Glory's Fray

by avidvampirehunter

Summary

Six years after abandoning his home to join the Roman army, Ben Solo stands reborn as Kylo Ren—the mightiest gladiator of Emperor Snoke. He lives his life in blood and riches, a glory earned through rage and loyalty alone.

Until one night, Snoke gives his prized fighter a gift: a young slave woman with a fiery spirit, wrapped in silk, waiting in his chambers.

Notes

Thanks in advance for reading. This fic is more exploratory than most of my others, which is my obnoxious way of saying I have no idea what I'm doing.

I am not a history buff. It's one of my worst subjects. But I love to learn, so I will do as much research as I can to keep this story cohesive.

Definitions and explanations of noticeable cultural differences will be provided in the end notes~
(A special thanks to LoveofEscapism for Beta-reading. She is the bomb-dot-com!)

See the end of the work for more notes.
The clash of steel in summer heat shrieks below the burning sun, the sweat of darkened brows shimmering, the sneer of ragged teeth and slick squelch of pierced skin warring. How they rage, there in the dust that cakes their sandaled feet, the attentive crowd roaring like the beasts trapped below.

Kylo Ren, arms crossed, glowers as he watches one of the finer gladiators duck away from his opponent's gladius, the short blade striking empty air. *He has skill and speed,* Kylo Ren notes, and files away this knowledge for the inevitable battle between them.

Someone taps his arm. He turns to find Caluan Ematt, a seasoned soldier retired to the entertainment of the Colosseum, sweltering in the shade of their shelter. He seems to have something to say, moving pale lips behind his beard to voice words barely heard over the screech of metal just beyond. “He is a young one,” Ematt informs, pointing to the lithe fighter. “Many bets on him go against you, Master Ren.”
Kylo reshuffles his arms, turning to glare out where the men fight. “I place no confidence in youth,” he replies lowly. “Nor in the plebs you associate with.”

Ematt smiles, toothy and yellow. “Well, I placed ten denarii on you. Perhaps age and patrician is worth more faith?”

“You worry too much about faith,” Kylo dismisses, waving him off. As he does, and Ematt retreats in obedience, the warrior beyond falls in a grand show of blood. The young man stands above him, beginning the slow work of decapitation as the crowd cheers.

Kylo Ren does not look away from the carnage. The man who cries from the ground now was condemned an enemy of the empire. Or, more precisely, an enemy of the emperor and his gods. Kylo is not new to witnessing the demise of Christians in the Colosseum, nor their blasphemous cries in the gasping wetness of bloody throats, though he finds the act of religion tedious in practice. In another life, he much preferred its study over its zealotry.

But, as life condemns one to death, so too does the practice of life itself.

The deed done, slaves run out to clean the remains. The flesh will be dragged below for consumption. They pass Kylo, the iron stench of blood flooding his nose as the gurney shuffles further within, the remnants of what transpired vanishing from sight forever.

The victor salutes the public as they cheer, turning in a circle of dust. Kylo huffs, rolling his shoulder and summoning one of the workers with his armor. He dons his black-iron breastplate as the announcer begins the usual droll, introducing him with Grecian fervor. He takes his sword as the servant looks on in bewilderment at its size, and affixes his signature mask into place.

His name ripples along the dust and beckons him into the arena, where the sun bakes hot against the darkness of his armor. The enemy sees him and shrinks, jumping back as Kylo Ren brandishes his magnificent blade.

Kylo Ren is not like most fighters. That much is obvious, in the concealment of his face behind the iron mask. Unlike the shorter blade of his enemy’s gladius, his own weapon is hand-crafted; long and sleek in the sunlight. Its heavy weight balances in his hand, giving him reach and fervent power in his swings. But, perhaps, its most amicable feature is the fear it casts behind his opponents’ eyes—that sudden despair amidst desperate hope that never fails to surface.

This will be a quick battle. The emperor will be disappointed.

* Might as well make it a show, Kylo concedes to himself, spinning the blade at his sides and taking a defensive stance.

His opponent inflates himself, glaring out as he bellows in a thick, Celtic accent, “I am Bala-Tik of the Kanjiklub Clan—prepare to fall to my blade, Kylo Ren!”

Kylo says nothing.

In fury, Bala-Tik charges. He is quick, but lacks finesse in his footwork. Kylo waits until the man is closer and turns just before his chest can be impaled. Then he reaches out, butting the hilt of his sword against Bala-Tik’s nose. The smaller man cries out in shock, holding his face as Kylo rounds behind him.

Panic ripples over Bala-Tik’s wide eyes. He turns swiftly, lashing out with his blade. Kylo backs away, deflecting with ease and crashing steel, letting the crowd laugh at the blood dripping down his opponent’s chin. The scarlet of the Celtic man’s skirt gathers dust as he charges once more, all
the rage of his youth gathering in a vicious swing.

But Kylo has seen it all before. He parries easily, kicking a large foot into Bala-Tik’s torso and sending him sprawling effortlessly into the sand. As the man struggles and sputters, blinking for his bearings, Kylo allows him a few seconds more to live, turning and silently accepting the public’s praise of him.

Behind his mask, Kylo turns to see the emperor looking down from his throne at the crest of the Colosseum, eyes cast upon him. He lifts his weak, withered chin, then his slim, pale hand—a subtle motion Kylo knows quite well.

By this, Kylo is not surprised. The Celt is obviously a seasoned gladiator from lower-level matches, a Britanian slave at last nearing the date of his release; the end of his usefulness.

A shame he would not live to see the first.

Bala-Tik makes an ass of himself in yet another charge, braying and baring rotted teeth. Kylo wrinkles his nose beneath his mask at the depravity of it, but nonetheless wastes no time. He swings hard enough to knock the gladius from the man’s hand, and crosses his other arm over to grasp the thin layer of hair atop his head. The sweat and grime is a disgusting affair, but Kylo makes do, yanking and dragging him down to meet his knee with a shattering crunch.

