”

“We know a lot about you—”

“Who the kriff is _we_?!”

“The ReyLo-Riders.”

Rey’s eyes widened.

“I _beg_ your pardon?” she squeaked.

“It’s kind of like your fan club—”

“I have a _fan club_?!”

“Your relationship with Kylo Ren does.”

“I don’t _have_ a relationship with Kylo Ren!” _Much to my eternal chagrin._ “ I have a business arrangement.”

The girl suddenly lit up with an unholy glow.

“Reeaally? Now that’s steamy.” She started furiously typing on her tablet. “Our readers will eat that up.”

“Wha-”
“Are there feelings involved at all? Or is it purely a physical exchange to meet one another’s needs?”

The kid looked practically ravenous now and Rey felt a monumental headache coming on.

“No. Gawd - no. Listen here, Miss-”

“Bateman. Beatrice Bateman. But my blogger handle is BB8.”

“Miss Bateman – I – wait BB8?! You’re one of the DROID bloggers!”

DROID was an online publication – blog – gossips site – editorial mouthpiece - …of sorts.

The content put out by DROID was opinion based, but never fabricated. Its writers used alpha-numeric pen names and razor-sharp writing to establish quite a reputation for themselves. DROID had the distinction of being an online media pioneer in several ways, but it was most notable for its habit of covering (or blogging about) literally anything.

Just last week DROID published a glowing review of the latest “My Little Pony” film next to a point-by-point analysis of all the ways Senator Versio’s new budget proposal would harm middle class citizens.

Both pieces were written by BB8.

Rey often enjoyed reading DROID content. She named her cat BB8 because she thought it was an adorable name and the real BB8 was such a clever writer.

*That was before I knew she was a 17-year-old girl with romantic delusions.*

“Aren’t you a little young to be a DROID writer?”

BB shrugged.

“K-2SO is my dad.”

Rey let out a low whistle. K-2SO, the founder and owner of DROID, was a living legend. His real name was Katoo Sorren, and he was still one of the most popular DROID writers, even after nearly 19 years.

“He’s a little older, isn’t he?”

“I was a mid-life crisis.”

Rey blushed and cleared her throat.

“Ah…I see. Well… considering your father’s reputation, I think you should keep a firmer grasp on your imagination. When Kylo Ren needs to communicate to the press – which is very rarely -  he contacts me. There is –” tragically “-nothing more to it than that.”

BB8 looked genuinely crestfallen and Rey suddenly felt guilty for crushing the girl’s hopes.

She sighed.

“What if I give you a scoop… Something I found out totally by accident – mind you.”

The teen’s eyes widened dramatically.
“Oh Ms. Niima! That would be the absolute best!”

“It isn’t a detail I’d ever include in a Chronicle piece –” she fixed the blogger with a firm stare, “- and this is totally anonymous. Off the record. If you quote me, I will deny it to my dying breath. Are we clear?”

“Ohmygosh we are SO clear, Ms. Niima!” BB was literally bouncing with giddy suspense at this point.

Rey took a deep breath. She bit her lip.

“Kylo Ren has an 8-pack.”

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“I still don’t see why I can’t just go down there as Kylo Ren and handle the situation.”

Ben and Rose were making their way up to Poe and Kaydel’s house. Ben was still trying to weasel out of working with Rey.

“Kylo Ren is too recognizable –”

“I could dress differently.”

“Yes. That would work because there are so many people with super-human abilities running around out there. You’ll blend right in.”

“Obviously I’d be discreet –”

Rose rolled her eyes.

“We’ve been over this. Kylo Ren is inextricably linked to the Resistance which is inextricably linked to your mother who is now inexplicably linked to treason.”

Ben shot her a look.

“You come up with that off the top of your head?”

“I’ve been waiting to bust it out for a while now.”

He grunted.

“I am aware of all that. Honestly, Rose, from your tone – someone might get the idea that you don’t trust me to follow through – even though I already swore to do so – despite –”

“Allow me to refresh your memory. Two days ago, you sat on my couch and professed your undying commitment to professionalism. And then you let Rey Niima climb you in an elevator a mere 6 hours later.”

Rose shook herself.

“I still have the image of you tangled up like a 70s softcore burned into my retinas. So - you’ll forgive me if I’m harboring doubts about your resolve.”

“Should I ask why you know so much about 70’s softcore?”
“I didn’t ask how you ended up between Rey’s legs.”

Ben flinched. “That was a low blow.”

“Well I’m a short woman.”

Superficially, Poe and Kaydel were throwing a get-together to celebrate their first year of marriage with their friends and family.

Surreptitiously, the “dinner party” was an excuse to debrief core members of the Resistance on their upcoming endeavors in Canto Bight.

(Poe, however, was no fool. He surprised Kaydel yesterday with a four day Alaskan cruise and backstage passes to meet the Spice Girls on their upcoming reunion tour to make up for a mission hijacking their anniversary.)

The Resistance often took a toll on the personal lives of its operatives, but friendship and love (in its various forms) bonded its current and past members. It was never a large operation. The core leadership relied more on connections and old loyalties than actual manpower to accomplish their goals.

No one applied to be in the Resistance. They were always recruited.

Simply defined, the organization was a private black ops unit that contracted with government agencies and selected private interests all over the world. Their primary goal was always combat corruption in their home country, but they had been known to target international influences, like the First Order, if the occasion called for it.

Most Resistance operatives maintained civilian jobs or covers. The vast network of social, political (and occasionally blackmail) connections allowed the group to simulate at least the pretense of domesticity. Serving the Resistance, serving each other, and - by extension – serving their country was more than a job.

It was a vocation.

Poe Dameron was once Leia’s protégé. He ‘officially’ held the rank of Commander in the National Air Force and his (former) unit, Black Squadron (which included Paige and her fiancé Temmin ‘Snap’ Wexley) flew covert ops for the government. Paige Tico became head of Black Squadron when Poe took over Leia’s position as head of the Resistance, but he still ran the occasional mission with his old team.

After years of mournful pining, Kaydel took pity on Poe and fell in love with him. She served as the Resistance’s chief medical officer and worked the odd shift at a hospital run by the Ackbar Group. The founder of Ackbar Group (an original member of the Resistance) gifted her with a vague job description, full access to the facilities, and the authorization to requisition whatever supplies necessary.

Finn Tico and Cassian Andor were Poe’s second-in-commands.

Finn’s specialty was tactics; the ‘man with a plan.’ His more rational thinking patterns were invaluable when it came to tempering Poe’s enthusiastic engagement style. (Poe was a devotee of the
Finn’s identity was completely fabricated by the Resistance. Legally he was a distant relative of Juan “Chewie” Bacca (who would swear to several details of Finn’s elaborate childhood that he was definitely a part of), and, as far as the general public was concerned, he worked as a private contractor with Cassian and Jyn for a company called Rogue Securities.

Cassian Andor was an elite military commando when he rescued 18-year old Jyn from a prison camp in Siberia. Neither one of them spoke about her family, why she was imprisoned, or why Cassian was willing to break her out. Their story was – and continued to be … rather mysterious.

Cassian married Jyn as soon as he delivered her to the embassy (a mere 12 days after meeting her). The union was only intended to protect Jyn and grant her citizenship… but somewhere along the line it became the real deal.

The Andor-Erso power couple handled many of the uh- shadier aspects of Resistance operations. (General consensus agreed that it was ‘just best not to ask’ for too many details.)

The Resistance received most of its funding from the Skywalker-Organa-Solo fortune along with several other generous donors. (Rose, however, routinely hacked the personal accounts of horrible dictators worldwide to boost Resistance coffers and funnel cash to agencies helping the citizens said dictators oppressed.)

Aside from Ben and Rose (who’s roles within the organization were labeled as ‘specialists’) the last guest was Temmin Wexley. After sustaining an injury on one of the Black Squadron ops, Temmin (or ‘Snap’ to anyone that mattered) took a job as a Senatorial aide and kept the Resistance well informed on happenings in the nation’s capital.

“Niima and Solo are leaving in 20 hours for Canto Bight.” Poe turned to Ben. “Luke made arrangements for you to fly in a private 1st class cabin. I don’t think he wanted the two of you fighting in coach again – with all those witnesses -”

Finn snickered. Ben elbowed him in the ribs (hard).

“We already know which cabin it is,” Poe continued over Finn’s wheezing. “My people are checking it now to make sure there are no bugs. The two of you will be able to get down to business with no interruptions.”

Finn (bravely) snickered again. Rose smacked him on the back of the head.

“Snap, we need you to keep your eyes and ears open in the capital. Let us know if you see these four doing anything remotely out of the ordinary. I’d be willing to bet that they have no idea they’re about to be accused of treason.”

Poe turned to Ben and handed him a black briefcase.

“Inside is everything you need to get you set up - including the master key to a secure suite in the Grand. We had to do some fancy maneuvering to book the one directly under the Royal Suite where the meeting is taking place. Your surveillance equipment and an assorted array of gadgets for you to break have been dropped off already -”
Snap leaned over and whispered to Rose

“Gadgets for Ben to break?”

“Well... Ben ...tends to take out his frustrations on helpless inanimate objects. Rumor has it there are still fragments of a Simeon Decoder lodged in the walls of room 212 at the Coruscant Plaza.”

“Uh - huh…”

“You guys know the rules,” Poe continued. “We’re as off the grid as possible. Minimal electronic messaging. Absolutely no exchange of information over the internet. There can be no digital trail. That means drops and in-person contacts, paper info – and transfers only in disintegration cases -”

Disintegration cases were a brilliant invention of Jyn’s. They looked – to all the world – like a regular briefcase (or bag, or file folder…) but they were rigged with a ‘panic button’ which could be triggered on the case itself or remotely. If the panic button engaged, an acidic compound flooded the chamber and disintegrated its contents.

“If - for any reason - you or Rey need back up - there’s a secure line rigged to the burner phones in the case. They’re both untraceable. We also parked a motorcycle in space 14E of the Grand Gungan’s garage. Finn has agreed to be the go between for us if we need to send you something or vice versa. We’re setting up a safe house about 45 minutes outside of Canto Bight. I’ll text you the address on the burner.”

Ben nodded.

“I really hate to do this – especially considering the wedding – but all members of the team not on assignment will be on call for this. If you need to pull anyone else – we’ll make it happen.”

Paige Tico and Snap Wexley were set to be married in 8 days. The timing of events was not ideal.

Poe took a breath and looked around the room. “Any questions? … Good. Let’s eat.”

Conversation at the table centered primarily on the various aspects of the mission. Ben was just starting to feel marginally better about his situation when –

“Uh…Ben. Why is #KyloRen8pack trending on social media right now?”

“What ?!”

There was a flurry of movement around the table as everyone simultaneously reached for their smart phones… and then…

Chaos.

“Oh my gosh! It IS!”

“DROID broke the story – claims they have a source ?!”

“Ben, is there something you want to tell us?”

“Oh – guys – there’s already fan art. I’m clicking -” Finn tapped his screen and immediately regretted it. “Oh gawd – my eyes!”
Rose glanced over and reeled back in horror.

“Surely they know that’s anatomically impossible –”

“I mean he is Kylo Ren –”

Ben shriveled into his chair. “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

“What’s a ReyLo-Rider?”

“How do you not know about that? I have a mug and two t-shirts-”

Ben idly wondered if he could spontaneously develop the power of teleportation.

Poe continued to scroll down the comments and snorted.

“This is crazy. Ben doesn’t even have an 8-pack.”

Kaydel giggled “Uh yeah he does -”

There was dead silence. Everyone slowly turned to face the nurse.

Ben groaned. Poe’s jaw dropped in shock.

Kaydel suddenly seemed very preoccupied with her soup.

Her husband leaned forward very slowly.

“And how – may I ask – do you know about Ben’s 8-pack?”

Cassian surreptitiously raised his phone.

“Are you filming this?” Jyn hissed.

“Oh most definitely.”

Ben shrank even further into his chair; a real accomplishment considering his size.

“Is anyone else ready for dessert?” his voice cracked.

Kaydel (still fiercely studying her soup) attempted to salvage the situation.

“I mean it could have been a medical exam –”

“I think that ship sailed when you both started acting like guilty characters in a sitcom.”

Ben threw his cousin a betrayed glare.

“Et tu, Rose?”

She shrugged. “Why are you even surprised?”

“We’re off topic!” Poe shouted. “And I am very invested in the answer to my original question. Kaydel?”

“It wasn’t really anything. We were on a break -”
“Wait - WHAT?!?”

Ben was practically one with chair at this point. “Oh...this is not good,” he muttered.

“Did you guys date?!?”

“What? - NO!- We didn’t date! It was... all in the line of duty-”

“What was in the line of duty?!” Poe’s voice was coming out unusually shrill.

Kaydel chuckled nervously.

“Right after we had that fight... the one where we broke up for three weeks,” she shot Ben a nervous glance, “you sent us to Stewjon to investigate a serial killer – the one in the hospital. Well... you see... our cover was about to be compromised. There was no reason for him to keep hanging around. We had to pretend that we were a couple... and it had to be convincing – on – on several occasions - so...”

Poe turned to Ben.

“You laid the moves on my girl?!”

“Poe - I swear- it was only to protect our cover. We’re just friends. There was no reason to upset you- I-”

“WE WERE ON A BREAK!” Kaydel shouted.

“Please tell me you got all that,” Jyn whispered to Cassian.

Poe suddenly smacked both hands down on the table.

“Do you know WHY Ben wears a cape as Kylo Ren?”

All the color drained from Ben’s face.

“Poe. You promised you wouldn’t tell-”

“That was before you kissed my wife!”

“She wasn’t your wife at the time!”

“On a break,” Kaydel chirped.

“So after we decided to create the persona of Kylo-”

“Poe!”

“He took a personal day from work and I dropped by with a bottle of Mandalorian wine-”

Rose’s eyes widened.

“You mean-”
“The only liquor we know of that can still affect Ben? Yep. That’s the stuff!”

“Poe Dameron! We had a SACRED agreement never to speak of this.”

“Quiet, Ben,” Finn shushed him impatiently, “I HAVE to hear this story now.”

Cassian was still filming. The look on his face approached unbridled glee.

“So we’re planning out how Kylo Ren will act, putting the finishing touches on his uniform, and – in the process – we get completely trashed. Then suddenly Ben admits -”

“Poe... please -”

“He announces that Rey Niima - his new partner - was... What was that phrase you used?”

Ben shook his head frantically. Poe smiled.

“Ah yes. I remember. He said - and I quote, ‘Rey is like a charging freight train of frustration, stubbornness, and sex appeal’. ”

There was a pitiful gurgle echoing from the direction of Ben’s seat; at this point he was essentially bonded to it on an atomic level.

Poe continued, relishing every word of his grand pronunciation.

“ AND then he went on to declare that he ‘wouldn’t mind being hit by that train’...”

Finn struggled to hide his grin as he faced Ben (who looked distinctly puce).

“Wow, man - that’s... poetic.”

Someone snickered.

And then mass hysteria broke loose.

Ben longed to crawl under the table and die with whatever dignity he had left.

“I was drunk,” he practically whimpered.

Poe, however, had no intention of leaving Ben with any dignity.

“Wait - Wait - guys-” he quieted them. “Here’s the best part. Apparently Rey has some sort of recurring dream – vision - thing about a guy in a cape. SO I suggested that if Ben really wanted to be the man of her dreams...”

“Oh my god-” Cassian choked.

“I wasn’t serious, of course. He was already in his uniform, so I grabbed the black top sheet off my bed. We pinned it to his shoulders and laughed ourselves sick - until Rey called Ben for help at Takodana –”

Rose was having trouble breathing. Her entire body shook with contained laughter. Cassian zoomed in for the grand finale.
“He was so preoccupied with saving her that… he forgot to take the sheet off.”

“Hold on – just – so we’re clear. Are you telling us that Kylo Ren performed his legendary first save trashed and wearing your dirty bedsheets!”

“Yep.” (Poe popped the ‘p’.) “And once all the pictures of that iconic debut circulated - well... There was really no going back.”

It took a solid ten minutes for everyone to calm back down. At some point Poe leaned over and whispered, “I figure we’re even now” in Ben’s ear.

Ben struggled to cope with the fact that this story would likely be told to his great-grandchildren – and worse – his parents.

“This is great guys... Really great.” he muttered

Poe just smiled and raised his glass.

“To Rey Niima! The only woman who can embarrass Kylo Ren.”

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“What is it with those two anyways?” Finn asked (much later) as he readied himself for bed.

Rose laughed.

“Do you have like 5 hours?”

“Can I get the highlights?”

She considered for a moment before replying with a question of her own.

“How much do you know about Rey’s childhood?”

Finn shook his head. “Not much. Orphan – I think. Lived in Britain - or a British territory - most of her life. Then here from about five-ish years ago.”

“She’s the quintessential survivor. Not an orphan – abandoned – unwanted as a little girl. She bounced through multiple homes and institutions before finally breaking out with stellar grades and a long list of infractions. She doesn’t depend on people very well. People – in her experience – are not dependable.”

“So how does that play into her relationship with Ben?”

“Ben is a bit of a two-edged sword. Not only is he her partner – a relationship which requires trust to be successful– but… She’s also attracted to him. And that – for her – is a real problem.”

“I don’t understand.”

“She’s vulnerable with Ben. He makes her feel vulnerable. I mean - a partner is bad enough – but one she’s attracted to? She’s a wreck. She doesn’t want to be hurt. And I’m not even sure she has
any idea how to proceed - even if she was willing to risk it. She’s not very experienced.”

“Rey *has* dated before though.”

“Yes, but – she was never all that attached. I think she did like a few of them. There was never anything serious. Honestly, I doubt any of them ever truly knew her. Not like Ben does.”

“What do you mean?”

“I *mean* – he read her like billboard from day one. Ben’s always been remarkable at reading people. He always sees more than they want him to. But with *her*...” Rose shook her head. “He can be so arrogant sometimes – because he *is* brilliant – but he messed up with Rey.”

“How so?”

“He underestimated her.”

Finn laughed, “I bet that went well.”

“Oh - it was fabulous. He waltzed in, casually analyzed her in that horrible tone of his – the one he always puts on when he’s trying to awe someone with his intellectual and psychological prowess. He expected - no doubt – that his lovely new co-worker would swoon at his feet.”

“Let me guess. She let him have it with both barrels.”

Rose shuddered.

“Indeed. She fired back a massive dose of his own medicine. Read him better than his own mother, and then stormed out of the breakroom like the Queen of all England.”

Finn snorted inelegantly. “And how did Ben react to that?”

Rose felt the corners of her mouth begin to twitch. She lowered herself to the bed with a deep sigh.

“He was... stunned. I’ve never seen him like that. Just completely transfixed. And – quite frankly – he hasn’t been the same since.”

Finn sat up at that. His eyes shining with curiosity.

“Reaaaallly? How do you mean?”

His wife considered for a moment.

“Tell me. How would you describe Ben – in general?”

“Quiet. Brilliant. Intense… Occasionally terrifying.”

“Annnnd how would you describe Ben around Rey?”


“Exactly. She throws him completely off balance. He fluctuates between resenting her and wanting to impress her. She’s always fascinated him, but lately she’s really gotten to him on a much deeper level. He’s not in any rush to be vulnerable either – especially considering his...situation. But he can’t help it around her. She *matters* to him. Whether he likes it or not. They matter to each other.”
“Do you think they know?”

“Know what?”

“All of it – any of it. That they’re mildly obsessed with each other. That they’re incapable of staying away from each other. That they desperately want to bone –”

Rose bopped him with a pillow and collapsed into a fit of giggles.

“I think they know on some level, but are fiercely refusing to acknowledge it – or – more likely– neither of them wants to be the one who gives in first.”

“So they’ll just… do this forever?”

The couple snuggled closer together on their absurdly extravagant king-sized mattress. (Finn spent most of his life on bunks. He didn’t bother with self-restraint when he was finally able to purchase his own bed.)

“No…” Rose whispered, “they’ve gone too far. They’re too close. A collision is coming… It’s what might happen after the collision that worries me now.”

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click click

Rey twitched.

click click

She let out a loud sigh.

click click

She fidgeted.

click click

Her fingers clenched around the armrest.

click click

She lost it.

Diving across the cabin, she jumped atop Ben and wrenched the clicky pen from his hands.

“WILL YOU STOP THAT!”

“There was no need for the flying leap, Rey! All you had to do was ask!”

…but that would’ve involved acknowledging your existence.

“What kind of a person clicks a pen for fifteen minutes!?”
“The kind of person who’s been flying to Canto Bight for twenty minutes locked in with a partner who refuses to speak to him!”

Letting out a frustrated breath she slipped off his lap.

*What would you like to talk about Ben? The thing that didn’t happen in the church or the thing that didn’t happen in the elevator…*

Ben cleared his throat and tried not to think about the fact that Rey had been upon him 45 seconds ago. “I have some information regarding the story.”

*Or we could talk about that.*

“This is our cover,” he said, handing Rey a thin envelope from the briefcase Poe assembled. His partner let out a resigned sigh as she looked over the information

“We are... Kira and Phillip Johnson. We reside in Coruscant - married four months - which will help explain why we rarely leave our room...” She gulped. Ben loosened his tie. “We’re accountants - in Canto Bight for our first vacation together.”

She looked up to meet his eyes.

“Sounds simple enough. Nothing we haven’t pulled before. Just make sure you take the blankets off the couch this time. I swear that maid in Theed knew we weren’t actually sleeping together.”

Ben leaned in and lowered his voice a bit.

“You know, most people share a bed with their partners while on assignment-” his head tilted forward, “- undercover.”

Rey drew back into her own recliner.

“Yes. Well – ” her voice wobbled, “most people are not partnered with a towering sasquatch.”

He pretended to look hurt.

“Just what are you trying to say, Niima?”

“You’re too big!”

Ben’s eyebrows shot up. He grinned.

“Too big?”

Rey flushed and tried to explain.

“In – in bed – you’re too big to bed – IN bed – I-”

*Please kill me now.*

Ben was howling at this point. Rey glared at him; caught helplessly between fury and utter mortification.

“You know exactly what I meant, Ben Solo!”
“Did I, Miss Niima?” He leaned close again. “Perhaps you should clarify.”

Rey ignored him. Ben felt his ire rise. His eyes narrowed.

“What if I was Kylo Ren?”

Her head whipped up.

“You are not Kylo Ren.”

“Of course not. The man’s a kriffing drama queen.”

“That’s rich coming from you –”

“The question I’m attempting to ask is -” he placed a single finger under her chin and fixed his gaze on hers, “would Kylo Ren be too big to share a bed with?” Rey’s eyes widened. “If you were on an undercover assignment – of course.”

She gulped.

“I could probably work him in there,” Rey whispered breathlessly. She could actively feel her pulse accelerating.

“Is that so…” Ben’s eyes lost focus for a moment.

Then he frowned.

“Kylo Ren isn’t that much smaller than me. In fact we might be almost the same size –”

“Kylo Ren is more flexible than you. He-he can bend to accommodate –”

“How would you know how flexible Kylo Ren is?”

Rey shrugged.

“It’s just an inference, really. He always seems quite flexible when he’s rescuing me from um – situations –”

“Situations you are responsible for 99% of the time-”

“And DROID just confirmed that he has an 8-pack. So obviously he works out –”

Ben just barely resisted the urge to throw something.

“That’s a ridiculous argument. Muscles do not always equal flexibility – and for all you know - I could have an 8-pack.”

Rey rolled her eyes.

“Yes, Ben Solo has an 8-pack.” She cocked her head thoughtfully. “That’s about as likely as you actually being Kylo Ren.”

Ben laughed. “Is that a challenge?”

“It’s a dismissal,” she chirped, turning back to study the paperwork on her lap.

But her partner wasn’t quite finished.
He moved toward her one last time – closer than before – until there was barely an inch separating their faces.

“We’ll see,” he whispered; lips quirking in the barest hint of a smug smile.

Rey felt familiar tingles in all the wrong (right) places.

*He’s not playing fair.*

She narrowed her eyes. An idea began to form in her head.

Rey casually started removing pins from her tight coif, letting her hair fall lazily down past her shoulders. She shook it out provocatively. Ben nervously cleared his throat.

“Whew. You know. It’s really hot in here.”

Slowly she began to unbutton her shirt. Ben’s eyes flew to her fingers, following their agonizing progress.

He gulped.

The buttons took a full minute. Finally Rey peeled off her over-shirt completely to reveal a tight white tank top.

“R-Rey... aren’t you um...”

“Thirsty? Yes, I think I am.”

She rose from her seat and swayed suggestively towards the mini bar. Chuckling to herself, she dropped an ice cube.

“Ugh. Gosh I’m so clumsy.”

When she was sure she had his attention, she slowly bent over to retrieve it; intentionally providing a spectacular view.

The pen he was holding snapped.

Taking her seat again, Rey swiped through her files and nonchalantlypretended to review schematics.

“So. Which vent do you think would be better for rigging the mini cam; Southwest A or North C?”

Ben blinked. Twice

“I - ...what?”

She arched an eyebrow and barely held back a satisfied smirk.

Ben recognized the victory twinkling in her eyes immediately. He squared his shoulders.

*So that’s the way it’s gonna be.*
Without breaking eye contact, he undid the first two buttons of his shirt, rolled up his sleeves, and *stretched*. His chest and biceps strained obscenely against the fabric of his top.

Rey’s smirk faltered and he heard her pulse scatter (enhanced senses often had unexpected advantages). Satisfied, he met her restless gaze with a clear challenge.

*Bring it on.*

Chapter End Notes

As always, your support - in the kudos and the comments - is invaluable to me as a writer. Please drop me a line. The totally mean the world to me. I always respond!

Additional Notes:
DROID is very loosely based on Buzzfeed.
Yes. It is a FRIENDS reference.
You will see Ben's perspective on a lot of the Kylo Ren encounters in the next installment.
Crait Expectations

Chapter Summary

Ben vs. Kylo Ren
The key to Ben's powers is (somewhat) revealed.
Poe is taken hostage.
Ben cannot escape his dreams.
Rey cannot escape Ben.
And the plane comes down unexpectedly...

In Crait.

Chapter Notes

TODAY IS MY BIRTHDAY!

So I got you guys a present. (This update.) I hope you like it!

The response to this has been fundamentally overwhelming in the best way. When I posted this it was with the hope that at least a few people would read it and enjoy it. I simply wanted to share the story in my head... and you all have made it a wonderful experience.

This chapter is a little...darker. It took awhile to publish this time because school is wrapping up and I need to grade things if I want to keep my job...

I do hope you guys are taking a moment to check out the additional notes at the end of each chapter. I am using them (in a vaguely Tolkien-esque manner) to address questions/fill in some background that I don't always have time to put in the narrative.

To My Beloved Beta: Thank you for making my whole life better (even though you only married me to gain custody of my cat).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“…Rose… Hey Rose… Rose –”

The lady in question moaned.

“Im-sleepin-” she slurred from underneath her covers.

“I know – but – I just thought of something –” Finn sat up. Rose remained silent and hoped he’d take the hint.

He didn’t.
“If Rey is afraid of vulnerability, why is she so crazy about Kylo Ren?”

Rose rolled over. Her eyes were still 90% shut.

“This couldn’t wait until like – morning?”

Finn’s only response was to look both guilty and adorable. She snorted.

“Because Kylo Ren is – like – a fantasy. He’s not real. He’s – he’s - an idea. Nobody is going to date Kylo Ren. She can’t actually get her heart broken by some obviously unattainable hero person…”


“Of course it does,” Rose mumbled. “I’m brilliant.”

Finn chuckled and was just preparing to snuggle back into bed when -

“You know - since you’re up… I could really use some pickles.”

Rey was currently entering her 23rd minute of pretending to be asleep. Ben was content to let it be. He didn’t think he could take one more view of her bending over.

The last three had nearly killed him.

It was dark outside and, judging from her breathing pattern, Rey’s slumber would soon be genuine. The lights were dimmed – but it was enough for Ben to see his reflection staring back at him from the inky sky beyond the window.

The man in the darkness studied him with a knowing gaze. He was always there, even when light surrounded him.

Memories overwhelmed Ben as they often did when he was alone. His eyes dropped to the ring on his right pointer finger; a tangible reminder of his worst mistakes wrapped around him for all the world to see.

To see…but never to understand.

*Dulcium*

It was strange how that odd metal affected the lives of so many people he loved.

Paige and Rose grew up in a dulcium mine.

Rose, Finn, Kaydel, and Poe almost died in a dulcium refinery.

And a single dulcium ring was all that stood between Ben Solo and the beast in his reflection.

“…A small amount of dulcium in direct contact with your skin will help regulate the more intense effects of the obscura. Your abilities will weaken slightly, but your mind will be clearer -”
“What about a larger amount? What could that do?”

“The more dulcium you physically touch, the weaker you will grow. It’s completely proportional. A ring this size will calm you – focus you. More than that – a heavy bracelet or a collar – and you would begin to weaken even below the threshold of an average man. Dulcium neutralizes obscura –”

“Permanently?”

“No. The second you break contact with the metal all of the obscura in your blood will reactivate at peak level. For the other subjects, it doesn’t matter. Their levels are continuously dropping – but yours…”

“No fluctuation?”

“…None. The more you take in, the more potent your concentration becomes. It’s more than rare – it’s practically impossible. The only other case –”

“- was my grandfather.”

Ben tore himself away from his reflection. Away from the memory. No matter how many years stood between him and the chilling leash of Solomon Snoke, the trauma remained visceral.

Fear. Anguish. Pain. Shame…

So much shame.

So much rage.

After he’d come home, his mother, his father, Poe, Rose…

They all tried to help him.

But Ben was forced to disappoint them once again.

They could not possibly understand what he had chosen to do… What had been done to him.

They would never understand why – and if they did – the knowledge would not bring them peace.

Leia offered to hire him a private treatment team, but he refused. There were few therapists qualified to deal with the psychological effects of meta-cellular human experimentation.

The enhancement trials, his grandfather’s horrifying legacy, the betrayal of everything he’d been raised to value…

All of it weighed solely and heavily on him.

Ben angrily pulled the shade over the window and leaned his forehead into his hands. The most precious gift his family and loved ones offered him was the one thing he never expected:

Forgiveness.

…and with it, the opportunity to move on.

But the truth was there between them all.
The past few years had been about creating a new truth. Ben chose to come back. He chose to destroy the First Order, and he oversaw its destruction with unparalleled dedication. He’d thrown himself into the Resistance. He’d thrown himself into his new job.

It went a long way.

Yet there were still times…

Rose would panic momentarily. Poe hesitated to speak. Finn flinched every once and awhile.

Leia and Han called occasionally just to hear his voice.

He had changed all their lives forever. Damaged them in subtle, meaningful ways…

And he lived with that.

He pushed it to the back of his mind every day so that that he could function. He worked to not remember.

Across the cabin, Rey stirred. As Ben predicted, she had drifted off. He watched her for a moment, transfixed as – as always - by her quiet elegance and the incredible strength stirring beneath it.

She makes it easier to forget.

The traitorous thought slipped through him, but Ben clenched his hands and resisted it. The dulcium ring pressed into his palm.

She is not here to soothe me.

But sometimes he forgot that as well.

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“I am very disappointed in you, Nurse Kaydel. I came down to your office to requisition some files and you couldn’t even control yourself long enough to open the cabinet. You seduced me and haven’t even given me what I came for. I feel very cheap –”

“I seduced you?!” Kaydel cut off her husband’s self-indulgent rambling with an indignant squeak.

“Of course you did,” Poe continued primly. “I mean what else would you call pushing me backwards onto your desk and whispering ‘permission to come aboard, Commander Dameron’ in that seductive voice thing you do. I’m only human after all – and I was simply trying to requisition some files -”

“NAKED. You came down to my office to requisition files naked!”

“I don’t know what you’re implying with that tone, young lady. This is my house and I should be allowed to requisition in the nude without you reading into it -”

Kaydel let out a theatrically long-suffering sigh.
“Oh well forgive me, Commander. I promise to exercise more self-control in the future.”

Poe grinned and yanked her giggling into his lap. “See that you do, Nurse,” he muttered affectionately into her neck. After a long moment of basking in the simple pleasure of intimacy with his wife, he spoke again.

“So… I really do need those files.”

“Which ones?” Kaydel asked, hopping off his lap to open her safe. She was still naked. Poe was momentarily lost in the view.

“Uh – the – uh – the ones –”

“Yeees?” she coaxed saucily.

Poe raised an eyebrow.

“Ben’s medical records – including his latest physical.”

“Alright.” She pulled the appropriate drive and plugged it into the computer.

“Tell me what I’m looking at,” Poe said as he snuggled Kaydel back onto his lap.

“These are the results from Ben’s physical a week ago. He’s in excellent shape. Organ function is above optimal, tissues are normal. His body is maintaining average rates of stress and aging – which is astounding considering what he does.”

“And the obscura?”

“Levels are still completely stable. No drop or increase according to his last blood test. Those are a real hassle, by the way – I have to use a fair amount of dulcium to even get the needle through and sometimes they still break off on him.”

“…What about his psych eval?”

Kaydel turned to look at Poe. His jaw was tight and his eyes seemed distant. She breathed a quiet sigh.

“I know you’re worried about him,” she whispered.

Poe rested his forehead on her shoulder. “I’ve seen the footage of his grandfather, Kay… It gave me nightmares for months.”

“Ben is not his grandfather. The obscura in his system is much more refined than the injections Anakin was taking in the 70s –”

“Yes. But it’s also more potent –”

“He hasn’t demonstrated any of the instability –”

“The other two did. The only other ones to survive the injections in Snoke’s test group - what were their names?”

Kaydel clicked through her data bank.

“Armitage Hux and… Christine Phasma. Their levels were extremely erratic. The obscura degraded
in their bloodstream, so they kept having to re-inject at high concentrations to maintain the enhancement. They were exposed to much more than Ben.”

She bit her lip as she scanned through the additional notes.

“Apparently they reacted negatively from the first injection. Both lost some pigmentation in their hair and skin… It caused sub-dermal bruising around the eyes for Hux. Phasma’s tissues became hypersensitive to light. She had to cover her entire body –”

“And Ben?”

Kaydel shook her head.

“No adverse reactions recorded…. Psychological evals during the experiments indicated minor irregularities, but they were classified as ‘within acceptable parameters.’ No interventions - other than a dulcium ring - were recommended.”

“What about his latest session with Maz?”

It took a moment to exit out of the First Order Med Logs and pull up the notes from Ben’s ongoing assessments.

“He’s still suffering from an incredible amount of guilt… The night terrors have become much less frequent – so she took him off medication for that. His sleep is…better – still not great. He is reluctant to be open with others due to his past and his current role as Kylo Ren and –” Kaydel broke off and leaned forward to read the notes more carefully.

“Now that is interesting…”

Poe shifted. “What – what is it?”

“Hold on – let me read it all the way –” She was silent for a few moments.

“So… according to this, Maz believes his relationship with his partner – Rey Niima - is very beneficial to him. She’s a stressor – but not a negative one. His interactions with her tend to provoke-”

She paused to double checked Maz’s wording.

“– ‘introspection and personal growth’ – but ‘he does not demonstrate any significant awareness’ of this – which is most likely the result of…” – she scrolled further, “– ‘intimacy issues, fear of rejection, and the fact that Rey is infatuated with his alter ego’. ”

“Why would Rey crushing on Kylo lead Ben to pull away? Ben is Kylo.”

Kaydel shook her head.

“No…Ben is Ben. Kylo is what Ben can do.”

“I’m still not following-”

“Ben has had too many people in his life who want him for his abilities and his titles and his bloodline… He’s never felt worthy of love or acceptance as just…Ben. He’s a prince. He’s wealthy. He’s genetically ideal for enhancements, and now he’s a kripping superhero. That’s all what he is – not who he is. That dichotomy – and the insecurities that come along with it - is what allowed Snoke to manipulate him in the first place.”
Poe’s fists tightened angrily on the arms of the chair.

“Leia and Han loved him… Paige and Rose and I loved him! Why the kriff weren’t we enough –”

“Snoke gaslighted him for years, Poe. You know that. He twisted everything… By the time Ben was 18, he didn’t know what to believe… And he didn’t have a purpose like you did. You and Paige were born to fly, Rose was hacking before she was in double digits…”

She considered her words carefully.

“Snoke gave Ben a purpose. Now Snoke is gone and Ben is trying to figure out who he is – what his purpose is – without him. It’s not a quick or easy process.”

Poe was silent for a long time.

“How’d you figure all this out?” he finally asked.

“I didn’t. I’ve been reading Maz’s notes since the beginning of his sessions. They’re her insights… I just explained them in layman’s terms.”

Her husband sighed heavily and Kaydel moved to fold more deeply into his arms. After several minutes, he spoke again.

“Sometimes I want to hate him – Ben - for all of it. But I can’t… Especially considering that - without him – Snoke would still be out there plotting world domination like some crazed cartoon villain.”

Kaydel absently stroked her fingers through his curls as he continued.

“And…sometimes I’m just so happy that he’s here – that he’s alive – that it doesn’t even matter. I’m just so glad to see him. But I can’t let that keep me from checking on him – from following his progress and his evaluations… I hold my breath every time we go over these records.”

“I know,” she spoke softly. “I know…”

Poe lifted his head a bit and kissed her deeply.

“You’re an amazing woman, Kaydel. I couldn’t do this without you.” The nurse felt tears begin to threaten her eyes, but her husband was already determined to lighten the mood.

“I think -” he grinned mischievously, “- that these naked meetings really facilitated a successful and collaborative environment. In fact - I’ve decided to make all future Resistance gatherings mandatory nude meetings.”

Kaydel threw her head back and laughed.

“Finn would be all for it –”

“Of course.”

“But I think you’ll have a hard time convincing Jyn and Cassian.”

“Oh Jyn would definitely do it. And Cassian would show up in 15 layers and a parka just to drive home his refusal.”

Kaydel began to laugh again, but suddenly sobered.
“Speaking of Jyn and Cassian… Don’t we have their children stashed somewhere in the house?” She reached for a blanket to cover herself.

He shrugged. “Relax. I put them to bed. Read them a story. Locked the door. They’re fine.”

“We’re talking about the twin offspring of Jyn Erso and Cassian Andor.”

Poe paused a moment. “You know what? You’re probably right. I’ll just… grab some snacks and a fire extinguisher. That worked last time-”

“Which makes them less likely to try it again.”

“Suggestions?”

“Markers. Clorox wipes.”

“Noted.” He turned to leave, but Kaydel shouted after him.

“You’re still naked!” She tossed the blanket at his face. “Put this on or we’ll be explaining to Cassian and Jyn why their children need therapy!”

Ben’s sleep was fitful. He didn’t remember closing his eyes, but he found himself locked in a familiar nightmare and was forced, once again, to relive his failures.

He recognized Chandrila.

He could hear Paige behind him counting to ten. He could feel himself running. Everything was so much bigger…

He stumbled into the world-famous Revan Library – a massive room three stories high – filled with the private literary collections of his esteemed family. Academics from all over the world applied for access.

It was part of Ben’s home. A perfect place to play hide and seek. A safe place…

Or so he’d once believed.

“You must be Ben Solo.”

There was a man in the library. He was tall and handsome. His gaze was kind.

“Yes, I’m Ben. You must be one of the scholars.” The boy’s eyes narrowed. “Where’s your badge?”

The man smiled.

“I lost it. Perhaps you could help me look?”

Ben shrugged. Paige wouldn’t find him here for a while.

“Ok.”
Ben paced the library, his eyes combed the floor for the red access badge.

“*You know… You remind me so much of your grandfather.*”

“*Grandfather Solo? I’m not like him. He laughs very loudly.*”

“*No… I mean Anakin Skywalker.*”

The boy’s head snapped up immediately.

“*I’m not allowed to know about him. No one will tell me. Mother even took down his portrait.*”

The man leaned back into his chair with a pensive look.

“*And why is that?*”

“He did something bad. But it’s a secret…”

“Yes…” The scholar was smiling in earnest now. “*It is a secret. But it’s not something bad… I’m sure your parents only told you that because they didn’t think you were ready for the truth.*”

Ben frowned.

“I’m eight years old. And I have top marks. Why wouldn’t I be ready?”

“…Perhaps… they underestimate you?” The man appeared casually thoughtful. Ben’s frustration reared its head.

“I am ready.”

“Yes… *Yes I think you are…*” He leaned forward, bringing himself face to face with the child. “*Would you like to know the secret, young Solo?*”

The boy nodded vigorously. His eyes shone with curiosity.

“The secret is…your grandfather Anakin…was a superhero.”

Ben crossed his arms angrily over his chest.

“*Are you making fun of me?!*” he demanded. “*Superheroes aren’t real!*”

“*Ah but what if I could prove it? Would you believe me then?*”

The boy considered for a moment.

“*Maybe…*” he conceded, before his gaze sharpened once more on the stranger. “*What is your name?*”

The man held out his hand and smiled again.

“*Snoke. Solomon Snoke.*”

Ben Solo - the real Ben Solo - wanted to scream.

He wanted to grab the boy. Tell him to run as far and as fast as he could. He wanted to call security like he should have all those years ago the moment he’d seen that the man was missing a badge. He wanted –
“Ben-”

He wanted it to be different.

“Ben!... Ben, wake up!”

He wanted to be less of a fool – less of a naïve child. He wanted -

“BEN!”

Something bounced off his face. His eyes flew open.

“Sorry for the rude awakening, but the captain just came on over the speaker. There was a massive oil spill on the runway at Canto Bight and we’ve been diverted to Crait. Wheels down in 5.”

“...Did you throw a pen at my face?”

“What?! Ben, are you listening to me? Gather your gear. We land in five minutes. The stewardess has already been by. She said they’re putting us up in a motel-”

“Rey. Did you. Throw a pen. At my face?”

Ben could feel the skin under his eyeball twitching.

“Why are you still on that? I just said that we’re being stashed in a motel and there’s only one room with one bed and I tried to tell her that you have a condition and needed a second bed-”

“PEN AT MY FACE!?”

Rey rolled her eyes.

“Yes. I did. And I probably saved your life. It’s very unsafe to land without your seatbelt on and I noticed that you were unsecured-”

“And the only thing you could think to do was hit me in the face with a pen?”

“No. I thought of several things. That was just the least likely to get me written up by HR. Now. Can you please gather those files and prepare to -”

“Wait - You told the stewardess I have a condition?!”

~~~*````*~~~~*````*~~~

After a hasty landing - and an excruciating five minutes of Rey trying to convince the airline representative of Ben’s (non-existent) medical abnormality (the symptoms of which apparently included foaming at the mouth, eye-watering stench, uncontrollable licking, and profuse nasal secretions) - Solo and Niima found themselves crowding in to a glorified closet at the Salty Rebel Inn.

There was a long awkward moment while the partners stared catatonically at the dingy mattress with a distinct dip in the middle. Outside a car backfired and a woman began shouting obscenities with impressive fluency.
Ben took in the crumbling plaster and curious carpet stains. He suppressed a shudder.

There was a coin machine attached to the headboard.

Rey leaned forward curiously. “What do you suppose that’s for?”

Her partner ignored that question entirely.

“I need a shower,” he mumbled before disappearing into the bathroom and locking the door.

There was a series of loud bangs and a distinct crack. Rey winced.

After a few moments, the sound of the shower starting carried through the doorway and Rey was forced to confront her surroundings without distraction. She noticed a small pamphlet on the table near the bed and reached over to read it.

!WELCOME TO CRAIT!

Below are a list of vendors and
attractions associated with

The Salty Rebel Inn

Just show’em your room key and
receive 10% off at any of these
fine establishments.

* ~~~~ *

The Crystal Fox Saloon

Crait and Barrel of Laughs Comedy Club

Mineral Planet: The Crait Historical Society

Crait Expectations Lounge

Monoskiing! A Crait Pastime!

Rey groaned.

“What even is my life right now?” she wondered aloud.

A hundred years ago Crait was a thriving mining town. Now it was a pun people lived in.

The clock on the wall read 11:30 PM and the bus to Canto Bight pulled out at 7 AM sharp. Grumbling, Rey tore into her suitcase and yanked out her pajamas.

It was going to be a long night…
Someday, Poe mused, these two are going to be amazing operatives.

It was his sole comfort as he stared down identical pairs of chocolate brown eyes from across the table. The Andor siblings had taken advantage of his compromised state and – through a combination of booby traps, teamwork (and probably dark magic) Poe found himself handcuffed to a dining room chair clad only in a blanket.

If he moved to pick the lock – the blanket would fall.

The twins had him right where they wanted him.

He cleared his throat.

“Ok. So I have your list of demands – may I say that the choice of red crayon was particularly inspired – and - in exchange for ‘going to bed’ and ‘my safe release’ – ”

Poe paused to raise both eyebrows.

“You would like five cookies –”

“Each,” Leo interrupted significantly.

“Five cookies each, chocolate chip waffles and ice cream for breakfast, the controllers for the PlayStation in your room, the location of your father’s firework collection, a promise never to tell either your father or mother about this incident, and the hand of my first-born daughter in marriage.”

Riez nodded solemnly.

“Papa says that’s how they made alliances in the old days. Leo and I have decided to ally with your family.”

“Ah… And I’m flattered – naturally. Now – which one of you will be marrying my daughter?”

“Riez will. He’s the oldest.”

“Right… right… I - I see… Well. Here’s the thing, guys. I don’t have a firstborn daughter-”

“Yes. We’re aware. You’ll need to make one.”

“I’ll need to make one?!” Poe could barely contain his snorts. “Guys… there’s no guarantee – I mean – that’s not really how it works –”

Leo’s adorable face lit with terrifying excitement.

“How does it work?”

Poe paled.

“KAYDEL! HELP!”
Rey Niima was a reporter.

She was there when they nabbed the Morbid Motel Strangler in Tatooine.

She led the police to the lair of the Corellian Cutthroat.

She was personally taken hostage in Kessel by a creep who never had the chance to get a cool newspaper name because he made the mistake of kidnapping her first and Kylo Ren had nearly killed him before turning him over to the authorities.

All of those cases (and countless others) involved crummy little motel rooms just like this one.

Therefore it was perfectly natural for her to do things like… check the mattress and the ceiling tiles for dead bodies.

She didn’t find any bodies.

But she did find a rat.

And she reacted like any other red-blooded female (or male) would when faced with a rodent of that size.

She screamed.

Ben came bursting through the bathroom door wearing the shower curtain which (in her heightened state of agitation) caused Rey to scream again.

“What happened!? Is everything alright!!?”

“Of course everything’s alright! I ALWAYS scream like that when naked men jump out at me!”

He rolled his eyes and tightened the curtain around him more securely.

“Why were you screaming in the first place?”

“Because there is a RAT underneath the bed!”

Ben let out a long sigh.

“Is that all?”

Rey’s mouth dropped open.

“Yes – THAT’s all.”

She watch dumbfounded as he reached under the bed, grabbed the rat, and threw the animal out the window.
“Next time call maintenance – and please - don’t scream… I thought you were being murdered.”

“You certainly came rushing out in a hurry. Worried about me, partner?”

“Not all,” he shot back, “I just promised myself a long time ago that if anyone was going to murder you – it would be me.”

Rey scoffed, “Gawd - You are so mature.” She bent down to retrieve the toiletries she knocked over in her scramble to escape the rat and Ben nearly choked on air.

“…Do your shorts say ‘Property of Kylo Ren’ on the a-”

“What are you doing looking at my shorts!?” Rey squeaked as she spun around.

“I-I-I – You- It was in my line of vision and – I –”

She started to giggle at his obvious distress and Ben found his eyes narrowing.

“Has Kylo Ren seen those shorts?”

“That’s none of your business –”

“Of course not. I was only wondering – simply because you’re my partner – and I don’t want you to find yourself in an uncomfortable situation –”

“What are you talking about?”

Ben moved closer. Close enough that he could feel her breath on his exposed chest.

Rey gulped. It was impossible to ignore how deliciously tall he was at this range… How incredibly fit he was. Most of him was wrapped in a shower curtain, but the visible bits were…

Mouthwatering.

Rey gulped again.

*Please get ahold of yourself, you thirsty little freak.*

“I wonder if you know what it does to a man to see his name stamped on a woman’s intimate curves like that.”

His voice was deeper than it had been a moment ago. Rey felt it all the way down to her toes.

“I… don’t think –” she shivered.

“You don’t think - do you. You don’t think about what man like Kylo Ren would do to that tight little body of yours if he really believed you wanted him to –”

Her knees physically gave out beneath her. She stumbled back against the wall. Ben continued to press forward.

“Kylo Ren is a gentleman,” she whispered – ashamed of how needy and desperate she sounded.

“*Kylo Ren is a monster. He would rip those shorts to shreds and mark you like a savage –”*

A single breathless moan escaped her lips before she could stop herself.
The effect on Ben was instantaneous. His pupils blew wide. Every one of his visible muscle groups tensed with leashed power.

Tendrils of pleasure began to curl up her spine. She bit her lip and -

A growl of raw frustration tore from his chest as Ben abruptly pulled away from her.

“You have no idea what kind of beast you’re tempting,” he finally spoke through clenched teeth.

Rey felt the spell of the last few moments shatter. Her skin was strangely cold...

“I think you should go finish your shower right now, Ben Solo,” she snapped, “because I refuse to argue with a man wearing a curtain.”

Ben emerged nearly a half hour later to find Rey sitting cross-legged on the bed. Upon hearing the door open she looked up.

“There’s no couch.”

“Excuse me?” He looked around in confusion.

“…For you to sleep on. I just realized there’s no couch.”

“…………….Oh.”

“…There’s a chair.”

“A chair?”

“It’s a… nice chair.”

“It’s practically a folding chair.”

“Well the other option is… not an option… so-”

“Fine. I’ll take the chair.”

Ben irritably stumbled over to the miniature chair in the corner and plopped his massive frame on the tiny seat. After about five seconds he realized that he would probably be more comfortable on a bed of nails.

Grumbling he reached for the remote control and turned on the TV.

“…I don’t really want to watch TV.”

“Well I do.”

“But…this is my room too and I don’t want to watch TV!”

“Well that’s tough! I don’t want to sleep in a chair!”

“Why are you yelling!”
“You started yelling!”

“No I did not!”

“Yes you did too!”

“Give me that remote!”

“Not on your life! This is my favorite episode of-” he quickly looked at the screen and cursed his rotten luck – “Gilmore Girls…”

Rey arched an eyebrow.

“You are just being difficult.”

Without another word she jumped up, snatched the remote, and switched off the television.

Quick as a flash Ben dove after her and began attempting to wrestle the clicker away.

“Give me that, Rey!”

“Never!”

Rey shoved him back and began trying to roll over but he quickly grabbed her and pulled her down on top of him. Before he could retrieve his intended target, however, Rey managed to slip out of his grasp and hit him with a pillow. She nearly made it off the bed entirely this time and was beginning to feel quite pleased with herself until she felt Ben’s hand close around her ankle - which incidentally led to her being pinned underneath his unusually large frame.

At this point they were both breathing very heavily. Ben held her wrists securely above her head. The full line of his body weighed her into the mattress with glorious pressure.

“This isn’t about a stupid remote,” he sputtered.

“Oh yeah?” she snarled. “Then why don’t you tell me what it’s about!”

“I think we both know it’s about –”

“SEX BA-BY! LET’S TALK ABOUT YOU AND ME!”

Ben groaned and scrambled for his phone. His entire face was bright red from his ears to his chin. Rey was tingling all over her body. She had no interest in examining why.

“Nice ringtone.”

“Eat me.”

The screen lit up with the name CASS and Rey stiffened.

Cass… Like Cassie? Like Cassandra?… Who is she? And why does she have THAT song as her –

“I have to take this,” Ben muttered before walking into the bathroom and slamming the door.

Rey was preparing to curl up on the bed and NOT think about Ben – or how his body felt – or who Cass was – or how she might be feeling his body -

"ANNIE ARE YOU OK! WILL YOU TELL US-"
She sighed and reached for her own phone.

“Yes, Rose?”

“So… How’s Crait?”

“I think I could have lived a full rewarding life without ever seeing it.”

Rose laughed.

“And are you and Ben getting along?”

Rey was silent. Rose’s eyes narrowed.

“Rey…”

“We were doing better before being cramped into this crime-scene-waiting-to-happen.”

“Tell me.”

“He… may or may not have been on top of me less than a minute ago-”

“Oh-my-gawd-FINALLY. Who made the first move? Was it you?”

“What – ROSE – stop being funny. It’s not like that-”

“Of course not.”

“We were fighting over the TV remote.”

“Yes. I can’t tell you how many people I’ve mounted in my quest for a remote.”

“Hilarious.”

“It is – it really is – but what happened to behaving like adults? Wasn’t that everyone’s big plan for this trip?”

“I may have… briefly lost sight of my objective. BUT I promise to do better… from this point on.”

“Excellent. That’s my girl.”

“Though – it would be a lot easier if HE was also committed to being less difficult. He’s been giving me a hard time since we landed. First about the ‘Property of Kylo Ren’ shorts – then about –”

“BEN saw your Kylo Ren shorts?!”

“Yes! And he went full Ben over them. Honestly, I don’t – oh… Rose? Rose are you ok?”

The noise coming through the phone sounded like a cross between wheezing and a barking seal.

“Oh-my-gosh-” Rose finally managed to cough out when she calmed down several minutes later. “It hurts. I laughed too hard and it hurts-”
“Have I told you lately how much I don’t enjoy your habit of changing my ringtone while I’m in the bathroom?”

Cassian shrugged on the other end of the line.

“You left it on the table at Poe’s. It was obviously an invitation.”

“Obviously,” Ben deadpanned.

His friend chuckled. “I’ll make this quick. The twins are holding Poe for ransom so I have to Skype and save him.”

If it were any other children Ben would have probably been shocked, but kidnapping Poe was far from the most interesting thing Leo and Riez had done.

“Take all the time you need.”

“We called the Grand Gungan. There wasn’t any problem holding your reservation another day, though we did have to pay for it. Your check-in is 11 and everything else is pretty much on schedule.”

Ben sighed heavily. “It’s good to know something is still going according to plan.”

“I bet. I hear you’re in Crait.”

“In Crait… In a closet… With Rey.”

“Sounds like a line from Clue.”

“It’s about to be-”

“She makin’ you crazy?”

“You have… no idea.”

“No – I do – I do…I -uh- had a coworker like that once.”

“Really?”

“Yeah... Drove me absolutely insane. Got under my skin. I lost sleep-”

“It’s like that – It’s definitely like that.” Ben rubbed his forehead in frustration. “So what’d you do about it?”

“I married her.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, I would REALLY like to know what you think. Just the smallest amount of
feedback can bring some serious joy to my little heart! I always respond to comments! THE kudos and feedback seriously DO drive my creative flow. THANK YOU to everyone who has commented so far. You guys rock my socks.

Correction: In my introduction to this work I mistakenly listed the title of "His Girl Friday" as "My Girl Friday" - Thankfully, the lovely DarthVictoriana noticed the error and was kind enough to point it out. (I fixed it!)

Additional Notes:
Ben actually has several dulcium rings – all of which look the same. He usually carries a spare (or two) because he does not want to risk being without it.

The reason a person who has been injected with obscura is weakened below the threshold of an average man is because without the effects of obscura actively bolstering their physical systems, the body begins to feel the true strain of utilizing enhanced abilities.

Ben still has all of his abilities when wearing the ring – he does not take it off to become Kylo. He does occasionally take it off AS Kylo if he needs a boost because he is stronger without it.

Ben gave full permission for Poe and Kaydel to monitor his records. They are not invading his privacy.

The full names of the Andor twins are:
Temiri Andor (Riez) who is named after Cassian’s grandfather (and Temiri is the little boy from Canto Bight in TLJ)
AND
Galen Andor (Leo) who is named after Jyn’s father.

The twins are very precocious and have displayed genius level intellect. They are 7 years old.

Jyn did not initially take Cassian’s last name. Eventually she hyphenated it (Erso-Andor) but most people still refer to her as Jyn Erso.

Maz Kanata is the official psychologist/psychiatrist for the Resistance. That is her full-time job.

The Resistance members of this universe tend toward a very “it takes a village” approach to child rearing. When possible – children are with their parents – but when parents are on a mission – children are with one of their unofficial “aunts and uncles” in the inner circle. That is why the Damerons have the Andor twins at their house in this chapter. Cassian is in Canto Bight and Jyn is away on another assignment. There is a lot of love and affection between them all and – as a result – the whole team ends up feeling more like family than anything else. (There are rooms for the kids in just about everyone’s houses) Ben, Rose, Poe, and Paige were raised this way – and Ben would have probably been just as fine with it as the rest of them if Snoke wasn’t actively turning him against his family for most of his childhood and adolescence.
Chapter Summary

Things heat up:
literally and figuratively
Where there is smoke, there is not always fire.
BB8 hits a wall.
Rey loses her shorts.
Ben loses his mind.
And Cassian is a lovable troll.

Chapter Notes

I am completely humbled and amazed by the incredible feedback you wonderful readers have given me in the form of comments and kudos. Thank you so much from the bottom of my heart. As always, feedback feeds both my morale and my creativity. So pretty please (if you can find it in your heart to do so) ...let me know what you think?

Just a reminder (because it comes up): The church Rey confessed to Ben in was St. Windu's.

And something to know - something that I thought I added, but - yikes - I didn’t (though I may go back and do so later): the parking lot of the Salty Rebel is littered with broken beer bottles and bits of glass (actually inspired by real life - believe it or not lol). Kudos to the fabulous Darth Victoriana for her sharp eyes!

(Update: I added it)

The sexual tension DEFINITELY kicks up several degrees in this one. I hope you like it!

General Hugs and Phasma Kisses to My Beta Reading Hottie of the First Order. Thank you for being emotionally supportive after that fender bender this week. You could have been grouchy -because it WAS my fault - but - as always - you were better than I could have hoped for.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rey looked oddly subdued when Ben emerged from the bathroom (after hanging up on Cassian), she seemed to be debating something in her head. He was prepared to just ignore her and return to his tiny sleep chair when-

“Who is Cass?”
Her eyes widened the moment she spoke. She had obviously not intended to.

Ben’s gaze sharpened in suprise.

“Awfully curious today, Ms. Niima.”

Lord but she hated that tone of voice.

“I was just making conversation. The women you choose to spend your time with are none of my business. I really don’t care who she is-”

“Who she is?”

“I said I don’t care -”

“Really? Because you seem a bit tense –”

“Well. I’m not. I am just…offended - On her behalf…Yes.”

Ben rested his chin on his knuckles. A smile he couldn’t quite suppress tugged at his lips.

“And…why are you offended on her behalf?”

“Because – that – the ringtone - Its rather clear that your relationship - er - the nature of your relationship. Every woman is entitled to her privacy –”

“Oh Cass and I don’t have a relationship. It’s more of a …” he appeared to search thoughtfully for the correct wording, “- desperate physical need. One that only I can satisfy.”

Rey experienced a totally unwanted mental onslaught of all the needs Ben Solo could potentially be satisfying.

Her entire body visibly shivered.

Ben grinned.

Rey wondered if the lunatic inevitably scheduled to commit homicide in this room could just hurry up and murder her now. Grasping at straws, she managed to counter with -

“I doubt Cass would be pleased with you sharing the intimate details –”

“Probably not. After all –” (the grin became more pronounced) “I’d hate for his wife to find out.”

Rey’s indignant glare was priceless.

“You are an actual brat,” she growled.

“I’m the brat?!” He shook his head and chuckled. “One of us is 6’3 and sleeping on a chair when there is a perfectly adequate double –”

“Oh for heaven sake, Solo! Just get in bed with me!”

Rey knew – objectively – what she’d been trying to communicate. Words never seemed to cooperate when she was flustered. Her latest outburst was certainly one for the scrapbook.

*Maybe I’ll just put an ad on Craigslist: “Tactless female journalist seeking immediate kidnapping to avoid further embarrassment in the presence of antagonistic thirst-trap partner. Salty Rebel Inn.*
Room 207.”

There was an uncomfortable pause and then:

“Are you sure?” Ben whispered – his eyes never leaving hers. He seemed almost…vulnerable.

*No. No, I’m not bloody sure, you horribly attractive moose! I want to evaporate and rematerialize in a blanket fort somewhere surrounded by copious amounts of chocolate and cheese. I’m not sure of anything when it comes to you and frankly I never have been.*

But what came out was:

“Well you’re not Kylo Ren. But I suppose it’s alright – considering the chair.”

Ben’s gaze hardened instantly.

“No,” he replied with a mirthless snort. “I’m just Ben.”

She nodded as he shifted to climb in next to her; carefully avoiding any contact.

_Sometimes I feel like ‘just Ben’ is more of a mystery than Kylo Ren._

*Crait was cold at night. (*Which was odd considering how unbearably hot it was during the day.*)*

The motel air conditioner sputtered with admirable dedication; dropping the temperature lower and lower with each passing second.

_Not for the first time, Rey wished she could sleep in shorts, but anything more than underwear on her lower half, was bound to get twisted in her fitful sleeping, so it was better to leave them off. She waited 30 minutes for Ben to fall asleep before carefully shucking them and stuffing them under her pillow._

_Several hours later, Rey continued to lay as still as possible, hoping her imitation of sleep would entice the real thing. Ben snored softly next to her, his body radiated a gentle heat she longed to press into, but she remained stubbornly glued to her side of the bed._

_Darkness was occasionally as unforgiving as it was deceptive. She found herself preoccupied over the last several days. First, with the mortification of confessing to Ben, and then with the pressing matter of Leia’s alleged treason… But now her desperate mind held her exhausted body captive._

_She would need to sort through some things or there would be no rest._

_Ben stirred and her constant awareness of him hummed. He was the center of all her latest distress. Their relationship had been eluding traditional definition for a while now, but the incident in the confessional signaled a cosmic shift._

_Before St. Windu’s, they had been on somewhat equal footing. Their days filled with verbal sparring and constant pranks - but no concessions. No profound losses. No unforgettable revelations…*
It was chaos with balance.

And now that balance was well and truly wrecked.

She wanted him.

It was her guiltiest pleasure. Her most indulgent secret. One she barely and rarely let even herself acknowledge.

And now he knew.

He knew.

The knowledge pulsed between them now – always. She could feel it every time he looked at her – every time he talked to her. It was subtle, but earth-shattering. There was an undeniable boost in the charisma of a man that knew he was speaking to a woman who was attracted to him.

Ben’s boost had been stratospheric (though she privately admitted some of that might be in her head).

Rey felt fundamentally vulnerable. The balance had to be restored.

… And there was one irresistibly obvious solution.

~~~*````*~~~*````*~~~*````*~~~

Across the bed, Ben was encountering some awareness issues of his own. He was far more experienced at fake sleeping and his technique was truly advanced.

Consequently… he had not been unconscious when Rey removed her shorts.

And now every part of him was decidedly awake.

He stifled a groan and wondered if she was aware - at all - of the torment she inflicted upon him. The actual agony of desperate want in direct conflict with everything from his common sense to his professionalism.

He wasn’t even sure if he liked her sometimes. And other times...

He liked her way too much.

She laid four measly inches from him wearing nothing but a t-shirt with cotton drawers and he was clinging to the edge of the bed like a virginal debutante.

The events of the last several days played through his mind as a rollicking farce. He was thoroughly ashamed of himself... They were partners and he had violated her trust. He couldn’t figure out what came over him.

You know exactly what came over you. A dark part of him reared it’s Cheshire grin.

It was her. Fascinating. Liberating. Invigorating. Intoxicating. Infuriating.

Her.

Rey
He could feel her shivering behind him; burrowing into herself and the blanket to find relief. Part of him wanted to let her freeze.

*Let her dreams of Kylo Ren keep her warm.*

But another part - a part of him treacherously close to his soul - wanted to wrap around her. Pull her close.

Show her tenderness.

And heat.

Resent warred fiercely with desire and Ben eventually allowed the familiar struggle to pull him into a restless sleep.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

BB8 flipped her pencil across the room in frustration.

Rey Niima and Ben Solo were high profile reporters for the Coruscant Chronicle. Ben Solo – it turns out – was kriffing *royalty* (in addition to being a senator’s son *and* the grandson of a president). Finding pictures and information about them should be a piece of cake!

But there was almost *nothing*. They were practically ghosts…

There was the helicopter rescue footage and *the picture* (of course) of Rey unconscious in Kylo Ren’s arms. But… she wasn’t exactly in clear profile most of the time… and cellphone videos were not great for capturing fine details and features.

Spotting Ms. Niima on the street a few days ago and correctly guessing her identity had been the result of sheer dumb luck (and some light stalking). Rey didn’t even have a bio or byline picture on the Chronicle website and neither did her elusive partner, Ben.

It made sense… in an odd way.

Investigative journalists would not benefit from widespread recognition, especially a pair like Niima and Solo who were known for their undercover work.

BB8 sighed contemplatively.

*Rey and Ben could be actively seeking anonymity.*

But still…

*How were they able to be *this* anonymous?*

It shouldn’t be possible. Not in today’s world. Not with cell phones and paparazzi everywhere. Not considering the modern obsession with royalty or the Kylo Ren frenzy…

Images of Rey were primarily fan art (most of which didn’t even look like her) and finding a picture of Ben Solo after the age of 15 was less likely than finding nuns at a disco.

“What is your trick?” she wondered aloud.
BB8 might have been surprised to discover that the secret to Solo and Niima’s persistent anonymity was not a *What*… but a *Who*.

Rose Tico.

When Ben disappeared, Rose had thrown herself into facial recognition software and sub-web data tracking. She wrote program after program to scan networks for his face, for mentions of him…for anything that could lead to him.

In the end, Ben reached out to her and the programs were not instrumental in bringing him home.

But they had proved *very* useful in other ways.

Rose could track, block, and neutralize images or mentions of virtually anyone.

As a result, most members of the Resistance enjoyed a relatively sparse digital footprint. Rey’s status as an investigative journalist and her constant proximity to Resistance personnel (notably Ben) earned her a slot on the blackout list.

No one’s identity, however, took more time to curate than Ben’s or Rey’s. Pictures disappeared off drives. Stories were edited on their way to print, blogs crashed…

You simply could not photograph or write about Solo or Niima and expect to get it anywhere near the internet.

(There were mentions here and there, of course. Wiping them completely would be very suspicious. And there was no way to entirely block Rey’s online presence after her association with Kylo became a fandom… but even the voracious ReyLo-Riders had trouble tracking down a clear shot.)

BB8 remained firmly unaware of this. The more she dug – the less she knew. Her meager search results glared smugly from her laptop. The young blogger let out another miserable groan.

“What are you still doing up, Bea?”

She turned to see her father’s sharp eyes regarding her curiously from the office door.

“I’m trying to track down something – *anything* – on two reporters…Both are technically public figures, but they might as well be local lunch ladies for all I’ve been able to pull up on them.”

Katoo leaned casually against the wall – mildly intrigued.

“Names?”

“Ben Solo and Rey Niima”

Her father barked out an incredulous laugh.

“*You mean - Leia Organa’s son and the Kylo Ren girl?!!*”

“Well yes I-”

The laughs were fuller this time and lasted a solid minute. BB8 crossed her arms.

“I can’t imagine *what* is so funny,” she pouted.

Katoo wiped tears from his eyes and bent to place a sweet kiss on her forehead.
“Give it up, kiddo. You’ve got a better chance of finding Amelia Earhart.”

There were several concerns that patrons of the Salty Rebel Inn could legitimately raise.

The heat did not work. At all. Ever.

There were definitely mice and probably snakes.

The showers had exactly two settings: ‘Mordor’ and ‘the tears of Queen Elsa’

A persistent, vaguely organic odor permeated every single room.

BUT…

Never let it be said that the good Ol’ Salty Rebel did not have a state – of – the art fire alarm system.

Considering the general condition of the motel, one might be forgiven for assuming that the smoke detectors were equally dilapidated.

It was this erroneous assumption which led guest Watto Sleazingham to callously light up a cigar in his poorly ventilated bathroom.

The alarm (an excruciating blend of ‘air raid siren’ and ‘dying cat’) pierced through the building like the last trumpet of the apocalypse. Screams, shouts, and a stunning array of profanity erupted in all directions. Weirdly, a car alarm also started going off.

Ben had never been a believer in spontaneous human levitation, but he was seriously reconsidering his position on the matter when he opened his eyes to see the un-shorted body of Rey Niima sailing over him like soft-core Tinkerbell.

He blinked (still not totally processing the fact that his partner was airborne).

*Are those Super Mario underwear?*

Rey landed with an inelegant crash (it wasn’t every day she had to vault a human tree two seconds after being woken up by ear-splitting chaos) and began frantically digging through the classified case files. Ben fell off the bed next to her and scrambled to his feet.

“What are you doing?!” he shouted as he grabbed for his phone. “That’s a fire alarm! We have to go! Now!”

“The files! We can’t lose them if there’s a fire!”

“We can’t read them if we’re dead! Come on!”

“No I-”

Rey found herself levitating a second time as Ben hauled her into his arms. She was so stunned by his effortless speed that she almost didn’t notice what was going on.
Ben Solo was about to carry her outside. In her *underwear*.

She let out a horrified shriek and jerked – momentarily dislodging herself. But her partner was way faster (and - um *stronger*) than she expected. His large hand gripped her thigh and hoisted her up around him again. He didn’t even break stride.

Only this time they were pressed front to front.

He’d wrapped her legs around his middle and was supporting her backside with his arm. Somehow her arms had gone from ‘seeking escape’ to ‘circling his neck.’

...She was bloody *riding his hips* out the door.

In her kripping *Super Mario underwear*.

Before she could even begin to process all of that, Rey registered a splintering crack.

Her mouth dropped open.

“You kicked down the door!”

Ben ignored her. The hand he hadn’t used to open the door was furiously messaging Cassian.

*[FIRE ALARM. SET-UP? PLEASE ADVISE.]*

“Hold on,” he muttered, his grip tightening.

Rey opened her mouth to reply – but all that came out was a gasp.

“You’re NAKED!” she sputtered – completely mortified that she’d only just noticed (though – to be fair – there was a lot going on).

“I’m wearing pants!” His eyes briefly darted downward and he grinned. “Unlike you.”

Rey could physically feel the blush burning pyres on her cheeks.

“Why are you *only* wearing pants?” she squeaked.

It was because he’d knocked over the flower vase (with strange food coloring water) on his way to the bathroom in the middle of the night and used his shirt to gather the pieces and mop up the mess. More-Lucid Ben would have probably grabbed a towel, but Half-Asleep Ben thought using his shirt was a great idea.

Totally-Awake-and-Surrounded-By-Half-Naked-Rey Ben enthusiastically approved.

He shrugged. Rey felt it everywhere.

“I’m hot,” he whispered.

Her body responded in wholehearted agreement. She had to physically restrain herself from moving against him.

“Don’t you mean you *were* hot?” Her voice was trembling. It was probably smoke inhalation (an excuse that would be more convincing if there was actually smoke).

Ben grinned again and – despite her state of undress – Rey suddenly felt hot as well.
He was so close. *Too close.*

Not nearly close enough.

“What do you think?” he drawled.

Rey was past thinking. She was eyeball deep in feels. She could *feel* his corded muscles moving against her legs. She could *feel* her body reacting to him. And currently there was nothing but a thin piece of cotton between his skin and her *reactions*.

Soon he would *feel* them too.

She needed to move.

Ben noticed his partner beginning to struggle again, but his fingers dug in and held her firm. He tried not to think about how utterly glorious it all felt.

She drew back accusingly.

“You’re not wearing shoes, Rey.” He motioned ‘around’ with his chin. “There’s broken glass everywhere.”

Sure enough, broken beer bottles and other sharp unmentionable bits glittered menacingly throughout the parking area.

*The universe is trying to ruin my life.*

Firemen and dazed guests wandered anxiously around the lot. Ben leaned back lazily against a truck and wiggled a bit to settle in. Rey hissed as a spike of sensation pierced her core.

His eyes flew to hers.

“Leg cramp,” she wheezed pitifully. The tingles were *not* stopping.

His brow furrowed in concern. “Do you want me to rub it?”

*GAWD YES PLEASE*

She shook her head frantically.

“No. I- I will -uh – handle it later.”

*Much later. Alone. Where no one – especially you - can hear me scream your name.*

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“I’m on it,” her voice crackled back.

A few tense minutes later, the receiver lit up again.

“Threat unlikely, sir. We got one cranky guy smoking in the shower. No hostiles.”

Cassian breathed a sigh of relief.

“Did you pull the tapes to confirm?”

“Affirmative. Sending now.”

“Copy that.”

He switched off the comm and rubbed his eyes. The last thing they needed was a set-up. Fire alarms were one of the oldest (and most effective) tricks in the book.

You could disorient a target. Separate a target from their valuables. Draw out a target...

The possibilities were endless. People tended to panic and make mistakes when under threat in large groups. An experienced operative thrived in that type of chaos.

Ben was right to be suspicious. Thankfully his suspicions were nothing more than that.

Still... it never hurt to be too careful.

Standard procedure was to pull available surveillance from the last 10 minutes. Cassian would watch the old footage while Tallie monitored the live feed on-site. A few clicks later found him dutifully perusing the (slightly sped up) video from outside Ben’s room. Everything looked normal...

He reached over to take a sip of his water -

And promptly sprayed it all over the keyboard.

“What the -”

His fingers fumbled for the mouse as he continued to cough uncontrollably from water inhalation. The images scrolled backward and played again.

“Noo…”

He rewound it. Watched again. Paused and looked closer.

Are those Super Mario underwear?

Cassian threw his head back and cackled hysterically.

“Ben Solo, you DAWG!”

Ben’s phone vibrated in his hand. He glanced down to read the message from Cassian.
[NO THREAT. ALL CLEAR... REY LOOKS COLD. WHERE IS YOU SHIRT? CURRENT TEMP. IN CRAIT: 46° F ... SHOULD I INITIATE INVESTIGATION INTO WHO STOLE YOUR CLOTHES?]

He paled.

Kriffing ‘standard procedure’

Ben’s fingers flew across the screen – but it was too late. Cassian’s next message confirmed his worst fears.

[SENT FOOTAGE TO POE AND FINN FOR ADDITIONAL THREAT ANALYSIS.]

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think! Comments and kudos feed my creative juices!

Additional Notes:

The ‘President’ Ben is the grandson of... is Padme.
Smooth Operators

Chapter Summary

Rey gets a piece of the puzzle.
The Andor Twins are at it again.
Kaydel starts a story, but doesn't finish it.
Ben and Rey arrive in Canto Bight and things get a little...

Tight.

Chapter Notes

I know this one is a little later than usual. School is out and (after a few zombified days of recovery) I’m back!

I am over the moon at the continued love for this fic! Every comment and kudos are like actual gold to me. I read them a LOT. (And I read them to my husband. He's very grateful.)

THANK YOU so very much for every instance of support. You all are genuinely incredible. Your feedback IS the fire to my creative engine.

Also: I don't just write fanfiction, I also consume it voraciously. I saw one of my favorite authors do this and I thought it was a fantastic idea! So, if any of you are also authors, let me know. I am always looking for something new to read!

Some Quick Reminders and Important Notes:

I do reference Stephen King's Carrie very briefly...but also in kind of an ironic way...You'll see.

Leia and Rey do know each other (details to come) but (as mentioned previously) they know each other well enough that Rey occasionally texts Leia updates about Ben.

I tend to keep the medical stuff pretty vague - I know a bit, but not a ton. Please kindly suspend disbelief if necessary.

Bast (or occasionally Bastet) is the cat goddess of ancient Egypt. (Bastet is also the name of my cat; who believes herself to be a goddess.)

This chapter contains more backstory; specifically the beginning of Kaydel and Poe's romance. I am always VERY nervous about these chapters, but you all have been wonderful so far. I know the majority of you are die-hard Reylo-ers (like me) - no worries, there is definitely Reylo in this chapter. In fact there will never be a chapter without Reylo.

You finally meet Leia and Paige and...other people this chapter!

Finally...
To the Most Adorable Beta in the History of Betas: I think its adorable that your name is Adam and my name is Rae and we get to love each other every day. (Rhyming?) Thank you for saying that everything was just better with me. I stole your line and put it in my fanfiction. Because it was better with you. (And so am I. Always.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ben was scowling at his phone for some reason and Rey was well past caring.

She was very exposed in a very public setting (straddling a very delicious – if not infuriating – man) and insanity was swirling all around her.

But she was not afraid. Nor was she anxious or apprehensive.

She should be. All the ingredients to inspire fear (and anxiety and apprehension) were in place:

...strange location, threat of fire, potential loss of property, compromised clothing, disorientation, disreputable looking strangers everywhere, forced immobility due to glass menagerie in parking lot...etc.

Yet, amidst it all, there was a strange peace sitting low in her chest and after a moment she realized –

It's him.

He was huge, but never threatening. His anger could burn the very air around her, but it never cowered her...

She’s not afraid because he’s here. He’s holding her.

And she has always felt safe with Ben.

(Not emotionally, of course. Her emotions went haywire from the first moment she laid eyes on him.)

But the part of her that grew up afraid… the little girl who hid in closets and learned to fight before her scrawny limbs were even steady…

That little girl felt safe with him.

He was still scowling at his phone. He didn't see her staring. He didn't see her emotions go completely sideways again.

He didn’t hear his mother’s voice echoing in her head from a conversation long ago...

"Rey, love doesn’t mean that you can’t do everything yourself...It simply means that you don’t have to. Real love – can only make you more. It will take everything, but you will never be less."

She didn’t want to think about it – any of it – now. She didn’t want to think about why she was remembering those words, or why she felt safe, or why she felt off balance -

Or why being held in Ben Solo’s massive arms was the best thing she had ever felt in her life.
She just wanted to hold on to him for a moment.
So – for a moment – she did.

~~~*\~~~*\~~~*\~~~*\~~~*\~~~

“Daddy rescued Uncle Poe, so we never actually agreed to go to sleep.”

“Oh yes you did. I heard –”

“No.” Leo clarified smugly. “We agreed to go to bed. We did not agree to sleeping.”

Kaydel crossed her arms and planted her feet.

“Surrender, Andors, or I will tell your parents and there will be no waffles.”

“There’s no need for that, Aunt Kay.”

Riez nodded in agreement.

“We have decided to give in… In exchange for a bedtime story.”

“It’s 1 AM.”

“Yes,” Riez’s eyes glittered. “Aren’t you tired, Aunt Kay? Wouldn’t you like to sleep?”

Leo adopted a calculating puppy face.

“Please?” he whimpered.

Kaydel collapsed on the couch and the twins scrambled over to claim the best spots on her lap.

“You two are evil,” she groaned as she kissed their foreheads. They giggled. It was not the first time someone made that declaration.

“We love you too, Aunt Kay!”

“No. I don’t want to hear it. It’s clearly lies.”

Leo looked downright offended.

“We would never lie to you!”


“Oh. Well I feel much better now.” She sighed. “What story am I telling tonight?”