Weakened and dizzy, his opponent quivers blindly, falling to his hands and knees. As he shuffles through the sand, searching for his lost sword, Kylo decides this is the end of it. He presses his sandaled foot atop Bala-Tik’s hand just as it wraps around the hilt, and a bemoaned whimper leaks from his foreign lips. “Please,” he groans, “I want my wooden sword… I want to go home...”

Sighing faintly, Kylo knows he cannot allow this to end painlessly. Tradition must be kept, his image maintained, lest they both meet their end where the starving lions pace.

So he lifts his mask, frowning down as Bala-Tik looks up at him with shining-black eyes, full of hope and desperation. Foolishness. When he sees no mercy in the true face of Kylo Ren, he growls low in his battered throat. “You’re a dead man,” he threatens shakily, lurching forward to—

With a decisive thrust, Kylo plunges his sword into Bala-Tik’s abdomen, taking his hair once more with his opposite hand. The small man pauses, down on one knee, and gasps. He coughs, speckled blood raining sticky upon his assailant’s feet. A shadow looms over his face as he closes his eyes, placing his hand upon Kylo’s thigh, remaining dutifully soundless as Kylo retracts his blade and slices the man’s throat.

The crowd of Romans heaves in marvelous uproar, rising to their feet to cheer as the body of Bala-Tik falls limp onto the sand. Kylo grips his long sword tight, breathing deeply as he lowers his mask, and looks up into the glittering approval of his emperor.

Slaves flood the field, the two attendants disguised as his master’s gods meandering to the dead body. As they do, Kylo does what is expected of him. He salutes the cheering crowd, turning fully to land on his master's eye. He touches the crest of his forehead and lets his hand fall, anchoring him into a deep bow.

When he rises again, a laurel is offered to him by Ematt, who says something about winning a hundred denarii. But all falls to silence in his mind as the emperor stands, smiles, and beckons him forth.

Not waiting for his attendants, Kylo leaves the slaves and Ematt to their work, striding
purposefully into the glorious arch of the Porta Triumphalis a victor.

And yet, he feels hollow as the arch itself.

Chapter End Notes

[That gorgeous heading is by the amazing Reylocalligraphy! Follow and see her amazing Reylo works on Tumblr here!]

[“Pleb” is a derogatory term, short for “Plebeian,” which basically means “peasant”]

[Ten denarii back then would be about forty dollars today]

[Greeks and Romans shared a lot of art. It was the Greek’s fault that Roman’s got into showmanship, which is why Kylo deems the announcer “Grecian” (when he was probably Roman)]

[Slaves would sometimes be turned into gladiators, and it was custom for them to be released after three years of service, where they would receive a wooden sword as a symbol of earning their freedom]

[When sentenced to death, the defeated gladiator would kneel and grab the victor’s thigh, not allowed to make a single sound as his throat was cut]

["Porta Triumphalis" means "victory door," where the winner would exit the arena after a fight]

[For those who are wondering, Ematt is the guy with the white beard who says "It's another Death Star" in Ep. VII]

[BONUS: I know Bala-Tik was not of Kanjiklub, but the Guavian Death Gang. "Kanjiklub" is just more fun to hear him say~]

{Themes for this chapter are "Tourniquet" by Breaking Benjamin and "Gladiator" by Zayde Wølf. Listen to the Glory's Fray Spotify playlist here!}
Wealth

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for the warm reception! You guys are the best! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kylo enters the hall, tall pillars barricading him along the tiled limestone floor. His footsteps echo in lumbering strides as he walks the familiar path, Roman guards standing attention and gawking openly as he passes by.

Sweat clings to the nape of his neck, ripe against the humid air. His helm rests beneath his arm, chest plate shifting against his dark tunic lying underneath. Here in the shade he is relieved, somewhat, mouth set in a firm line of professionalism.

The emperor has summoned him to the bathhouse of the palace—the gaping maw of its entrance leaking steam beyond the courtyard garden as Kylo comes near. The sound of chatter ripples beyond, a man and woman clinging to one another and laughing as they exit, reeking of social affair. Kylo pays them no heed beyond a dubious glance before ducking inside.

A woman in a toga rises from her work to greet him. He knows her. She is a Tico sister, the stern one, an engineer of the waterways that keep this bath house irrigated—a respected servant in Snoke’s household. He nods to her in slight, stringed bangs tapping limply against his soiled cheek.

She bows, offering a polite reply. “Master Ren. The emperor awaits you in his private bathing chamber. If you will follow me…”

He does, trekking out into the men’s side of the bathhouse. Water ripples like gems in the sunlight shining through the open roof, a faint odor of malfeasance heavy in the air. The gathered, at the sight of a woman in their midst, call out with various praises and obscene gestures. She ignores them with a lifted chin, leading the equally impassive master gladiator into the rear chambers of the internal structure.

Water drips and deep voices echo gossip and camaraderie. Here, in such a place, Kylo is well aware the game. A place of such vulnerability, of aristocratic men reduced to no more than their flesh, bleeds into the realm a sense of dignified unity. This is where politicians are born: in the steaming womb of glowing sanctification and filthy water.

And still beyond this awaits the private bath of the emperor.

The Tico woman leaves him with another slight bow, and he turns to the doorway.

A voice, deep and slow, calls from inside. “Enter.”

Kylo obeys, stepping saintly into the innermost chamber. At the center, resting in the violet steam of a darkened room, Emperor Snoke sits languidly in his bathtub of raised stone. Kylo pointedly ignores his master’s nudity, as well as the eight armored men standing post around the curved, shining walls. “You sent for me?”

“Yes,” Snoke replies, long fingers resting along the rim, glazed with the water's sheen. “You
fought well today.”

He fights well no matter the day, but does not say so. Instead, he inclines his head, sweating anew from the stifling heat. “Thank you, Master.”

“Come now,” Snoke chortles lowly, “false humility is for the weak.” His smile falls into a state of trance and hidden wrath. With a deft gesture, he points to the wall behind Kylo. “Your winnings.”