“Tell us the story of you and Uncle Poe!”

“No.”

“Why not?”

*Because its X-Rated.*
“It not really appropriate.”
“I won’t tell Mom.”
“Me neither.”
“I’m sorry, but there is no way –”
“We swear to go to bed at curfew for the next 10 visits.”

Once upon a time there was a beautiful lady named Kaydel who lived in huge mansion …”

The twins snuggled in closer as Kaydel launched into a heavily edited version of her – uh – courtship with Poe.

*************

About 10 ½ Years Ago
*************

Dulathia was the richest province in the entire country. Its ancient manors and sprawling estates were nestled tastefully between country clubs, polo fields, and private fitness spas. The area reeked of old money and boundless privilege. Sparkling parties lit up the meticulously manicured landscape night after night. Champagne flowed freely and extravagance was the main event.

The true jewels of Dulathia, however, were its carefully guarded and methodically crafted crop of debutantes.

Marriage to a Dulathia Deb guaranteed political and financial success. They were the ultimate status symbol; beautiful, powerful, wealthy, and equipped with a lifetime of social training… Every man in the world wanted one.

It was downright barbaric.

But no one dared oppose the powerful dynasties whose reach extended far beyond the gated walls of their gilded haven.

So the glittering parties and archaic marriage mart continued with minimal interference. The ‘precious jewels’ (daughters) of the ancient families were bartered to the highest bidder behind closed doors to men whose ascent in society would soon be assured.

It was at one such glittering party where one such jewel found herself breaking away from the festivities to ponder the awful monotony of her existence…

Kaydel Ko Connix was bored out of her ever-loving mind.

17 years-old and already suffocating under the weight of her family’s unpleasant expectations, Kaydel was a mere five months from freedom.

Her eyes scanned the dark horizon and, not for the first time, she wondered if she could simply… Run.
Just five more months. She repeated it over and over in her head. Five more months and they can’t touch you. Five more months and you’re free.

The Connix family was one of the First Four Families of Dulathia. Kaydel’s birth had been marked by an actual parade – complete with floats and fireworks.

Unfortunately, her parents, Kellan and Kyrana Connix, met an untimely tragedy a mere 6 weeks later. The last of the Connix line was left alone in the world with three conditions to define her reality.

**Condition 1:** Her nurse, Harter Kalonia, would remain with her as a secondary guardian and could not be let go for any reason short of radical negligence or a felony.

**Condition 2:** Kaydel would be raised in the custody and primary guardianship of her maternal uncle’s family, The Sindians

…and finally

**Condition 3:** Kaydel would assume complete control of her family’s estate and power of attorney upon the occasion of her 18th birthday.

Which was still five months away…

“You can do it, Kay,” Harter’s voice whispered through her subconscious providing comfort and strength.

The first 16 years of Kaydel’s life were idyllic. She was removed from the cavernous halls of Connix Court and installed at Arkanis Manor before her first birthday. The Sindian family dutifully provided for all her needs (courtesy of the Connix fortune, of course).

Harter was a devoted caretaker and loved the young heiress fiercely. Kay’s interest in medicine appeared around the age of ten and Harter brought in additional tutors to train her bright charge in basic first aid.

By the time she was 15, Kaydel’s fascination with the human body and science of medicine surpassed the level of ‘interest.’ Her wealth allowed her to shadow surgeons and world-famous doctors around the world. She greedily assimilated anything they were willing to teach.

The Sindian family ignored their odd orphan niece and her medical pursuits for the most part, and she did not miss their company. Uncle Birren and Aunt Maxine were self-obsessed and shallow, while cousin Carise, though beautiful, proved to be manipulative and cruel from a young age. She was grateful to them for their distance and preferred to live and learn with Harter.

Then she turned 16 …and her aunt and uncle turned their calculating gaze upon her. Suddenly she had obligations, itineraries, and the constant appraisal of overly familiar strangers...

As the last living heir to the Connix fortune, Kaydel was a valuable pawn. Carise was already deeply immersed in the Dulathia social scene. She took almost perverse pleasure in dragging her young cousin to an endless parade of events and discussing her like a carnival oddity (“Spends all her time in an operating room, the little freak. Hahaha!”).

Parents and ‘prospectives’ assessed her like a prize horse and more than once she found herself hiding to avoid interactions that subtly crossed the line.

Tonight was no exception. Some upstart son of some CEO of Some Important Company had begun
following her around the ballroom with an unpleasant (but sickeningly familiar) look in his eye.

Entitled.

Entitled to whatever he wanted.

Entitled to her.

She bolted.

And now here she was, crouching on the balcony of her own home, hoping that no one would think to look for her out here…

That was when she first laid eyes on Poe Dameron.

There was a noise – whimpering from the bushes below. It sounded like a wounded animal. Kaydel gripped her fancy evening gown and hurried down the stairs-

Two things were immediately obvious:

1. This was the most attractive man she had ever seen and –
2. He was bleeding profusely all over the flower beds.

“Hello, Angel”

Kaydel blinked. Twice.

The stranger grinned.

“I swear its worse than it looks,” he drawled woozily. Then he frowned. “I mean – looks worse than it is -”

Kaydel tilted her head and assessed his wound.

“No. I think you had it right the first time.” Her fingers gently prodded the area and he hissed sharply. “Internal bleeding I’d say. You need medical attention immediately.”

She reached for her bag, but his bloody hand shot forward and seized her wrist.

“No hospitals.”

A hysterical snort escaped her lips. This was the most ridiculous conversation she’d ever had.

“Sir. I have limited experience with strangers bleeding to death on my lawn, but I do know medicine. You will bleed to death if you are not treated within the next –” her eyes darted to his side again, “-twenty minutes.”

“A clever …Angel…” His body began to crumple. Kaydel caught him at the last moment and had the wind thoroughly knocked out of her.

“Get me to Chandrila,” he whispered.

And then he was totally unconscious. On top of her.

“Great.” She gritted her teeth and rolled him off. Her gown was stained with blood. She looked like kriffing Carrie.
Her gaze scanned the area and – thankfully – spotted a familiar face.

“Ezra!”

Harter’s teenage godson just started his first night shift as a groundskeeper. He was reattaching some damaged party lights in the gazebo. His eyes widened in terror when he saw her stumbling toward him.

“Miss Kaydel! Oh my Go-”

“It’s not my blood, Ezra. You’ve got to come with me – and do exactly as I say.”

Ezra was quite a driver. Chandrila Castle was on the farthest outskirts of Dulathia – almost in Coruscant and miles from the rest of high society…

The young groundskeeper managed to get them there in 9 minutes. Kaydel deliberately ignored the speedometer. She didn’t want to know.

Her car must have tripped an alarm on the way up the drive, because there were 15 people charging toward them from all directions when Ezra finally skidded to a stop at the front door.

The next several minutes were a blur. They were swept through the bowels of Chandrila and deposited in a miniaturized hospital – right on the grounds.

“My life has never been this interesting,” Kaydel mused aloud as the staff frantically paged for a doctor. One of the aides was speaking to the tall hairy man who carried the stranger in from the car.

“-but Doctor Ackbar is a half hour out. There was an incident in Coruscant-”

Kaydel’s head jerked up.

“He doesn’t have a half hour! He doesn’t even have ten minutes. He needs to be stabilized –”

The tall man turned toward her for the first time.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“She’s a doctor. She found him in the bushes at Arkanis Manor,” the groundskeeper interrupted from the corner. “Don’t let that baby face fool you. She’s had lots of training.”

Ezra also lied like a champ. Apparently.

The tall man seemed to mull the situation a moment. His gaze met hers again.

“Can you do it? Can you treat him?”

Maybe.

But if she didn’t try…

“Yes.”

~~~*~~~~*````*~~~~*````*~~~

It wasn’t pretty….and he would likely have the scar for the rest of his life.
But it was enough to keep him alive until Dr. Ackbar arrived to take over.

Kaydel sat shaking in the corner for what felt like hours afterward. Ezra was on the phone with his godmother trying to offer some sort of explanation and begging her to cover for them.

“She thinks I’ll probably lose my job – for leaving,” he said after hanging up and sliding down beside her on the floor.

“You’ll have one here.”

Both teens looked up to see the tall man coming toward them. He stooped down to Kaydel’s level. “You saved his life, young lady,” he paused and took a deep breath, “I don’t believe for a moment you’re a day over 18-”

“I’m 17.”

The man laughed. “Of course...” His face became serious again. “We owe you one.”

He held out his hand.

“Name’s Bacca.”

Kaydel opened her mouth to respond when an explosion of crashes and shouts erupted down the hall.

“Is he awake?! POE! POE!”

“He wasn’t responding on the comm. We lost him at Arkanis. No one’s seen him. How could he be here?!”

“I’m reading the same texts you are, Paige-”

“POE!”

Three women rushed into the room at once. The two younger ones were clearly related – sisters probably – their features shared a telling symmetry.

The third was instantly recognizable.

Senator Leia Organa

Several things clicked into place.

Resistance.

The noise woke the man on the bed – Poe – who opened his eyes to an awning of worried female gazes.

His lips quirked saucily.

“Don’t worry, ladies. I still have the important parts.”

One of the sisters rolled her eyes.

“He’s fine.”

The other one flicked him on the nose.
“What does ‘radio for back-up’ even mean to you! When I say those words – what do you actually hear?”

“OW! Kriff, Paige! Was that necessary!?”

“What happened?” Leia’s voice cut through the bickering.

Poe rubbed his head.

“I don’t know. There were like – booby traps – I mean I was expecting the safeguards – but intel never mentioned flying knives – or the extra muscle. Something was going down tonight. There was way more than we expected. They didn’t make me, but I took damage... and there was... an angel-” he lurched forward suddenly and began to scan the room. “A girl – I swear there was a girl-”

One of the sisters – not Paige – rolled her eyes again.

“There’s always a girl with you.”

“It’s true,” Bacca spoke up from the foot of the bed. Poe groaned.

“Really, man – you too? Come on-”

“I meant –” he cut Poe off with an impatient gesture, “about your angel.” The room turned to look at Mr. Bacca. “The girl saved you. Dragged you to the Castle. Stabilized you. You’d be dead now if she hadn’t.”

“What girl?”

“Hello,” Kaydel piped up from the floor.

Five pairs of eyes fell on her at once.

“I’m the Angel – er – girl. I’m the girl.” She waved stupidly.

Paige was the first to speak.

“So... you meant like a literal girl – like a kid.”

“I’m 17!”

“Great. She’s a minor.”

“She’s seen like...a lot. All of our faces – the inside of Poe –”

“Ew.”

“Can we focus!” Poe shouted from the bed. “Our window is rapidly closing here. I don’t know how we’re going to get back in. Arkanis is a kriffing fortress –”

“I can get you in.” The full attention of the room fell on the mysterious ‘angel’ once again.

Paige raised an eyebrow.

“...For money? Are you a maid?”

“She did come in with a groundskeeper,” Mr. Bacca offered.
Kaydel shook her head.

“I live in Arkanis Manor. I’m Kaydel Connix.”

The silence that met her statement could have felled an aircraft carrier.

Leia paled.

“Oh my God,” she whispered, “you look just like your mother.”

“Poe what did you do!” the still unidentified sister was shouting.

“What do you mean ‘what did I do’- I got stabbed and shot -”

“Grazed-”

“Still counts-”

“You kidnapped a Dulathia Deb!”

“And not just any Dulathia Deb – a Connix – the Connix – the Billion Dollar Orphan –”

“Knock it off Paige – she’s right there,” Bacca growled.

“What are you talking about!?” Poe shrieked indignantly. “If anything SHE kidnapped ME!”

“I kidnapped you!?” Kaydel jumped to her feet in fury. “You’d still be bleeding all over the orchids if it wasn’t for me!”

Poe drew back – momentarily stunned silent. (An occurrence so rare that it shocked the rest of the room into silence along with him.)

“I like her,” Unidentified Sister stated matter-of-factly.

“Rose,” Leia warned with a tone (finally speaking the girl’s name). The senator turned back to Kaydel and fixed her with a penetrating gaze.

“Why would you help us? You don’t know what we’re after. You don’t know who we are –”

“You’re the Resistance.”

“I swear we are the worst kept secret in the country,” Paige observed. Kaydel ignored her and continued.

“It was easy enough to figure out… I know where I am. I know who you are -” she motioned to Leia. “I know the Resistance fights against government corruption – against treason and… my uncle …is not a moral person. I’ve spent 17 years in his house. The three of them – they aren’t the type of people who worry about things like wrong and right.”

She chewed her lip nervously before continuing.

*Time to put all the cards on the table.*

“And…Harter Kalonia is one of my guardians. She was one of you.” Kaydel looked at the tall man significantly. “I believe she’s your ex-girlfriend… You’re Juan Bacca - correct? Harter says they call you ‘Chewie’-”
The man in question blushed furiously. Leia began to laugh.

“Welcome to the Resistance, Kaydel Connix.”

The next several months were completely surreal.

The landmark 18th birthday came and went, but Kaydel’s original plan of breaking away from her old life had changed.

She embraced her circumstances with gusto – no longer suffocating.

Now she was making a difference.

Poe (after a grumpy recovery) and Paige moved into Arkanis as Kaydel’s ‘dear friends from America’ and the three of them set about wrecking a centuries-old web of political influence.

Paige’s beauty soon caught the eye of several trust fund brats. She was a formidable distraction. Carise hated her immediately.

Kaydel and Poe openly hinted that they were a couple and no one questioned their frequent disappearances (to bug an office or clone a hard drive). Poe was uncomfortable about it. His cover age was 20, but - in reality - he was five years older than her – and (at least for the first five months) she was underage.

Still…it was necessary (and always strictly professional). Kaydel’s knowledge of Dulathia’s estates made everything easier and their success rate skyrocketed.

Despite her persistent awareness of Poe’s unreasonable attractiveness (I mean really. Who looked that good bleeding in a flower bed. It was ridiculous), Kaydel learned early on to ignore the effect he had on her.

Because he had that effect on everyone.


It didn’t matter. Poe could generate chemistry with a coma patient. He had more charisma than an army of used car salesmen.

Developing a crush on a man like that was a one-way ticket to tears and heartbreak. He would burn her up from the inside out and never even notice.

Kaydel was not a wildly emotional woman. Her feelings ran deep and strong, but she was pragmatic and practical. Logic was always a better compass than desire.

Poe Dameron could break someone else’s heart. He wasn’t getting anywhere close to hers.

That’s not to say that she was distant or cold with him. Quite the opposite, she embraced his friendship and comradery with genuine enthusiasm. Their relationship was pleasant and playful. Poe flirted with her, of course – the same way he flirted with 80-year-old matrons and giggling little girls. No heat. No intent. Just charm.
It was a different story with women he pursued. She knew that first-hand.

Dr. Ackbar granted her free reign of the Chandrila Hospital wing and – after falling asleep in the records room – she inadvertently scored front row seats to a bona-fide Poe Dameron Seduction.

It was no secret that Chandrila’s sweet little secretary was quite affected by the young pilot’s legendary magnetism.

Kaydel stayed hidden when she first heard his voice. Poe and Liz (Lyn? Lee? What was her name?) were smoldering intently at one another and the content of their conversation left no doubts as to its conclusion. Surely they were about to move to a more discreet location and –

Nope.

They were gonna do it right here. On the front desk. At full volume.

(I mean, it was the middle of the night, but still – didn’t Lou (Les? Lane?) realize that she never left? That she was 30 feet away behind a bookshelf in the archives trying to unhear everything she was definitely hearing.)

Kaydel sighed. She couldn’t really blame poor Len (Lei? Lia?). If Poe looked at her that way, she’d let him bend her over a desk too.

He was speaking to her – to the secretary. Whispering things – wicked, wonderful things – the whole time. Making her whimper and moan and writhe in a way that would probably ruin her for any other partner.

Kaydel decided then and there that she could never – ever – go to bed with Poe Dameron.

The woman beneath him was sobbing – desperate. He had pleasured her into a primitive frenzy. Kaydel could feel every sound they made vibrating over her body. She throbbed helplessly.

A lover like that was addictive. One taste could never satisfy. She would need him. Crave him. She had no illusions about it. She knew herself better than most.

She would be like all the others before her. Left with only a memory to soothe her aching body… her aching heart.

Her resolve solidified.

Poe doesn’t look at me that way… will never look at me that way. At the very least, I won’t be tempted.

It was a comforting thought in an extremely uncomfortable situation. She clung to it like a lifeline as the secretary screamed his name.

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Three months after her 18th birthday, Kaydel faced her first true temptation.

To be fair, it wasn’t her fault the owner of the house they were bugging decided to leave the party (and his wife) to meet up with his girlfriend –

In the library-
Where Poe was delicately positioning a mini cam.

The giggles echoing down the hall gave the two of them only seconds of warning. Kaydel thought fast. She knocked Poe backwards over the sofa arm.

His mouth opened in shock, but he never got a chance to protest.

“Shut it, Dameron,” she hissed before hiking her gown up to her belly button and mounting him.

Poe’s eyes rolled back into his head.

“Miss Connix,” he gasped – digging both hands into her hips – presumably to remove her.

“Nope -” Kaydel grabbed his wrist and shoved it up under the back of her dress.

He squeaked. She had to forcibly restrain a snort. It was time for some desperate measures. Poe was obviously too distracted to comprehend the plan.

Calling on years of quietly watching Carise and her vapid band of socialites seduce men from the shadows - Kaydel brushed her body over his, lowered her voice to an appropriately sultry tone, and whispered:

“You’re gonna have to do better than that, Flyboy.”

Poe’s eyes instantly darkened to black. The fingers beneath her dress fanned out instinctively.

But he hesitated. The sounds became louder.

Kaydel went all in.

“Come on-” she taunted, grinding her hips over his, “make your clever Angel moan.”

Then she nipped his ear –

He broke.

His hands gripped her body possessively and he reversed their positions in one effortless twist. The friction was incredible. She trembled uncontrollably as he bore down on her.

Suddenly, her hair tumbled free of its twist. Poe’s fingers threaded greedily into the loosened waves and he sighed with something that sounded suspiciously like relief.

Kaydel felt her mouth fall open in a surprised gasp– it was all the invitation he needed.

His lips came down on hers and (despite a firm commitment to avoiding it) Kaydel Connix was thoroughly kissed by Poe Dameron.

It was so much worse than she feared.

He tasted like heat, and chocolate, and the first sip of lemonade on a summer day.

She moaned.

It was a dark, obscene sound and Poe felt it over every last inch of his body.

“What are you playing at, Angel?” he breathed the words in a desperate groan over her lips.
But there would be no answer.

“My – my… What do we have here? I guess we weren’t the only ones looking to study anatomy in the library...”

The nasally voice of their host (along with his slimy, leering tone) shattered whatever pleasant daze hung over them. The reason for Kaydel’s aggressive seduction was immediately obvious.

And the show wasn’t over yet.

“I couldn’t help myself,” Poe offered sensually. (Hopefully the woman he was on top of didn’t realize that the heat in his voice wasn’t entirely feigned. Where the Kriffing Hell had she learned to speak like that? In that tone.)

He bit his lower lip without meaning to.

Kaydel let out a pathetic whimper of arousal. It was appropriate for the situation, after all.

(No need to acknowledge that the sight of him biting his lip like that did things to her.)

Be careful, Kaydel Ko. The last shred of reason warned. You know better...

~~~*````*~~~~*````*~~~

There were few people in the world less qualified to give romantic advice than Ben Solo.

He was… somewhat awkward looking at 19. Several of his body parts were too big for his body.

Ben generally avoided females all together. It saved time for everyone involved.

He wouldn’t lose time pining for a woman. She wouldn’t lose time awkwardly rejecting him...

It was simple math really.

He liked women – of course – but he considered himself a realist – and (realistically) he needed the rest of puberty to be very kind or his chances of ever touching one were slim.

The sullen teen might have been surprised to discover that several women were more than willing to give him attention – but he never seemed to want it...

So they gave up.

Ben Solo had been listening to the wrong voices for years. He had been systematically conditioned to believe the myth of his own undesirability. He no longer questioned it.

He knew it.

He knew he was unwanted.

By women. By his parents. By the Resistance...

They did not value him. They did not see him for what he truly was.

Not like –
“Ben!”

Ben shut his book and looked up to see his oldest friend jogging toward him.

He sighed.

It would be easy to hate Poe…

Poe was handsome – charismatic – naturally tan…

He was a born leader – like Leia. People trusted him without question. They expected great things of him and he delivered – every time.

He probably should hate Poe.

But he didn’t and he couldn’t.

Poe Dameron was more like his brother than his friend. He loved him. He was proud of him.

Even when Ben resented him (which was more and more often), he couldn’t hate him. Poe didn’t understand him… But he always tried…and he never treated him differently.

That meant a lot. More than he could put words to…

“Nice suit.” Ben scanned the older man’s lavish attire with a critical eye. “I think there might be a peasant around here somewhere for you to abuse –”

“I’m done abusing peasants for today.” Poe pulled up a chair, “I’ve come to seek advice from the prince.”

The prince in question rolled his eyes.

“What good is a title if I can’t have you beheaded every time you torment me about it?”

The pilot shrugged.

“I blame the peasants.”

Ben chuckled at that and leaned back into his seat.

“So… How’s the upper crust?”

“Crusty.”

“No surprise there. What brings you before the throne?”

“A… woman.”

“I think you have the wrong Solo. My dad’s room is two lefts and fifteen doors down. Best of luck.”

Poe shook his head.

“No – I don’t need the kind of advice your father would give. I need a perspective like yours – not like mine –”

“Is that a nice way of implying that I’m not getting laid or just a tactful way of saying that you only think with your cockpit when it comes to women?”
“Little bit of both.”

“I see.”

“…Help?”

“I mean… I probably can’t. But sure.”

Poe took a deep breath. His hands fidgeted in front of him.

Ben couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen his friend this twisted up. For a moment, genuine concern began to churn in his gut.

“Have you ever thought of something – someone – one way – but then… something happens and you can’t see them that way anymore?”

“Yes… I think. You’re saying that your opinion of someone has changed?”

“No. I still have the same opinion. This girl – woman - she’s very young – very brave – very inexperienced – way too good for me – both as a woman and a friend. She’s smart – like really smart. And she’s quiet - like you are…except when she isn’t…”

“O…K…”

“She’s just a kid - you know – She’s barely 18 – and she’s very short … But today she… she - uh…”

“…She?”

“She pushed me over a couch. Unleashed a sex voice that’d give a priest a boner. And bit my ear.”

“God. How terrible for you,” Ben deadpanned.

“It was – or – I mean it wasn’t. Like… She was just trying to cover for us - and I was …trying to remember my kriffin name.”

Ben’s eyebrows shot up.

“Is that new?”

“Yes! Normally it’s the girl’s name I can’t remember –”

“You’re gross.”

“Hey! I practice very safe sex with very willing women who are very aware of what we both want and are always very satisfied!”

“I very much did not want to know that. But – ok - I take it back – you’re not gross. Just – please gawd don’t tell me anymore.”

“About Kaydel?”

“Kaydel Connix bit your ear? How are you not assassinated right now?”

“Just – shut up and listen – I have a problem.”

“I’ve been saying that for years.”
“THE PROBLEM is that I keep thinking about it. About her. About that voice and the way—”

“Oversharing.”

“You get my point.”

“…Do I? What are you asking here?”

“What should I do?”

“I mean, do… her. Right? Isn’t that how it works for you?”

Poe groaned in frustration.

“No! I don’t want that kind of relationship with her. I want… I want it to go back to normal. Before I knew what her sex voice sounded like.”

“You really have a thing for her voice—”

“If chocolate covered strawberries had a sound, it would be Kaydel Connix’s sex voice.”

“Damn.”

“Yes.”

“Alright… well… I would just… tell her that.”

“You want me to tell her that?!”

“No - No. Tell her that you don’t want to see her as a woman. I - I think… that might work?”

“You think?”

“Yeah I mean… No one wants to be confused about how people feel so… just tell her you don’t have feelings for her and that even if your body was about it… you don’t want her that way.”

Poe looked thoughtful for a moment.

“That sounds reasonable…”

“Glad I could help.”

Armed with Ben’s advice, Poe began the 20 minute journey to the East Wing of Chandrila (where Kaydel’s temporary quarters were).

The East Wing was added in 1921 when Henry Skywalker (who fancied himself quite the archeologist) returned from a landmark dig in Egypt and commissioned it as a monument to his passion.

Everything in the East wing was very… Egyptian.

Or… what someone who knew very little about Egyptian culture might imagine to be Egyptian…
The overall effect was rather like being in the first half of Cecil B. DeMille’s *10 Commandments*.

Kaydel stayed in the Bast Bedroom (mostly because it was the only room in the East Wing with a secret passage to the hospital). Two massive statues of the ancient cat goddess flanked the door. Both seemed to be eyeing Poe judgmentally as he knocked.

“Come in.”

This was a mistake.

She was in a sports bra. And the tiniest shorts he had ever seen.

It was terrible.

It was *glorious*.

It was… extraordinarily bad for his short term memory.

Why was he here?

“Poe?”

Kaydel was equally confused by his presence. She just spent the last hour in the Scorpio gym trying to exercise the Poe-thirst right out of her system and here he was - in her bedroom – at midnight – with his tailored clothes artfully disheveled like Latino James Bond –

Honestly. What a jerk.

Poe still hadn’t spoken. He just stood there blinking at her (distracted – perhaps – by the monstrous golden pillow pyramid on the bed next to her). She tried again.

“Can I… help you?”

The door slammed shut behind him and he jumped. Kaydel bit back a laugh.

“I uh – I thought we should talk about the – you know. I think… we should be clear about it.”

“Uh, Ok… I would probably agree. Because I like clarity… But I don’t really know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about the-” he paused here to make comically suggestive eyebrow movements, “- *you know.*”

“…IIII…don’t. I don’t know.”

More eyebrow movements.

“Maybe you should use like – *words.* I’m not super fluent in the ‘spastic eyebrow language’ you’re trying to use-”

He stopped and raised a single unamused brow. Kaydel snorted.

“Now *that* I understood.”

“Hilarious, Angel, as always. But you and I both know that I’m talking about –”

There was a loud knock on the door.
“Kay? Its Rose – and Paige… We uh - Can we come in?”

Poe shook his head frantically.

“They can’t find me in here!” he hissed. “If they see me in your room, I will never hear the end of it. They’ll definitely get the wrong idea.”

Kaydel threw her hands up in the air.

“I never even found out what the right idea was!”

She started for the door and Poe scrambled for a place to hide. Hopefully he’d find one.

“Hey guys. What’s up?”

There. That sounded casual. Nothing to indicate the presence of a serial secretary seducer hiding somewhere behind her for no apparent reason.

Totally normal night.

“We need to talk about Poe.”

Or not.

“Sure. I mean. Yeah. What about Ol’Poe?”

Ol’Poe?! Who are you!? John Wayne?

The girls filed in and made themselves comfortable(ish) on the custom throne armchairs. Kaydel hopped carelessly on the bed-

And immediately froze.

Poe was hiding under the covers.

Brilliant.

….annnd she was sitting on him.

Double Brilliant.

Her eyes slowly closed. She counted to 10 in her head.

“Something wrong?”

Rose’s face was the picture of concern. It was all Kaydel could do not to scream.

“Nope. Nope – nope. I’m just …sitting on a problem lately.”

She didn’t even know which part of the problem she was sitting on…

The other sister nodded sympathetically.

“We’ve all been there. I know it can be rough and… hard to take all at once –”

The problem snickered. Kaydel punched it – him – in what she hoped was a leg – and was immediately rewarded by a muffled groan.
Paige continued.

“Obviously we are here if you ever need to talk…”

“Thank you. Really. It means a lot… I think I have it under control now.”

Her bed shifted indignantly. She ignored it.

“But – we actually came to discuss what happened with Poe.”

“What happened with Poe?”

Rose fidgeted uncomfortably.

“He got the cam in place before you were interrupted. So we saw…”

“You saw us maintaining our cover?”

“Kissing. We saw you kissing and …stuff.”

“Ah… and you’re here to find out whether or not he used too much tongue?”

There was a faint scoff. Its origin was…unclear. (To everyone but Kaydel.)

Rose continued her fidgeting and shot Paige an imploring look.

“Poe is…a very… friendly man. And…his friendship has… given many women …er - ideas about how close their friendship is… and we …we were wondering if you …”

Kaydel’s laughter ended Paige’s painful monologue.

“Oh my gosh –” she gasped through the giggles. “You’re worried I’m going to fall in love –” (more giggling) “-with Poe Dameron - because of one kiss?”

“You wouldn’t be the first.”

Rose spoke the words as if they were a matter of undeniable fact. Kaydel swore she could feel Poe smug-ing beneath her. She pinched him for good measure.

“Rest easy ladies. Poe’s er – potency notwithstanding. I have no illusions about what kind of a man he is. It would take more than his pretty face or his pretty lips – for that matter – to ever make me fall for him. I’m not an idiot. There are other pretty faces, after all. I hear Ben Solo is quite handsome.”

Poe’s head was concealed behind a wall of pillows, but he managed to pull her comforter down far enough for his eyes and nose to glare at her accusingly (and attempt further brow communication).

He looked decidedly less potent pouting in a pillow fort.

*Heh. Pretty Poe Pouted Petulantly in his Pillow Palace. Say that five times fast.*

“You have nothing to worry about,” she finished smoothly. “Poe Dameron is never getting in my bed.”

It was an ironic closing argument (considering that Poe was – at that very moment – *in her bed*) but the meaning was clear:

Kaydel Connix was not about to fall apart for a man.
So a man might need to get it together for her.

Back in the Present

Kaydel’s voice gently tapered off.

Her tale was far from over, but the mission was complete. The boys were curled up on either side of her – sound asleep.

Their soft snores were the only sounds disrupting the peaceful quiet of the house.

Somewhere during the story she had shifted to lean back against the arm of the couch. Now it appeared she was stuck here… She chuckled softly and looked towards the door.

There he was.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor simply… taking her in.

What a difference a decade could make.

“Hello, Angel.”

Kaydel fell in love with him all over again. Just as she did every day.

He rose quietly – utilizing his full arsenal of stealth training – to place blankets over her and the twins.

A pillow appeared behind her head and familiar lips brushed tenderly over hers.

Without a word, he gathered the remaining blankets and cushions from the room and laid down on the floor next to the couch.

The flight to Canto Bight left at 7:00.

They would be apart for a while... He was in no hurry to be away from her. Most of the last several years had been spent trying to get closer.

Everything was simply better with Kaydel.

A pallet on the floor near her …beat a bed without her any day.

"Goodnight, my love,” she whispered.

He grinned.

“Goodnight, Mrs. Dameron.”
Finn yawned as morning sunlight filtered in through the bay window. Rose was already sitting up in bed next to him. He smiled.

“Hey,” his hand came up to trace lazy circles on her back. “…Am I going crazy or did I hear you talking to Rey last night?”

His wife nodded and leaned in for another lazy stretch.

“MmmHmm. There was an issue at the Canto Bight airfield. She and Ben ended up in Crait - in some motel – heh… It wasn’t pretty.”

“I see,” he chuckled as he reached for his phone.

“Yeah... I think it was about to get bad when I called.”

“Did you help?” Finn noticed he had an urgent file transmission from Cassian.

“I did… I really think I did. I talked to Rey. She reaffirmed her commitment to just powering through and getting the job done. I have a lot of faith in them. I don’t think there’ll be any more complications. They’re really starting to act like adults…”

Rose broke off after turning to look at her husband. His eyes were the size of dinner plates and his mouth was hanging open.

“What – What is it?”

Now he was laugh-coughing. There were tears. He handed her the phone.

Rose gasped.

“Looks pretty adult to me.”

~~~*````*~~~~*````*~~~

Ben Solo was no fool.

He deactivated his personal phone after reading Cassian’s text. If they needed him for something urgent, they could call the burners. At least the mission was top secret, so the file wouldn’t be widely circulated.

(Though Poe was already trying to figure out how to send Leia a copy and make it look like an accident.)

Ben was in no way prepared for Finn and Poe’s variety show reactions to the footage. His own reactions had been difficult enough.

Rey was wrapped around him for 20 minutes.

That was 20 solid minutes of picturing everything from frog dissections to the time he caught his parents making out on the dining room table.
And still… things were a little … *solid*.

If she noticed, she hadn’t said anything. In fact neither of them had said anything for the remainder of the night. They spent the next several hours lying next to each other like cadavers – staring soundlessly at the ceiling and hoping that sleep would just… happen.

It didn’t.

Morning came and the partners quietly packed their belongings under an unspoken truce of exhaustion and embarrassment.

“Maybe we can sleep on the bus?”

Ben’s eyes shot up to hers. It was the first time either of them had made a sound in hours.

She offered him a sheepish smile and he found himself grinning in return.

*You’re ridiculous, Ben Solo. Utterly ridiculous.*

“Yes. I think that’d be nice.”

~~~*````*~~~~*````*~~~

The bus from Crait to Canto Bight was a good 40 minutes behind schedule.

The passengers included several recent guests of the Salty Rebel (all of whom witnessed Rey clinging half-naked to her equally half-naked partner as glass from the parking lot glittered romantically around them)…

Knowing glances abounded left and right, but neither one of them seemed to notice as they were finally catching up on sleep.

At 2:05 pm ‘Mr. and Mrs. Johnson’ checked into the Presidential Suite of the Grand Gungan.

By 2:35 pm Ben Solo had broken his first gadget.

“Ben - that’s an expensive camera!”

“Oh Please! Expensive cameras usually WORK, Niima!”

“It DID work! You just didn’t know how to turn it on!”

“I’ve never had any trouble with TURNING THINGS ON BEFORE!”

Rey raised her eyebrows, deliberately misunderstanding his last statement.

Ben scoffed.

“Perv…” he mumbled stomping off towards the bedroom.

She snickered.
~3:00 pm~

“The red one goes in that hole...”

“No - the yellow one goes there...”

“No - the yellow one is on the left...”

“No. It isn’t-”

“Yes, it is-”

“Look – I KNOW what hole it goes in-”

“Do you really?”

“REY... please... could you just-... set up the mini cam....”

“FINE.”

~3:20 pm~

“...Rey?...Rey?”

No answer.

“Rey? Where are you? ...This isn’t funny.”

Ben stalked into the living room area. Two chairs had been stacked atop one another and the vent was hanging open.

He let out an exasperated sigh

“Rey...”

After jumping into the air duct, Ben crawled in the direction of the Royal Suite’s floor vent. That was, after all, where the mini cam was supposed to go.

Except Rey wasn’t there.

...and neither was the mini cam.

He heard a faint clatter to his right and irritably began slinking towards the sounds.

“Rey... What are you doing!?”

“Ben, I thought you were messing with the plugs.”

“I was - until you disappeared. Since when does it take twenty minutes to rig a mini cam? The vent
was only thirty feet over ...Speaking of which - where are we?”

Rey grinned.

“Those schematics were two years old. I thought I’d check for a better location...and: Viola!”

“...I assume you’re going to tell me why you’re so pleased with yourself.”

“This new vent is by the DOOR! We can see everyone who comes in!”

She was practically bouncing with glee.

He shook his head, trying not to chuckle. Rey definitely made up for all frustration she caused.

“We’re all set here,” she grunted, twisting one last knob into place.

Ben nodded and started to crawl back towards their exit.

Then he remembered her little stunt on the plane...

Time for some payback.

Grinning to himself, he quickly formulated an idea.

Rey followed behind Ben (and, since no one was watching, she didn’t feel the least bit guilty for enjoying the view) until he suddenly stopped a mere five feet away from the opening to their room.

“Oh no-” he groaned.

Rey rushed forward concerned.

“What is it?”

“My...my leg. It's cramping. I can’t move -”

“What? Well just – push through. We’re almost there.”

She gave him a small shove, but instead of urging him forward as intended, he collapsed dramatically and grasped his left leg.

“Ow! Rey!”

“Sorry...I didn’t know it was THAT bad ...gosh.”

Ben saw a small glimmer of guilt flash in her eyes. He went in for the kill.

“It’s ok, Rey. This has happened before. I used to get them as a kid. They pass in about ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes!?“

Rey balked. She couldn’t spend ten minutes in this tiny little space with Ben Solo.
No WAY is that happening.

Ben tried not to laugh at Rey’s panicked expression. She was playing right into his hands.

“I don’t want you to have to sit here with me for that long. It’s not fair-”

Rey softened a little.

“-so you can climb over me.”

“..................what?”

“It alright, Rey. I don’t mind. And it’s selfish of me to expect you stay cramped in this tiny intimate space while my leg settles down.”

She gulped. Ben was a... larger than average man. And he completely obscured the majority of the passage way.

There’s no way you can get past him without......... contact.

He saw hesitancy warring with reason in her eyes. Time to seal the deal.

“I mean ... I guess you could stay.... and we could talk about things ... like Super Mario?”

Her eyes widened in horror.

He stifled a snicker.

Gotcha.

Rey took a deep breath and squared her shoulders.

You can do this, Niima... Just pretend he’s a rock... a really... sexy... rock.

Slowly she moved forward and braced her hand on his ‘good’ leg. Ben jostled and she lost her balance. Her left elbow came down hard on his ‘bad’ leg. Howling in feigned agony he surged forward in a fit of theatrical pain and sprawled out...on top of her.

Immediately her heart rate shot through the roof.

Yeeeeessss.

I mean – Noooo!

“GET OFF ME!”

Que bumbling reporter

“Rey I’m sorry I-”

He clumsily attempted to slide off her and accidentally brushed his hand up her thigh. She jerked her leg.
“OUCH! Rey!”

Scrambling out from under him (and smacking her head on the ceiling of the vent) Rey desperately tried to catch her breath...then she heard it.

A snort.

...followed by another.

She whirled around to see Ben laughing...and sitting up using both legs.

Her mouth dropped open.

“You...Ugh! MOVE OUT OF MY WAY!”

Ben just crossed his arms and smiled.

“No.”

“N...No?!”

“I think I’d like to sit here for a while.”

“Ben Solo, if you don’t move-”

“The heads of the families aren’t due until at least tomorrow,” he looked her square in the eye, “so I have time.”

Rey let out a frustrated growl. She crawled forward angrily until they were nose to nose.

“Let me out.”

“There’s only two ways out of this tunnel, Miss Niima: ‘over’ or ‘under’... So which will it be?”

Adrenaline coursed through her veins and she irritable began to push past him. She was almost through when he gripped her shoulder and brought them face to face again. A lighthearted grin (colored with a recognizable hint of cockiness) stole across his lips.

“Maybe next time, you’ll think before pushing somebody’s buttons by undoing your own.”

Without warning she surged forward and pushed full against him. His breath caught as desire shot through his chest unexpectedly.

Rey smiled.

“The next time,” she whispered, “you’ll beg.”
As always I would love to hear from you!

Thoughts? Questions? Comments? Please let me know!

Additional Notes:
Kaydel's bed in the Bast Bedroom is piled high with an obscene amount of pillows and accouterments (which is how Poe was able to hide there). I hint at this briefly in the narrative - but I just wanted to be clear about it in case anyone was confused.

Kaydel and Ben never actually meet until after he is enhanced. They know of each other - and may have seen each other in passing - but they never meet until she is under cover as a nurse for the First Order.

Carise is 8 years older than her cousin Kaydel.

Kaydel's mother knew Leia - it is hinted in the narrative. It is no coincidence that Harter Kalonia was made Kaydel's guardian. Details of all that may come out later...but if you sensed a connection - its there.

You may be wondering why Kaydel is still a nurse and not a doctor... Nurses are amazing - my grandmother was a nurse and she was extraordinary. Kaydel has significant training and is certainly qualified to be a doctor, but work with the Resistance never allowed time for for her to meet (or fully meet) some legal qualifications - like official med school and etc. She could probably bypass that with her connections if she wanted to - because she has equivalent training and experience - and she may in the future. At the moment she is content and extremely capable.

The incident with Poe is why the Chandrila hospital wing is always kept fully staffed. It was not the policy the night Kay and Ezra brought him in.

There are actually vents and ducts big enough for people to crawl through and the Grand Gungan has them - because I said so... with my keyboard... Though - from what I understand - big buildings (like casino hotels) are the most likely to have ginormous vents and ducts.

The backstory/love story of Kaydel and Poe is not complete - but it will be - there will be future installments of it. Much of their backstory will also reveal things about Ben, The First Order, Snoke, Vader...and a bunch of other stuff. I figure its more immersive and enjoyable to reveal things that way. So I hope you're down for the ride.
The Suite Life

Chapter Summary

Niima and Solo go stir crazy.
Ben goes for a walk, but takes a ride.
Poe, Finn, and Cassian make a very dangerous decision.
Kylo Ren and his favorite lady reporter have a memorable moment...

And Ben and Rey come face to face with several versions of the truth.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains one of THE moments. A moment I envisioned writing as soon as I came up with this story. I genuinely hope I did it justice. I love everything that happens in this chapter.

Thank You. All of You. For every last drop of support in any and all forms. You make this a better ride just by getting on board. I feel like I'm running out of ways to tell you that you're fabulous and this story would wither without you. I hope you know how much I mean it - each and every single time.

Potential Trigger Warning:
There is a vague (not detailed) mention of someone being drugged in this chapter.

Clarification: A section of this chapter mentions a cage. To be clear: it is a dancing cage. Entertainment purposes only and could not actually contain or restrain anyone.

Ode to My Forever Beta:
Best of Husbands and Best of Men.
I'd still choose you. All the time.
Every time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Stakeouts were (for the most part) very formulaic. They involved waiting, monotony, and sleeping in shifts

... at least until something happened.

Ben agreed to take the first four-hour watch while Rey unpacked. Four hours later they switched.

And so it went... for two days.

While not manning the surveillance equipment (which included 4 bugs, several pirated feeds from the parking garage and hallways, and one ideally positioned mini cam), Rey focused her energy into
uncovering anything she could about the Black-Sun family. She was grateful for the shifts.

They allowed her to avoid Ben with minimal effort.

Yet…

After two days of sparse verbal communication and no activity from the floor above, she was becoming both desperate and stir crazy. Restlessness drove her to wander around the suite in search of something to take her mind off the absence of the families.

And what it might mean for Leia if they didn’t show up.

She turned to look at Ben. He divided his spare time between sleeping and researching the Hutts. She could see dark circles lining his eyes.

His mother’s predicament weighed heavy on both of them, but he was her son… and without evidence, he would be helpless to save her.

Unexpectedly she felt the urge to go to him... to hold him.

Rey sighed.

If it was anyone else, she might have.

Situations like this often permitted that type of comforting intimacy. She hugged Bodhi when his dog died. Bazine cried on her shoulder when she learned of her brother’s car accident…Rey wasn’t especially close with either of them, but they were part of her community and she was happy to offer support. She didn’t shy away from connections after a lifetime spent without them. Relationships were a gift. Rey understood this better than most. Her co-workers and friends were the closest thing to a family that she had.

And then there was Ben.

They were partners.

That was the simplest possible way to classify what was unquestionably the most complicated relationship of her life.

Rey let out a sardonic chuckle.

Even after all he’d done, she couldn’t really bring herself to be mad at him. He energized her every bit as much as he infuriated her.

She enjoyed him.

In the short years of their partnership (and really, if she were going to be honest, of their entire acquaintance) they pulled their fair share of ridiculous stunts on one another. And they always gave as good as they got. Their interactions set a competitive tone from the very first meeting. If it hadn’t been that stupid confessional... it would’ve been something else.

But there were other moments too. Conversations that lasted hours. Coffee and bagels deposited on each other’s desks. Inside jokes and texting during Luke’s boring meetings… They knew one another better than either of them would admit. Sometimes they were partners, sometimes they were tormentors…
Sometimes they were friends. That’s just how it was.

….or how it had been.

Lately, certain dimensions of their relationship seemed to intensify. Undercurrents that were always there suddenly felt unavoidable...

(Strangely, the appearance of Kylo Ren also added a point of contention.)

And now a violation of trust and a one-sided (unintentional) admission of attraction stewed heavily between them.

Niima and Solo were painfully on edge.

It wasn’t the first time – in even the last 48 hours – that Rey found herself dwelling on her relationship with Ben. It was difficult not to feel betrayed by her own thoughts. She wanted to focus on the story, but her head was muddled with questions…

*How much did she really know about Ben Solo? Who was he, really?*

*Who was he to her?*

*Who was she to him?*

The answers were alternately ‘out of reach’ and ‘too concerning to reach for.’

Rey shook herself and continued to scan for distractions. Finally, her gaze lit on a bookcase in the far corner. She stole another covert glance at Ben.

*It’s better than the alternative.*

With a heavy sigh she began to read the titles to herself under her breath.

“War and Peace… um… NO. Grey’s Anatomy… People read that for fun? Mating Rituals of the African Tree Frog - thanks but no thanks. A History of Cannibalism -”

She shuddered queasily. “Who put these here?”

The last title suddenly caught her eye. “Forbidden Passion…” Rey snorted, “-as if I’d wanna read about someone else’s sexual frustration.”

She whirled abruptly when she heard what sounded like a soft chuckle.

*Was that… Ben?*

Rey immediately brushed the thought aside. There was no way he could’ve heard her. She yawned.

*Perhaps I’ll take a nap.*

Ben rubbed his eyes again. They were dry from an eternity of staring at the monitors. Rey was shuffling around the other side of the room. She finished perusing the shelves and seemed to be snuggling into the couch.
Must be trying to get a bit of sleep.

Sleep during a stakeout was... difficult. The shifts were too short to be genuinely restful, but almost painfully long when nothing was happening for hours on end. Nerves were easily frayed and emotions simmered close to the surface.

Shaking his head, Ben turned back to work, but his thoughts kept stubbornly returning to Rey…

She made him laugh.

His stress level was through the roof. His mother and everything she stood for was on the line.

But Rey’s soft chatter made him laugh.

Perhaps her ability to make him laugh (to make him smile, even) was the reason he didn’t march up to Luke’s office and demand a partner transfer that very first day.

No matter how much he wanted to throttle her one minute, the next minute she could have him grinning like an idiot.

The sound of a burner phone vibrating pulled him from his wandering thoughts.

It was a message from Rose.

Scarecrow,

Compiled information (senator activities: past 18 months) hard copy files/isolated drives. Big Deal delivered to Outpost. Hope it’s helpful. Acquire ASAP.

Love,

Posey

(P.S. So... How’s Sparrow?)

Ben rolled his eyes at the post script and tried to think of a good answer for that loaded question.

Sparrow is slowly chipping away at my sanity. I may have myself committed.

Love,

Scarecrow

Probably not the best response to send to Rose.

He chuckled. Code names were quite a mixed bag.

Young Ben Solo was Crow… but adult Ben became Scarecrow.

Leia got to be The General. His father was saddled with The Scoundrel. Lando had somehow ended up as Old Smoothie…

No one had ever explained that.

Jyn was Switchblade. Cassian was Dagger.
Finn had initially been *Trooper*, but, after one particularly interesting mission with Han, he was christened *Big Deal* and no amount of begging could convince Poe to change it back.

Rey was *Sparrow*.

It was Senator Organa who suggested it. She read once that sparrows were a symbol of triumph in adversity and Rey’s story could certainly be classified as such…

Sparrows were also the sacred animal of Aphrodite. They represented love and spiritual connection. His mother was sure to mention that (to everyone) when she finalized the designation.

Thoughts of Leia drew him painfully into the current circumstances. Ben glanced toward the monitor once more.

No activity.

Worry spiked anew and he found himself struggling to maintain his composure.

*Where are they?*

Suddenly he slammed down the cover of his laptop and began stalking towards the door. *Outpost* was the safe house they established near Canto Bight. If he took the bike Poe left for him, he could be there in under 30 minutes.

(After all, what better use of enhanced reflexes than safely driving at insane speeds?)

Rey whirled around when she heard Ben heading for the exit.

“Where are you going?” she asked somewhat confused.

“For a walk.”

“You – You’re seriously just ‘going for a walk’…?”

“I need to get out of here for a while.” He glanced back when he reached the door. “Your shift started 3 minutes ago.”

...and then he was gone.

Rey groaned as she trudged over to the makeshift control center.

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“...are you sure you put it in the plant by the recliner?”

“I swear, man - I stuck it in there. It’s active. They’re probably just in the kitchen. Rose eats like five times an hour.”

“Well ok, but I-”
“No, I wouldn’t say blue. I like the aquamarine shades more...”

“SHHH!! They’re coming in!”

The three men eagerly leaned closer to the speaker.

“What’s going on here?”

Poe, Finn, and Cassian jumped guiltily out of their huddle.

“What do you mean, Ben?” Poe squeaked.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in a hotel room somewhere?” Finn managed, trying to catch his breath.

Ben gave them a suspicious look.

“I... was, but Rose messaged me and-”

“I would never buy anything there. It always comes apart a week later-”

Poe’s eyes widened.

Cassian gulped

“Was... was that Kaydel?”

“No-”

“Tell me about it. I bought a dress there for the Connix Gala last year, and it ripped in the middle of a tango-”

Ben’s mouth dropped open.

“Are you WIRE TAPPING Girl’s Night!?!”

Finn leapt forward and clapped his hand over his friend’s jaw.

“Could you keep it down, man.” He nervously scanned the surrounding area. “...The girls have people who know people everywhere.”

Ben glared irritably as he pushed Finn away.

“You realize if they ever find out about this, you will be monks for the rest of your natural lives.”

Poe rolled his eyes.

“This coming from a guy who pretended to be a priest so he could hear Rey Niima confessing her sins.”

“Hey how did you-”

“Besides. It’s for a noble cause this time -”
“This time?”

“Snap is getting married in five days and…” Poe’s eyes took on a steely glint, “we can’t lose again.”

Realization dawned.

“This is about The Prank!? You still haven’t figured out what they’re doing?”

Most normal people threw their friends bachelor and bachelorette parties to celebrate upcoming nuptials.

Not the Resistance.

Resistance folk planned and meticulously executed ‘The Bridal Prank.’

It was a tradition that began decades ago with the wedding of Han Solo and Leia Organa…

Chewie (the best man) had planned a relatively standard bachelor party for Han and his groomsman (Luke and Lando). A limousine was scheduled to collect them in the morning and shuttle them around for a day of male bonding and booze...

An hour before pick-up, the guys received a special delivery from the bridesmaids; a package containing a simple collared shirt and custom button fly pants …along with a note expressing fond wishes for a fun day and a request to wear the outfit.

Naively, all four men complied.

The chauffeur arrived right on time. After a suspiciously long drive, he proceeded to drop the groom and three unsuspecting groomsman off...

At an Amish barn raising.

The smell of burning rubber still hung in the air as Brother Obadiah greeted the bewildered quartet. He informed them that they were expected and the nice lady (Leia) had pledged their services to the struggling community for the entire day.

From that point forward…it was ON.

Every time members of the Resistance tied the knot, the groom/groomsman and bride/bridesmaids competed to out-prank each other. Over the years, each side scored major victories, but the ladies were the undisputed champs of the last three weddings…

Finn shook his head miserably.

“We can’t have a repeat of last time.”

The four of them shuddered collectively.

The Connix-Dameron Bridal Prank was… truly legendary. (And not just because the women managed to capture the mighty Kylo Ren along with the rest of the guys.)

Ben knew he should have been on guard…

He was Poe’s best man. Finn, Snap, and Cassian were groomsman.
But Kaydel was such a lovely, sensible woman. When she told him that she needed to reschedule his weekly blood test, he never questioned it.

He never expected her to inject him with a sedative and kidnap him.

In fact, none of the groomsman expected their food, drinks, and vitamins to be laced with sedatives.

But they were.

Five unconscious gentleman later, the ladies pulled off a landmark operation.

All five of them slowly woke up to find themselves in (dance) cages – in costumes – at a very exclusive ladies club where Kaydel, Rose, Jyn, Paige, and Tallie were enjoying their ‘bachelorette party.’

Poe – the groom – was dressed as a classic Chippendale’s dancer.

Snap ended up as a ‘sexy cowboy’ (vest, whip, boots, hat…no shirt).

Cassian was a leather daddy (He even had a collar. Jyn reportedly paid extra to keep the outfit).

Finn’s locked and loaded ‘uniform’ identified him as Captain Boo T. Call of ‘Her Majesty’s Very Special Forces.’

And Ben…

Ben discovered that ‘Sexy Kylo Ren’ was apparently a thing.

His outfit included extremely tight leather pants (that for some reason came up over his navel), a cape, and a demi mask that vaguely resembled the design of his helmet.

Poe earned $3,000 in tips that night. Finn apparently knew how to dance really well. Cassian’s glaring only made him more appealing as a bad boy leather fantasy. Snap discovered 145 ways to misuse a whip. And Ben could honestly say that he’d never had so much money shoved down his pants in his entire life.

The highlight of the evening, however, was when a female performer dressed as ‘The Sexy Reporter’ appeared to give ‘Kylo Ren’ a lap dance as part of the festivities.

Ben literally broke through the bars of his cage to run away. The audience thought it was all part of the show and cheered wildly.

“Never - ever - again,” Cassian vowed solemnly. “We couldn’t risk not knowing…”

The three of them shamefully avoided his gaze.

Ben couldn’t help laughing just a little. He was safe. The only good thing about the entire Canto Bight/Leia Treason/Potentially Missing Paige’s Wedding debacle was that he was unable to be a groomsman – thus dodging the Bridal Prank shenanigans.

“Well. You all belong to me now,” Ben snickered. “This is premium blackmail material. I can almost see Rose’s face…”

Finn visibly paled.

“You... you wouldn’t do that, Bro... My child’s about to be born. You wouldn’t take her father away
Ben snorted and Poe shook his head.

“Kaydel wouldn’t kill me. That would be too quick for her...” he looked at Cassian meaningfully, “...and Jyn-”

Cassian held up his hand.

“Just... don’t finish that sentence.”

Ben grinned.

“I won’t tell. Obviously. Though – in the history of stupid ideas – this is by far the stupidest. Those women are some of the most highly trained black ops agents in the world –”

He paused for effect.

“I hope that bug is hidden very - EXTREMELY- well.” Ben allowed another moment of silence for his words to properly sink in before changing the subject.

“I was actually dropping by to grab the evidence Rose compiled. She said it was here.”

Poe immediately appeared confused.

“Um... yeah. It’s over on the desk there. Why didn’t you just have Finn run it down?”

Ben shot him a meaningful look.

Cassian smiled. “Rey?”

“...I had to get out of there.”

The men nodded sympathetically before Cassian spoke again.

“I know how it is, man... Last month-”

“Ok Ladies... Our legacy is on the line. What are we going to do to them-”

Poe, Finn, and Cassian nearly knocked one another over diving for the speaker.

Ben just shook his head.

Two hours later Ben re-entered the Presidential Suite to find his partner curled up in a tiny ball on the office chair next to the monitors; her nose buried in a small paperback book...

“Rey...”

She didn’t even look up at him.

“Rey... I’m back.”
She nodded absently.

“Have you been keeping an eye on the screens?”

“Uh huh...”

Letting out an exasperated sigh, Ben reached forward and snatched the book out of her hand.

“HEY!! What are you doing!? Reginald was just starting to tell Amelia that she was his true love! They were about to get it on!”

Ben raised his eyebrow.

“...Reginald?”

“He happens to be very devoted, caring, gorgeous-”

“-and fictional-”

“The point is-” Rey snapped, snatching the book back, “- you took it away right before the good part.”

He rolled his eyes.

“...You always take it away right before the good part,” she muttered.

“What was that?”

“Nothing!” she replied brightly.

Eager for a quick change of topic, Rey zeroed in on the package in his hand. “Whatcha got?”

“Data from Rose. I’m not sure its as exciting as -” he leaned down to read the book title, “-Forbidden Passion-” (Rey quickly shoved the novel behind her back) “- but it is relevant to our story.”

Ben sighed and plopped down on the floor next to her.

“Your shift is almost over. I can hit the monitors again if you want to start digging into this stuff.”

Rey leaned forward and rubbed her eyes.

“Actually… would you mind if I laid down for a little bit? I’m fading in and out... If I don’t get some rest, none of that’s going to make sense.”

He offered her a tired smile. “Sure. You want me to wake you in an hour?”

She nodded and allowed him to help her up before stumbling over to collapse on the couch.

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Rey was dreaming.
Her second meeting with Kylo Ren projected in shimmering details over her subconscious. The rain. Her balcony. The shine of streetlights on the wet pavement below. All of it came into focus as the memory played through.

“Can you at least tell me your name? … Any name?”

He was unnaturally still. Once again, Rey had the distinct impression of being captured by eyes she could not see.

“…Kylo Ren. Use that if you need something to call me.”

He turned to go, but Rey stumbled after him.

“Wait! I-”

She tripped. Because of course.

But - as before –

She never made it to the ground.

His arms caught her up and pulled her full against him. She gasped and - despite the mask - it almost seemed as if he did too.

The moment stretched. Rey allowed herself to feel every last unfiltered realization singing through her mind and body.

You’re so strong.

You saved me.

I want to stay here.

I want to know you.

I want to feel like this always.

“I …I never got the chance to thank you,” she whispered.

He chuckled. Even through the mask, it was a delicious sound.

“My pleasure, Miss Niima. Perhaps in the future you could stay out of trouble like that.”

She bit her lip. For a moment, Rey swore she could feel his grip tighten. But it passed and she dismissed it as wishful thinking.

“Will you still save me if I can’t? I’m a reporter… I have to find the truth. Searching for the truth – a truth… has been my whole life. I don’t know any other way.”

He sighed and Rey fought to hide her disappointment.

“What can I say to that, Miss Niima-”

“Rey…my name. Please call me Rey.”

At that his grip did tighten.
"What can I say… Rey… Any answer I offer will complicate things."

Her heart pounded heavily against his armor. The words flew from her before she could stop them.

"Offer me the truth."

Gently, as if she were something precious and rare, Kylo eased her upright and let his hand linger to steady her.

"You already know the truth, Rey. I have never let you fall."

Then something changed.

The memory was over. He had turned to go then… on the rooftop all those months ago. He turned and left her there on her balcony in the soft rain…

But now… in her dream…

He was still here. Waiting for something.

Waiting for her.

"Who are you?" she called to him.

"You already know the truth."

The modulator was gone. She could hear his voice.

She knew that voice…

"Show me."

He shook his head slowly.

"You already know the truth."

"Then why can’t I see you!?" she sobbed. Frustration from a lifetime of loss welled up around her.

"Because…" he spoke softly, "you aren’t really looking."

The tears were blinding her now. Everything was becoming less clear.

"Kylo!" Her arm stretched forward - reaching toward him. If she could only touch him…

"That isn’t my name, Rey."

Her eyes flew open.

"Ben?"

Her partner was crouched down on floor next to the couch. His hands lightly circled her arm.

Rey blinked several times.

Ben was …glaring?

“What’s wrong?” she mumbled groggily.
His expression blanked.

“Sorry to wake you from your dreams of Kylo Ren, but it’s been an hour.”

The venom in his tone was almost painful. Rey drew back.

“H-how did – how could you possibly have known I was dreaming of Kylo Ren?”

“You called for him,” Ben shot up angrily, “but you’re stuck with me,” he snapped.

A tingling indignation began to build in Rey’s barely conscious mind. It took her a moment to correctly identify it.

Anger.

“What is your problem, Ben Solo!?”

“I don’t have a problem.”

“You do.” She scrambled off the couch to chase after him. “Every time anyone so much as mentions Kylo Ren to you –”

He whirled on her; eyes blazing with true fury.

“Kylo Ren is a lie that you and everyone else believes because you’re all too naïve to see past the smoke and mirrors –”

“What are you talking about? He saved my life! He’s saved hundreds of lives-”

“You know nothing about him!”

“I do-”

“You don’t know who he is!”

“I-”

“You don’t know what he is –”

“He’s a hero –”

“He’s a freak! He wanted to be special so badly that he violated nature!”

She shook her head in vigorous denial. “You don’t know the first thing about Kylo Ren.”

“I know everything about him,” Ben snarled. Rey physically recoiled. “I can see what you just refuse to acknowledge…”

Suddenly his eyes seemed to lose focus. The tone of his voice shifted subtly.

“He probably lives for those moments when you tag after him like a pretty little acolyte. When he can pretend that you wouldn’t despise the man behind the mask if you really knew him…”

Rey could feel tears burning her eyes as she endured his words.

“Why are you being so cruel?” she whispered.
His gaze sharpened. For the first time, he seemed to register the effect of his animosity. Immediately his demeanor gentled.

But he did not back down.

“Because I know the truth, Rey… Kylo Ren doesn’t deserve your adoration. He doesn’t deserve you.” His jaw clenched. “No man gets power like that without selling his soul.”

Ben’s words hung ominously between them. The room seemed to contract and then expand all at once as the emotions of both reporters spun wildly without a satisfying outlet.

Ben was the first to break eye contact. As he moved to leave, Rey’s hand shot out and wrapped around his forearm.

He stilled, but did not turn to face her again. Not even when she began to speak.

“…I already know the truth.” Her fingers dug into his skin. She steeled her resolve.

“Kylo Ren has the power to take whatever he wants … but he doesn’t. Kylo Ren has the strength to bend people to his will… but he saves them instead. He could inspire terror… but he tries to bring hope.”

Rey’s tone became firmer. Ben was suddenly overwhelmed by feelings, fears, and desperate longings he couldn’t begin to identify. She continued, unaware that he was unraveling further with every passing second.

“Kylo Ren doesn’t have to do any of those things. No one has the power to force him. He chooses his path - a path of service – of sacrifice - day after day. And that is the truth behind the mask. That is what you refuse to see.”

Rey let go of Ben’s arm… Neither one of them moved.

“Maybe-” she spoke softly after a moment, “…maybe you’re right. Maybe he wanted to be… special and that led him to his abilities.” Her heart wrenched painfully. “Can you imagine being that lonely? Being that lost?”

She paused significantly; aware - on some level - that her next words would matter more than all the others before them.

“Whatever the rest of his story may be… Whoever he is… It’s clear that he was already special.”

Ben Solo left at that. He tore away and slammed the door without a word.

She didn’t see what her loyalty had done to him.

He didn’t see what his silence had done to her.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Comments? Feedback?

This is may be my favorite chapter so far. I would love to hear what you think...(Pretty
IMPORTANT: My goal has always been to entertain. Just in case... Please read.

The girls would never hurt the boys or subject them to anything truly dangerous. Kaydel is a trained nurse. The cages are specifically dancing cages (popular in many clubs and you can easily walk in and out of them). The boys could have left at any time, but (in the spirit of the prank) they played along. The girls were there the whole time (I mean, instead of hiring bachelorette party strippers, they pranked the boys into it). The guys were expecting something crazy to happen, because it’s been going on for decades. They were more embarrassed than anything else. (Also...they are ...super spies. Tricking them takes more than the average.)

This is simply a story. A fantasy with elements of slapstick comedy. I do not advocate drugging anyone in real life - ever. (Even in the story, the sedatives are handled by a professional.) I hope you have read and enjoyed this update in the spirit it was intended.

Additional Notes:
Just in case it wasn't clear (sometimes as a writer you think its clear - but then it isn't): Rey does not know or suspect that Ben is Kylo. But that does not mean her subconscious has not picked on a few things... Still - she remains firmly unaware. That is important to note.

The emotional, physical, and psychological stress of stakeouts and surveillance details is/are a real thing. They can take a considerable toll.

Poe mentions at the dinner party that he left a motorcycle for Ben at the Grand Gungan.

Rey has a code name because she is often inadvertently and unknowingly involved in Resistance operations and she is Ben Solo's partner.

In case you were wondering...
Additional Resistance Code Names:
Kaydel: Seraph
Chewie: Lionheart
Maz: Oracle
Poe: Cockpit
Paige: Pigeon
Luke: Wizard
Temmin: Cracklepop (because Poe said so)
Ezra: Maverick
Harter: Matron
Riez: Saber
Leo: Rapier
Baby Tico: Small Fry
Chandrila Castle: Old Folks Home
Connix Court: Playground
Kylo Ren: Raven (not everyone knows who he is after all...)
Chapter Summary

Leia gets a message.
Ben phones a friend.
Jyn learns a secret.
The partners move forward in several significant ways.
And the reason for the treason comes to light...

Chapter Notes

I know it has been a minute and then some since I updated, but the last two weeks were so nuts and I was doing all the things... Not to mention that this chapter is INTENSE. So much happens...

(When I first posted this, there was a formatting error with all my italics. I fixed it now. I swear this chapter has run me ragged.)

Posting should return to normal now!

I know some of you have been waiting for this moment awhile. This is just a taste...

Again. The love you guys are giving this story is worth a thousand BB-8 tummy rubs. You are the best and I am so excited to continue this ride with you. I read every last comment approximately a million times. The feedback is next-level awesome. Thank you.

To the Beta of My Dreams:
I promise to listen to all your X-rated nursery rhymes, if you promise to keep making them up when you are half-asleep and horny. You have the soul of a truly debauched poet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light from the tablet in her hand shone softly on the face of Senator Leia Organa. She was wrestling with the wording on a particularly important speech. Environmental advocacy wasn’t a typical cause for her, but mining in the valley could have deadly consequences. Lives were at stake… and they were facing a surprising amount of opposition.
Her words needed to pack a punch.

Han slept soundly in the bed next to her. He returned - exhausted - at some point in the middle of the night.

She smiled.

The years added some wrinkles and a few gray hairs... but he was still the sexiest man she’d ever seen.

Shaking her head at her own thoughts (and firmly resisting the urge to wake Han and enjoy a signature Solo distraction) Leia returned her attention to the speech.

*It is important that we take action... It is ... imperative that we take action... We *must* take action -

A notification flashed across her screen.

*Number: Unknown*

*Origin: Unknown*

*Subject: I'm sending this to you by accident.*

*Message: You absolutely cannot ask where it happened, when it happened, why it happened, or how it happened. Not ever. Under no circumstances initiate contact.*

*Just know that it happened.*

*fileattachment:reyloriding.mp4*

*(File can only be viewed once. This message will degrade in three minutes)*

*Love,*

*Cockpit*

Leia raised one eyebrow and clicked.

It appeared to be surveillance footage of ... a motel?

Suddenly the door closest to the camera blew open (off the hinges?!) and out ran-

*Oh. My...*

Son.

Her son.

Out ran her son. Shirtless. With a half-naked women hitched to his hips.

*LAWD almighty. Benjamin Solo!*

Leia paused the reel and zoomed in.

*Well, well, well... I always knew you had it in you, Niima.*

Her whole mood lightened. Laughter bubbled up uncontrollably.
Han stirred beside her.

“Wha- what is it?” He mumbled, half-asleep.

“Nothing really... I’m just much closer to achieving my goal.”

He yawned, “Which one?”

“Grandchildren.”

“Oh. That’s ni- wait WHAT?!”

Ben heard the door slam behind him with a deafening crack. He stormed into the elevator and jabbed in the code for a private observation deck.

Her words followed him every step of the way.

“…It’s clear that he was already special.”

Ben didn’t know what he was feeling. He didn’t know what to feel.

There was just so much of it.

He took a deep breath when the doors broke open; trying desperately to grapple with the conflicting emotions tearing him apart.

Rey’s devotion to Kylo infuriated him… but her defense had stripped him raw.

She wasn’t following an idea.

She was looking through his armor… and seeing more than he realized was there.

For a moment, it filled him with such awe. Everything in him screamed to tell her. To take the adoration and the loyalty she gave so freely to Kylo Ren and bask in it as Ben Solo.

…but Ben Solo was always the problem.

If Rey kept looking … she would see the rest. She would see his deception.

She would see the monster.

And her revulsion would cut him to the bone.

Ben wasn’t sure he could survive that…

Not from her.

Unbidden his thoughts drifted to one of his earliest memories involving a woman - a girl... at the time…

*Solomon Snoke stood at the edge of the lake. His handsome face twisted in a distasteful sneer.*
“You’re late, young Solo.”

“I know,” 12-year-old Ben huffed in reply. He ran all the way from the stables. “But I had a good reason. Look!”

The boy pulled a note from his back pocket. It had clearly been folded and refolded several times. His eyes shone with youthful excitement as he presented it to his scowling mentor.

Snoke gingerly opened the paper and scanned the juvenile cursive:

Dear Ben,

Thank you for helping me with my saddle and form yesterday. You are the nicest boy I know. Peter and Sol always laugh at everyone when they make mistakes. But you always help. I think you are cute when you smile. I like you. Do you want to go riding with me after class?

Vanessa M.

Snoke sighed. “I had hoped to shield you from this sort of cruelty.”

The boy’s face immediately became guarded.

“What do you mean?”

“Children… can be so heartless.”

“I… I… I don’t understand.”

Snoke drew back.

“Oh… Ben,” he whispered sympathetically, “you actually believe this girl cares for you?”

All the delight warming through the boy suddenly felt cold.

And empty.

“I… no. I guess not.”

Tears abruptly began to burn behind his eyes, but Ben savagely beat them back. He would not cry in front of Snoke. He was not weak.

Still…

“Why?” he whispered. “Why would someone write that if they didn’t…”

“Well. There is the obvious reason.” Snoke paused expectantly.

Ben felt his stomach begin to churn.

“You mean… She’s making fun of me.”

The older man balled up the note in his fist and dropped it distastefully.

“I’m sorry you had to find out this way, child. At least she didn’t get the chance to make a fool of you in front of those other boys.”

Then he turned and walked away without a backward glance.
Ben stared for an endless moment at the treasure he’d carried with him all day; destroyed now and revealed to be nothing more than another rejection.

He kicked it viciously before following after Snoke.

Ben studied the broken little boy in his mind’s eye… Wishing, as he had countless times before, that he could somehow change the past.

“You were a child, Ben. It isn’t your fault.”

Maz’s voice challenged the self-loathing in his head.

“Then why does it feel like my fault?” he whispered bitterly.

He was 21 years old before he ever touched a woman. And even then, it was in Snoke’s arena.

Creda Vonn volunteered for the obscura test group because she was an orphan and Snoke promised her a full ride to any college of her choice. She had kind eyes and a pretty smile…

Ben shied away from Creda’s suggestive touches before eventually admitting to her that he was a virgin. She offered him her body and thoroughly enjoyed his for the few weeks of training prior to injection.

She was his friend.

Later, they told him that she died - screaming - as the obscura burned up in her blood.

By the time he began sessions with Maz Kanata (after his complicated escape from the First Order), Ben’s conceptualization of women and sex had been thoroughly wrecked.

It took Maz months to convince a recovering Ben that Snoke prevented him from forming connections – with his family – with his friends – and, yes, with women – in order to ensure his unquestioning loyalty.

It was hard to walk away… even from loneliness and a family that (he believed) rejected him.

A girlfriend and a thriving support system would have been much harder to turn his back on.

Perhaps even impossible.

The truth was a cold comfort, and even in its wake, the scars and knee-jerk reactions remained.

Maz (whose therapy style was never strictly conventional) came up with the brilliant idea to have him ‘discover his own appeal’ and ‘prescribed’ a tour of Europe and the Americas.

Normally, she would recruit Poe to guide him through this delicate ‘mission’ … but Poe was uselessly smitten with Kaydel by that point. So she sent him off with Ezra instead.

Ezra Bridger worked as a groundskeeper for the Sindian family until the night he and the Connix heiress rescued Poe. He joined the Resistance then and there (along with Kaydel) and never looked back.

Initially Ben questioned her choice (frankly he questioned the whole idea - several times, but he was routinely out-voted and frequently reminded that he had agreed to whatever therapy Maz prescribed).
Ezra was a few years younger than him, but his appeal was undeniable. He was notoriously good looking, and the heir apparent to Poe’s playboy crown.

What woman would look at him when Ezra was available? (And Ezra was very available.)

Many, many women it turns out...

He and Ezra bro-ed their way through a considerable number of traditional mix-and-mingle spots. They weren’t really Ben’s scene, but the constant change of venues and crowds sharpened his skills as an operative.

And several women (who didn’t know who he was - who didn’t have the slightest inclination of what he could do for them) …

Several women offered to ‘fill his prescription.’

He took up a few of those offers (initially with bewildered awe and eventually with subtle confidence). It was enough to convince him of his appeal. The scars faded… but they did not disappear.

However, the most important result of the whole notable adventure was actually the friendship he formed with Ezra.

Ezra never interacted with Ben prior to his association with the First Order. He had no expectations or preconceptions about the ‘wayward Solo.’ He didn’t see a lost soul or a damaged loved one…

Just a fellow operative and a friend.

It was remarkably refreshing and (in hindsight) likely the real reason for Maz’s bizarre pleasure trip suggestion.

Memories of his time with Ezra brought a smile to his face… but soon Ben’s thoughts returned to the immediate circumstances. His temples ached with trying to sort through it all…

“Seek another perspective. You are not alone. Snoke’s greatest victory was convincing you otherwise. When you are troubled... ask for help.”

Maz again. Ben idly wondered if there was as miniature version of her reclining in the curve of his ear.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he opened his phone and dialed a familiar number.

“Betty’s Massage Parlor! We rub you the right way!”

Ben rolled his eyes.

“It’s me, Ezra.”

“Of course it is, baby girl. Let me just take this somewhere more private.”

“Do I even want to know what you’re working on?”

A door slammed on the other side of the line and Ezra dropped his ‘do me’ voice.

“You most definitely do not. It’s classified anyways, but -”
He paused dramatically.

“I can confirm every last one of those rumors about Governor Talzin being into bondage. She is a fa-reak. I mean that in the best way. Or I would - if she wasn’t also corrupt and about to be arrested.”

“Thanks for keeping that under wraps. I feel totally in the dark.”

“Listen, ‘under wraps in the dark’ has been my life for the last three weeks. I regret nothing.”

“Noted.”

“Sooooo. What’s up, man?”

“I... need some help. I’m in a position with a woman that I’ve never been in before...”

“Ahhhh. Did you pull something? Or - oh no - did you miss?! That happened to me once. I thought I broke it. It was the worst moment of my life-”

“Ok. NO. It’s not that type of ...Wait - you missed?! And you thought you broke your-”

“Let’s pretend I never said any of that. Start over. Be less vague.”

“It’s like … she tore out everything inside of me and threw it in a blender. And then ... she poured it out and... the goo became… a monument ... to all the ways I’ve been an idiot.”

There was a pause and then:

“Alright, so - When I thought I said ‘less vague’ ... What actually came out of my mouth? Because clearly -”

“I just – I need to make things right, with... a female. She’s wrecking me-”

“Hold a minute. The lady you’re referring to wouldn’t happen to be that snack you keep toting around as Kylo Ren, would it?”

“My partner, Rey Niima.”

“Yes... I remember her very well. Beautiful woman. Fantastic fighter. She was up for recruitment, wasn’t she?”

“It’s... complicated. Luke got to her first. She’s wanted to be a journalist since she was a little girl. He actually fought with my mother and Poe about it.”

“Shame. She would have been special. There was something about her-”

“Ezra.”

“Right. Yes. Rey is wrecking you. Go on -“

“We had a... fight. She has a crush on Kylo Ren -”

“Oh boy.”

“I got annoyed about it - because she doesn’t even understand what Kylo Ren is-”

“I... see?”
“And... I lost my temper a bit.”

“Always a great tactic."

“I... I didn’t mean to. We’ve been under a lot of pressure lately. The stuff we’re working on is... heavy. And the rest - ... A lot of it’s my fault.”

He felt his jaw begin to clench.

“I don’t even know why her stupid crush bothers me so much-”

“Reeally? Because I could think of a few reasons... off the top of my head-”

“It’s just - she started to push back. She started defending Kylo...”

“So... her feelings go a little deeper than a crush - I’m guessing.”

“She cares. Truly cares. And not just about his - my powers. She’s loyal to Kylo. She looks at him in a way that I never considered... It was like she saw me... but - a better version.”

He shook his head, weighing his next words carefully.

“The person she wants isn’t Kylo Ren or the man behind his mask.”

“I think... I disagree. How did you come to that?”

“Because. Both of those men... are me. And she doesn’t want Ben Solo.”

Ezra tapped his fingers methodically. He’d bet his favorite saber blades that Rey would have that man for breakfast, lunch, and dinner if the opportunity safely presented itself. Still... It was never a good idea to guess what a woman was thinking.

“What does Ben Solo want?”

“I want… to fix this. I don’t want her to hate me.”

“Sounds like you’ve made a right mess of things, mate.”

“Honestly, I’m not even doing the full extent of it justice... It’s bad.”

“Listen... Rey is sharp. She is special. What she sees is the truth. It may not be a truth you’re willing to accept. But that doesn’t make it any less real... So Ben Solo needs to fix this. Or none of your personas will have any peace.”

“How? I don’t even know where to start.”

“My best guess? Tell her... as much of the truth as you can. Be transparent. Apologize... and offer something...”

“A gift?”

“No... It’s... something that will bring your relationship back into balance. It differs for every situation.”

“Thaat’s... remarkably obscure.”

“Well... It’s hard to describe. Honestly, I got most of this from watching Poe figure out Kaydel.
You’re reaping the wisdom of several Dameron misfires right now.”

“Rey’s not my girlfriend, Ezra.”

“Kay wasn’t Poe’s girlfriend either. Until she was.”

“It’s not the same -”

“Obviously. These are two radically different situations. Clearly. No similarities whatsoever. What was I thinking? I get upset like this over random women all the time-”

“I’m growing old here.”

“She matters. Right? She’s important. That’s all that needs to be the same.”

Ben rubbed his eyes aggressively. The expression on Rey’s face – the one he left her with – slipped through his mind.

She was important.

“I’ll... try,” he sighed. “Any final words of wisdom?”

“Don’t miss. Ever.”

The walk back was endless.

Ben’s emotions continued to stir chaotically, but he ran through Ezra’s advice in his head like a mantra. Taking a deep breath, he swiped his key card, unlatched the door...

And felt his heart stagger pitifully in his chest.

Rey sat curled up on the couch with her knees tucked beneath her chin.

Tear tracks marked either side of her face.

I made her cry.

All at once Ben hated himself. The wave of shame and self-loathing he’d taken refuge in countless times rose up to welcome him like a familiar friend.

A thousand cutting remarks rushed to the forefront of his consciousness. He was ready to distance himself. To burn a bridge. To find safety even if it meant destroying everything.

But then she looked up.

Her eyes met his. And for a moment they were filled with pure relief and the briefest trace of hope.

“...Ben.”

She called his name and the walls fell again. The fear ebbed. He found himself speaking the words he meant to say all along.
“I’m sorry... Rey. I’m so sorry.”

She gasped and her tears sputtered to life. All at once he was next to her. His hands came up around each of her arms.

“I’m not doin’ well,” he whispered, shaking his head jerkily. Ezra’s words echoed in the back of his mind.

...offer her something...

“I’m... afraid.”

Rey’s fingers gripped the front of his shirt. Her forehead lowered to his shoulder. Ben kept going.