Kylo looks over his shoulder at the bulging pouch of denarii entitled to him resting on a nearby outcropping. They have done this transaction many times, in many ways and places. And, after so many victories in the arena, it becomes difficult to hold grand meetings to hand over a simple sack of coins.

He turns back. “Thank you, Master.”

Snoke frowns now, but the sight is less severe than it could be. His dark eyes take on a mirthful glint—which concerns Kylo more than its alternative.

Even so, he keeps himself impassive as his emperor continues. “I may never tire watching that sword of yours at work. Truly, you follow in the steps of your predecessor.”


“I remember the wrath of Vader,” he reminisces openly, droning like the old man he is. No matter. Kylo can exercise patience. Sometimes. “One-hundred men befell him in a single hour; he truly earned his glory, just as you have. Though now, I wonder… what comes next for you.”

Kylo blinks. “Master?”

Snoke sighs deeply; it echoes across the chamber. “I, like Nero, do not hold stock to the Christians’ faith. They are a vile sort. But, I think, they are correct about one thing,” his eyes meet Kylo’s steadfastly, “man was not meant to be alone.”

Bile rises in Kylo’s throat, a sudden terror at what his Emperor may be propagating here in the privacy of his bathing chamber. Though, as far as he is aware, Snoke would not be the type. Instead he forces himself to remain subjugate and perspiring. “I do not understand.”

At this, Snoke scoffs. “Few men are like you, who do not express their cravings. My boy,” he coos, “I will host a revelry tonight in your honor. Surely you are aware of the more,” he smirks, “carnal delights I offer in my palace.”

Yes. Kylo is aware, has witnessed men disappear for some indeterminate amount of minutes and return alight and disheveled, but schools himself into humble ignorance. “You are a generous leader,” he says simply.

“And you a mighty warrior, who has earned himself a place among my Praetorian Guard—yet refuses to take it.” Snoke smiles openly now. “I am no young fool. I see your rage, your intentions. It is in this rage I perceive a building sense of discipline. For a man of your talents, you have earned the right to enjoy yourself.”

“I have no such appetites,” Kylo fumes, burning from the inside at his master’s outspoken gall against his private affairs. But he manages himself, turning and striding to the outcropping. As he reaches for the denarii, a spear is aimed at his head by one of the Praetorian. He freezes, locking eyes with the guard, before closing them in defeat. “Master—”
“When your emperor offers you a gift, you are beholden to accept,” Snoke warns. Then, with a lift of his shriveled hand, the guard relaxes, allowing Kylo his freedom. “However, as you said, I am a generous leader.”

Kylo takes his winnings and turns to meet Snoke’s eye. “I’ve given everything I have to you. To Rome. I would be a fool not to accept.” His gaze grows cold, chilling the chamber steam. “But. It is as you say. This life makes me stronger. I am... content.”

“We shall see,” Snoke says softly, leaning back into the water. He waves his subject away, repeating the words to himself with a sickening certainty, of which Kylo Ren finds no comfort.

His steps are hurried from the bathhouse through the courtyard, returning to the stables for his horse. A slave boy brings to him his magnificent black stallion, Silencer, whose long, arching snout Kylo strokes in soothing lines.

“Master Ren,” another servant calls. Kylo turns to face him as he bows, holding out a note. “The emperor has invited you to his revelry tonight, in honor of the summer solstice.”

Kylo sneers down at it, snatching the note from the slave’s trembling hand. “I accept,” he almost hisses, settling instead for a huff as the messenger wisely races away.

Sundown will be upon them soon, when the revelry will begin. Kylo sighs, carding a hand through his hair, fighting with himself on whether he should simply mount his beloved horse and ride to his quiet villa, far from any more Roman “revelry.”

Instead, he motions for the stable slave to return his horse within, uncaring of his denarii left sagging on the saddle, and paces back into the bathhouse—where he intends to, at the very least, make himself presentable for what is sure to be a night of misfortune.

Chapter End Notes

[Owning and attending bath houses in Rome was considered a sign of high social status. The elite and "classy" were often expected to have their own bath houses for social activities. It was similar to our modern-day bars mixed with the animal-world's watering hole—where folks would meet, greet, and passive-aggressively compete]

[The guards assigned to protect the Roman emperor were actually called Praetorian Guards—not kidding]

[Nero was a crazy emperor years and years after Caesar, who reigned during the evangelization of Paul the Apostle. He would crucify Christians at his parties, burning them alive while topless women danced around them. He also did many worse things to the people, especially women, who denied him—such as force their husbands to acquiesce them for a night. Snoke's character is inspired by Nero (as well as a few other Roman dignitaries, which will be revealed later in the story)]
Revelry

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sun begins its descent, the orange claws of evening clouds streaming across the sky, threatening violet bloodshed on the horizon.

Kylo Ren enters the courtyard, where small groups have already begun to gather. He stands atop the stairs, leaning against a pillar, looking on in brooding contemplation.

Snoke claimed this revelry was in his honor, yet he was invited under the admonition of the summer solstice. As of now, the event seems more of an elite affair, members of the high court trekking about in search of patrons to woo and attendants to refill their goblets. Among them is a certain general, whom Kylo would prefer to avoid.

Before he can maneuver himself into the less-noticeable corner of the courtyard, the familiar, graveled voice of Ematt sounds beside him. “You certainly left in a hurry,” he chuckles, holding up his hand. A laurel crown dangles on his finger. “You forgot this.”

Kylo frowns. “I didn’t forget,” he murmurs, adjusting himself against the pillar. His tunic smells of linen and warmth, dried in the sweet, gentle wind of late afternoon. Aside from the consistent, discomfiting attention given to him in the bathhouse, he’d found bathing quite refreshing when able to step into laundered clothes afterward. Even now the lively scent of perfumed oil clings to his soft raven hair.

Though it lulls him in slight, it does not relieve the lingering disturbance he feels.

Ematt sighs, shaking his head, and folds the laurel under his arm. “What am I going to do with you?”