“They’re not here. And I don’t know how we’ll get her out of this.” He took a shaky breath. “She’s my mom and I’m powerless to help her.”

His eyes drifted closed. She felt him exhale and deflate a bit.

“Being in this room. Just waiting for something to happen. All of it... It got to me.”

He drew back to meet her gaze again.

“Forgive me?” he whispered.

Rey nodded. A small smile began to bloom beneath her tears.

“Thank you,” she breathed softly.

They were silent for a minute or two before she let out a short broken laugh.

“I... I know what you mean. I’ve been so worried and... I haven’t felt like myself in days.”

Her shoulders straightened. She drew a deep breath and reached for Rose’s data. Ben tried valiantly not to notice how incredibly beautiful she was.

“Enough of this,” Rey declared firmly, wiping her eyes one final time. “Let’s get to work.”

~~~`````````````````````````````````````````````

It took her four hours, but at 12:39 AM (three days after their bus pulled into Canto Bight) Rey Niima struck gold.

Or (more accurately)... oil.

“BEN!”

Ben had fallen asleep with his eyes open on the couch. Rey’s wild scream sent him careening to the floor in a half awake daze. She didn’t even slow down to make fun of him.
“It’s OIL!”

Ben peered up at her from the ground - completely lost.

“What’s oil? Why are you bouncing?”

Rey waved a fistful of papers in his face.

“Two years ago, a meteor shower hit Dantooine Valley and the surrounding areas – all of which sit on the edge of a protected national forest. The affected land is home to three species of endangered trees, one endangered species of bird, and a breed of groundhog on the species watch list.”

“So... basically it’s an environmentalist’s day dream?”

“Precisely – and - the Dantoo Mountain Range – which Dantooine Valley is a part of - is the source of a massive natural spring that provides water for three surrounding provinces. It’s the primary watershed.”

Ben shook his head; still very lost and barely conscious.

“That’s… wonderful, Rey, but how-”

“BECAUSE it’s a protected area, several environmental agencies sent in crews to repair damage done to the habitat during the shower. One of the things they did was take soil samples.”

Rey began tossing papers onto his lap each time she finished a sentence.

“Now - the samples indicated an extremely high concentration of some very rare - but worthless - element in the soil AND a mineral content that was practically off the charts. Several major foundations donated money and resources to discover if this would damage the habitat long term. Eventually, the government authorized geological surveys.”

“OK… I think I’m following you…” Ben attempted to swim out of the paper pile Rey was actively building on him. “I’m assuming they found something?”

She grinned.

“Eight months ago, surveys confirmed a vast depository of semi-precious stones, marketable minerals, and OIL in the Dantoo Mountain Range – particularly in the Dantooine Valley.”

Ben cocked his head; starting to make several connections of his own.

“Next to a protected forest and a major watershed…”

Rey shook her head excitedly.

“When the possibility of oil came to light - about a million corporations started fighting over it, but the environmentalists and the government have been putting up roadblocks every step of the way.”

Suddenly Ben’s eyes lit up. “Rotta Hutt’s great-grandfather made it big after Prohibition by buying shares in Palace Oil - which is now one of the three major providers of native fuel.”

“And the Black-Sun family bought out Renegade Resource five years ago. Right now it’s not a
major supplier, but a native well and extensive mineral reserves would make them a contender.”

Something crucial connected in Ben’s mind. He immediately began digging through the stack of memos Rose sent them. Rey smiled and held up a small file folder.

“I assume this is what you’re looking for.”

He snorted softly and shook his head as she handed him the data.

“The Dantoo Reserve Act. It would legally put to rest all of the controversy by making the land a national park. No mining. No testing. No experimenting. And it has excellent grounds for passage. Industrial activity in that area would destroy the natural habitat of the aforementioned endangered species, and almost certainly contaminate the water supply which…”

“- would eventually cost the provinces millions of dollars. Probably wouldn’t do the citizens any good either.”

Rey was bobbing back and forth on her knees next to him. She was excruciatingly adorable. Ben had trouble keeping a straight face.

“The citizens you’re referring to are some of the poorest in the country. They don’t have the money or influence to fight corporations and private interests looking to tear apart the valley. The Hutts and the Black-Suns have more than a few Senators on their payroll. They wield considerable power… but it’s not quite enough – because…”

Ben could physically feel his spirits begin to lift.

“Because someone is fighting for the people of Dantooine.”

Rey grinned, “Very good, Mr. Solo.” She leaned down, bringing them nose to nose. “Would you like to guess which four mismatched Senators happen to be spearheading the campaign for the passage of this act?”

“Raddus, Antilles, Holdo –”

“-and Organa.”

Ben’s face broke into a wide smile. Impulsively, he swept Rey into his arms and the spun her around. She laughed as lightness flooded her limbs. His eyes shone with real hope for the first time in days…

Suddenly she could feel him everywhere. Waves of pleasure spread from where his hands spanned her waist. For a brief moment her body was entirely in his control.

Rey knew the instant he came back to himself. His lips parted in shock and he pulled her to him instinctively. Her feet remained suspended a few inches off the ground. She slid slowly down his torso, brushing her curves over the firm muscles of his chest and abdomen.

Neither one of them breathed.

A stack of papers fell and Rey stumbled backward awkwardly.

“I guess now all we need is the proof,” she observed, deliberately avoiding eye contact. Her hand reached blindly for some notes to scan.
Ben immediately coughed and collapsed into the couch. “If they ever show up.” He pretended to stretch, then began re-stacking some of the scattered files directly on his lap.

“To be honest -” his voice cracked, he cleared his throat, “-it’s no surprise that Rotta Hutt is trying to destroy my mother. He has more than enough incentive to come after her.”

Rey glanced up from her reading.

“Why’s that?”

Ben snorted.

“I guess you wouldn’t know the story...” He gathered a few more files off the floor, then placed them on the cushion next to him. “My mother – Leia - killed Rotta’s father, Jabba Hutt, when she was 23 years old.”

His partner’s mouth dropped open, much as he imagined it would.

“Wha – Oh my god! Was it an accident!?”

“No. No she - uh… strangled him in the middle of a party - while her brother blew up his yacht.”

Rey began coughing on a lungful of air.

“What?! Luke?! Luke Skywalker blew up a mobster’s yacht?! How did that even–”

“They were sort of... rescuing my father. He owed the Hutts a lot of money… Jabba was holding him at the Palace – the one in Tatooine. He was going to kill him actually. My mom tried to get him out, but Jabba caught her.”

“So she killed him?”

“Well... He was... a very unpleasant man. He forced her to wear strange metal lingerie and chained her to a chair – right in the main audience chamber.”

“Lord. That’s horrific. I can’t even imagine.”

“Yes... I avoid imagining it at all costs.”

Rey couldn’t help it. She giggled.

“I’m sorry – oh my gosh that’s terrible – I should not laugh –”

Ben shuddered, but a smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

“So... How did Luke get involved?”

“Luke had to save my parents. He got to Han first – on the boat - but they couldn’t find Leia. Apparently, dad started a Wild West shoot out right next to the fuel tank, which gave Luke the idea to blast the whole thing. Honestly, I don’t know where he gets off calling me dramatic. Of the two of us - I’m the only who hasn’t blown up a yacht.”

Rey could feel her brain short circuiting every time she tried to picture her grumpy boss fighting gangsters.

“What about your mom?”
“Chaos on the yacht distracted everyone at the party. She cut the lights and wrapped her chain around Jabba’s neck. He was dead before anyone realized what was happening.”

It took five minutes of silent awe before Rey felt able to speak again.

“What an absolute boss.”

Jyn Erso’s workshop was once one of Chandrila’s six great halls… (4th largest one – to be precise). The cavernous space served her purposes very well. Every time she returned, it felt a little like coming home.

Jyn was the brilliant mind behind a majority of Resistance tech. She inherited her notorious father’s gift for innovation along with her mother’s innate aesthetic genius.

She wasn’t just a remarkable engineer and inventor.

She was an artist.

Most of her creations never hit the open market. She invented things that the public could not be trusted with. Funds from the few ‘gadgets’ she did patent and release were enough to keep her tinkering with the best materials for decades to come.

The only real problem with a lab that size was that it was easy to lose things…

Tools.

Fuses.

The twins.

Today, however, it was copper wire.

After tearing apart her workspace for nearly twenty minutes, Jyn let out a frustrated growl and grabbed her cellphone.

Two rings sounded on the other end of the line and then-

“Hey, Jyn. Listen, I can’t watch the twins tonight. I scheduled a - a root canal for this tooth that has just been killing me. I can barely eat –”

Jyn bit back a snort.

“I don’t need you to watch the twins, Chewie. Kay has them till tomorrow.”

Chewie mumbled something that sounded like ‘oh-thank-god’ then cleared his throat significantly.

“What can I do for you, pajarita?

“Copper wire. I think I’m all out.”

“I have some. Meet me in the Constellation Study. That’s about half-way between the two of us… Oh. And can you grab me another pack of Oreos from the pantry?”
“I thought you were in so much pain you could barely eat.”

“I got better.”

Fifteen minutes later, Jyn found herself munching on Oreos in the Constellation Study. It was one of the oldest rooms in Chandrila; built and commissioned as part of the original Mustafar House. The entire ceiling was painted to resemble the night sky while most of its furnishings and décor were golden or star themed.

Cassian taught Leo and Riez the shape of different constellations from this very room. Jyn smiled as she lost herself in the memory.

Suddenly, the Oreo package in her hand began to move.

“Yoda!”

A tan cat with vibrant green eyes glared back at her.

“These are not for kitties.”

Yoda blinked indignantly. His companion, a grey tabby with white streaks named Qui-Gon, sauntered over to greet her.

She giggled and stroked them absent-mindedly until something very odd caught her eye.

The painting above the mantle had been replaced by a portrait Jyn had never seen before... Although, it’s subject was instantly recognizable.

President Amidala.

…Padme.

The woman on the canvas barely resembled the fierce politician from official photographs and press reels. She was a little older, a little softer…

And very pregnant.

There were so few private images of Padme left… Jyn found herself utterly transfixed. She moved closer to catalogue every detail. The lady’s hair was partially twisted into elaborate braids near the back of her head, while the rest was left to flow gracefully over her shoulder. Her dressing gown (clearly custom made) featured an embroidered bodice and gorgeous skirt that fell all the way to the floor where –

Jyn frowned. She leaned in closer.

“That’s strange…”

Two very familiar cats posed regally at Padme’s feet.

Jyn turned to look at Yoda and Qui-Gon. Then back at the portrait. Then back to the cats.

The gray tabby had the same white stripe over his nose… and the tan cat shared Yoda’s distinctive eyes.
She shook her head. This portrait was painted over 50 years ago. “There’s no way…”

“There’s no way what?”

Chewie placed his box of copper wire on a chair and wandered next to her.

“It’s… the craziest thing,” Jyn chuckled. “Look at the cats in this painting. If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear they were the same cats. They even have the same markings.”

She turned to Chewie expectantly, waiting for a teasing remark or amused dismissal… but it never came.

Instead, his gaze lingered heavily on the portrait.

“They are the same cats.”

Jyn’s eyes widened for a half-instant – then she broke into full laugh.

“You actually had me going for a moment. You looked so serious.”

“I am serious. Those are the same cats. Yoda and Qui-Gon. They were Anakin’s cats.”

“Chewie… That not possible. They’d be almost 60 years old –”

“They are 60 years old.”

“Very funny.”

The older man smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“It isn’t… Not really. Those cats…” His eyes dropped significantly. “The nightmare of Anakin Skywalker began with them.”

“You aren’t making even a little bit of sense.”

Chewie cracked his knuckles absently.

“You know what happened to him, yes?”

“I do… ” Jyn folded her arms and leaned back against the fireplace. “It’s quite a story.”

“…You know how it started?”

“Uh… vaguely. I know he discovered a new element, impeturan. It’s very rare. The Skywalkers own all known quantities…” she bit her lip, “because it’s the raw form of obscura.”

He nodded.

“Obscura is refined from impeturan, but so is another similar substance – Anakin’s initial creation, illumos.”

“Illumos?”

“When Ben Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker first began working with impeturan, they refined a pure form. It was very powerful. Anakin theorized that it had healing and regenerative properties. And – in a way – he was right.”
“Ok… So - what happened? And… how did the cats get involved?”

“Anakin’s mentor, Sheev Palpatine - he always travelled with a nasty Doberman named Tyrannus. One day, while he was visiting the estate, Tyrannus attacked the cats.”

Jyn gasped. She reached over to stroke Yoda, but thought better of it when she noticed he was licking his butt.

“Did he… kill them?”

“Almost. He mauled them badly. They would’ve died if Anakin hadn’t intervened.”

“He experimented on them?”

“Yes. To save them… Illumos was completely untested, but he didn’t have anything to lose. So he injected them both.”

“And it worked?... I mean - it must have.”

“It didn’t just work. It practically performed a miracle. The damage mended instantly… But there were other side effects. The illumos altered their DNA on a molecular level. Their bodies looked the same, but they… weren’t.”

“Are-… Are they immortal?” She scoffed and let out an embarrassed groan, “I cannot believe I just asked that question.”

Chewie grinned.

“I actually asked the same thing first time I heard the story. But – no. Kenobi estimated they’ll live to be about 90 or so… Illumos affects animals a bit differently than humans, but what happened was… stunning; a major scientific breakthrough.” He sighed. “That was when – and why - Palpatine got involved.”

Jyn turned her gaze back to the portrait.

“I know what happened after that,” she whispered.

```
Rey crinkled up another piece of paper to throw at the waste basket.
She missed... again.
Sighing, she began to circle the chair and pick up all her previous failed attempts.
Ben was in the next room bending and unbending a paper clip.
“Welcome to the Grand Gungan, Mr. Hutt.”
```
Rey dove overtop her office chair, shoving Ben out of the way in her haste to reach the display screen before him.

Ben rolled his eyes and shoved her back - taking the seat for himself.

Rey kicked the chair out from under him and smugly positioned herself in front of the monitor.

Ben was just about to retaliate when -

"Has my guest arrived yet?"

"Yes, sir. He and his associates are waiting in the Gunga Lounge. I will escort them up."

Rotta Hutt nodded, then turned to address someone else.

"Make sure you take the old man’s guns before he gets here. Bossk... check the windows in the bedroom and set up the-"

Ben raised his eyebrows.

“That’s Trand Bossk... He’s definitely Rotta’s creepiest lieutenant.”

"Contact Arawn. He’ll want an update…"

He frowned.

“There was never any mention of an ‘Arawn’ among the Hutt associates.”

Rey shook her head.

“I don’t recognize it either. Perhaps it’s an alias?”

“Maybe… But it almost sounds like Rotta is reporting to him… That can’t be right.”

They counted three men in the Hutt entourage; Trand Bossk, Greg Greedo … and Cad Bane - the family’s highest ranking assassin.

“He’s not traveling light is he?” Rey muttered as she ran the footage through facial recognition software.

Ben shook his head.

“No… That’s the holy trinity of Hutt enforcers. It’s an odd move to bring all three at once.” He steepled his hands thoughtfully. “No boss who wants to stay alive travels with only three men. There must be more somewhere else…”

Rey nodded.

The door opened again.

“Master of the Black-Sun family… You honor me with your presence.”
The scowling face of Maul Black-Sun passed over the monitor, followed by three of his own men. Rey quickly set to work identifying them.

“That’s his cousin, Pre Vizsla - in the tan coat. The one with the earpiece is Sarco Plank. They call him ‘The Blood Scavenger.’ Apparently, he’s located and dispatched more witness protection sources than any other hired gun to date. He was responsible for the murder of that alderman two years ago, but they were never able to make the charges stick”

She bit her lip as the third man came into view, but Ben spoke before her.

“Savage Black-Sun. Maul’s brother.”

Rey felt her blood run cold. She shuddered to think of stories she’d heard of him. By all accounts he was aptly named.

“They each brought their hardest hitters.”

Ben turned toward his partner. He could see the prospect of a sensational lead burning behind her eyes, but it was tempered with a streak of completely justifiable fear.

The men in that room did not play games. If you crossed them, they killed you. End of story.

...and Rey was only flesh and blood.

Without a word he reached over and pulled her to him, bringing her back against his chest. She didn’t acknowledge his actions, but she didn’t pull away either. Right now she needed her friend as much as she needed her partner.

Ben always knew what to do in those rare moments of uncertainty. Taking a deep breath, Rey drew confidence from his simple gesture and continued to watch the scene unfold above them.

The two mob lords exchanged meaningless pleasantries before getting down to business

“I have kept my end of the deal. Provided you keep yours, we will all be much happier men this time next year.”

“I’ve taken an incredible risk, Maul. The only dealings I ever wanted to have with a Senator involved unmarked bills in an empty automobile... This game we are playing... leaves a dangerous trail.”

“We all would’ve liked to handle this in the usual manner, but those four are not so easily dealt with. That’s why we’re here. That’s why Arawn came to us.”

“Arawn takes too many chances. I don’t trust him... and I don’t trust you.”

“Nor I you. But we’re committed now. The evidence has been placed. Soon Holdo, Organa, and the others will be arrested for treason. The bill will be tainted with them – and their votes will be gone.”

“It still might pass-”

“Unlikely. We’ve paid well for our influence. Besides - it’ll definitely pass if nothing is done. Those tree-huggers pinned their hopes on four unusually clean politicians. We don’t have anything to hold over ‘em. Raddus doesn’t even have a parking ticket... Believe me - we looked.”
“I still think we could’ve persuaded Antilles. He doesn’t strike me as a man to turn down a bargain.”

Rey swung around to look at Ben.

“They’ve said all four names. We’ve got them.”

“It doesn’t matter. We needed all of them to go down - and Leia Organa is about as likely to accept a bribe as she is to sprout wings and fly.”

“What about Arawn? …Why did he involve us? I would hardly expect a man like him to share.”

“Arawn is determined to see this through. He wants something on that land - but I don’t know what it is. And to be honest, I didn’t ask... He promised it wouldn’t cut into our profits.”

“As long I get my shares in the fuel, I don’t care if he wants to open a petting zoo...”

Ben shook his head.

“It sounds like ‘Arawn’ is the real source of all this… I wonder if…”

“Boss. I found something! Looks like a tap...”

Rey eyes widened and she frantically began typing on the keyboard.

“Ben - that bug isn’t ours-”

“Well who’s is it?!?”

“I-I don’t know! Ours are still in place. I-”

“Find them – IMMEDIATELY. Greedo - check the lots. Bane, sweep the rooms below.”

“Sarco! Savage! Follow them-”

Ben grabbed Rey.

“Get in the bedroom! NOW!”

“Ben-”

“NOW REY! Go!”

“Pan the room! Get rid of anything that doesn’t belong!”

Ben shoved Rey into the bedroom and slammed the door behind her. He tore the dulcium ring from his finger, unleashing the full force of his abilities. In the blink of an eye he dismantled the majority of their equipment; jamming the larger pieces into the ceiling vent and covering the rest with clothing and furniture. (Jyn designed her tech to look like common office supplies. That feature came in handy a lot).
Savage and Bane continued to close in. Ben’s mind raced frantically. There was no good reason for two young tourists to be in their hotel room right now unless…

*Time to implement the Kaydel Dameron Method of Maintaining a Cover.*

Rey turned to see Ben bursting through the door - his shirt already off.

“Are they-”

He reached forward and tore her blouse in two. The next thing she knew, he was on top of her and they were both lying on the bed.

“I’m sorry, Rey -” he whispered as he lowered his mouth to her neck.

Blinding heat poured through her, obscuring the fear from moments ago. She knew there was a reason for this - a reason she needed to play along. But reasons evaporated as he moved against her.

*Yes. This.*

She could feel his bare flesh pressing intimately over hers. It was a practically a spiritual experience. He was so big. There was so much of him. Her body lit up from front to back like a neon sign. She knew what she wanted. What she *needed.*

Tangling her fingers in his hair, she arched toward him.

*Closer. Harder.*

A deep primal urge overtook her, replacing inhibition with a much simpler voice; one that obeyed the commands of her baser instincts.

*More* it sang as Ben’s callused fingertips slid possessively up her thigh, bunching her sensible skirt to allow him closer.

A low growl tore from his lips as her body opened to him. The words he meant to offer faded as his mouth became more insistent against her skin; drifting lower until his teeth scraped over her collarbone. Unable to endure another moment, Rey dragged him upwards; desperate to taste him once and for all-

The sound of their door banging open froze them immediately. There was barely an inch separating their faces. For a moment, they lay there; staring breathlessly into one another’s eyes. Listening as the men carelessly tore apart their suite.

Ben reached down and gripped Rey’s hand - never breaking eye contact.

“Don’t be afraid,” he whispered softly. “I feel it too.”

She nodded frantically.

“We’ve got to keep going. Do you understand?”

She nodded again. “I understand.”

And then she kissed him.

Not because her body wanted his. Not because they were seconds away from discovery.
She kissed him because it was *him*.

*Ben.*

Because she was more terrified of never getting another chance to hold him like this than she was of armed men coming to kill her.

So she kissed him. Because right now - in this moment - she could.

Ben took every brush of her lips like a blow to the head. Sounds muffled. Sensation narrowed. Thought ceased.

There was her.

Only her.

The bedroom door cracked violently from its hinges.

Their eyes met in a single instant of understanding.

She screamed.

Savage Black-Sun arched an eyebrow and turned to Bane with a cold grin.

“Looks like we interrupted something.”

Ben yanked the covers up over both of them.

“What’s going on here!?” he shouted in a tone that he hoped was appropriately confused and disoriented.

Rey whimpered theatrically behind him. It was a ruse, but his protective instincts kicked into overdrive nonetheless. He moved to pull her more securely against his chest. If this wasn't enough to convince them, Kylo Ren would be making a surprise cameo.

Savage’s eyes lingered heatedly on Rey. The air charged with a sinister new threat.

A cell phone rang. Bane answered it and shot his companion a meaningful look.

“It appears we have the wrong room.” His gaze brushed Rey with a final leer.

Ben tightened his embrace. It was everything he could do not to snarl and rip them both to shreds. He could feel her trembling against him. Her fear was real now and he itched to make them suffer for it.

They waited breathlessly for Bane and Savage to exit the suite. As soon as the door clicked, Ben surged forward to reactivate their audio sensor.

Fortunately, it was still in place.

“*found them outside in the parking lot of the Lucky Lucas-*”

“Feds?”

“*Not anymore. We took care of it.***”
“The feed - Were they broadcasting?”

“No. It was a dead wire. Sarco lit the van. Whatever they had, it’s ash now.”

“We need to leave. We can meet again the day after tomorrow - at the Palace. It’s an event night. No one will be looking too closely. My associate will call you with a time.”

“I don’t like it. The Palace is your territory.”

“I’m not fool enough to cross Arawn - or you. Nothing to be gained there. We need to finish this. Arawn expects everything in order when the time comes.”

“I don’t think killing two federal agents is what he had in mind. He wanted it clean. No unnecessary blood.”

“That was hardly unnecessary... Will I see you at the Palace?”

“...I’ll be there... You head out first. My boys will take care of the mess-”

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Comments? Questions? Concerns? This chapter is JAM packed with some SERIOUS clues and some hints and ... other important connections. Did you catch it all? Any theories? Talk to me! I would love to hear from you!

Feedback in all its forms makes the updates flow faster. Its SCIENCE. (Pretty Please with sugar and Clyde Logan on top?)

Additional Notes:

The suite Ben and Rey are staying in is like an upscale apartment. It has several sections and rooms.

The data from Rose was stashed under the bed. That’s why Bane and Savage didn't see it.

Rey has more of a history with the Resistance than even SHE is aware of... It will be revealed and explored in the coming chapters.

Yes. Ezra is hot.
Mortal Recoil

Chapter Summary

Ben and Kylo assess Rey.
Rey makes a discovery.
Kylo makes up his mind.
The partners search for Arawn.
Kaydel drops off the twins.
And Jyn worries about everyone else.

Chapter Notes

What words could I possibly say to express what your feedback and the continued support for this work mean to me?

I am past words. You make me SO happy. I love reading every one of your comments and theories and ideas and compliments...

It’s beautiful. You’re beautiful.

Over 500 Kudos... I can hardly believe it. I never thought people would love it that much. Honestly I could just burst... You guys have really made this special.

I am sorry this update was late as well. Everything was on schedule... but life happened. My husband and I unexpectedly needed to fly out to Tennessee to see his grandmother. She is a wonderful woman who has lived a wonderful life... but that life is coming to a close.

We are home now and I am so happy we were able to see her. This is a shorter chapter (though not really short), but what happens next simply cannot be shortened so... I hope you will still enjoy it.

Quick Pre-Reading Notes:
In cannon, the character of Snap Wexley was born on the planet of Akiva.
There is a passing reference to someone named "Koo." This character - a pilot named Koo Millham - is played by Mark Hamill's daughter in the movies.

To the Alpha of My Heart and Beta of My Stories:
You and I are one glorious song. Thanks for loving me even when I’m sharp. And thanks for being enough of a music nerd to get that joke...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For a long time neither one of them spoke. They just sat... numbly absorbing the last hour.
Adrenaline continued to pound through their systems, fueled in equal parts by fear and arousal.
Two federal agents were dead; their lives snuffed out as casually as candles.

They had evidence now.

Evidence to avenge the lost souls in that van. Evidence to exonerate Leia.

And they kissed.

There was evidence of that as well…

Ben knew he was staring. He just didn’t know how to stop. Her skirt was rucked up over her hips. Her blouse was destroyed. Her hair was a mess and her bra – a sensible nude underwire that was mystically the most erotic undergarment he’d ever seen - was tugged in several directions –

But Ben wasn’t staring at any of that (though he was *excruciatingly* aware of it all).

Ben was staring at her neck and collarbone - where evidence of his lips and teeth glowed like brands across her pale skin.

*Marked.*

*Mine.*

His nostrils flared. Heightened senses kicked into high gear. He could *smell* her.

*Pheromones. Arousal.*

His eyes lowered to her legs. They were spread - bare - exposed. He’d done that. Unfolded her like a fire flower and the scent was burning him up.

He could feel his hands clenching into fists. The ring – his dulcium ring - was gone and nothing but the press of his fingernails against his palm was left to ground him.

He needed to get ahold of himself and his inner rutting highlander *immediately* before he did something monumentally stupid.

Like club Rey and drag her back to his cave.


*Mom.*

His arousal took a sharp nose dive and Ben took a shuddering breath. His hand closed around his phone:

*[TOUCHDOWN. ARRANGE FOR AWARD CEREMONY. WHO ARE THE MVPs?]*

The response was immediate.

*[QUARTERBACK: PALADIN – RECIEVER: HAWKEYE. CEREMONY SET FOR 8/17. COUNTY FAIR. PRESS WILL BE THERE. SERVICE SHOULD BE EXCELLENT.]*

Ben raised a brow.

*Paladin was Quarterback…*

That meant Joph Seastriker was somewhere in the building covering them. Hawkeye – the ‘receiver’
was Finch Dallow. Ben would pass the information to him.

**8/17 COUNTY FAIR**

Drop was set for 7:18 in the private observation deck. His eyes darted toward the top of the phone screen.

*15 minutes*

The last two lines were crucial.

**PRESS** - the cameras along his direct route and at the drop site had been tampered with. **WILL BE THERE** indicated a 10 minute window. And **THE SERVICE SHOULD BE EXCELLENT**… Finch would be dressed as a hotel employee.

The flash drive with all their data and the recordings was shoved up a ceiling vent. Ben began to scan the room for the best way to reach it without using his abilities.

Rey’s eyes darted briefly toward her partner. His shirt was off. Someone (who was definitely *not* her because *oh my gawd*) had undone his belt and the top button of his pants. And –

*No.*

It couldn’t be. The universe could NOT be that unfair.

1… 2… 3… 4… 5… 6… 7…

Eight pack.

Ben *Kriffing* Solo had an eight pack.

Ben I-kissed-him-in-a-moment-of-self-preservation-and-now-I-don’t-know-what-planet-I-live-on-or-what-color-my-own-eyes-are Solo had an EIGHT PACK.

“Done counting?”

Rey gasped guiltily and yanked her gaze up to meet his.

“I-I-I don’t know what-”

“You mouthed the numbers.”

If there were ever an appropriate moment for a brain aneurism, now was it. But Rey had never been that lucky.

It only *felt* like she was dying.

“You could have told me-” she mumbled.

“I could have described one of my body parts to my female coworker? Isn’t that the *exact* scenario we read in sexual harassment training last month?”

“Only if –” Rey choked on her own words and abruptly slammed her mouth shut.

Unfortunately Ben’s hearing and memory were both exceptional.

His eyes sparked with an unholy fire and suddenly he was prowling across the bed like a feral lion;
stopping mere inches from her face.

“Go on, Niima. Finish that thought.”

He leaned in another inch, causing his massive biceps and all eight of his glorious abdominal muscles to ripple obscenely. For a moment Rey thought she might actually weep. And she really might have – if there was even a single drop of moisture left anywhere above her waistline.

She could not – should not - answer. But she did.

“Only if it’s unwanted.”

He grinned. It was a familiar grin. Rey had seen it on his face every time he opened an order of Lo Mein. It was the grin of a staving man about to tear into his favorite meal.

Ben knew he was clawing up against the invisible lines that defined their relationship. Lines that were already raw and pulled tight after their hasty cover-up.

But the beast was awake.

Kylo Ren knew what she wanted. Kylo Ren had seen his name stamped across her perfect backside. Kylo Ren’s teeth marks were still fresh and red on her gorgeous neck.

Kylo Ren could still taste the bit of Rey he marked and he was primed to devour the rest.

The phone in his hand buzzed again.

[CONFIRM?]

Kylo Ren howled in frustration and Ben Solo remembered that it wasn’t 1200 B.C.E. and ravishing your coworker – no matter how delicious – was NOT appropriate.

Where the kriff is my ring?!

[CONFIRM.] He typed back… Then he cleared his throat and deliberately looked anywhere but Rey.

“And it is unwanted -” he paused (but couldn’t quite resist one last quip), “because you told me – when we discussed this on the plane – that I was too big to bed.”

Her mouth dropped open.

“Why you – I –” She glared at him. “You misheard me. I believe I was actually remarking about your head being too big.”

“So… I’m not too big to bed?”

She threw a pillow at him – secretly grateful to be on familiar footing again.

“Put some clothes on! No one wants to see all that.”

Lies, lies, lies…

Ben snorted and pulled a shirt over his head before walking towards the door. He was almost all the way out when he leaned back over the threshold and said-
“Nice bra.”
Rey gasped and yanked her blouse closed.

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“Promise me.” His tone was gentler this time. He didn’t bother to hide his concern or his fear.

“I promise.”

“Here is your dress-” Kaydel laid a garment bag on the cleanest looking section of Jyn’s workbench. “And there –” she motioned to a corner of the workshop where several suspicious crashes were already in progress. “- are your children.”

Jyn grinned.

“Any problems?” she asked innocently.

“Other than kidnapping Poe for ransom and blackmailing me for a bedtime story?”

“Yes. Other than the usual-”

Several loud bangs suddenly split the air - followed by the distinct sound of glass shattering. Then a shout of -

“We’re ok! Everything is ok! Don’t come back here! Just – Just stay over there!”

After a brief pause.

“Hi mom! Missed you!”

Kaydel turned back to Jyn.

“Pretty standard.”

Rey sat cross-legged in the middle of their suite. Ben left two minutes ago and she was all alone with her thoughts. The past few hours had been... intense. To say the least. It wasn’t the first time she’d risked her life for a story...

But no sane person faced something like that completely without fear.

Rey Niima did not like being afraid. It was a cold, harsh reminder that she was only human. She rested her forehead on her hands.

When she recognized Savage’s face - and remembered the stories - the horrible stories…

For a moment she let trepidation claw its way through.

Ben saw it. And he pulled her close.

His simple gesture gave her everything she needed. It wasn’t a new thing really...
But it was confusing every time.

_and the bed._

She could still feel his hands on her. As if everywhere his skin met hers, he left traces; like ripples in water or lines in the sand.

Ben Solo was a passionate man. His passion burned bright in everything he did. Intimacy – even feigned intimacy – was clearly no exception. His body sought hers as if the very feel of her skin was like a drug. It had been so long since anyone touched her that way…

Had anyone _ever_ touched her that way?

She was a busy woman. She had little patience for the games and traditional niceties of modern courtship. It all seemed so shallow and empty… Like eating imitation chocolate when you’d tasted the real thing.

Rey had _not_ tasted the real thing. But she’d seen it.

Every time Finn subtly leaned toward Rose for comfort. Every time Kaydel smacked Poe’s ass when she thought no one was looking. Every time Han or Leia sought each other’s hand behind a podium or under a table…

It was there.

She sighed.

Ben would find it someday. Of course he would. Then there would be no more late nights chasing leads. No more pranks and close calls in elevators.

No more moments when the press of his chest against her back would soothe the storm in her mind and heart.

He would belong to someone else in the raw and beautiful way all true soulmates belonged to each other. Not as possessions, but as melody and harmony; surrendered in tandem to the same glorious song.

And Rey would be left alone… with further proof of how _hollow_ the various texts, and swipe-rights, and hints, and cheap drinks of her limited romantic experience really were.

_What kind of woman could hold Ben Solo?_

The question appeared in her thoughts uninvited. Rey shook her head, allowing a chuckle to slip through despite her maudlin musings.

_She wouldn’t drive him insane. She wouldn’t give him ten heart attacks and a stroke chasing unsavory leads all day. She wouldn’t flick his ears or leave chickens in his desk or flirt with Chad Fortuna just to irritate him…_

No. She wouldn’t do any of those things.

_She would be incredible. Just like him._

A lump formed unexpectedly in her throat, and – for reasons she stubbornly refused to examine – Rey yanked her mental emergency break and forcibly turned her thoughts elsewhere.
There was still work to be done, questions to be answered…

Truths to be revealed.

Her fingers twitched toward a pen. The laptop in the corner beckoned. She could feel the familiar drive flooding her limbs – pushing her forward.

Rey Niima was a reporter. The truth was her job.

In this arena, at least, she knew where she stood.

The drop went off without a hitch. Ben passed the data to Finch and departed as quickly as possible.

He didn’t want to leave Rey alone for too long.

Joph was just outside their suite, ready and able to extract his partner if danger presented itself.

But still…

It was a well-known fact that Rey Niima plus long periods of unoccupied time equaled trouble... and screaming... and headaches.

And Kylo Ren.

He increased his speed.

The suite looked less destroyed. She clearly took some time to straighten the mess he and the mobsters had made. Shrugging off his jacket, he wandered into the bedroom and found Rey sitting on the bed with her hands around her knees.

Her gaze was unfocused. She appeared to be puzzling something over in her mind. Ben sighed and slowly crawled up next her, folding himself into a similar pose. After a moment she spoke.

“I looked up Arawn. There was… nothing.”

He nodded.

“I’m not surprised.”

“I even ran the name through some of those search algorithms Rose wrote… Nothing. Not even on the deep web – and that honestly worries me more.”

Tiny little ‘pops’ filled the air as Ben began to crack his knuckles. There was something odd about her tone. Something was bothering her.

“What about alternative mentions?”

She bit her lip.
“Arawn is the name of an ancient Celtic god… The god of terror and revenge.”

Ben’s eyes widened.

“Terror and revenge?”

“He’s the king of hell – or ‘Annwn’ - in the old myths. There’s a saying about him. It kept coming up over and over again. It seemed…” she paused carefully to consider her words, “…oddly intentional. Like someone made sure that any search for that name would see it.”

Rey passed him a small scrap of paper. She’d written out the old warning in her recognizable scrawl.

“Long is the day and long is the night… and long is the waiting of Arawn.”

Ben felt a strange chill as he spoke the words aloud, as if he’d summoned the ancient menace into the air around them. He wasn’t a superstitious man… yet his gut churned with nameless foreboding.

“I don’t like this,” he whispered, crumpling the paper in his fist. “Something is… off. Something doesn’t feel right. I know it sounds crazy –”

“It doesn’t – It doesn’t sound crazy. I feel the same way. Like we’re missing something crucial here…”

She trailed off for a moment before voicing another unsettling observation.

“What kind of man intimidates men like Maul and Rotta? I’ve never heard of anyone who could command that type of deference from them.”

I have.

The thought lurked sinisterly in Ben’s mind, but he didn’t dare voice it.

“No one alive,” was all he managed to say.

“The twins’ suits won’t be ready until the day after tomorrow, so I’ll just pick them up on the way to the rehearsal.”

Jyn nodded.

“What about the guys? I haven’t checked my phone.”

“Finch and Koo are taking over in Canto Bight as we speak. Tallie is on route as back-up. The guys should get in tomorrow night - but I think they’ll all head back directly after the wedding.”

“Really? No contact yet?”
“There was. Less than an hour ago – but… there’s complications of some sort - a secondary location in play.”

“So Ben probably won’t make it back to see Paige…”

Kaydel shook her head.

“She understands… We all do. Ezra missed my wedding for much the same reason.”

Jyn snorted.

“Yes. I remember him saying several times that he was supposed to be the Maid of Honor. Or wait – what was he calling himself?”

“Best Man of Honor. Said he was going to wear the dress and the corsage AND bring his swords because – traditionally - the ‘best man’ was actually the best swordsman.”

“You think he would've actually worn the dress?”

“Oh. Absolutely.”

After a moment picturing Ezra with his swords in a bridesmaid dress, Jyn snickered and changed the subject.

“I’ve never been to an Akivan wedding before. I’m pretty excited. Though -” she paused to look at the twins – one of whom was wearing Yoda as scarf, “I do worry about the boys being involved a ceremony that lasts three days.”

Kaydel bit her lip thoughtfully. “I mean… I think they’ll be ok…”

“Oh-” Jyn snorted, “I wasn’t worried about them.”

Chapter End Notes

As always I would LOVE to hear what you think. Your comments and feedback are the lifeblood of this story. They inspire me to write even if I don't feel like it sometimes. You have no idea how much it helps - how much it means. Gimme some sugar, prettiest of pleases?

Additional Notes:
Rey does know Poe and Kaydel. She knows them as their cover identities: an Air Force commander and a nurse

Snap and Paige's wedding is not a traditional western wedding. In this universe, Snap comes from a province called Akiva and Akivan wedding celebrations take place over several days. For those of you worried in ANY WAY about cultural appropriation - please do not be concerned. Although there are several cultures world-wide who participate in multi-day ceremonies, the Akivan ceremony will not be directly or even
loosely based on any culture and will ABSOLUTELY not be disrespectful to any culture. It is entirely made up (just like many of the alien cultural traditions of Star Wars).

New Code Names in this Chapter:
Joph Seastriker - Paladin
Finch Dallow - Hawkeye
Contents Under Pressure

Chapter Summary

Kaydel looks to the future.
Ezra looks stunned.
Poe looks at Kaydel.
Rey looks for an opportunity.
Ben looks for Rey.

And now the partners can't look at each other the same way...

Chapter Notes

Ok. So this was going to go up yesterday. But I fell down the stairs and the pain derailed a lot of things. Good News: I will live. Bad News: Oooooouuuuccchhh.

The gorgeous mood board you see below was created by the incomparable reylocalligraphy. I haven’t stopped squeaking about it since I first laid eyes on it, so I’ll understand if you need a moment to bask in the awesomeness. #relatable

This is the first piece of art anyone has ever made for my work, so it is very special to me.

Reylocalligraphy is one of those incredible people who can do it all. Do yourself a favor and explore her creativity on tumblr here. She also writes top notch fan fiction which you can (and definitely should) read here.

You can thank the one and only darthvictoriana for the bit of heat you are about to receive. Not only did she help me hash out a particularly frustrating section on this post, she also voted to pull the proverbial pre-smut trigger and presented a compelling case for doing so. The Poe/Kaydel scene featuring Pat Benatar’s “Shadows of the Night” was inspired by her and this chapter is dedicated to her. She has a compelling new cannon verse fic out that you can read, should read, and hopefully will read here.

I have actually never written anything like this before. I would really appreciate feedback on it cause… it’s a whole new world for me.

Speaking of whole new worlds… I joined tumblr. Come say hi! Ask me questions! I might even try to fill a prompt or two if anyone is moved to request one. Find me here.

Some Pre-Reading Notes:
The Connix Gala is an annual charity ball thrown by the Connix Foundation. The Connix Foundation is a charitable enterprise (among other things) run by Harter Kalonia and Kaydel Connix. The Gala takes place at Connix Court.

Finally:
To the Man Who Has Taken the Best Care of Me: I’m no picnic when my whole body ISN’T a giant bruise. You were at my side in an instant. You cooked me breakfast,
lunch, and dinner, gave me several massages, fetched me a ton of firecracker popsicles, and still beta read this chapter. I don’t deserve you, but I’m keeping you anyways.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“‘What are they working on over there?’ Kaydel mused curiously as she eyed the twins.

Jyn shrugged.

“Last week Leo said they were developing some sort of ‘non-electronic tracker.’ I checked their materials. Nothing explosive, radioactive, or sharp. Other than that I tend to let them tinker. That was how I started.” A small smile tugged at the corner of her lips as she adjusted the settings on her power drill. “There is a kind of brilliance to the mind of a child… They’re innovative in ways we don’t remember how to be.”

Kaydel’s hand drifted unconsciously to her abdomen. Jyn’s gaze sharpened.

“Kay… Are you-”

“Are you ever going to finish the story?”

The women turned to find Riez plopped down at their feet. He appeared to be fitting Qui-Gon with some sort of collar jewelry.

“Story?” Jyn’s head tilted in confusion.

“The story of how she and Uncle Poe fell in love.” Leo piped up after materializing in a nearby chair. Yoda was still sound asleep and draped over his neck.

His mother’s jaw dropped. She spun back around to Kaydel.

“You told my children the story of –”

“I told them a very edited version.”

“And you didn’t finish it,” Riez chimed in. “We made a deal for a complete story.”

“You made a deal with the twins?!” Jyn whispered to Kaydel, “Isn’t that the one thing we all agreed
“not to do anymore?”

“I was weak. They promised 10 bedtimes!” (The twins always kept their promises.)

Jyn let out a low whistle.

“I don’t even blame you.”

Kaydel chuckled and settled into a chair. “Ok. Where were we?”

“You were sitting on Uncle Poe in bed while Paige and Rose watched.”

Jyn dropped her drill.

*******************************

Eight Years Ago

*******************************

Kaydel Connix had a sense of humor as well as a sense of justice.

When the Resistance finally took down the Sindian family, she took possession of the Sindian estate, Arkanis Manor. It was the house she grew up in. The house she never felt quite comfortable in.

Several offers rolled in – from all over the world – to purchase the property, a beautiful manor situated in the middle of exorbitantly wealthy Dulathia.

But she turned them all down.

And opened a non-profit homeless shelter and rehab: The Arkanis Hope House.

Outcry from the community was… predictably dramatic. And immediate. But Kaydel grew up in their world. She knew how to play their game...

After all, she was the last Connix. She wielded the combined power of the Sindian and Connix fortunes. And (thanks to the Resistance) –

She had a ton of blackmail.

The rehab shelter went up and (despite the collective pearl-clutching of 200 scandalized Dulathian matrons) no one lifted a finger to stop it.

The facility also served as a refuge – of sorts – for young women (and occasionally men) of Dulathia being pushed into marriage alliances and/or pursued in ways they were not comfortable with.

It was a brilliant scheme, really.

No self-respecting Dulathian would be seen within 500 feet of the building (even to retrieve their child) and – on the off chance they did venture in – Kay had enough dirt to bury them if they put so much as one manicured toe out of line.

Dulathia would not be allowed to continue as it had for so many centuries. Kaydel Ko Connix was prepared to personally make sure of it.
Her return to Connix Court (her family’s ancestral estate) was an emotional one, but she could not afford to linger on what was lost. Her sights were set on what could be found – what could be built – in the future.

Kaydel, despite her pedigree and the family she found with Harter, Ezra, and the Resistance, was an orphan. Her extravagant wealth made life easier and opened countless doors, yet it was no substitute for parents. There were orphans all over the country – all over the world – who had little but their names to survive on. They had no wealth. No family.

Kaydel was prepared to change that too.

Connix Court was transformed into a specialized orphanage and foster care facility. Children were taken in mostly on recommendations; many of them were victims of abuse or past the age when they were likely to be adopted.

And some… were gifted.

While all residents of Connix Court received care, education, the chance to be part of a loving community, and the benefit of Kaydel’s wealth and connections – a few select individuals were brought in for their unique abilities and potential.

Connix Court became home to the Resistance recruitment and training program.

(…The same program that - three years down the road - would open its doors to a scrappy orphan from the streets of British-occupied Jakku; a pretty girl with a mean right hook and dreams of becoming a journalist…)

All in all, the previous two years had been very busy for Kay.

She became a registered nurse, nabbed her black belt in Krav Maga, opened a rehab and a black-ops training center disguised (but also serving) as a fully functioning orphanage…

As co-chair of the Connix Foundation and a valued member of the Resistance, Kaydel felt generally fulfilled and happy in her life. Though, she was a bit busy… and had almost no time for personal pursuits.

Which was why (at twenty years-old now) Poe Dameron was still her first – and only – kiss.

It was almost tragic, really, but she simply… hadn’t come across anyone else she wanted to kiss. She operated in an odd social circle – most potential romantic options were either taken or old enough to be her grandfather… And Kaydel never did things just to do them. She was a deliberate person by nature and intimacy was no different.

In her less forgiving moments, she liked to blame her lack of experience on Poe. She never meant to compare other men to him.

It just sort of… happened.

And it wasn’t like Poe Dameron was the best specimen of mankind she’d ever seen or interacted with. It was just that… every other man seemed to have the same problem over and over again… They weren’t kriffing Poe.

And if they weren’t Poe, then her body just… wasn’t interested.
I don’t get out of bed for anything less than Poe Dameron. And I certainly don’t get into bed for anything less (she imagined her rebellious libido explaining in an oddly sassy tone.)

And now here she was.

On a Connix Court balcony – outside the Connix Gala – with Ezra – explaining her situation and trying to rectify it in the most logical (albeit unorthodox) manner available.

“You want me to what?!” Ezra squawked.

Kaydel rolled her eyes.

This was a terrible idea.

“I want you to kiss me. I hear you’re very good at it.”

“I am. I’m a kriffing tongue artist –”

“Well that doesn’t sound overly appetizing but-”

“But nothing. I’m good. I just have no idea why you’re doing this. If you want to kiss Poe –”

She slapped her hand over his mouth.

“I don’t want to kiss Poe. I want to want to kiss somebody else – anybody else. Understand?

“No. Not at all,” Ezra muffled from behind her hand.

“But nothing. I’m good. I just have no idea why you’re doing this. If you want to kiss Poe –”

She slapped her hand over his mouth.

“I don’t want to kiss Poe. I want to want to kiss somebody else – anybody else. Understand?

“No. Not at all,” Ezra muffled from behind her hand.

“Just kiss me. Honestly, it’s embarrassing you have to be asked twice.”

“Kay – you don’t even want to kiss me. I don’t do anything to ladies that they don’t want. I’m very committed to that.”

“I do want you to kiss me. I just have no desire to be kissed by you. But hopefully you’re skilled enough to get me there.”

“Now. You say something like that – as if it makes perfect sense – when you know good and well it doesn’t –”

“Please, Ezra. I need this fixed. Can you help me or not?”

Ezra let out a long sigh. After a moment he placed his hands on either side of her face and drew her close.

“I’ll do what you ask.” He looked deeply into her eyes. “But I think we both know it won’t help.”

Then he kissed her.

After a few moments –

“Anything?”

“No. Try again. I’ll open my mouth.”

Ezra snorted.

“Truly, this is all so romantic. I might swoon...”
He kissed her again.

“What about that time?”

“Did you have the chicken tortellini?”

“Ew. Gawd. Could you taste it?”

“Here. Just put your arms around me and try one more time.”

“My manhood is in the ER right now.”

“I appreciate your sacrifice.”

He kissed her again.

“HEY! What the hell do you think you’re doing!?”

No.

No no no no no no no NO!

Poe Dameron appeared – as if summoned by the universe when it realized she was kissing someone other than him.

To her eternal shame and frustration, Kaydel was more turned on by the sound of Poe’s shouting than she was by all three of Ezra’s kisses.

The two of them jumped apart like guilty school children to face an absolutely livid Poe.

Poe – for his part – was drowning in a raging flood of his own adrenaline. He wasn’t entirely clear on why he was here – yelling at two consenting adults for a fairly PG kiss in a generally private area. But he’d glanced out a window, saw Ezra with his tongue down Kaydel’s throat, and suddenly he was snarling at his date that he “had to go.”

His fists were clenching. His legs couldn’t move fast enough.

He’d practically kicked down the double doors.

And now he’d created the mother of all awkward moments.

Nice, Dameron.

Well aware that he’d crossed a line, and having no logical (or remotely acceptable) reason for doing so, Poe attempted to salvage the situation.

“There are… children. Children everywhere. This is a house of children.”

Kaydel blinked.

Ezra took one look at Poe’s body language and decided two things on the spot.

1. He did not want to die today. And also –
2. The solution to everyone’s problem was literally right in front of him.

“Yes, Poe. You’re right. This… is a house of children. And – honestly – if it wasn’t for Kaydel being so upset and needing to disprove her theory –”
Kaydel could actually feel all the blood draining out of her face.

“…What theory?”

“Her theory that she is unable to enjoy kisses because of her horrible ex-boyfriend who was a terrible kisser.”

Both Kaydel and Poe stared at him as if he’d just announced his intention to amputate his leg with a spoon. Ezra, however, was not easily deterred.

“I am an amazing kisser, so I offered – gallantly – to help her rediscover the experience in a positive way –”

Kaydel’s eyebrows were well into her hairline. Poe looked profoundly confused. Ezra was talking literal nonsense. And it wasn’t over yet.

“Unfortunately, I was… not good enough. And I was just saying – before we tried that last time – that she should ask you –”

Kaydel eyed the edge of the balcony, mentally calculating if she would survive throwing herself over. Poe looked like he’d been told exactly what he’d just been told. Ezra was still going –

“I know you guys have been friends awhile – and she trusts you. She just – doesn’t want her experience to be tainted going forward, you know? …I feel good about this. I think you should help her.”

Kaydel’s brain had lost the ability to produce human speech at this point. Her lips kept moving, but there was no sound. Poe was still trying to sort out what Ezra was saying. He couldn’t get past the realization that he was being asked to kiss Kaydel and she was not protesting.

Ezra – sensing his targets had reached full disorientation – unleashed his finishing move.

“She wasn’t sure you’d be willing to help. But I know – I mean – I absolutely know – that you are. You are just a …very helpful man.”

There was a hundred year pause. Then Poe turned to her and asked –

“Is… Is this true? Did you want my… help?”

What I want, Kaydel mused, is to chop Ezra up into itty-bitty pieces and toss him in the air like confetti.

But – in the time it took to formulate that thought, her libido had jumped out of bed for Poe Dameron and taken the proverbial wheel.

“Yes. I – I think you could definitely help.”

Ezra was fist pumping madly behind Poe.

Poe’s face took on an oddly resolute expression as he moved toward her. Kaydel was fully prepared to run away and hide in the nearest flower bush, but then he muttered something that caused her mind to blank entirely:

“Just please don’t use the voice.”

And then his lips were on hers.
Kriff.

Kriiiiiiff.

He was the right height. He had the right angle. He cupped her chin the right way.

He even smelled right.

There was no way around it. From the moment his skin brushed over hers…

It felt right.

She plowed her fingers through his curls, drawing him closer as her libido broke into five-part harmony.

Finallyyy! It sang.

Poe’s hands rested on her waist with deliberate pressure. She could feel him restraining himself. Trying to be a gentleman. Trying to be a friend.

But his mouth…

His mouth plundered hers with a desperation she couldn’t fathom. And, as he pulled her plump lower lip between his teeth, Kaydel lost all semblance of dignity.

“Please,” she moaned, not even entirely sure what she was begging for.

Poe froze. The grip on her waist suddenly tightened – then pulled.

“Kriff it,” he growled as he pressed forward – backing her up against the stone railing. His hand wrapped possessively over her thighs and he lifted her effortlessly onto the flat seat of the balustrade. Kaydel’s legs opened reflexively and Poe stepped between them without a second thought.

“What did I say about the voice, Angel.” The words wrenched out of him even as he scraped his teeth over the shell of her ear. She whimpered at the surge of rough pleasure.


She arched forward when his palm brushed a particularly sensitive spot. Poe groaned.

“I don’t understand either,” he murmured helplessly.

Her legs tightened around him as his mouth returned to hers again. She couldn’t recall a single reason for ever avoiding this –

“HEY! What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

Ah. That’s the reason.

Poe’s body whipped back, allowing Kaydel to take full stock of the situation.

Ezra was fully shook.

(To be honest, she had totally forgotten he was still standing there in her unbridled charge towards Poe Dameron’s lips.)

His mouth was open. His eyes stretched to dinner plate width. He was basically in a fugue state.
And behind him…

Poe’s monumentally pissed-off date.

There was a moment of painful silence (during which Captain Dameron was clearly trying to remember something). And then he asked -

“…Madeline?”

“It’s Madison, you piece of shi–”

But the rest of her (no doubt) eloquent reply was cut off when Ezra broke like a loudly deflating balloon and collapsed into actual hysterics.

Several things happened at once after that.

Madison stormed off, Poe stumbled behind her like a disoriented drunk (despite being totally sober), and Kaydel snapped her legs shut after realizing that (without Poe between them) she was flashing the entire East Wing of Connix Court.

Well… That didn’t go as planned.

“…Murder you,” Kaydel hissed as she slid gracelessly off the balustrade.

“You should name your first child after me,” Ezra wheezed when he finally caught his breath. “I’m sure Poe won’t mind.”

Despite the infamous balcony incident which no one (except Ezra) ever spoke of, Kaydel’s friendship with Poe continued to grow, much as it had the previous two years. They worked the odd mission together and their interactions were often playful and engaging.

A keen observer may have noted that – despite being generally physical people – both Kaydel and Poe were careful never to touch each other. No accidental collisions… No careless brush of fingers… They interacted constantly. She teased him about being a roguish lothario. He teased her about being an insufferable know-it-all… but they remained firmly and deliberately apart at all times. It was the unspoken law that governed their every interaction. No one thought to look for it… No one but Ezra, who – after witnessing the unmentionable inferno on the balcony – did not need his keen observational skills to detect a quiver in the air each time the pilot and the nurse came within twenty feet of each other.

At some point they fell into the habit of making random bets and paying ridiculous forfeits to one another. Poe lost frequently and Kaydel’s wild imagination landed him in a number of embarrassing scenarios. After being forced to walk through a local Walmart dressed as Pikachu, Poe suggested that the penalty for losing their bets be less … performance based.

“Information,” he said. “Information is the most important currency in the world right now.”

“What information do you have that I could possibly want?” Kaydel drawled.

Poe waggled his eyebrows lasciviously.
“How many times must I say this –” she lamented, “I don’t speak ‘eyebrow’…”

“Come on. I know you understood that.”

Kaydel regarded him thoughtfully for a moment before hazarding a guess.

“So… You’re offering to answer any question I ask – with the absolute truth – even if it’s…” she bit her lip, “–inappropriate?”

“Especially if it’s inappropriate.”

She laughed.

“You are the resident expert on inappropriateness, Dameron.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Poe was forced to pay up a week later. Kaydel insisted that Snap Wexley was hooking up with Paige. Poe didn’t believe it for a second…

At least not until he caught them christening Paige’s plane.

He sighed.

A bet was a bet and Poe Dameron was a man of his word.

Besides… a small guilty part of him whispered, It’s a good excuse to see her.

Poe expended a great deal of energy pretending that part of him did not exist.

Kaydel lived in her quarters at Chandrila when she wasn’t working for the Connix Foundation. The Castle was one of the few places she felt comfortable after growing up in the amoral Sindian household. Even the presence of Harter wasn’t enough to shake the persistent unease that characterized her time there. Most of her pleasant childhood memories revolved around traveling and learning beyond the stifling confines of the manor.

Poe sought her out in the hospital wing initially and they informed him that she was in the Scorpio gym, blowing off steam after assisting Dr. Ackbar on a particularly difficult operation.

The Scorpio gym boasted a giant wall of mirrors and a wide dance floor. Poe had only been inside a handful of times… It took him a few extra minutes, but he eventually located the glass doors covered in ornate scorpion etchings, pulled the giant bronze scorpion handle…

And discovered something truly delightful.

She was dancing…

Not with the poised movements of a studied routine or the calculated steps of a professional.

But with the casual joy of a young girl releasing herself from the troubles of her day.

He recognized the song. Pat Benatar: “Shadows of the Night.”

She’d taken her hair out of its ponytail so she could whip it along with the music and ditched scrubs for some old cloth shorts and a sports bra. Her perfect pink mouth – a mouth he’d tasted and still couldn’t quite forget the flavor of – sang along soundlessly with the throaty pleas of the vintage
ballad queen.

“We’re running with the shadows of the night. So baby take my hand, it’ll be alright. Surrender all your dreams to me tonight. They’ll come true in the end.”

And then she began to twirl out as the melody swelled to a stirring crescendo.

Maybe it was the music – the charged desperation and longing woven into every chord of that song. Maybe it was the way she moved – with careless grace and innocent passion. Maybe it was the lilt of her private laughter braiding through the notes to reach him.

“And now the hands of time are standing still.”

Maybe it was just… Kaydel. Maybe she was the only reason he moved into the path of her spin – to catch her against the firm wall of his chest.

Her eyes met his as he softly spoke the next line.

“Midnight Angel, won’t you say you will?”

Kaydel Connix was a sensible woman.

But in that moment – she would have given Poe Dameron her virginity on a silver platter if he so much as asked politely for it.

“I lost,” Poe whispered.

“I knew you would.”

His grip loosened. Kaydel pressed her burning back into the cool surface of the mirrored wall and slid to sit on the floor.

“How did you find out?” she asked after a moment.

“I thought she was being murdered in the hanger.”

“Yikes. Did you see anything?”

“The last shreds of my innocence scuttling into the nearest gutter.”

“Now that is a surprise. Where did you get shreds of innocence? Ebay? ...They’re certainly not yours.”

Poe laughed and allowed his shoulder to rest against the glass.

“I’ve come to pay up. Ask away.”

Kaydel was silent for a long while as she considered.

“What… are you most afraid of?” she asked finally.

He cocked his head.

“Wow. Right out the gate. No what’s your favorite position? No have you ever been with two women at once? Not even who was the best kiss you’ve ever had? Just straight to tell me your greatest fear?” Poe chuckled. “You’re an odd one, Kaydel Ko.”
“Odd because I’m not begging you to talk dirty to me? Please. I have a better imagination than you
do.”

His grin became even more pronounced.

“I bet you do, Midnight Angel.”

“Besides –” she continued primly, “I already know the answers to all those questions. You don’t
have a favorite position. You have not been with two women at once. And obviously I was the best
kiss.”

She turned to him with a grin of her own, but his expression had changed. Now he regarded her with
open curiosity and the slightest hint of awe.

“How… How did you know that? Any of that?”

Kaydel shrugged.

“I know you.”

She held up a single finger.

“You are a serial lover, not a casual one. You like to give pleasure, but you really like to win. You
want to be the best lay. That’s what gets you off. Position is only a detail – one that changes with
every partner, because every partner is different.”

She held up a second finger.

“The second one is tied to the first. You don’t like to divide your focus. The kind of sex you enjoy
isn’t about your pleasure – it certainly isn’t about intimacy. It’s about being the guy who gives her
the best orgasm she’s ever had. The one she thinks about even with somebody else – and you’re not
confident you can do that if you’re pulling double duty.” She shrugged. “It was all quite easy to
figure out once I nailed the central truth.”

“…And what is the central truth?”

If she had turned to him in that moment, she would’ve seen how deeply her casual words had shaken
him. That he was transfixed by her. That he had never felt more naked in his entire life.

That she figured out a piece of him even he couldn’t define, and he was both desperate and terrified
to know why.

But she didn’t turn. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the glass. A small smile
danced across her lips.

“You never lose yourself in it. You’re always in control – always competing with every other man
she’ll ever have. Poe Dameron doesn’t want to be a lover. He wants to be a legend.”

The words hung between them for a small eternity. Poe found himself playing through a hundred
different moments and interactions – only to come to the same inescapable conclusion every time.

She was right. She was right about all of it.

Including the last point. The only one she hadn’t answered seriously, and – he was beginning to
suspect – the only one that mattered.
She was the best kiss he’d ever had.

Maybe not the most technically skilled… but kissing her was something else entirely. And now he knew why.

*I lose myself with you, Angel.*

*I can’t think when I touch you. I just feel.*

*I want to be your lover… but I don’t know how.*

It all came to him sharply and profoundly. Like a tire iron to the face.

“Where are you going?” Kaydel asked when Poe suddenly shot off the wall. “You didn’t even tell me your greatest fear!”

He froze and turned slowly to face her.

“I did actually. Somewhere along the line, I did.”

She looked genuinely confused and opened her mouth – likely to protest, but he cut her off with a parting shot.

“And you were wrong,” he drawled with his signature devilish grin. “I do have a favorite position.”

“Really?!” She hopped up. “Well what is it?”

He looked thoughtful for a moment, then said:

“I’ll tell you… If you manage to guess correctly.”

“That’s not fair.”

“I literally don’t care.”

“…Is it missionary?”

“No.”

“Cowgirl?”

“No.”

“Wheelbarrow?”

“Gawd no. Wheelbarrow is terrible.”

---

Kaydel was sore. Sparring with Ezra was always brutal. He never went easy on her – that’s why she preferred him. Her muscles ached and everything within her screamed to soak in a hot bath and drift into the welcoming abyss of sleep.
She trudged wearily through her door, dropped her gym bag, and was preparing to peel off her shirt – when she saw him.

“Poe?”

Something was wrong. Something was truly – terribly - wrong. The young pilot’s face was pale and drawn. His normally vivacious brown eyes stared listlessly at nothing… vacant.

Forgetting her discomfort, Kaydel rushed toward him… He was curled – oddly motionless – near the foot of her bed with his knees propped up.

*He looks like a little boy.*

“Poe -” her hands went to both of his shoulders, “Poe, *what happened*?”

He was so still. She wasn’t getting through –

“Poe. Tell me what happened.” Her hands cupped his chin, bringing their gazes together. “Please tell me what’s wrong.”

His jaw worked reflexively, grinding his teeth together before he finally spoke.

“Ben is gone.”

Kaydel felt his hands come up to close over her wrists. She shook her head.

“What do you mean he’s *gone*? He’s with Luke – They’re living with that Lanai colony for the anthropology journal. They’re –”

Poe’s grip on her wrists tightened.

“He left Luke four months ago. Sent him a letter, saying he was home. Sent Han and Leia letters saying he was with Luke. But the letters stopped. Han went out to see Luke –”

Kaydel was stunned speechless. She knew there were problems with Ben… but not like *this.*

Poe and Rose spoke about it every once and awhile. They would make an offhand comment or she would hear the odd bit of conversation…

The story wasn’t hard to put together.

By the time he was 14, Ben Solo’s anger and resent were such a problem that he was routinely sent to travel with his Uncle, Luke Skywalker. Luke’s acclaimed works in the field of anthropology were often the result of cutting off all communication with the outside world and living among tribal societies whose way of life had not changed in over a thousand years.

Ben confessed to Poe a number of times that it felt like he was being exiled to another century so his parents wouldn’t have to deal with him. Although he shared his uncle’s passion for journalism and scholarship, the ancient religions and customs of living history tribes like the Lanai did not interest him. He wanted to write about the world as it was happening – not as it had been.

“I don’t understand,” Kaydel whispered. “How could he be *gone*? We’re the Resistance. There must be a way to find him –”

“There’s no trace of him,” Poe cut her off. “His accounts are drained. He left all his clothing. All his possessions – everything… He’s been planning this for months – maybe even years.”
“But – but we have trackers. We have computer programs and – and data nets – we can –”

“They’ve been trying that for two months… Government agencies all over the world have been searching. Leia didn’t want to tell us – Rose and Paige and I… They’ve been looking everywhere – trying everything –” Poe felt his throat constrict. “He was raised by the Resistance. They’ll never find him if he doesn’t want to be found.”

“Poe…” she whispered softly; her heart poured into the sound of his name.

“I held Rose for hours while she cried. Paige just kept screaming and shouting and breaking things and… after the screaming stopped, she was just… so quiet. She just sat there…”

Suddenly his hands lashed out to grip Kaydel’s arms – right above the elbows. He pulled her closer; the vacancy in his gaze blazed with raw pain.

“I didn’t cry… I didn’t shout or pace or anything. I told them it would be ok. I told them we would find him – that I would find him. I promised them over and over again –” he cupped her cheeks as he shook his head frantically, “ –and it was a lie. I can’t promise that. We might never find him. We might never see him again – but I wanted… I wanted to–”

Kaydel didn’t wait for him to finish. She pulled him into her arms, allowing his screams of rage and bitter anguish to break over her chest. Tears soaked through the front of her shirt. Sometime – minutes or hours later – he surrendered to exhaustion and his breathing evened into the tell-tale patterns of sleep.

She lay awake for hours with his body wrapped around hers.

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“Why did Ben Solo run away from his family?” Leo whispered.

Kaydel reached over to softly muss the boy’s hair.

“Because… a very bad man told him lies about his family – about himself… And he believed those lies.”

“And… that made him run away?”

“The lies convinced Ben that running away was the right thing to do.”

The twins were silent as they turned the information over in their brain.

“What made him come back?” Riez asked finally.

Kaydel lifted her gaze to Jyn, who had long since given up the pretense of work.

“He discovered the truth.”

~~!!~~!!~~@~~!!~~!!~~

It was the heat that woke her. The left side of her body was on fire. The right side was freezing.
Rey groaned in frustration. She reached out to grope for the covers and –

Both eyes flew all the way open.

“Ben?” she whispered.

He was next to her. Sleeping.

They were –

They were sleeping in the same bed.

How did –

A series of images flooded her mind.

Ben returning from his walk. Going over the research. Discussing Arawn. Ben is unnerved; she can see it. He sits on the bed next to her. They keep digging…

Her eyes darted over her surroundings. The clock read ‘1:00 AM.’ Papers were scattered over the mattress. She was still wearing her jeans… Sighing, she tried to sit up slowly.

We fell asleep. Ben must have –

Rey was abruptly yanked back (specifically ‘to the left’) and immediately experienced several simultaneous revelations.

The entire left side of my body was on top of Ben. Ben is cold now. I want to scream. I want ice cream. Neither of those seem particularly likely or advisable right now.

Ben Solo is holding onto my shirt in his big giant fist with an iron death grip.

I need to pee.

She shifted a bit and attempted to tug her shirt free.

Fail.

Rey frowned and tried again.

Nothing.

Her mouth dropped open.

What kind of grip exercises is this man doing?

Pressure in her bladder increased. Rey was becoming desperate. She gave one last tug –

The sound of ripping fabric split the air as Rey went flying off the bed.

The entire back of her top was missing. She grabbed hold of the nightstand to haul herself up off the floor. Her legs were still a bit unsteady. Huffing, Rey tossed a glance over to the bed and rolled her eyes.

Her partner was completely undisturbed. Half of her shirt was still clutched securely in his hand.

Ben Solo: 2 – Rey’s Shirts: 0
“If he keeps this up, I’ll be walking around naked.” She mumbled as she trudged toward the toilet.

Rey might’ve spent several minutes (or hours) contemplating the fact that she was (again) sharing a bed with Ben, but somewhere between the floor and the bathroom an idea occurred to her… She paused to consider it and immediately realized that her partner – were he conscious – would veto her idea quicker than she could say ‘overreaction.’

*Ben would have a cow. Ben would have 10 cows and a moose.*

But that never stopped her before.

As quietly as possible, she slipped into an outfit suited to her endeavor; then discreetly gathered her reporter’s notepad, pepper spray, cell phone...

Her plan had only one set principle.

*Whatever happens, Ben cannot find out.*

With that objective in mind, she slowly crept past their bed – *her* bed. It was *her* bed. He was just in it.

That thought caused her to momentarily lose focus; she bumped into an end table right beside the door.

Ben stirred.

She froze.

“...Rey...?”

Her eyes widened – but when she turned to guiltily accept the chastisement he was certain to rain down on her (especially if he saw her outfit) she realized that –

He was still asleep.

Sort of.

She quickly dropped to the floor as her partner drifted groggily into consciousness.

He sat up in a slight daze and looked around the room.

Rey lay flat on her back, staring up at Ben lazily perusing the area.

*Don’t look down, don’t look down, don’t look down...*

After a while he appeared satisfied that nothing was amiss and snuggled back into the pillows. Rey waited (what seemed like forever - but was only two minutes) before resuming her silent crawl.

She turned one last time to look at Ben, then slipped quietly out the door.

~~!!~~!!~~@~~!!~~!!~~
Ben shifted restlessly in his sleep.

Something was wrong.

He awoke several minutes ago for no apparent reason, and now he couldn’t shake the odd discomfort stirring in his subconscious. His hand drifted up to tug at his hair.

“What the –” Ben sputtered through a face-full of cloth. He shook himself and turned on the lights.

“Rey?” he called.

Clearly he fell asleep on the bed while they were doing their research last night… Maybe she wandered out to the couch?

His eyes dropped to fabric in his hand.

_Is that Rey’s shirt – well, half of Rey’s shirt?!_

Ben shot out of bed fully awake.

“Rey!” He rushed through the various rooms and corners of the suite. “Rey!”

...But she was gone.

There were no signs of a struggle. She wasn’t abducted. Which meant –

Fear and frustration spiked in equal parts. Ben yanked on his clothes with an angry growl and tore out of their suite, slamming the door behind him. He knew where Rey was going. His jaw clenched as he threaded through the seedy streets of Canto Bight.

He knew _her._

~~!!~~!!~~@~~!!~~!!~~

The Palace was every bit as ostentatious as its name implied. Locating it was as simple as ‘taking a look around.’ The building was so lit up, it could probably be seen from space.

Straightening her shoulders, Rey began to sway sensuously toward what she assumed was the staff entrance. A large security guard put his hand to her arm as she walked past.

“Where exactly you headed, sweet thing?”

Rey tossed her hair and shot him a sultry smile.

“I’m new. They told me to report here my first night.”

The guard shrugged and let her pass. He agreed to cover this shift last minute, when the regular guy’s wife went into labor. He probably forgot to mention a new hire. The girl certainly _looked_ like
she worked there.

And if she didn’t, Bossk would handle her.

Rey maintained a casual pace as she traveled down a long, narrow passage. After several yards, the path veered sharply right and opened into another hall filled with dressing rooms. Picking one at random, she slipped inside.

A large assortment of slinky waitress outfits hung around her.

*Bull*s-eye.*

She had her shirt halfway over her head when –

“*REY!*”

Groaning, she turned to face Ben.

He was livid. Anger radiated off him in waves, electrifying the air around them.

“What are you *doing*?!” His question barely made it through his clenched teeth.

“My job,” she whispered tersely.

“You don’t think should’ve consulted me before disappearing into the bowels of *Canto Bight*?!”

“I didn’t need to consult with you. I knew exactly what you’d say.”

“So you snuck out *in the middle of the night*?!!”

“I have no desire to deal with your unreasonable –”

“UNREASONABLE?! Rey, this whole city is crawling with drug dealers, mobsters, gawd only knows what else – and you’re wandering around *by yourself*, with no back up, dressed –”

Ben finally got a look at her outfit. His eyes bulged out of his head.

She was only wearing a little make-up, but her hair fell freely over her bare shoulders and brushed the top of a skin-tight red halter. A small swath of gold fabric (that could – in the loosest definition of the term imaginable – be called a skirt) wrapped around her waist, providing a generous view of gorgeous tan legs, enticingly showcased by a pair of black stiletto ankle boots.

His mind filled with white noise.

“Are you *trying* to kill me?” he whimpered.

Rey crossed her arms aggressively.

“Oh of all the ridiculous –”

“*Excuse me.*”

The bickering partners turned to see a short balding man.
“Who are you people?” he asked, his gaze bouncing warily between them.

Rey stepped forward.

“I just got a job here.”

The stranger quirked a curious eyebrow.

“O…K. What’s your name?”

“Daisy.”

“Got a last name?”


Rey’s eyes widened as her hand tightened to a fist.

No he didn’t.

Ben met her furious gaze with a smug smirk.

It’s official. I’m going to knock him out and sell him to a kriffin circus.

The man turned to look at her partner.

“Who’s he?”

Rey smiled sweetly. Or perhaps I’ll let him die of embarrassment.

“This is Father Ben. He’s my priest.”

Her smile widened when she heard Ben hack out a strangled cough.

The bald man was now very lost.

“He don’t look like a priest. And – if he is – what’s a priest doing here?”

Rey didn’t survive 17 years in Jakku without being able to think fast on her feet.

“He’s... here to dissuade me from taking this job. He said no decent woman would work in this… ‘den of iniquity’.”

She turned to Ben (who was looking rather shell-shocked) and pointedly added. “But I told him that I can do whatever I want because I’m a big girl and I don’t need a father.”

His eyes narrowed.

“Surely a big girl would understand how dangerous it is to sneak out of her room – in the middle of the night – to play with all the criminally inclined boys and girls roaming the streets of Canto Bight.”

The Palace employee snorted. “You don’t seem like no priest I ever seen.”
Baldy was not the sharpest tool in the shed, but he was definitely becoming suspicious. Rey quickly weighed her options. Their cover was already crumbling. And Ben – gawd he could be the most infuriating man sometimes. Frankly, he had this coming.

_Here goes nothing._

“Oh. He’s a priest. I can prove it.”

Ben’s expression alternated between glaring and staring at her like she’d sprouted a third head. Without bothering to explain, she grabbed him and forced him into a chair facing her with his back to the stranger.

“No flesh and blood man could endure _this_ without reaction, but a man of the cloth has grace enough to resist temptation.”

Her hand gripped the firm muscle of his shoulder. Ben’s gaze locked into hers and his breathing became notably uneven; whether from horror or anticipation was anyone’s guess. Rey nibbled on her lower lip nervously, but it was too late to back out now. Using his body to balance the movement, she swung one long, perfect leg over his lap and straddled him.

Ben’s eyes rolled back in his head; every nerve ending on his body fired to life. His nostrils flared. He bit back a noise of raw desperation as his hands latched desperately onto either side of the chair.

“Rey,” he warned in a low growl.

But it was too late. She’d seen it – all of it.

_She_ had done that to him with a single movement. _She_ had ignited him.

It was invigorating. Intoxicating. It went straight to her head like aged whiskey. Suddenly every smirk, every grin, every knowing glance he’d shot her since that bloody confessional disaster rose up in her consciousness like a swelling tide.

Her fingers dug deeper into his shoulder and he hissed.

She was going to break this man.

“Let’s see how much you can handle,” Rey whispered sensuously.

A muscle ticked in his jaw. His eyes fixed on the wall behind her in a final bid to retain control.

Bracing herself on the back of his chair, Rey positioned herself directly against him. Warm sparks of pleasure erupted over her skin and she strangled a moan. Something dark and instinctual curled through her. Her nails dragged over his abdomen and up the sculpted planes of his chest in a deliberate caress.

His jaw clenched, but his gaze remained stubbornly fixed away from her.

Rey let out a snarl of frustration.

_Ignore this, Solo._

Ben jerked when the teasing brush of her lips skimmed over his once… twice… three times. His eyes flew closed as a sharp wave of pleasure hit. He clenched the chair harder; fighting his instincts
with every ounce of strength he possessed, even as his body screamed to surge forward.

Rey practically purred as the muscles underneath her fingertips shook with the effort of restraint. He was nearing the edge and she reveled in it.

“Beg,” she breathed, echoing the promise she’d made days ago in the air duct.

Ben’s focus snapped as he processed her words. Abruptly the full heat of his gaze shifted onto her and Rey gasped. The desperate ache building in her core throbbed with an intensity that was just shy of painful. She could feel the barely leashed power of his massive frame shifting subtly beneath her.

“Rey.”

His voice was barely above a whisper. He was so close to begging. So close to breaking. But so was she. Her mind struggled desperately to maintain balance. She could not lose. Not now. Not when she had thrown down the gauntlet.

The bald man, however, had seen quite enough.

“You’re right…” he interrupted in a tone of awed reverence. “He ain’t normal. I can see why they hired you…” His eyes glazed over momentarily, then he shook himself. “I-I’ll go get Bossk. He probably has your paperwork.”

As soon as the door shut, Rey breathed a sigh of relief and started to back away, eager to end her own torment. But Ben wasn’t having it; he seized both her legs and yanked her back against him. She cried out as a harsh jolt of sensation tore through her.

“You will pay for that,” he whispered tightly in her ear.

Rey had trouble breathing; her fingers curled into his shoulder as she fought to reclaim her calm... Then his grip began to slide possessively up her thighs and she was wrecked all over again. Instinctively she tried to pull away once more, overwhelmed by the sheer amount of stimulation, but his hands held her like a steel vise.

It occurred to her that she may have actually pushed Ben Solo too far.

Suddenly her body lifted off the chair. The world shifted upside-down for a suspended moment and Rey felt the breath leave her lungs when she realized what was happening.

Ben had thrown her over his shoulder and was now carrying her out of the building.

“What are you doing?! Put me DOWN!”

Ben didn’t speak; he continued toward the exit in furious silence.

“Put! Me! Down! Put me down this INSTANT!”

Still no response. Rey was preparing to kick him anywhere she could manage when she spotted a flyer on the wall. Her eyes narrowed. Reaching out, she tore it off and folded it into her pocket.

Ben finally marched out to the street (amidst several suggestive whistles) and hailed a cab.

“I will get you for this Ben Solo if it the last thing I ever dooo—”
Rey’s impressive revenge monologue was cut short when Ben shoved her unceremoniously into the taxi.

The ride back to the hotel proceeded in complete silence with Ben glaring out one window and Rey glaring out the other. When the driver pulled up to the hotel, Ben paid him and stormed toward the elevator. Rey dug her heels into the carpet and waited for him to realize she was not following. She could tell the second he noticed, and wondered if he would board the lift and leave her seething by the taxi gate.

Apparently not.

He was beside her in a matter seconds; Rey braced for a confrontation. Instead she found herself tossed her over his shoulder for the second time in twenty minutes. She gasped and would have shouted gawd only knows what if he hadn’t whipped his free hand up, smacked her ass, and hauled her straight through the lobby, thoroughly scandalizing the reception staff and two little old ladies from Jersey. She was too shocked and embarrassingly aroused to manage a single word of protest. Even when he didn’t put her down in the elevator.

In fact, Ben didn’t release her until they reached her bedroom, at which point he tossed her on the bed, and slammed the door behind him. Before she could storm out after him (and she was definitely storming out after him), he grabbed the couch he’d been sleeping on and wedged it in front of her exit.

The curses Rey let fly when she fully realized her predicament would’ve seared the ears off a veteran truck-driver. Ben collapsed on the couch and retreated inside himself, drowning out her colorful recitation in a desperate attempt to calm the chaos in his mind and body…

Until –

“I don’t know WHO you think you ARE –”

He snapped.

The couch went flying across the parlor. The bedroom door crashed open. And Ben stormed forward past the point of no return.

“I am your PARTNER, Rey! Your partner! Not your father, or your brother, or kriffing Kylo Ren—” (ok that part was a lie, but still-) “I didn’t come after you because you’re a woman, or because I think you’re weak, or incompetent, or any of the other ridiculous reasons you’ve been spewing for the last ten minutes!”

He advanced toward her, bringing their faces as close as possible.

“We are supposed to work together. This is a dangerous job. You’re not meant to do it alone! It’s not safe to do it alone! And you can’t pull a stunt like disappearing in the middle of the night without telling me because you know I’ll disagree with it! I have a right – as your partner – to know – even if I can’t stop you!”

Rey’s eyes blazed back at him. Tears glistened in their hazel depths, but Ben wasn’t done, and this time, he would be heard.

“You’re so kriffing reckless, woman! What if you were hurt tonight? If I woke up tomorrow and you were just gone! It would be too late then!”
“I had everything under control,” she answered tightly – even as the tears began to flow.

“Did you?” Ben’s tone was deeper now. Rey drew back until her thighs collided with a dresser; she let out a little gasp of surprise.

“Which part?” He pressed forward and braced his palms on the flat surface behind her, caging her in. “Was it when the idiot manager went to find Trand Bossk, or before that, when you were giving me a kriffing lap dance?”

“You didn’t seem to mind,” she shot back.

Ben surged forward, crushing his solid heat directly against her. The impact unleashed a sharp burst of unexpected pleasure.

Rey felt her legs give in to the edge of the dresser.

“My mind had nothing to do with it,” he growled. “I can’t even-”

...Did she just-

There was friction. Unexpected friction considering... everything.

His eyes widened and dropped.

She was moving - slipping off the dresser.

Ben groaned; his hands reached out to steady her instinctively, clapping down on her thighs with an audible smack.

He did not enjoy the way her pupils darkened or how her body subtly shuddered or -

Rey let out an delicious whimper that seemed to startle even her and it hit him like a punch in the gut.

All at once something shifted.

Fingers gripped the front of his shirt. Ben distantly registered that he was moving forward and Rey was pulling him and the voice of reason was becoming more of a vague whisper the closer he drew, but he had neither the strength nor the inclination to withdraw. Dulcium ring or no dulcium ring, his baser side was starving and Rey’s intoxicating heat beckoned like a kriffing dinner bell.

He wanted her. Gawd how he wanted her.

Strong fingers sank into soft flesh of her legs and yanked - eliminating every last inch of space between them.

Rey bit out a raw hiss of pleasure.

“I – I need–” she gasped.

A hand (his hand, Ben noted absently) gripped her jaw, forcing their eyes to collide. The corner of his mouth quirked up in primal male satisfaction.

“I know what you need,” he whispered.
And then several things happened at once.

He surged forward - she pushed upward - and the very expensive Swarovski lamp (that had been helplessly rattled to the edge of the dresser by their exertions) fell downward and promptly shattered into a hundred sparkling pieces.

The effect was brutal and immediate.

Labored breathing filled the air as reality tore through them.

Ben stumbled back, landing awkwardly on the bed as Rey slid down the front of the dresser to collapse on the floor.

Their gazes held for an instant that stretched profoundly. The shock of almost intimacy echoed in the space between them like an a silent siren.

Ben gulped.

“Rey, I…”

It was too much.

It was all too much.

Suddenly he was tired... and so utterly lost.

His hand closed over the cold metal knob (he must have risen at some point and walked to the door, but he couldn’t really recall doing so), Rey turned at the sound of it twisting.

Their eyes locked one final time.

Then he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

As always I WOULD LOVE to know what you think! Your comments and kudos are so fantastic and all of the support so far is amazing. I am humbled and wildly thrilled by the response. It takes hours and hours to write these chapters, but your feedback really does make it worth it. Seriously, it means a lot. You guys make this fun.

Additional Notes:
The Poe and Kaydel story you are reading is what really happened. It is NOT the version Leo and Riez are getting.

Did anyone catch the massive hint about Rey’s history with the Resistance?

Any and all acts of a sexual nature in this fic are (and will continue to be) consensual.

Luke didn’t buy the Chronicle until AFTER Ben’s disappearance. He considers newspaper journalism to be “exile” from his true calling (anthropology scholarship). Luke acquired the paper as a sort of penance for his failure with Ben. He vowed to give Ben a job as a journalist if he was ever found and uses the paper’s considerable
resources to maintain many of the official stories about Ben’s life circumstances and identity.

Poe and Kay’s story STILL isn’t over. Next time they show up, the future Mr. and Mrs. Dameron will be undercover in the First Order! And there will be a lot going down… like… A LOT.
Turning Points

Chapter Summary

Rey and Ben have a very serious(ly awkward) discussion.
Leia has eyes on The Girl.
Ben remembers a dark moment.
Rey returns at the right moment.
And the past begins to catch up to the present.

Chapter Notes

I know it has been a literal month. I am...sorry. I have not abandoned this story and I
will not abandon this story.

Honestly this has been a very hard month. I've been in a lot of pain from the fall (I am
MUCH better now), but that meant going to a chiropractor and lots of sitting around stiff
and too miserable to do anything but binge Netflix and eat ice cream.

My dog passed away... I've had her for 14 years. I cannot put into words the effect that
had on me. I was not ok. I'm still not totally ok. I probably will not be ok for awhile. I
loved her so much...

School started. Setup was the week before last and the kiddies came back this week.

My life has been crowded and messy. But I was profoundly encouraged by your
comments and support. They gave me smiles on many days I really didn't feel like
smiling. Things have calmed a bit and I was finally able to finish this.

This was NOT an easy update to write. I simply could not let it go out before it was
right. It is an extraordinarily pivotal installment on several fronts - it connects several
chapters together and SO much more and I just... could not give you less than what it is
now. I could not post until I was proud of it.

I cannot thank any of you enough for taking this adventure with me. You have been
incredible so far. I have cried (happy tears) over some of your feedback. (Whatever - I'm
not ashamed of it.) I love your comments. I love your kudos.

I was not entirely idle during this brief hiatus. I wrote a Reylo Fairytale/Soulmate AU
oneshot for Reylo AU Week called "Once Upon a Bracelet" which you can read here. I
really loved working on it and I hope you'll check it out.

I want to thank Darth Victoriana for listening to my crazy ideas, talking with me about
my story decisions, and for generally being a wonderful friend. She really is a very
talented author, you can read her stuff here.

And at last to my Beloved Better Half and Wonderful Beta:
You held me while my Lady died.
My heart broke into a million pieces and you picked up every last one.
They write them stories 'bout a love like that.

**WARNING:**
This chapter is - at times - much darker than the others. A character is choked. Please take care of yourself if this is a trigger.
Also, this chapter mentions modern slavery. There is a character (a clearly evil man) who is not bothered by slavery. Please be aware that I am vehemently against slavery in all forms - in any place and/or time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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22 Years Ago
Chandrila Castle
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“I’m Ben... What’s your name?”

The little girl sniffed and rubbed her nose.

“Rose,” she whispered shyly.

Ben was a tall boy with a mop of unruly black hair. He gnawed his lip while he studied her.

“Uncle Lando said he was adopting you.” He leaned closer curiously. “But... where did he get you?”

Rose dropped her head in shame.
“Hays Minor,” she mumbled. “The doctor said I was a slave.”

Tears began trickle down her pretty little face. The boy panicked immediately.

“No. Nononono - Rose don’t cry - It’s ok – well... It’s ok now-”

“Isn’t a slave a bad thing?”

7-year-old Ben wrinkled his forehead in concentration.

“It’s a bad thing to do to someone. Only bad people have slaves. But the slaves aren’t bad.”

“How do you know that?” Rose sniffled.

“My great-grandmother was a slave,” Ben said proudly.

The little girl’s eyes widened.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Her name was Shmi. She was a slave in Tatooine before it was one of the provinces. My great-grandfather - Jinn Skywalker - he was a war hero! And - and - and he was awarded land in Tatooine because of the war. That’s how he met her -”

Ben bounced excitedly as he began the familiar story. Rose leaned forward, her tears forgotten.

“His car broke down when he went to visit his new land and the only person who had the part it needed was the man who owned Shmi.”

“A bad man?”

“Yes. He was bad and mean.”

“Whoa.”

“Jinn fell in love with Shmi when he was getting his car fixed, but the bad man wouldn’t let her go because he liked having a slave.”

Rose gasped.

“What did he do?”

“The bad man liked to bet on races and Jinn liked to race – so he made a bet with the bad man. Jinn bet that he could win a big horse race in Tatooine called the Boonta Eve Classic. If he won, Jinn would give the bad man all his prize money and Shmi had to be set free. If he lost, Jinn promised to give the bad man all of his new land!”

“Did he win?”

“Of course he won!” Ben said. “He was a great horseman - but the bad man didn’t know that. Jinn married Shmi as soon as she was free!”

“And she was a slave... like me?”

“Uh huh. She was really important too. She worked hard to stop slavery in Tatooine - and she built a hospital - and she had my grandfather Anakin - and he married a queen who became a president!”
“Wow!” Rose squealed.

Ben grinned.

“So it doesn’t matter that you were a slave. You can be anything you want.”

“Can I marry you? Like Shmi?”

He thought for a moment.

“I don’t think so. I think you have to be old first.”

“Oh...”

“But,” he added when he saw the little girl’s face fall, “if Uncle Lando adopts you, then we will be cousins!”

“Really?”

“Yeah! And that will be better than getting married! You have to kiss if you’re married.”

“Ewww.” Rose’s nose wrinkled. “What do you do if you’re cousins?”

“Um... well I don’t know for sure. I’ve never had one before. But I think we play games together and we tell each other secrets and we look for each other if we’re lost.” Ben seemed to consider this for a moment, then gave a satisfied nod. “Yes,” he declared. “We do all that. And we protect each other.”

“So...” Rose bit her tiny little lip, “you won’t let anyone take me back to Hays Minor?”

“Of course not! I would beat them up and I would bring you back.”

“You would?”

“Yes,” Ben declared solemnly. “We’re cousins now. That’s what cousins do.”

~~@~~~[Present Day]~~~@~~

“Wheels up in 20.”

Finn latched his bag and slung it over his shoulder.

“Looks like we’ll be back a couple hours early.”

“We will-” Cassian pulled out his phone, “so I need to call Jyn.”

“Why not just surprise her?”

Cass shot him a look.

“...You don’t know?”

“I don’t know... what?”

“We don’t surprise Jyn,” Poe explained from the doorway. “It isn’t... safe.”
“It isn’t safe?”

“So… Once - before you showed up - we tried to throw her a surprise party and... It was bad. People were kicked in the face.”

Cassian rubbed his jaw absently.

“Just one of the many exciting benefits of being raised by Saw Gererra.”

Finn blinked rapidly. “Uh right. Yes. I... Wow.”

“Do we have a schedule?”

Poe pulled up their itinerary.

“Touch down in Coruscant: 8 PM tonight. Cassian and I need to go straight to the tailor... Rehearsal and rehearsal dinner tomorrow at 5 PM. Wedding procession begins from Yavin Temple at noon sharp the day after, but we should be there at 10 AM for the meditation ceremony.”

“Operations Status?”

“Tallie just took over the comms. The new team is in position to support Ben and Rey if there are any issues at the Palace tomorrow night.”

Cassian nodded.

“Have either of them checked in today?”

“Yes... I got a very emotional two-word text from Ben this morning… around 2 AM.”

“2 AM?”

“Yep.”

“What did this ‘very emotional’ text say?”

“It said, ‘I’m okay’...”

“.........He’s not okay.”

“Nope.”

“Definitely not.”

“...You think I should call him?”

“Nope.”

“Definitely not.”

~@~@~@~

Mortification evoked a very specific emotional experience.

It rolled heavily in the chest like a burning ball of lead and weighed its victims into the ground
without care or mercy...

Rey could have spent literal hours waxing morbidly poetic about the level of mortification she was currently in the throes of. No doubt it would be an entire chapter in her autobiography (My Life and Other Related Horror Stories).

The last eight days were (objectively) the most mortifying in recent memory (and that included the Surprise Menstruation of 2012).

She was angry, and (according to her calculations) approximately 80 percent of her anger was totally justified.

She was embarrassed. (Too embarrassed to calculate how much of said embarrassment was her fault.)

She was... disappointed in herself.

Because she had not embraced the most calm and logical reactions to her circumstances.

And she was tired...

Tired of being a coward.

From the moment she ripped open that confessional door and looked into the (admittedly gorgeous, but also) hopelessly guilty eyes of Ben Solo, Rey had been running.

Running from him. Running from herself. Running from several uncomfortable truths.

She owed Ben Solo an apology... and a hand grenade...

And a piece of her mind (though she’d be hard pressed to find a piece he wasn’t currently messing with).

After thinking the words ‘hard pressed,’ Rey experienced a rush of memories from the night before.

Ben Solo knew how to hard press. She could testify to that.

Not helpful.

Her fingers fiddled absently with her hair. She sighed.

Lines were crossed. Lines she never intended to approach with her partner.

She no longer knew where she stood. And that was unacceptable.

Rey Niima was not a coward.

“Ben!”

She squared her shoulders, wrenched open the bedroom door and-

Slammed it shut immediately.

“Sorry!”

Ben was not dressed.
“Hold on…” he grumbled from the other side of the door. After a moment -

“I - I’m decent. You can come.” There was a brief pause and then… “- OUT. You can come out... now... Oh my gawd-” Ben was mumbling into his hand.

Rey took a deep breath.

“Thank you.”

She shuffled over to the couch and sat down across from him. Ben’s hair stuck out in all directions. He looked like he’d been punched in both eyeballs.

“I want to start by saying…” She gulped nervously. “You were right... You’ve been right for a long time.”

Her fingers twisted together reflexively. Speaking these words was much harder than she imagined.

“It wasn’t safe - or professional - to do what I did last night. It could have gone very badly.”

Her eyes locked into his significantly.

“When you grow up with no one you can trust, it just becomes second nature to live that way but-”

Now came the truly difficult part.

“But I should have told you. Not just because you’re my partner... but you’re also... my friend. And I feel like I’ve lost sight of that over the past few days,” she added softly.

Ben nodded. He shifted his massive frame in his seat several times, stalling while he searched for the right words.

“...I... I know.” His shoulders flexed. He rubbed his face with his hands. “I made a mess of things in that stupid confessional. Nothing’s really been the same since... and I don’t blame you for being angry.”

He wasn’t meeting her gaze. Instead, his eyes scanned the floor and four walls with admirable determination.

Rey was struck, all at once, with an overwhelming wave of affection for him. A reminder, really, of what his presence in her life had come to mean.

“We need to move past this…” she whispered finally. “You messed up. And I was hurt and angry... but I want to forgive you - I do forgive you because... I know it isn’t who you are.”

Ben jerked up at that. His eyes flashed with such raw hope, Rey couldn’t help but continue.

“I know I don’t say it often but... you’re a good partner, Ben. You look out for me. You support me. You never try to take credit for anything I’ve done... Together we’ve produced some amazing work. So -”

She took another deep breath.

“I’m going to stop holding it against you, and you can stop worrying about it and -”

Her hand reached tentatively to rest on his.
“And we’re both going to move on.”

Ben’s expression was enough to twist her heart out. His jaw clenched and unclenched sporadically while he processed her olive branch.

Finally, he whispered, “Even with your crazy reckless streak, there’s no one I’d rather be with. You’re the best. A great partner and...” his fingers gripped into the couch, “- a great friend.”

He leaned forward then, as if the importance and urgency of his next words compelled him to do so.

“You have to know that I wasn’t nearly as angry as I was worried.” His hands drifted lightly to rest on her forearms and his gaze sought hers with purpose.

“I don’t want anything to happen to you. You’re... important to me.”

Rey’s entire body buzzed with a sensation that felt suspiciously like joy.

“You’re important to me too,” she whispered.

The air became subtly heavier. Was he moving closer? Was she?

His breath brushed intimately across her lips - an instant reminder of what else had gone down last night.

She gulped.

“And about what happened on the dresser.”

Ben paled, then immediately blushed from the tips of his ears to his throat. Their gazes disengaged awkwardly and Rey decided to rip off the metaphorical band-aid as quickly as possible.

“We are... adults.”

Brilliant opener, Niima.

“We... are. Yes.” (Ben spoke the words as if he wasn’t quite sure what they actually meant. He also became oddly preoccupied with his own hands.)

“And... we have been under an enormous amount of stress... which may have compromised our judgement a bit.”

He nodded jerkily and continued examining his fingernails with rapt intensity. “A bit.”

“I mean. That was a very adult form of... stress relief that we indulged in...”

Ben’s eyes widened, but he still didn’t look up. “Yes. It... yes.”

“And I trust you. And - and you trust me.”

“I do.”

(Both of their voices were very high now. It was like no one in the room had gone through puberty.)

“And I want to thank you for being willing to relieve my... stress.”

Thank you? THANK YOU?! He didn’t wash your car, Niima. Dear gawd. Just change your name and disappear forever. You never have to remember this.

Ben didn’t think it was possible to blush harder, but he did.
“Uh. Yeah. Yeah. Same. Thank you for the stress relief. It was... I felt better. For sure.”

Fact: There are several 13 year-olds more suave than you.

“Good. Me too. Thank you... again.”

I wish I remembered what it felt like to be not dying of terminal awkwardness. I really took that feeling for granted.

“So I mean. This was a really stressful job - and we just had to kiss - and then the emergency lap dance – so I can see why we-”

“Engaged in stress relief?”

I cannot believe that my mouth is still moving and there are still sounds coming out. I must not want to taste happiness ever again. Please bury me next to my Kylo Ren Build-a-Bear.

“Yes. And - although I was very… relieved - I know it was probably against one or more of the professional guidelines of the Chronicle-”

“Oh – it was. I memorized all 15 guidelines regarding physical intimacy between coworkers.”

“Why?”

“Bazine... can be very persistent. I’m occasionally reduced to quoting them like scripture.”

“Ah -”

“It’s intense. Her fingers will suddenly be everywhere like a gropey sea anemone-”

“Say no more.”

“Right uh - so - go on.”

Why?! Haven’t I done enough to myself?!

“All I’m saying is that -” Apparently not. “- at the end of the day some stress relief between friends and coworkers is really nothing to get worked up about.”

Dear Heaven, if you could make Ben blindly accept this and never bring it up again -

“Totally understandable.”

Call the Vatican. There’s been a miracle.

“Yes.”

“Ok.”

“Awesome.”

“Yep.”

Rey cleared her throat and leapt off the couch. Then she froze. Turned around. And pulled a flyer out of her back pocket.

“I – uh – forgot I brought it with me,” she muttered sheepishly, holding out the paper for him to
examine.

Ben raised a single eyebrow.

“What is this?”

“This is how we’ll get in to the Palace tomorrow. Rotta said it was an event night. That’s the event.”

“A costume rave…?” He looked up, confused. “What’s a costume rave?”

“It’s… like a dress up dance party.”

“What do you dress up as?”

“Didn’t you read the flyer?”

Ben looked at the paper again.

“Sexy Professionals Night?” His forehead wrinkled. “Sexy professional what?”

Rey shrugged.

“Sexy doctor, sexy policeman, sexy firefighter… You know. The usual.”

“Why on earth would I know what ‘the usual’ would be in this situation?”

“Don’t you watch movies?”

“What kind of movies are you watching?”

She rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Just leave it to me. There is a costume shop two blocks down. I’ll take a cab over and get us something.”

Her gaze brushed over his sunken eyes and chaotic hair arrangement.

“In the meantime, I think we need to get some rest before tomorrow night…” She smiled softly. “Neither of us has had a decent night’s sleep in days… and we’ll need to be alert for this.”

“Agreed,” Ben spoke mid-yawn. He was already deflating back into the couch. Rey noticed that much of the tension he carried with him for the last week no longer appeared to be weighing on him.

His mother was innocent. Now they had the proof.

His partner forgave him…

Now he could sleep.

Rey lingered while he slipped into unconsciousness, aware - on some level - that her forgiveness affected him far more deeply than she anticipated.

Perhaps more deeply than either of them realized.

A strange ache stirred to life in her chest, one that had nothing to do with heat or desire…

Ben Solo was always too close.
And never close enough.

“You’ve got eyes on the girl again.”

Leia’s chair swiveled around to face her husband.

“I’ve never taken eyes off the girl.”

Han let out a heavy sigh.

“The one that got away.”

“She didn’t get away. Luke stole her right from under my kriffing nose.”

“Does he know you still watch her?”

“I don’t need his permission to look out for her.”

Han eyed the screen warily and began shifting through the papers on her desk.

“I’d say this is a bit more than ‘looking out for her’...”

“Do you object?”

The aging scoundrel cracked a small smile.

“Of course not,” he whispered.

5 Years Ago

Jakku: British Commonwealth

“This is a Corellian. A Falcon. Why on earth would you bring this vehicle to Jakku?”

“I didn’t. I tracked it here after it was stolen last week.”

“You need to get it out of here. Now. Or it will be stolen again - probably by me. I could eat for a very long time on those parts.”

Han’s eyes sharpened immediately. “You’re just a kid.”

“Everyone earns their living in Jakku,” the girl whispered, “even kids.”
Her clothing was threadbare, and her hands stained with grease. The tell-tale scars of labor marked her body wherever skin was visible.

“I can’t leave,” Han spoke after a moment. There’s a problem with the fuel line on the Falcon. I was told to come here and ask for Ray—”

“I’m Rey.”

“You?! You’re the only mechanic for 50 miles certified to work on Corellians?”

“Nubians as well.” She grinned proudly. “Can’t say that I love it. But it keeps me alive.”

Han felt a surge of anger well up in his chest. Jakku was basically a glorified prison colony. There was no beauty. No softness.

No green.

Just a barren wasteland. A graveyard for people and products that polite society had no use for.

“Where are your parents, Rey?”

The girl stiffened slightly.

“They’re dead. They’ve been dead a very long time.”

“You’re a foster child?”

“Property of the British government,” she replied with false cheerfulness.

Han opened his mouth to say something else, but a large crash from the back of the shop cut him off.

“What the—”

A staff appeared in Rey’s hand out of nowhere.

“Shhhh!” she hissed. “I knew that bloody Falcon was trouble. One of the clubs probably tracked you here.”

“Clubs?”

“The real power in Jakku. They’ll tear your ride apart and sell it.”

“Should we call the police?”

Rey snorted.

“Most of them are the police.”

Han’s eyes widened comically.

“What sort of place is this?”

“The nasty sort—” Rey muttered, shoving him into her supply closet.

“Stay here and do not speak. At all.”
“But-”

The door slammed in his face and Han bit back a full blown chuckle.

...If Leia could see him now.

Hiding in a closet.

There were several loud shuffling noises. Han drew his gun. He wasn’t about to let the kid get hurt - especially not because of him.

Carefully he eased the door open.

Rey was surrounded by six men. They were circling her like vultures. Han tasted bile.

“We know you have a Falcon under one of those tarps, luv.” He heard the little one snarl. “We saw it coming in.”

“The owner took it and left. Said he was headed to the Outpost. You could probably still catch him.”

Her voice was clear and steady. Not a hint or tremble of fear.

The leader continued to pressure Rey, but she never wavered, answering each of his aggressive demands with an even denial...

Until one of the club members lost patience and reached for her-

Han cocked his gun.

And then almost dropped it.

*Maker - that girl is fast.*

She moved with the lethal grace of a wild desert cat. Two of them were out cold before he could even blink.

Han holstered his gun and reached for his cell phone instead. His camera clicked on just in time to see her backflip over a work bench and punch the tallest goon in the windpipe.

The entire altercation was over in a matter of seconds. Rey took a hard slap to the face near the end – she barely flinched before round-housing the slapper.

Han burst out of the closet. Rey hopped over the pile of unconscious men and yanked up the hood of the Falcon.

“Where the kriff did you learn that!?” he asked.

“Get in!” Rey shouted breathlessly from across the shop.

“What!”

“I stuck a jack patch on the fuel line. It won’t hold forever - but it’s enough to get us out of here-”

She slipped into the driver’s seat and gunned the engine.

“Hey! What are you doing!? That’s my-”
"You are not a Jakku native! You have no idea where to go or how to get there-

"I have GPS!"

"GET IN!"

Han jumped forward. "Jeez, I’m coming."

The Falcon tore out of the garage with an impressive roar. Han went flying back in the seat as she drifted around a corner.

"How long have you had a license?!" he screamed.

"I don’t."

Han paled, but Rey just chuckled as she rounded another curve going 80.

"Don’t worry, mate! I’ve been driving since I was ten!"

"Oh, I feel much better now," he grumbled. "I’m Han Solo. You should probably know my name-”

she whipped through a blind turn, "-in case these are my last moments on earth."

"Rey Niima. Pleasure to meet you."

"Well, Rey. If we live, how would you like to get out of Jakku?"

She laughed.

"No one gets out of Jakku. Not unless they know someone with more money than sense."

"Well..." Han sighed (as he sent footage of Rey owning six armed club members with a bow staff to Poe and Leia). "I happen to be married to someone like that."

~@~

The First Order

Still 5 Years Ago

~@~

Poe let out a heavy yawn. The only place in the entire TIE Department with a blind spot was a maintenance hallway in the basement.

He was here to meet the Knight for an update, but Tall-Dark-and-Terrifying was late.

The specialized burner phone in Poe’s jacket buzzed.

*incoming video file: scoundrel/jakku*

...Han?

He shrugged and clicked the icon.

Then his eyes widened.
“Oh... Oh wow... that definitely hurt-”

“What are you watching?”

Poe felt his soul leave his body.

“You know, for such a big guy, you sneak up on people a little too well.”

The Knight’s mask and hard brown eyes remained emotionless.

“What are you watching?” he repeated in his odd modulated tone.

“Uh... a video. Of a girl.” Poe paused to scan the text. “Apparently, she saved my boss’s life. Well - he’s my boss’s husband but -”

“Han Solo.”

The pilot frowned.

“Okay. I know you’re helping and - I’m grateful. I am. It’s been a truly magical 6 months. But... Who are you? Seriously-”

“Show me the video.”

Poe raised both eyebrows.

“Well you have Ben’s manners - if nothing else.”

“.........Please show me the video.”

“Ummmm. No.”

“That is unreasonably petty. Even for you.”

“What do you mean ‘even for me’ - you don’t know me. You don’t know anything about me. I’m beginning to think you don’t know anything about Ben -”

“Information regarding Ben Solo is classified.”

“Oh yeah? Well this footage is classified. So piss off.”

The Knight shifted a bit.

“What about a trade?”

“Of what?”

“Information. I will give you information about Ben Solo and you will show me the video.”

Poe narrowed his eyes.

“Why are you so interested?”

“That information is not on the table.”

A growl of frustration erupted from Poe.
“Tell me about Ben and I’ll show you,” he ground out tightly.

The Knight crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall.

“Ben Solo was not forced to join the First Order. There was some suspicion of abduction, but... it is not correct.”

Poe’s eyes filled with pain.

The modulated voice became oddly tight as he continued.

“The boy was unaware of several significant facts when he chose to leave. He did not know the whole story of Anakin Skywalker… I doubt even you know the whole story.” His shoulders straightened subtly. “Ben came to regret his choice. He is committed to rectifying the situation now.”

“Why won’t he see me?” Each word was choked out, barely above a whisper.

“He’s ashamed... and different now. He -” The Knight took a deep breath. “Ben Solo is alive... but there’s not much left of him.”

Poe was quiet for a long time. Eventually he sighed and held out his phone.

“Here.”

The Knight double-tapped the screen. Groans of injured men and the fierce battle cries of a beautiful brawler echoed faintly through the hall.

“...She’s magnificent,” he breathed.

Poe’s eyebrows shot up.

“Well. That might be the most emotion I have ever heard from you.” He grinned. “Pretty girl - isn’t she?”

The Knight growled and shoved the phone back. He pulled new info for Rose from his pocket and thrust it into the pilot’s hands before storming away.

“Hey!” Poe shouted after him.

The dark figure slowed his pace.

“If you talk to Ben - tell him...” He gulped. “Tell him that even if he is different… We still want him to come home.”

The words hung heavily in the air for a moment.

Then the Knight resumed his brisk departure.

@~~~[Present Day]~~~@

Leia moved heaven and earth to extract Rey Niima from Jakku, especially after seeing her fight in the garage.

Raw talent like that was rare indeed.
However, her genuine affection for the girl - and the startling effect she had on Leia’s only son were... rather pleasant surprises.

Luke’s interference in Rey’s path was only a temporary setback. Senator Organa - the General - was playing the long game.

“I knew you wanted her as an operative... but you seem to be angling for something different these days,” Han observed wryly.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Leia replied with a suspiciously innocent smile.