At this Kylo manages the faintest of smiles. Which, to most, is no smile at all, but a certain quirk of the eyes. “Continue to manage my fights, and find me some suitable wine.” His gaze scours the crowd as he sucks in an uneasy breath. “I have no wish to remember this night.”

With a grunting, half-hearted laugh, Ematt waves an attendant over, who begins to pour for them both. “No delight in Roman festivity?”

“No delight in any festivity,” Kylo grumbles, snatching the wine from the server, who shuffles away in palpable submission. As his companion sips in observant silence, Kylo looks bleakly into his chalice. “I fear Snoke demands an end to my virtus.”

Ematt chokes, wiping the red from his white beard. “Your what?”

“Calm yourself,” Kylo nearly barks, already mortified enough by the evening’s grim outlook. As Ematt coughs, he notices hoards of men and scantly-clad women beside them, entering with a strange glow in their eyes. His heart begins to sink and pound itself into the miry muck of his own flesh at the sight. “You think a gladiator would know nothing of self-control?”

“I’m sure plenty do,” Ematt replies, voice ragged from drink, yet soft and serious. “Master Ren, if I may be so bold—”

Kylo scoffs.
“—your fervor in the arena, your anger, all of Rome knows that your power is unrivaled. Forgive me for being somewhat shocked that such passion would not carry over into… other matters.”

As Ematt speaks, his old eyes trail after a woman in blue, her bare stomach revealed to all in attendance. Kylo pointedly looks away, words echoing into his chalice as he lifts it to his lips. “And I thought Rome valued purity.”

“Purity, yes. Loneliness?” He frowns up at Kylo, a sad look in his eye as he scans the younger man’s face, as if reading something written there. “No.”

Kylo almost replies with derision, until the sound of drums beats rhythmically from within the palace. He, Ematt, and a few other lingering guests vacate the stairs to wait below as two rows of drummers, dancers, and attendants file in time.

When Snoke is carried into sight aboard a litter, the crowd erupts into applause. All but Kylo, who downs the rest of his wine. Then the company stills, kneeling as Snoke is lowered from his carrier and rises to stand atop the stairs in his flowing gold and white satin toga. It hangs limply from his bodice, giving him a square appearance that betrays the unobservant eye.

“My faithful subjects,” he calls out, steepling his fingers with a pleased smile. “Welcome. The time for Vestalia is upon us. Another year of plenty for Rome.”

As he speaks, toasts and cheers erupt from the courtyard. Even Ematt drinks to it.


With that, and a lift of his hand, the music begins. Lyres and harps strum, the slight beat of drums pulsing through the emerging evening. Torches and oil lamps ignite, dancing red with shadows as the sun abandons them blink by blink. Kylo manages to down several goblets of wine. Their distility leaves his massive body wanting for more even as the slight, light-headed pleasure of drunkenness begins to crest behind his eyes.

For some slight moments of gentility, he fraternizes with those daring enough to approach him, trading shallow compliments. As the night wears on, food is served within the palace, where the massive chamber lies littered with lounging couches and pillows. At some point he is lying down among a throng of young men, toasting half-heartedly to the upcoming festivities of some tournament, and tips back even more. The laurel upon his head tilts; it would seem Ematt put it on him at some point.

Snoke is nowhere to be seen until the ceremonial dances begin. He sits above all, picking at luscious grapes and cheeses as the female dancers take their positions.

They dance slowly to the music, their arms floating through the air as they undulate their bare stomachs. One of the men beside Kylo gestures to a woman in front. Some tall, sharp thing with predatory gaze cast upon him as she performs the sacrificial movements of an ancient worship.

He, like everyone present, watches the dance. But within his mind there is only despair, dark and lingering, tugging the frayed ends of his consciousness. In the heat of the room and involuntary reaction of his eyes, disgust and shame floods him and he knows he cannot stay.

Kylo Ren rises from his lounging as soon as the dance is over, pushing his way through the crowd
in pretense of emergency. Yet in a way, there is. He knew no good could come of this night, and even in his inebriation he has no wish to see where it will end.

As soon as he is about to leave, the dancer who stared at him pushes herself into view, blocking his path. He frowns.

She reveals a row of straight, large teeth, dipping forward in a way that displays her decolletage. “You’re Kylo Ren, aren’t you?” she purrs.

“Yes,” he deadpans.

She ignores him. “I am Bazine Netal, daughter of the Persian patricians of Rome—”

“I don’t care,” Kylo growls, pushing his empty chalice to a passing servant. When he does, he brushes past her and the indignant gaze that trails after him with scorned eyes.

Kylo Ren holds no remorse for it, lumbering across the courtyard entrance and gardens, heading quickly to the stables. He played his part. He attended the revelry, he acted every inch Emperor Snoke’s shining master gladiator. But he will partake of no more. Whether he dies on this journey home, he cares not. Good riddance, to be lost of this pointless dance.

He crashes into the stables, summer insects flitting and dying in lamplit flame. It would seem this place has been abandoned, but he knows the way. He finds Silencer, pulling him out and whispering hushed ease to his startled horse. Indeed, he must look a nightmare in the late evening mug.

It takes more effort than most times to mount his horse, but less as he flees the stable and ushers his stallion into a full gallop. The few travelers on the road gasp in shock as he rushes by in a blur of darkness, but he doesn’t slow—even as he passes beneath the gates of the city.

The sting of wind against his face, the cool light of stars, close his eyes in bliss. Oftentimes this was the only peace he could find, this moment between seconds and spaces, where he belongs to nothing but the night.

His mind races alongside his horse, lost in disordinance. Rage begins to consume him as his deepest fears gradually coalesce, burning like fire in his palms.

For these six years, he has served Rome. Emperor Snoke. His loyalty unwavering, his duties unchallenged. But as his title from feared conqueror became esteemed gladiator, his honor in Snoke’s eyes had already begun to deteriorate.

The reason is obvious. Snoke wants him in his Praetorian Guard, a trophy of his successes always by his side. He has offered this position to Kylo numerous times. The only way he could slip from Snoke’s powerful grasp was Kylo’s preferred career as a gladiator, and the ever-patient pride of the Roman emperor.

Of course Snoke would have inevitably resorted to some sickening plot like drunkenness and revelry to weaken Kylo’s resolve—or, at least, attempt to. It’s enough to make his blood boil.

He approaches his villa within the hour, the starry Roman countryside flanking him with tall grass and weed-bed flora. The scent of wheat and livestock drifts down the distant hillside, far from his lengthy property. The wild and silence would normally envelop him in peace, but now he only longs for his bed.

A member of his house staff meets him in his stables. Dopheld Mitaka, his imperial messenger and
personal attendant, greets him with a stiff nervousness that, when he first hired him, significantly boosted Kylo's ego. Now it feels more like a nuisance, but he cannot bring himself to find any replacements. Besides, he needs to find amusement somehow.

Even partially drunk, Kylo can tell Mitaka has something to say by the drain of blood from his face. “Have you news from the day?” Kylo half-slurs, wanting to get it over with.

“Not exactly, Sir,” he murmurs, trailing Kylo as he enters his villa. The cream walls cast themselves in lamplight, gentle winds fluttering the long curtains across the floor of the atrium.

As he makes his way to his chambers, he strips himself of his tunic, tossing it back into Mitaka’s ready arms. The air feels good on his bare chest, especially after the heat of the evening gathering in the crevices of his generous build. His attendant is normally unperturbed by the sight of his master in only a loincloth, but tonight there is something... off about him that sets Kylo’s teeth on edge. “Then what, exactly, do you have to tell me?”

As he speaks, Kylo turns to enter his quarters. But as Dopheld sputters for his master to wait, it is already too late.

Sitting upon the edge of his bed, chained to a post, is a girl.

Chapter End Notes

[Wine in ancient Rome was distilled with hot water, so it would take a LOT of drinking to get fully drunk. It was actually seen as dishonorable and dirty to drink straight wine]

["Virtus", or "virtue", was the term for male celibacy in Rome. To be celibate in those times was actually seen as an honor for both men AND women, though (like today) that would not stop some from violating their own principles]

[I have no idea if Persia was in alliance with Rome, but "patrician" means nobility. In ancient Rome, there were three classes of people: Plebs, Patricians, and Slaves (who, as we will later learn, were not entirely considered "people" at all)]

[Romans didn't really eat on tables. They would have some tables attached to couches, where they would lie down to eat. It was about as intimate and fun as an ancient slumber party]

[Emperors would normally wear purple (it was actually more of a red color), but I wanted to stick to Snoke's pimpin' style]

["Vestalia" is the celebration of the Roman goddess Vesta, and is a celebration of the summer solstice (more to come on that, later)]
Thank you all so so so much for your kind words and comments! They truly make my day.

I want to give a bit of a warning for this chapter: No one is raped, but there is an insinuation of its potential to occur. Please proceed with caution. Thank you!

Frozen in the doorway, Kylo Ren stands dumbly, bereft of reasonable thought.

A girl, no—a young woman sits on the edge of his bed, startled by the opening door. Her wide eyes take in the sight of him, left only in his subligar, and immediately lurches to her feet. She backs away as far as the chains will allow her, scuffing her bare heels along the floor.

When their eyes meet, she stills, fear bathing her in sordid light that rivals the burning in his fireplace. Wind comes through the open windows, stirring the curtains and white silk of her loose-fitting gown.

At which point Kylo Ren abruptly closes the door.

For a long moment he simply stares at the dark wood panels, shoulders rising and falling on the tide of his unsteady breaths. Then he turns slightly to Mitaka, who waits behind him. “Was there anything else you needed to tell me?”

Mitaka swallows nervously. His master’s voice is strained and deep with warning, so he treads carefully. “She was delivered only hours ago by Emperor Snoke’s men. They had this…”

Kylo turns fully as Mitaka hands over a scroll. He takes it with trembling fingers, blaming the wine, and breaks the seal. As his eyes rove over the brief message, his stomach falls to his feet.

A reward for your faithful service.

He is silent, reading over the words penned in the messy hand of Snoke’s scribe. His voice drops to a whisper. “...Leave.”

“Master Ren—”

“Leave!” he demands, teeth bared. Obediently, Mitaka scuttles off to the stables. Kylo follows him to the entrance of his villa, watching as Mitaka flees into the dark Roman night, leaving him alone.

Or, perhaps, not.
Kylo scoops up the tunic Mitaka dropped, easing it over his head before grabbing the letter once again. His chamber door lies undisturbed and silent, unlike the blood in his body. He paces outside, clutching the note in his hand, mind rolling over every possible solution to this… this…

He sighs shakily, bracing a hand over his mouth. So, his fears were correct. In those six words alone, Snoke has sentenced an end to his celibacy. Of course it would be that simple. Now that revelry, that Bazine woman, seems a mercy compared to this. He sees now that Snoke had granted him some semblance of choice this night. A choice he scorned.

And now… it is too late for choices.

Kylo Ren is well-aware of the game of power in Rome. Knows the price of denying his emperor’s generosity. To refuse what, who, lies beyond this door would not just be an act of disrespect, but disobedience.

After a time of lingering deliberation, he takes a deep, stuttering breath. He should have known a day like this would come, when all he had to give would never be enough.

Finally relenting, Kylo reaches out, taking the handle and slowly easing open the door.

As soon as he peeks inside, something shatters against the wall by his head. He ducks, shaken, before looking over to where the woman stands with all the fury of Rome in her eyes.

The ruined vase crunches under his sandals as he enters, closing the door behind him. He gazes openly at her, lost in the awe of such brutality. Her eyes are dark as they glare right back, her chest heaving violently, rhythmically.