~~~@~~~~@~~~~

“Hold still, Solo. This will hurt.”

Ben shot upright on the couch, his breath breaking in uneven pants.

Memories.
Always memories.

He rubbed his eyes and slowly made note of his surroundings.

It was still daylight. Rey wasn’t around…

She was either shopping for their costumes or sleeping.

He was in a hotel. Not a lab.

Ben sighed and collapsed back on the couch.

“They’re slaves. They’re nothing. If they mattered, they wouldn’t be there-”

Bile rose in his stomach.

That voice... it always found a way to echo across old wounds. Even the name attached to it sounded sinister.

Gideon Hask

The doctor who supervised his injections, monitored his vitals, pushed for higher and higher doses...

He was a kriffing sociopath.

“How concentrated was that last injection? I… I feel off somehow-”

Hask ignored him and continued scribbling over his chart.

“You’re doing much better than anticipated, but we’ll need to forego your normal blood work this week. There was a workers’ revolt in Hays Minor. They’ve disrupted the dulcium shipment.”

Ben seized the man’s lab coat.

“Hays Minor?! In the Otomok Province?”


The doctor raised a single cold eyebrow.

“Take your hands off my coat, boy.”

Ben didn’t move.

“Hask,” he growled - enunciating every word. “Are we sourcing our dulcium from Hays Minor in the Otomok Province?”

“It’s certainly cheaper than sourcing from mines we don’t own.”

Pain began to throb beneath Ben’s temples. Something was wrong.

“When did the First Order acquire Hays Minor?”

The doctor shrugged and yanked his sleeve back.

“Snoke’s had that mine for as long as I’ve been with him. Going on 23 or 24 years now.”

Harsh ringing echoed in his ears. Ben squeezed his eyes shut, desperately trying to get ahold of his thoughts.

“I thought F. O. E. owned Hays Minor-”

“Yes,” Hask replied as if he were speaking to a child. “First Order Enterprises, it’s an old shell company – back from when Snoke was building up assets in the ‘80s and ‘90s.”

“But.” Ben’s headache was downright profound at this point. “Hays Minor uses slave labor…”

“No one has ever been able to prove that.”

Rose and Paige were living proof.

Ben’s stomach churned chaotically.

No... No. No No...

“....You knew that - you - You know that?”

“Of course I know. It’s not a secret inside the company.” He snorted and turned back to his paperwork. “It’s barely a secret outside the company.”

“And Snoke is aware?”

“What a child you are…” Hask muttered, as he noted Ben’s pulse and heart rate on his chart.”

“How are you accepting this? How could any rational person justify-”

Hask sighed as if the whole conversation had grown tiresome.

“They’ve been naturally selected, Solo. The strong survive by dominating weaker specimens. That is a reality of life.”

Then he chuckled. He actually chuckled.

“Where do you think all of these transfusions come from? Hux has had half his organs replaced, Phasma’s undergone multiple skin grafts… Where do you think we get those?”
Ben vomited.

“They’re slaves,” Hask continued. “They’re nothing. If they mattered, they wouldn’t be there.”

A hand shot out and wrapped around the doctor’s neck. Ben slowly became aware that it was his hand.

Rage blurred his vision. Fury burned through every cell.

This depraved psycho would be dismantling Rose and Paige for spare parts if Lando hadn’t found them... He was dismantling people - human beings - like they were used cars.

Suddenly something snapped.