He holds up a hand as he nears, as though approaching a wild horse. She snags a candlestick from his bedside table, holding it over her shoulder, daring him with her teeth to come closer. But he does not accept her invitation, instead seating himself in the cushioned chair beside the fireplace. How often this seat was a source of comfort, a shepard of knowledge in the lonely nights as he read. Now it feels more like a curse, the shackles of his newfound confinement.

She does not speak, maintaining her distance. He looks at her chains and then away, fury boiling deep in his gut at the depravity of her capture. The sight of it sickens him—its purpose, even more so.

For the sake of his sanity, there must be some relief here.

He taps his fingers on the arm of the chair, biting the inside of his cheek, and looks at her face. “What is your name?” He rumbles, hushed, as though his question threatens to reveal a secret kept only between them.

She gives him a confused look, cocking her head.

It occurs to him after a moment that she might not have understood him. He tries again, gesturing to her. “Name?”

The woman lowers her poor excuse of a weapon. Slightly. Her voice is soft yet firm as it leaves her parted lips. “...Rey.”

Kylo blinks at that, silently turning the name over in his mouth. The word feels heavy and sweet on his tongue, an unknown sensation cascading down his throat like wine at the thought of speaking it aloud. Yet he refrains. “Where do you come from?”
Rey gives him the same look as before, and he is certain she cannot speak the Roman language.

He remains still, as not to frighten her, and searches his mind for some language she may know. By her appearance, the pleasant height of her cheekbones and mix of ivory and sun on her skin, he could easily think her of European origin. Britanian, perhaps. But something about her is different, and so, following this instinct, he switches to Greek. “Tell me where you come from.”

Her ears practically perk, recognizing his words. She stutters at first. “Egypt,” she eventually supplies, swaying uncertainly, as if no one has ever cared enough to ask.

He keeps himself in Greek, the language clipped behind his teeth. By her rapidly-dwindling mood, he decides not to mince words. “Are you a prostitute?”

Her face flushes deeply. “No.”

“Hm.” Kylo braces his chin in his palm, leaning against the arm of the chair and frowning into the fireplace. It crackles, scolding him for such foolish hopes that at least one of them may know how to commence. “A slave, then?”

Rey’s chains rattle pointedly. “What do you think?”

He fights a smile at her amusing temper, allowing himself to look at her. Firelight dances on her cheek, sliding down to her bare throat. Her hair has been pinned intricately above her head, her skin cleaned to a polish. Suddenly, he is consumed by rage, gripping more tightly to the scroll in his lap. Usually he cares nothing for slaves, but it would seem Snoke’s cruelty led him to dress her in fine white silks. It is clear—even in his absence, he mocks both of their innocence.

Then a thought dawns within his blurry mind, an idea so foolish and irresponsible, so unlikely, that it may just save them both.

His dark eyes gleam as they find hers again. “Where exactly are you from? What are your skills?”

She blanches, obviously unnerved by his sudden shift, but remembers her place with flitting lashes. “I was raised in Jakku village, in Egypt… I can…” she gestures in supplication, “…read and write Egyptian, Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew—”

“So you are an educated slave,” Kylo notes, more to himself.

Rey frowns at that, as if unsure whether to take his words as complimentary. “Not educated. Just… knowledgeable.”

“He grunts, rising to his feet. She stiffens as he takes a step closer. “Then I’m sure you know why you are here.”

Her hand tightens around the candlestick, and she swings at his jaw. With his warrior reflexes, he catches it easily, ripping it from her hand and tossing it aside.

His gaze returns to her, burning. “I’m not going to hurt you,” he says lowly.

By the way she tries to evade him, she is clearly in disbelief.

He nearly sighs with the effort, taking her chin in his hand and tipping her face to look at him. He holds tight as she struggles. “I have a proposition for you, Rey of Jakku.”

“I’m not giving you anything,” she spits, baring her teeth.
“Not even if it saves your life?”

Her eyes scald his, pricking with unshed tears. “I would rather die,” she murmurs wetly, half-sobbing.

He knows she misunderstands him, but even so, a part of him aches at the knowledge such a woman would rather die than know him in his bed. He releases her face to take her shoulders instead, bowing his head slightly to meet her eyes. “You misunderstand. I have no wish to lose any virtue this night. Not mine.” His voice softens. “Not yours.”

This stills her, and she is overwhelmed with pitiful shock. “Then what is it you would propose?” she whispers, as though joining in his secrecy.

Having her close, he notices the color of her eyes. They remind him of a wheat field in the spring evening, sunset flanking each strand of iris into a molten blend of rich browns and sweet, honeyed greens. Here in the darkness, they are almost consuming, helping him find the words to speak that she will understand.

So Kylo releases her arms, retrieving the scroll. He rips it in half, tearing it to smaller pieces as he speaks. “If anyone knows of this, we will be crucified. Is that clear?”

Swallowing as she watches, she nods.

“It gives me no pleasure to partake of the flesh,” he states openly. “I will keep my body and mind to myself alone, as will you. However, to Rome, it must appear as if I have known you tonight.”

Her face falls. Kylo is not unaware at the loss of a woman’s virtue, in reality or society. However, he will not rob her of both.

He tosses the ruined papyrus into the flames as he continues. “Emperor Snoke wants me sated. I am certain he believes that it would make me more pliant to joining him in his palace. But I have no interest in that,” he sighs, “so you will simply work in my household until his behestment abandons him.”

“Then I’m still a slave?” Rey asks mournfully.

Kylo shrugs. “Until you earn your freedom. I cannot simply turn you onto the streets without drawing suspicion.”

She nods to herself, sitting down upon the edge of the bed, folding trembling fingers in her lap. “Oh. I… I see.”

His gaze lingers on her before he notices a slim box upon the mantelpiece that was not there before he left this morning. He takes the box and opens it, finding a key inside. Picking it out, he twists it between his fingers as he approaches her, snagging her wrists.

“What are you doing?” she gasps, wincing.

“I intend to sleep in my own bed tonight,” Kylo grumbles, freeing her. She rubs the red marks on her skin as the chains slither to the hard floor, glaring ruefully up at him. “You can sleep in the stables.”

Her brow furrows in bemusement.

He frowns. Sleep is quickly demanding he answer the call, and he couldn’t care less where this
woman sleeps, so long as it isn’t with him. “Come,” he commands, turning and leading her to the stables by the arm.

He shoves open the door. Silencer whinnies, perhaps as weary as his master, as Kylo releases her towards a bale of fresh hay in the corner. “Sleep there tonight. I will find you proper housing in the morning.”

She holds her own arms, staring incredulously at the haystack, mind lost to someplace far away.

Kylo stands in the doorway, watching her with tired eyes. “I advise you not to run. I’m sure even Egyptians are aware the punishment for runaway slaves.” With that, he abandons her there, desperate to escape into the safety of his chambers.

Perhaps there, he will not be so tempted.

Chapter End Notes

[A subligar is like a loincloth, but it's more like the "boxers" of loincloths, whereas regular ones were more like "briefs," and could be made of either cloth or leather. And yes, Kylo's are black]

[Roman society greatly valued a woman's chastity. They even had a religion JUST for females, where only virgins could enter the temple. These were known as Vestal virgins, and will come up a few times in the story]

[Prostitutes in Ancient Rome would wear heavy makeup and perfume. Rey is not wearing makeup, and perhaps Kylo is only smelling the perfume in his own hair... or he has no idea what a real prostitute looks like]

[Slaves with skills often had more value than those without, and could be used to not only work in their master's household, but their places of business as well. Talents like reading, writing, and cooking were especially desirable]
You guys, I feel like I cannot function. Seriously. Every time I think about you and all of your kind words, I'm caught smiling to myself like an idiot.

I think this is a good time to say that this story is going to be a doozy. There is a lot planned and much more still in the works, and I am so glad to have you here with me. Especially to my friends down at the Writer's Den—thank you so much for all of your love and support. Every day is made by you.

The door slams loudly behind him as he leaves Rey alone in the darkness of the stable, where she stands still and shivering despite the warmth of Summer leaking through the walls. She exhales shakily, clutching to the silk of her toga and wrinkling it in her damp hands.

Her thoughts race. That man, no doubt the master of the house, had… not touched her. At least, not invasively. She’s seen what happens to female slaves in Egypt in those cases, the cases of desperate women trapped in the clutches of powerful, desperate men.

And this man seemed desperate. His eyes were wide with fear, movements erratic, and she doesn’t know how to feel at the memory. Here in the darkness she recounts the depth of his eyes, of his voice as he spoke so gently to her.

Rubbing the raw skin of her wrists in an attempt to soothe the burning trace of her shackles, Rey steps forward, closer to the pile. Strips of hay stick to her bare feet along the stone, her eyes adjusting to the silvery moonlight shining through the slim cracks in the wooden ceiling.

Before she lies down, resolved to let this night pass fretfully, a horse whinnies close by.

Rey startles, looking up. A shadowy outline of a stallion nods to her—a strange, beckoning motion she is compelled to obey.

She whispers quiet, calming words, holding out her hand and pressing it against his snout. Hot air from his flaring nostrils gusts against her wrist. Despite her weariness, she smiles, embracing the creature’s lengthy face with both hands. “I suppose I’m not alone tonight after all,” she whispers dismally, reaching to stroke his long, silky mane.

After a few moments of appeasing the beast, Rey looks around. An oil lamp dangles nearby, and with some scavenging, she manages to light it. Immediately she is surrounded by a blessed light and sighs with relief, no longer drowning in darkness.

The horse’s face comes into view, strikingly long and beautiful. Its shape entrances her once more as she swipes her palm along the broad side of his neck. She follows his shape, walking alongside his stall, until her hand finds a saddle.

Rey looks at the saddle quizzically. A horse should not have to bear such a burden all through the night. Deciding to act, she adjusts her loose toga, opening the door to his stall and carefully
slipping inside. To her pleasant surprise, the horse seems to accept her openly, swishing his tail and blinking long, sooty lashes.

“Easy there,” she coos, patting his flank as she comes closer. She begins her work at the fastenings, letting loose the bands. The saddle begins to slip and, thinking fast, she catches it, easing the heavy covering off his body and hefting it onto the high fence of his stall with a grunt.

As soon as it’s settled, a slight sound clinks together, as if something full and limp has fallen. Looking down, Rey’s eyes settle upon a loosely-opened sack. It must have come unattached from the saddle. Looking at the horse, as if to see if he objects—which he doesn’t—she crouches down, scooping the bundle into her palms.

She peels open the lip and gasps, marveling at the silver and gold shining within. She cannot imagine the wealth this must mean to the Romans, what this could mean for her.

Heart racing, she clutches it to her chest. That man must have left this behind. As a test?

“No,” she whispers to herself, shaking there on the stable floor. The stallion whinnies softly behind her, tail twitching nervously.

Rey fights to calm herself. No. No, this shouldn’t be a test… She came earlier in the night, and by the stunned look on the man’s long, mopey face, she doubts he knew she was here at all until that moment when he so brazenly strode inside.

She rises, looking into the bag, pulling out one of the gold coins. She twists it, looking at it in the light. There is a man’s face printed on it, but no way to tell how much it is worth. But by sight alone, by the weight crushing against her thumb, she knows this must be made of gold.

What lies in this bag could be enough to live on, she realizes. At least for a while, until she finds her way back to Egypt. Perhaps Roman law would allow her to buy her freedom, no questions asked.

Or, perhaps, the man was right. If she flees this place, she may be hunted down and killed. Worse things can happen to slaves, even more so in Rome. She swallows, tales of slaves and criminals being fed to hungry lions churning over in her mind with the metallic stench of blood.

She looks at the horse, at the door leading outside, and the dark sliver of night beyond. She looks at the haystack in the corner, down at the white silk of her toga. All of this, it's... it’s too much. From the captivity of the gargantuan slave owner to the Roman men in armor who purchased her, to the women who dragged her into strange bathing chambers and scrubbed the desert from her skin, who dressed her in this thin, oversized garment and bound her in chains only to land her in this house.