And Hask stopped struggling.

~~~@

Ben stumbled out of the lab. He was shaking. He could barely see straight.

What have I done? Maker what have I –

The sound of violent retching jerked him back. It was coming from the storage closet up ahead.

His mind was scattered. Instinct drove him to open the door.

…It was a Stormtrooper.

Hunched over a bucket vomiting.

Despite the deep tone of his skin, the young man looked pale and drawn... His gaze locked onto Ben’s - and filled immediately with terror.

“Sir-” he managed.

“State your designation.”

The Stormtrooper pulled himself upright and stood at attention.

“FN-2187.”

“State your current assignment.”

“Assigned to Hays Minor as of this morning… I was sent to put down a revolt, Sir. But I-”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“…Sir?”

"Is that why you’re here... vomiting in a closet?”
FN-2187’s eyes dropped. He nodded.

"Will –" The soldier’s voice shook with barely suppressed emotion. “Will you be taking me to reconditioning, Sir?"

Ben was silent for a long moment. His eyes darted back towards the lab.

No,” he whispered, making a decision that would utterly alter the course of his life. “Come with me.”

A door creaked open near the south corner of the room. The memory broke –

But shame lingered.

Ben turned to see Rey walking toward him. Her hair was combed and she was dressed to leave the building (probably to pick up their costumes as they discussed)…

She seemed softer somehow.

“You look like you slept,” he whispered.

Rey smiled.

“You look like you didn’t.”

His eyes drifted closed and he leaned back a bit into the couch.

“I did just… not well.”

She yawned and padded over to sit next to him.

“Is there a reason why?” Her mouth quirked a bit. “I mean other than the mobsters and the treason and stuff…”

Ben snorted and shook his head.

“Have you ever felt like your life was just one significant mistake after another…”

“Well…” Her eyebrows lifted in surprise. She opened her mouth. Then closed it. Then opened it again. “I have to admit I was not expecting that…”

Ben grinned.

“Me neither. In fact I’m positive I meant to say something else entirely.”

His fingers tugged through his hair, then he pulled himself upright to offer a playful smirk.”

“ Forget that last answer. *The truth is* I couldn’t sleep because I was busy thinking about which sexy professional I’ll be for the rave.” He paused dramatically. “And I’ve settled on sexy plumber.”

Rey snorted.

“Sexy plumber? What does a sexy plumber costume look like?”

“It looks like exactly what I’m wearing - except I’m going to pull my pants down a bit in the back.”

“OH… Oh, I see.” She was giggling now. “And what about the sexy part?”
“I’m the sexy part.”

“You’re the sexy part? Ah. Well. I didn’t know it was like that.”

“It is. It is like that. You’ll see. Women will be begging me to tend to their plumbing.”

“Oh my goodness.” Rey bopped him with a pillow. “You’re a mess, Ben Solo!” She laughed and shook her head one last time before heading to the door.

Ben grinned in earnest and leaned back again.

“It’s not true you, know.” She spoke the words softly – just barely loud enough for him to hear. “Whatever choices you’ve made… They’ve brought you here… with me. And I don’t think that’s a mistake.”

Then the door clicked closed behind her and Ben was left alone with his thoughts once more.

Warmth spread through him… and the ugly shame of his memories slowly faded out.

Two hours.

She’d been gone for two hours.

Ben reached out to his new team around the hour-and-a-half mark, but Tallie had eyes on her and assured him that she was safe – and doing exactly what she said she was doing - so he busied himself with other tasks.

He was adding notes to a schematic of the Palace (from Rose) when Rey finally returned.

Something was… off.

She was walking slower. Her eyes seemed a bit… glazed.

“Rey?”

Her head jerked up guiltily.

“You know,” she squeaked. “It is unbelievable how much it costs to rent a costume around here. Not to mention a hundred credits in collateral - and 5 pages of paperwork. Next, I thought they were going to demand a DNA sample.”

Rambling. That was never a good sign.

Ben narrowed his eyes.

“Rey… What’s going on?”

Rey refused to meet his eyes. She toyed nervously with the garment bag in her hand. Horrible suspicion began build in his gut.”

“Rey.” He spoke carefully. “What costume am I wearing tomorrow night?”

She winced. Ben’s ears started ringing.
“Ok now. Hear me out-”

“Oh gawd.”

“We’ve discussed before that you’re not exactly average build…”

“This doesn’t bode well.”

“A-a-and the man at the store did say that the rave was a pretty big event so the selection was already slim—”

“Please tell me that’s not a loin cloth. I refuse to be a sexy professional Tarzan.”

“NO! No – It is definitely not a loincloth.”

Though I will be stashing that image away for Rey Private Time later.

“Is it… worse than a loincloth?”

“So, the only costumes left in your size were a Kylo Ren costume —”

Ben paled.

“But I know how you feel about Kylo Ren so… that left…” (she gulped) “…this.”

Ben reached for the garment bag with trepidation and slowly unzipped.

His jaw dropped.

“No. No. No no - absolutely not –”

“Ben, it was all they had in your size-”

“We have to get me something else.”

“I went to three stores. What do you think took me so long?”

Ben let out a defeated sigh and Rey finally succumbed to a grin.

“Look on the bright side, Solo. How many people can say they went clubbing dressed as a priest?”

@~~~@~24 Hours Later~@~~~@

Ben stared at his reflection in the mirror.

This is not good. Bad things happen when I do stuff like this...

“Ben!”

He tugged at his collar.

“Yes?”
“Could you come in here? I’m… having some trouble”

Ben ambled over to the bedroom, opened the door –
And promptly swallowed his tongue

*Oh. My. GAWD.*

“Could you zip this please?”

Rey faced away from him wrapped in a tighter, shorter version of a very familiar grey dress.

Ben gulped

....oh boy.

It was *her* dress - from the rooftop. From the first time he saved her.

The collar tightened around his neck as he fell into thoughts that were distinctly unpriestlike.

Rey twisted to find him staring numbly at her back with a vacant look in his eyes.

“Ben?”

He jumped.

“…Zip?”

“Oh... y-yeah... um."

His heart broke a little as the lovely curve of her back disappeared beneath the zipper. Then she

*Well that’s new.*

His eyes darted briefly over her plunging neckline.

The collar tightened again.

*This thing is going to choke me to death – one impure thought at a time.*

“Rey -” his voice cracked, “are you going as… *you*?”

“As a matter of fact, I am.” She grinned, reveling in his clear reaction to her. (Ben whimpered - just a little).

“After all - I inspired a *real* costume and I’ll probably never have another chance to wear it. It really

is a shame you couldn’t be Kylo Ren - because that would have been perfect.”

Ben lost feeling on the entire left side of his body. His mouth was totally dry. Rey was still babbling

enthusiastically about how great it was to dress up as herself.

*Well…* he mused, *It’s about to be a very long night.*
Rey sauntered confidently through the lobby while Ben attempted to hide behind every plant between the elevator and the door.

“Ben… You look afflicted. Leave the shrubbery.”

“Well maybe if I wasn’t dressed as a **clergymen** following a **woman in fishnets** out of a **hotel** I’d feel a little less afflicted!”

Rey giggled and continued toward the taxi stand.

“When we get there, you stay at the bar and look ecumenical. I’ll work the crowd.”

“Uh - No.”

“I promise to come get you once I’ve collected all the information-”

“Didn’t we just have this discussion?”

Rey rolled her eyes.

“Fine, **Father**, we’ll work the crowd together.”

She made sure to smack him with her jacket as she put it on

“Mature,” Ben mumbled.

“Excuse me, Father. Is this... **woman** bothering you?”

A well-meaning member of the CBPD stood behind them regarding Rey with a stern glower.

Ben quickly hid his snort in a coughing fit and Rey’s mouth dropped open.

“Of course I’m not **bothering** him. Of all the-”

Multiple warning bells went off in Ben’s head, but some opportunities were simply too good to pass up,

“Everything is alright, **Officer**,” he interrupted with a burdened sigh. “After all, it is my job to be bothered by her.”

The officer tsked sympathetically.

“It must be difficult when a member of your parish chooses the wrong path-”

“Indeed.”

He nodded sagely and grabbed his partner before she could launch herself at the nice policeman.
“Don’t hesitate to contact me if she causes you any more stress.”

Ben smiled as his hand slipped over Rey’s jaw (muffling an impressive barrage of profanity) and reassured the man that he would keep his ‘lost sheep’ in line.

“I’m telling your mother.” She growled after the cop was well out of earshot. “She will have your hide for that.”

Ben gave her nose a single patronizing tap with his pointer finger.

“Now, now, my child. Is that any way to talk to your spiritual leader?”

A taxi pulled up beside them.

Rey narrowed her eyes and nodded.

Then she grinned. A wicked wicked grin.

Her hand gripped his collar and yanked him down till they were less than a breath apart.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned,” she whispered seductively, letting her bottom lip just barely brush over his top one.

He whimpered.

And Rey shoved. Hard.

In the time it took for Ben to regain his balance, Rey had hopped into the car and locked the door. He looked up just in time to see her waving cheerfully from the back seat window –

As their ride drove off without him.

Ben chased the taxi for (at least) a quarter mile before Rey asked the driver to stop and let him in.

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6 Years Ago

First Order Primary Lab Unit

(24 hours after the death of Gideon Hask)

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

“Snoke accepted our version of events.”

The Knight and the Stormtrooper created a very elaborate story to cover the truth about Dr. Hask FN-2187 claimed that the workers from Hays Minor were incited to revolt by Hask as a distraction so he could steal the First Order’s obscura research. He then confronted the doctor while he was administering the Knight’s injections.

Hask panicked. He attacked them both and tried to run…
But the Knight killed him before he could escape.

That was the official story now.

The young soldier breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

“I was sure we were dead men.”

The Knight clenched his fists absently.

“Snoke would never suspect me of disloyalty. He knows I won’t betray him, because I’ve betrayed so much for him…”

He took a steadying breath.

“But he’s wrong this time.”

Ben’s mind darted through a hundred different images, a hundred different steps that led him here.

Vanessa’s note. Creda’s smile. Hux’s screams of agony. Phasma’s tears. His mother’s voice…

Paige and Rose standing on the steps of Chandrila covered in sores and filth.

“Enough is enough.”

FN-2187 nodded.

“What’s our next move?”

“We can’t do this alone. We’ll need help. Hask’s death creates an opening in medical - that could be very useful. And the explosion last week left a hole in the TIE Department. We have an opportunity here, but we must move quickly.”

He handed the soldier a small flash drive.

“There’s a woman on the outside searching for her cousin, a man named Ben Solo. This will show you how to contact her and what to say.”

“Who is Ben Solo?”

“He’s an idiot. But I know Rose is still looking for him.”

“How long has he been missing?”

“Two years.”

FN-2187 cocked his head curiously.

“Why her? And how do you know she’s still looking for him after two years?”

“Rose’s skill set is…unique. She won’t stop until she’s brought him home and destroyed the people who took him.”

His gaze lost focus for a moment.

“Because that’s what cousins do.”
Please let me know what you think. I'm sure it seems silly to ask for comments, but I put so much of myself into writing this ... Comments make everything worth it. I would love to hear what you think. Feedback kept me writing when I was miserable. It inspires me and drives me. Simple as that.

Additional Notes:

Hask's death was - in many ways - his own fault. The hints of it are there in the chapter (and it may be explored more in depth later) but he was injecting Ben with doses of obscura that were way too high. Ben's body was still handling it well, but it began to have a profound effect on his mind - especially in the first few hours after the injection. Ben is not a murderer, nor is he currently unsafe in anyway. His mind and body eventually healed from the overdosing. The combination of discovering the truth about Hays Minor - along with Hask's evil mentality and the erratic effect of the obscura - were what ultimately cost Hask his life.

Ben did not know that Hays Minor was supplying dulcium to the First Order because all the shipments were labeled "43-HM" - The Otomok Province is the 43rd Province.

Ben wanted to see the video Poe was watching because he thought Han might be in it... and he missed him.

YES. It will eventually be explained how Padme was a Queen who became a president. None of that was a typo.
Disco Ball and Chain

Chapter Summary

Lando holds half the Resistance hostage.
Ben and Rey attempt to save the day.
The partners discover something truly explosive.
There's a bit of a mix-up near the end.

And nothing will ever truly be the same again.

Chapter Notes

I am SO SORRY this took so long. I swear between school and just life I have been so crazy busy! Now that this is posted, I can finally catch up on some reading!

Several of my favorite authors updated while I had my nose to the grindstone. Cannot wait to dive in!

Also… I am a bit ashamed of myself...I usually try to answer comments before I post, but I wanted to get you the update as soon as possible. I promise to answer them all within the next few days because each and every one of them is precious and meaningful to me and honestly they were the only thing that kept me writing through the hectic mess that was the last month.

Please forgive me?

You DO keep me going. Your comments DO matter SO much and I cannot pretend that I don’t crave/need them.

This chapter was an actual nightmare to write… and when you read it you'll probably realize why. It moves at a breakneck pace and there is never a dull moment… Pretty much every single word matters.

Not to mention… well. Heh. You’ll see.

The fabulous opening mood board for this chapter was gifted to me by the luminous reylocaligraphy. You can access her collected works by clicking on the link in her name, but my personal favorite is her magical WIP Unwritten Oaths featuring a broody Ravenclaw Ben and a clever Slytherin Rey! I love her characterizations and the delightful situations she’s weaving into this lovely ride!

The fabulous closing mood board was created for me by the indomitable KyloTrashForever. You can read her collected works by clicking the link in her name (she has a hefty catalogue these days), but I would like to recommend her mysterious WIP Of Salt and Blood which is a TOTALLY INCEST-FREE Reylo version of Crimson Peak. Her prose and storytelling is deliciously atmospheric and evocative. I am thoroughly addicted.
You ladies are more than my fellow Reylos; you’re my friends and I’m privileged to fangirl by your sides.

The FABULOUS ConstellationsInMyTea was gracious enough to draw a scene from this story. The original post is here if you want to go tell her how amazingly talented she is! The scene below is from ‘Chapter 7: Cause for Alarm’ and features shirtless Ben and pantless Rey in Crait!

Thank you for sticking with me. I love you all so much. You have given me such a wonderful experience here on this site and on tumblr (where I would love for you to come say hi!)

My heart could burst with the sheer magnitude of my affection and appreciation for you all.

Plot Note:
Reminder that everyone (outside of the Resistance) believes that Ben was having amnesia adventures in Prague during his time with the First Order.

The obscura in Ben’s blood reacts negatively to dulcium. A little bit just helps him stay level headed (which is why he wears the ring)... but the more he is exposed to... the weaker he gets.

Also - just in case you do not remember - at this point in the story the Resistance members are prepping for Paige and Snap’s wedding rehearsal and Ben and Rey are preparing to go undercover at a club owned by Rotta called The Palace.

Potential Trigger Note: Rose references her pregnancy at the beginning of the chapter. Some lovely users on tumblr mentioned that they would prefer to be warned
about any content containing pregnancy and I am endeavoring to be more mindful of those who share this concern/trigger.

To My Big Bad Beta Reading Prince Charming:
I know you’re feeding the cat treats behind my back. She has become noticeably obese and she jumps excitedly everytime you even go near the treat cupboard. Be sure your sins will find you out, you handsome Cat Obesity Enabler. I still love you, but I will win back my spot as the cat’s favorite!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Akivan weddings were extravagant events even under normal circumstances.

However.

With Lando helming the entire affair and determined to give his precious baby girl the wedding she deserved…

Well.

That was something else entirely.

No one was really looking forward to the rehearsal, least of all Rose who found her gown a bit tighter than it was at the final fitting last week. Sighing, she smoothed the silk over her swollen midsection.

Nope, no hiding that.

She turned to her husband with a concerned frown.

“How does the dress look?”

Finn’s eyes roamed her appreciatively.
“Nice… Very nice. How long do we have before we need to leave?”

“Oh no - Casanova - you are just gonna have to wait. Lando is bridezilla enough as it is. We cannot be late for this rehearsal.”

“Come on,” he whispered, sliding up behind her to place soft kisses on her neck. “Please…?”

Rose felt her resolve wavering. If only he didn’t look so good in that suit.

“Well… maybe… mmm… I mean we do have twenty minutes-”

“Oh! Man! Guys. Cut it out!”

Joph Seastriker shielded his eyes dramatically.

Finn let out a frustrated sigh.

“Maybe next time you should knock.”

“On the kitchen door?”

Rose unsuccessfully tried to hide her giggle and Joph just shook his head.

“At least Poe and Kaydel have the decency to keep it in the bedroom-”

As if on cue, the couple in question burst through the entrance way in a telling state of dishabille. Poe’s shirt hung half undone and Kaydel’s hair was a mess as she ran around the kitchen counter waving his tie.

“Kaydel… that belongs to me.”

Kaydel smiled and wrapped the tie seductively around her neck.

“Oh yeah? Come and get it.”

Grinning, Poe launched himself forward and pinned her to the counter. She held the tie high above her head while he rubbed his nose against hers.

“Give it to me,” he growled.

“Make me,” she whispered back.

“If you insist.” Poe leaned down and captured her lips in a passionate kiss.

Rose didn’t even attempt to hide her giggles this time. Finn turned to Joph.

“You were saying?”

Seastriker just mumbled irritable nonsense in response. Poe looked up from his wife sympathetically.

“So… how long has your girlfriend been in Africa?”
“Three weeks and two days,” he snapped sharply.

Finn shook his head.

“I am... so sorry man.”

“Yeah... well... I’ll survive... I think.” He sighed heavily before changing the subject (the less he thought about his absentee girlfriend - the better). “What time is Ben supposed to check in?”

“Midnight-ish. He knows not to call during the rehearsal unless the world is coming to an end.”

“Because heaven knows it will if he does.” Poe’s gaze returned to his wife. “I’m so glad I’m not a bridesmaid.”

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Solo and Niima didn’t wait long at the entrance to Canto Bight’s infamous Palace. (Rey got in because of her legs. Ben got in because the bouncer felt bad for him.)

Rey took a deep breath as she surveyed the interior.

“There are three levels to this neon nightmare. Level 1 is the basement - a casino - not surprising considering we’re in Canto Bight. Level 2 - a dance club, and Level 3 - the VIP lounges where Rotta normally meets with his associates.”

She motioned toward the far left corner of the complex.

“As far as the general public knows, that elevator is the only way onto Level 3, BUT fire codes are fire codes and, according to the schematics Rose sent us, there’s a staircase in the opposite corner leading to the top.”

“I don’t suppose they left the door unlocked?”

“I wouldn’t bet on it.”

Ben nodded.

“We’ll wait till we see something then... sneak up the back way and figure something out?”

“Don’t we always...”

Rey scanned the club again.

The VIP elevator was right next to the dance floor behind a guarded rope. Big clubs wanted everyone to see their high profile patrons.

“We’ll have to dance,” she declared after a moment.

Ben’s eyes bulged.
“I’m sure there’s another way.”

“You know how to dance, Solo.”

“I know how to sway and Viennese waltz. This... wild gyration full body seizure looks-” he ducked a flailing arm, “- dangerous. Not to mention - I cannot bump and grind wearing this outfit. That is non-negotiable.”

“Then - just - follow me and bounce.”

Rey made her way to the far edge of the dance floor followed by a bouncing priest. The two of them rocked half-heartedly to the music while keeping a sharp eye on the elevator.

Unsurprisingly, Rey began to attract some… attention.

A tall pirate captain subtly started dancing closer to her. He was about to place his hands on her waist when he caught the gaze of the man beside her. The guy was dressed as a priest, but his glare was downright unholy. There was no mistaking the message:

*Back off. She’s taken.*

The pirate reluctantly moved away from his intended conquest. She was beautiful, but he wasn’t looking for a fight.

After a little while Rey began to wonder why every man who approached her suddenly ran off. First the pirate, then a doctor, and just now a fireman...

*Weird.*

Her eyes landed on a bar near the east wall.

“‘I’m gonna grab some water. You want anything?”

Ben shook his head and Rey shrugged.

“I’ll be right back.”

~~~@~~~@~~~@~~~

A few minutes later, Rey was reminded why she never went clubbing. Her eyes dropped pointedly to the hand wrapped around her forearm.

“I’m not interested. *Let go.*”

The beefy tool in fake army camo and designer combat boots did not loosen his grip.

“But you don’t even know me,” he slurried petulantly.

Rey resisted the urge to scream. She could flatten him seven different ways, but that would definitely draw attention and potentially blow her cover.

“Sir, I am warning you one last time. Take your hand off my arm or I will physically remove it.”
“I’d like to be physical.” The slime pulled her against him, intent on getting action one way or another.

Those intentions, however, died very quickly.

Before Rey could react, the creep was ripped away. Her gaze refocused in time to see Ben slam the man (if you could even call him that) against a wall and raise him up by the neck - with one arm.

“The next time you lay a hand on my wife, I will break every bone in your body,” he growled menacingly.

Camo creep struggled, but Ben held him firm - and with very little obvious effort.

Rey gulped. Biting her lip, she reached forward and placed a tentative touch on her partner’s arm.

“Ben,” she whispered gently.

He didn’t acknowledge her at first, but after a moment he inhaled deeply and dropped the terrified jerk into a heap on the ground.

“Leave,” he snarled when they were finally eye to eye again (well - eye to throat; Ben was very tall).

As soon as the unlucky idiot was out of sight, Ben grabbed Rey’s hand and began storming back to their original surveillance point. Halfway through the crowd he wheeled her around.

“Are you ok?”

Rey felt a pleasant heat begin to pool beneath her skin. He was angry… very angry. And while she did have the situation (mostly) under control, there was something... sexy about him getting hot and bothered over her.

“Yes. I’m alright.”

Ben’s fist closed reflexively at his side. “I know you can handle-” his jaw clenched, “interference. But-”

“But a man defending his wife is less of a spectacle than a woman laying out a man twice her size?”

He tilted his head in agreement and Rey grinned playfully.

“Well you are right about that but... you looked pretty fierce for a moment there, Solo, Almost-” she leaned in and lowered her voice suggestively, “possessive?”

His gaze darted guiltily away from hers.

“Fake Me doesn’t want anyone touching his woman. I’m just staying in character.”

“His woman?”

Ben shrugged.

“Fake Me is a Philistine.”

Rey threw her head back and laughed heartily. Ben rolled his eyes but couldn’t help the smiling just
a little.

“Come on,” he grumbled, tugging her along, “let’s do our job.”

The next hour passed uneventfully. Music in the club swelled to a repetitive techno beat under the scattered light of two massive disco balls. Eventually Ben found his mind drifting to other things.

He forced himself not to dwell too much on the human waste who manhandled Rey (because he was likely to go kill him and that wouldn’t do at all). Knowing she could protect herself didn’t make him want to protect her any less…

Ben sighed and resolutely aimed his mind elsewhere. His thoughts drifted back to the last time he’d worn a costume (other than his own).

It was Halloween. Last year. Kaydel’s Superhero Party…

Someone suggested that they all draw superheroes out of a hat beforehand to avoid the inevitable parade of Batmans.

Much to his eternal chagrin, Ben was stuck as Aquaman. Finn donned a Green Arrow outfit and some moron gave him a toy bow and arrow…

No one escaped without being shot in the butt at least once.

The hits of the evening, however, were Poe and Kaydel who came dressed as Kylo Ren and Rey Niima. Poe kept jumping off things while humming some cheesy theme song he made up. Kaydel screamed “Help, Kylo Ren!” about once every five minutes; Poe would immediately rush to her side (complete with sound effects) and carry her somewhere.

Ben had tried to protest the indignity of it all, but it was hard to hear him over the bouts of hysterical laughter...

Suddenly one of the wildly gyrating club youths stumbled into him - bringing him sharply back to reality. He pinched the bridge of his nose and turned to address Rey-

Ben frowned.

It appeared that (while distracted by his musings) he failed to give some randy ninja the stare down. The martial arts wannabe was busily twisting all over Rey (and she did not seem to mind).

Resisting the urge to slap the newcomer’s hands off his partner’s hips, Ben turned away and bumped into a curvy redhead dressed in an even skimpier version of Rey’s ‘sexy reporter’ costume. The redhead gave him a good once over and pounced - apparently unconcerned by his saintly garb.

Ben hesitated a moment before laying his hands on her waist.

She was cute. He needed to blend in…

And Rey seemed to be having a good time. Why shouldn’t he?

(Actually he was getting very little pleasure from the whole experience. The girl was too short and
didn’t fit against him very well, but she was undulating with admirable dedication.)

Ben sighed.

He risked another glance at Rey - and almost had to cover his mouth to keep from laughing. His partner was shooting the little redhead a look of pure venom.

All of a sudden he was enjoying the dance a lot more.

He flashed Rey a smug look over the auburn curls and spun his enthusiastic ‘sexy reporter’ into a smooth dip. The girl visibly swooned and let out a gasp of delight.

“Excuse me, dear.”

The couple turned to face Rey. She’d ditched the ninja and was now fixing the two of them with an unfiltered death glare. Reporter Redhead wrapped her arms around Ben’s neck and sneered.

“Get your own, Princess.”

Rey was thoroughly un-amused.

“Actually - you need to ‘get your own.’ - this one is mine.”

“Really? I didn’t see your name on him,” she grinned and raked her nails over Ben’s chest, “- and I’ve been looking pretty hard.”

Rey’s eyes widened. Her nostrils flared.

Ben bit his lip to hold in a snort.

She was about to lose it. There was no mistaking the flash of fire in her gaze. It always came before the pain… and the crying.

He stepped away and grabbed the one and only Rey Niima, pulling her securely into his arms.

“I’m afraid she’s right.” His hand slipped possessively over her backside. Rey squeaked as Ben gave it a firm squeeze (for effect he told himself). “I’m all hers.”

The redhead pouted out a disappointed sigh and ambled away. Rey shot her another menacing look for good measure and wheeled on her slimy partner (intent on giving him several pieces of her mind), but Ben was way too fast for her. Before she could open her mouth he swept her into the heavy sway of the music. Every inch of their bodies aligned perfectly, creating heated friction as they moved against one another.

It took Rey a full minute to find her voice again through the deepening fog of arousal.

“I-I thought you were supposed to be watching the door, not grinding with some cheap dye job.”

He cocked his head and met her accusing stare with a slow smile.

“Oh, I was watching… just as well as you were with that ninja pawing you.”

“He was not pawing me,” Rey insisted. She cleared her throat. “But honestly, Red looked like she was about to tear your collar off and have at you right in the middle of the floor.”
...which is - incidentally - a thought that crossed my mind...

Ben chuckled.

“Don’t worry Rey,” he whispered softly against her ear. “You’re still my favorite sexy reporter.”

Her body was definitely a traitor.

It didn’t care that she was irritated at Ben Solo. It didn’t care that Ben Solo drove her insane. It didn’t care that Ben Solo just had his glorious hands all over some nobody in her costume.

Her body didn’t care about any of those things.

Because it sang for him.

Her blood thrummed and her breath caught and every part of her throbbed.

For him.

*You are a disgrace,* her mind hissed.

Rey opened her mouth to respond (with a very witty remark - for sure), but her gaze snagged on two familiar figures striding confidently behind the VIP ropes.”

“They’re here,” she whispered.

Ben’s eyes never left hers. He didn’t turn to look or give any indication that he heard her other than a firm nod.

After a minute or two, they danced subtly into the position near the emergency exit. Then Rey slammed Ben against the door and slid seductively down his body.

“Is it locked?” she asked - looking up from around his abdomen.

Ben blinked. Twice.

Rey grinned.

“The *door*, Solo,” she explained in a sultry hum before shifting to slide her back down his front.

It was a ruse. She was covering his movements - making it look like they were pressed against the exit for purely carnal purposes.

However, Rey’s… dedication to her job, was rapidly cutting off the blood supply to Ben’s brain.

“Right,” he coughed, groping blindly for the knob behind him. His fingers brushed the cool metal in the exact moment Rey decided to grind.

The handle snapped clean off the door.

“It’s unlocked,” he croaked.

Rey slid past him through the door, making sure to rub him obnoxiously the whole time - just in case someone was watching. Ben’s priest collar dug into his skin judgmentally. He closed his eyes and pictured a moldy burrito. The collar loosened and he silently followed Rey up the stairs.

The secondary entrance to the VIP corridor was guarded by two beefy thugs. Ben noticed a crate of
complimentary-size vodka bottles - most likely on hand for priority guests. His eyes brushed over Rey’s body and he grinned.

“I have an idea.”

Guarding the Lounge Level door was the lamest job in the club, but somebody had to do it. Teedo glanced dispassionately at his co-worker, Greedo, and sighed.

Suddenly a gorgeous brunette stumbled sloppily up the stairs. Her unsteady gait and lopsided hairstyle bore the tell-tale signs of intoxication.

“Hiii,” she cooed with a saucy smile.

Teedo grinned and opened his mouth to respond, but Greedo beat him to the punch.

“Hello, sweet thing.”

The brunette winked at him...

Then everything went black.

“Seriously Ben, how do you do that?”

“It’s a stun… that I learned… in Prague.”

Every time Ben needed to explain a strange ‘skill’ in front of Rey, he attributed it to his time in Prague.

“Yeah - but - I mean it looks like you just tapped them on the back of the head.”

*With the concentrated force of a sledgehammer.*

“Well… the human body is a fascinating thing. Do you have the vodka?”

“Right here.”

Rey watched him dump the booze all over the unconscious guards. Soon both men reeked of alcohol.

“I wouldn’t want to be them when the boss finds out they were drinking on the job.”

Ben grinned.

“It's so hard to find good help these days.”

Rey quickly scanned the area.

“Should we be worried about cameras?”

“Rose said Rotta removed them from this level, probably to prevent his security team from
blackmailing him or any of his high-profile customers.”

“Alright then… How do you wanna do this?”

Ben narrowed his eyes.

“The schematic indicated a fuse closet next to the main lounge…”

~{ ONE MINUTE LATER }~

“This is the smallest fuse closet in the history of the world.”

“Hush, Niima, someone will hear you.”

“Hey. Watch your hands!”

“I was just going for the light switch.”

“Right -”

Ben rolled his eyes and scanned the claustrophobic space until his gaze lit on something helpful. Without a word he reached behind Rey’s head and removed a large duct cover.

“What are you doing?” Rey whispered as her partner crawled into the new hole he’d made.

“I’m improvising.”

Now it was Rey’s turn to roll her eyes.

“Move ahead so I can get in.”

“No.”

“What do you mean no ?!”

“I mean there’s only enough room for one person and I got here first.”

Actually Rey could have fit, but Ben was only able to hear what was going on because of his abilities.

“You just… guard the door.”

Rey mumbled irritably and began to entertain herself with various ways she could make him suffer for this. She wouldn’t do any of them of course, but there was something remarkably cathartic about the mental image of tying his shoelaces together or dropping him in a giant mud puddle.

After what seemed like several decades, Ben whispered, “They’re gone. I’m coming down.”

Rey’s eyes widened.

“Wait - hold on - let me get out of the wa-”
Her warning was abruptly muffled when Ben crashed down on top of her.

“Rey! Are you ok?”

His hands were instantly everywhere at once. Tingly, warm sensations shot guiltily towards her center. Rey felt dizzy and it had nothing to do with hitting her head.

“What did I tell you about those hands, Solo?” she managed breathlessly.

He snorted and rose to his feet.

“You’re fine.”

“Barely,” Rey muttered. (Truth be told, if he continued to ‘check’ her for injury, they might not have gotten up.) “So what’d you get?” she grunted as she pulled herself upright, “besides a good feel?”

Ben arched an eyebrow.

“An address.”

The door handle began to shake.

Ben’s hands shot forward. Rey was up against the wall with her legs around her partner in the blink of an eye.

“Moan,” he hissed.

“Mmm,” Rey managed (she was still a bit stunned at the rapid turn of events, but she knew what was going on and why she needed to start making noise).

Ben’s fingers tightened in frustration. His teeth dragged across her jaw.

“Moan harder,” he growled, bearing her ruthlessly into the wall.

The noise that ripped out of her this time was obscene and entirely unfeigned. Ben inhaled sharply and shuddered.

“Good girl,” he crooned softly against her ear.

Rey whimpered as the words and their underlying intent poured over her body.

The door swung open and two unfamiliar men peered into the closet.

Ben forcibly shook off the fog in his brain.

“Gentlemen,” he drawled in a deep mountain accent. His hand dug into the hair at Rey’s nape and cradled her face into his shoulder blade - hiding it from the intruders. “May I… help you?”

“What are you doing in here?” the shorter of the two men sputtered indignantly.

Ben fixed the blushing employee with an imperious glare for just a second longer than polite.

“I think it should be fairly obvious what I’m doing here,” Ben slapped Rey’s thigh suggestively. She giggled right on cue.
“Sir,” the other man began in an extremely professional tone, “we have private rooms here-”

“I’m afraid Sugar Puss doesn’t like rooms. Her tastes are real particular.”

Rey giggled again and dug one of her nails into his earlobe.

Ben winced and bit back a grin.

*Doesn’t like to be called Sugar Puss... What a shock.*

“Perhaps I can persuade you boys to er- give us a few minutes so I can take care of the little lady here.”

Rey giggled a third time. Her hand moved down to grip the back of his priest collar and tugged hard, causing Ben to wheeze painfully.

“Now, now darlin,” he coughed, “we aren’t at that part yet.”

Both the Palace workers looked like they wanted to crawl away and die. Ben reached into his back pocket (while continuing to hold Rey against the wall with his pelvis - a fact she was actively not dwelling on) and pulled out two 100 credit notes.

The procedure of this exchange was older than time immemorial. Everyone involved knew what to do. In a few short moments, both intruders were gone and the door was shut once more.

Ben lowered Rey to the floor. She stumbled a bit before dusting herself off.

“Solo,” she spoke conversationally without looking her partner in the eye, “if you ever call me Sugar Puss again, I will stab more than your earlobe.”

Ben grinned.

“Worth it.”

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Ben and Rey were able to slip away from the Palace and return to the Grand Gungan without a hitch. Rey insisted on returning because:

“-there is *absolutely* no way I’m breaking into anything wearing fishnets and stilettos-”

While they were heading back, Ben filled her in on what he’d heard.

Rotta and Maul were definitely taking orders from Arawn, but their primary objective now was keeping the dirty work untraceable.

Arawn kept detailed records of his scheme in a secured office building near the heart of Canto Bight. Maul and Rotta were planning to scrub the building and destroy the files in the next five hours - but they did not mention a specific time. It could happen at any moment... which meant they (Rey and Ben) couldn’t risk waiting for back-up.

Solo and Niima were going in after those files immediately.
Ben contacted Poe as soon as Rey left to peel off her costume.

Commander Dameron was a bit terse on the comms.

The wedding rehearsal had not gone smoothly…

Lando kept them there for four hours.

In fact, Lando decided to call another ‘emergency’ wedding rehearsal for the next morning. So… tensions were high at Chandrilla.

Ben offered his deepest sympathies (silently thanking every available deity that he was on assignment and unable to be a groomsman) before outlining an update of the situation and filling him in on their plan to extract (well - copy) files from Arawn’s building.

Rey ambled back through the door looking a bit more relaxed in dark jeans and a long-sleeved black tee.

“So… can I get a quick recap - again - of what’s going on and what the plan is? The euphoria of taking off those accursed heels overwhelmed my brain and I need to be reminded.”

Ben snorted and shook his head.

“This address is where they always met with Arawn - it's also where he’s been keeping the only records of his dirty deeds. Now... he’s been playing it smart: paper copies to avoid digital theft. All of it is in this building - specifically it’s in a room marked “maintenance” on the second floor - east wing.”

Ben paused crack his knuckles. Rey was unexpectedly aroused by this, but she ignored it because she was a strong professional woman.

“Those files are more evidence to exonerate the senators, and they’re also our best bet for finding out who Arawn is. Rotta and Maul are sending crews to get rid of it all very soon. We’ve got to copy what we can and get out as soon as possible. The bosses left before deciding on a time - meaning they’re probably finalizing those details electronically right now …”

He released a heavy sigh.

“Time is not on our side.”

Rey nodded and slung a backpack over her shoulder.

“Let’s do it.”

“Uh - whoa - hold on.” Ben yanked off the cleric collar and started unbuttoning his shirt. “I’m not breaking and entering dressed as a priest.”

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“It would be a dark and stormy night.”

“It wasn’t twenty minutes ago.”

“Well it definitely is now.”
“Look on the bright side, Rey; the rain will make it harder to see us –”

“Ben. Let me be as clear as I possibly can; there is no bright side when it comes to chafing…”

The two eternally bickering reporters cautiously approached their intended target, The building was overwhelmingly non-descript… boring, even.

Rey scanned the area with increasing confusion.

“Security seems a little… sparse. There’s no gate, no visible guards.” Her eyes darted over the roof and walls. “I don’t even see any cameras.”

Ben’s vision was more powerful than Rey’s and even his sweeps turned up almost nothing.

“Perhaps they’re trying to avoid suspicion?” he theorized.

“Maybe…” Rey shivered. “Something doesn’t feel right.”

“Agreed… Should we abort?”

Ben prayed she would say yes. It would be so much easier to leave Rey safe in their room and unleash Kylo Ren.

“No... This is too important. Without this evidence, Leia is still in danger.” She turned to Ben significantly. “We’ve got to know who is really after her.”

He sighed.

Of course she’s still ready to storm the castle.

Ben grinned in spite of himself.

“Lead the way, Niima.” He switched on Rose’s frequency jammer (effectively disabling every alarm in a one-mile radius) and offered her a playful salute.

Three broken doorknobs and a hot-wired security elevator later – they were in.

Rey began pulling files and scanning them on her phone. Ben stayed by the door to keep an eye on the hallway.

About halfway through the documents she let out a stunned scoff and motioned to her partner.

“According to this... Arawn's been mining in the restricted areas since early last year using a company called Hosnian Systems.”

“How did the other testing companies miss industrial mining?”

“My guess? Money - lots of it. Over 40 million credits labeled ‘camouflage expense’ ... a pretty fancy term for bribery.”

Ben nodded.

“With enough money he could make sure only the ‘right’ companies were working near him and keep the environmental groups at a safe distance. That area is massive - it’s do-able.”
Rey continued to copy and browse until she stumbled across a series of peculiar notes.

“Hosnian Systems is only interested in a specific substance. The name is redacted in every file – they’ve apparently collected a good deal of it.”

She frowned.

“I’m almost entirely through these records and this is the only thing he bothered to hide…”

Suddenly a loud crash split the air.

“Time’s up,” Ben hissed.

Rey bit her lip and made a split-second decision. She grabbed the remaining documents and shoved them into her bag.

Ben’s gaze fixed on the door. After a moment his eyes shot to Rey.

“They’re coming. We’ll have to force our way out and run.”

She nodded sharply and positioned herself behind him. Ben gripped the handle and waited… They could hear at least two men closing in on the door.

A tall shadow turned the knob and began to enter the room.

Rey struck out from behind Ben and pulled the man into a sharp knee while her partner slammed the door shut on the second guy’s head.

The reporters took off down the hall with several hostiles in pursuit.

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“Ugh. This is a whole new level of gross.”

“I thought you liked getting ‘down and dirty’ for your stories.”

“Metaphorically, Ben; I had no idea I’d be forced to make that statement literal.”

Ben grunted as they continued to crawl out of the dumpster. The chase had taken them deep into the city center.

Rey was almost out when a massive explosion rocked the area; her body was thrown into Ben’s arms.

“It’s Arawn’s building,” she gasped, turning in the direction of the blast.

“That’s why there were no guards.” Ben coughed and began to peel garbage off his shirt. “That was an awfully close call. Do you think we lost them?”

“I think s-”

“There they are!”
“- or not.”

Rey took off down the crowded street with her partner following close behind.

Ben’s gaze zeroed in on a small neon building in the center of the strip surrounded by a crowd of giggling 20-somethings in formal wear.

“This way!” He grabbed Rey’s wrist and dragged them through the glowing door. They could hear men shouting at the crowd to move.

Rey pushed through the building and found herself in a long hallway filled with large doorways, each one labeled Chapel 1, Chapel 2, Chapel 3, and so on... She rounded the corner only to collide with a short man in a green suit.

“Only customers allowed in!” the man grumbled irritably.

A loud crash echoed from the entrance way and Rey’s eyes widened.

“We’re customers!” She grabbed a veil from a nearby rack and threw it over her hair before quickly thrusting a yamaka in Ben’s face.

The little green-suited man smiled and ushered them into Chapel 7.

“Very well then. Your names?”

“Ben Solo and Rey Niima.”

“And which ceremony would you-”

A sharp cracking noise cut him off and Rey threw a look over at Ben.

“What did you do?!"

“I barricaded the front door with a church pew.”

“Well – it’s not stopping them!” She grabbed a suit jacket and forced his arms through it. “We’re gonna have to go with this-!”

Rey desperately searched for something to cover her own dirty clothes, but the only thing that would serve fast enough was an old kimono lying in the corner.

Green suit man gulped before tentatively asking, “Cash, check or credit?”

Ben yanked his personal card from a tiny pocket sewn into the back of his jeans. The man’s eyes bulged out of his head. Very few people had a credit card like that (all black with a single gold stripe down the middle to signify its exclusivity).

“Sir,” the man spoke with an entirely different tone of voice now, “my name is Gascon and we are delighted that you chose our humble establishme-”

“Could you hurry this up a little?”
At this point their best chance was appearing to be farther along in the ceremony when the goon squad inevitably burst in.

“Y-yes,” Gascon sputtered. “Please kneel and place your hands on the altar for scanning and identification.”

The partners placed their right hands on the giant altar screen. After a moment Rey’s name flashed in large letters, then Ben’s full name including titles began to scroll down for a small eternity.

Rey’s eyes bugged out of her head.

“You’re a prince?! And a duke?! And a-”

“Can we not do this right now!?” Ben hissed.

Gascon had fallen into a full bow.

“Your Royal Highness, I cannot tell you how honored -”

“Maker, this is a nightmare,” he groaned.

Shouts began echoing down the hall.

Rey wheeled on Gascon.

“Get on with it!”

The poor chapel owner was shaking as he handed the two of them a piece of paper.

“O-Of course – if you’ll just sign here.”

Rey scribbled her name then tossed the pen to Ben who did the same.

“Do this and make it fast!”

Gascon nodded and pressed a button on the wall behind him. Immediately thick metal bands unfolded from underneath Ben and Rey’s wrists and cuffed them to the altar.

“What's going on?” Rey gasped. She turned to her partner, “Ben what is - oh my gawd - Ben -”

Ben was shaking and leaning heavily on the altar rail.

“It’s a Cantosian ceremony,” he wheezed, “they chain themselves together during the vows to symbolize commitment, but-” he winced, “-something is wrong.”

Gascon was fluttering about like a spastic butterfly.

“Your Highness, whatever is the matter?”

Ben shook his head reflexively, then his eyes fixed on the cuffs.

“Are - are these made of dulcium?”

“Yes. It’s one of only three metals the chains can be made of.”

“I have a dulcium... allergy,” Ben groaned.
“Should I deactivate them?”

The back doors of the chapel began to shake. Ben shook his head frantically.

“No. No, keep going!”

Gascon took a deep breath and began reciting the lines of the traditional Cantosian Wedding ceremony. The doors gave another sickening snap.

“Do you, Ben Solo, take this woman to be your mate, your life-long companion, and your lawful spouse -”

Rey gulped – completely ignoring the chapel owner’s words.

“Are you ok?” she asked trembling.

“Do you swear to honor and protect her in the shadows and in the light and walk all the paths ahead as one?”

“No.” Ben gulped; his eyes squeezed shut as he concentrated on staying upright.

The chapel doors burst open. Rey and Ben froze. Gascon continued to drone on without even looking up.

“And do you, Rey Niima, take this man to be your mate, your life-long companion, and your lawful spouse -”

Rey glanced over towards a glass case in the left corner of the room. She could see a reflection of their pursuers. They were clearly trying to decide whether or not the couple in front of them was the couple they wanted.

After a moment they began to back away.

“Are they leaving?” Ben grunted tightly.

“Do you swear to honor and protect him in the shadows and in the light and walk all the paths ahead as one?”

“Yes.” Rey nodded.

“By the words of your mouths, the bond is set-”

“We’ll wait another minute then head out the back.”

“So be the Will of our Maker, the Almighty Force-”

Ben bit his lip and drew a sharp breath. He could feel his body weakening.

“Ok. Let’s just get a taxi to the hotel.”

“By virtue of the power granted me by the High Council of Cantosia Province-”

“I’ll call Rose-”

“I now pronounce you-”
“And I’ll call Luke—”

“-husband and wife!”

“What!?”

Chapter End Notes

I would love to know what you think! (PLEASE let me know what you think.) Writing this chapter felt like running a marathon and I could really use a boost. Every Single comment and kudos is worth a hundred Kylo Ren Bridal Carry(s) to me! I read them again and again!

Bonus Content: Resistance Dossiers

Curious to see what these characters look like in the “Bless Me” Universe? Want some more information about their background? Would you like to know exactly how attractive Ezra actually is? If so, check out the Resistance Dossiers that I have conveniently linked for you right here.

Kaydel Connix
Poe Dameron
Ezra Bridger
Rey Niima
Ben Solo  
Finn Tico  
Rose Tico  
Cassian Andor  
Jyn Erso

**Additional Notes:**  
Joph Seastriker (who was mentioned in passing in an earlier update) is a character from the canon novel, Bloodline.

The reason Maul and his associates did not enter the Palace VIP lounge ‘the back way’ is because Rotta does not trust Maul and is unlikely to reveal any of his club’s ‘back entrances’ to another mob boss (even if they are working together). He wants witnesses/cameras to see Maul and company entering the club in case anything goes south. Although the meeting is technically a secret, the heads of rival crime families/organizations often meet like this to discuss business. The initial meeting was on neutral territory (the Grand Gungan). Maul is only willing to go to the Palace because of the security breach at the hotel. ‘The Feds’ and whoever else are less likely to successfully bug Rotta’s home territory.

The ‘mountain accent’ that Ben whips out in the fuse closet is the equivalent of a smooth southern (American) drawl.

I totally made up the Cantosian Wedding Vows

The “Accidental Marriage” scene is heavily inspired by/loosely borrowed from a scene in “I Love Trouble” - a 90s movie starring Julia Roberts and Nick Nolte. It is an AWESOME movie and I highly recommend it. Although my version of the scene is considerably more detailed and pretty distinct in its own right, I DID get the idea from the movie and I feel like it is important to credit it.

**End Notes**

Guess What?! I have a [tumblr](https://tumblr.com) now! I am brand new to it and have no actual clue what I’m doing... but that has never stopped me before. Huzzah!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://archive.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!