As she sat on that bed, she assumed he had been the one to buy her. But his strange, quick words were impossible to predict, even moreso to understand. In the end he had spared her the pain shared by so many women before her, at least for tonight, but she cannot take him on his word alone. Regardless—his surprise and open displeasure at her sudden appearance was definitely unwelcome.

The feeling is mutual.

She huffs, leaning against the thin wall of the stallion’s stall, frowning intently at the coin.

She could do it. Take the sack and leave. Damn the man for his negligence, allowing her such a chance. Damn his ridiculous “proposition.” Whether he robs her of her virtue or not, he still gets a
slave out of her.

And she will not be slave to anyone.

Not anymore.

But...

The horse turns to face her, breathing warmly as he nudges her knuckles. She sighs, sufficiently distracted from her thoughts, and caresses his round jaw. If she were brave, or perhaps foolish, she could throw her leg over his back and urge him on into the night. She could run. Run to Greece. To Egypt. Anywhere but Rome.

But. She knows she can’t. Not yet.

Releasing a shaky breath, her fingers tremble as she returns the sack to the saddle and ties it where the rope had obviously come loose. Her hand knocks against something hard, which rocks and spins to reveal a helmet.

Rey considers it for a moment, staring into the black iron mask. Quickly, as if to avoid some curse, she turns away and leaves the stall with hurried steps. Before she can change her mind, she douses the light and goes to the stack of hay, kneeling down and adjusting it to something more comfortable.

The light of the moon returns to her, then, smoothing its touch along her exposed calves, up the slope of her thigh with its cold, lonely glow. She shivers, resting her cheek on her hands, as exhaustion begins to slip inside her bones.

No. She cannot leave. Not yet. Once she learns the Roman customs, if it is not already too late for her, she will find her freedom. Someday, she will leave this place and never return.

With that thought, and a lingering thread of doubt ghosting in the summer breeze, she dreams of soft, dark eyes.

In the yellow light of morning, the stable door opens, igniting the flickering dust motes and drowsy bugs.

A woman enters, pulling down the hood of her cloak, and ushers her dappled mare into the stables. The horse huffs, clopping obediently into a stall as her mistress bolts her in. The woman turns and reaches out a tanned, wrinkling hand to the horse nearby, who blinks blearily and presses his nose into her warm palm.

“Good morning, Silencer,” she whispers, playfully pinching the high arch of his snout. He blows at her and she relents, laughing. “I see. No play before breakfast? Well, I can fix that… what…?”

She rounds the corner to retrieve some of the stallion’s choice hay, only to find a young woman sleeping peacefully.

Placing hands on her hips, she scrutinizes the young woman's appearance. Her skin is clean, her hair mussed from sleep. A white satin toga blankets her slender physic, its gleam a beacon of her occupation. The woman holds a hand over her mouth, stepping back.

Could she be a desperate woman, seeking shelter in the night? She wonders. Or, perhaps, has the Young Master’s virtus finally…
Deciding to find out for herself, she kneels down carefully beside her, bracing a hand on her thin shoulder. “Awaken,” she orders softly.

Rey wakes with a start, looking immediately into the eyes of an older woman. They are a stunning blue, their bright color adding to the weathered beauty of her sun-kissed face and the long, silvery braids draped over her shoulders.

Rey scrambles to sit up, clutching the neckline of her toga to maintain decency, and wets her lips. “Who are you?” She asks, too tired to speak in anything but her home language.

The woman’s eyes gleam with recognition, honed by a severity Rey dare not test. To her surprise, the woman replies in smooth, soothing Egyptian. “I am Ahsoka, the head servant of my master’s house. And who are you?”

Her throat goes dry. “Rey… My name is Rey.”

“Well, Rey,” Ahsoka says, “you are a long way from home, and should not be here. If the Young Master catches you in his stables, you may not walk away with both feet.”

The blood flees Rey’s face. “Actually,” she murmurs, holding up her wrists.

Scanning her wrists curiously, Ahsoka takes them with swift tenderness, running her thumbs over the unmarred skin close to her palms. Understanding dawns on her, turning her gaze icy as it snaps up to join Rey’s. “Why are you here?”

Shakily, on the verge of tears, Rey explains everything from the Roman soldiers and the man who sold her, the women who scrubbed and dressed her, to the ones who took her to this house. She never understood what they were saying once, she tells. “They chained me to a bed, and that was all. Eventually he came, and—”

“‘He?’”

Rey’s eyes cast down, the memory fresh and cold in her ribs. “The… master of this house.”

Ahsoka’s gaze roves over Rey’s face, her mind constricting. Could it be that he had…? No. She doubts it. He is as uncompromising as his grandfather once was, unwavering in his ideals, stubborn as an ass. But she cannot keep from asking, afraid or not of what the answer might be. “...Did he come to know you last night, Rey?”

Rey folds her lips. She was about to answer honestly, but thinks differently of it. Last night, in the haze of his clipped Greek, he’d instructed her never to tell anyone the truth of what happened. If anyone knows of this, we will be crucified, his words rumble, deep and shaking even in memory, and she makes her choice.

Rey nods, looking away, face flushing. “Yes. He did.”

Like lightning, Ahsoka’s brows crease and she rises to her feet, pacing over and snatching a bucket from the wall before pushing her way into the villa.

Rey stands as well, curiosity pulling herself after the woman. She chases the storm into the atrium, where Ahsoka promptly stoops to fill the bucket with water from the trickling fountain. It sloshes onto the floor and carpets as it swings beside her. Then, with the power of an army, she thrusts his door open and stomps inside.

With both hands, Ahsoka curls her lip and thrusts the water directly onto the sleeping form of Kylo
He sputters, gasping awake as Rey stands dumb in the doorway. His voice booms throughout the room as he brushes water from his eyes, glaring at his assailant. “Es sturcus! Et…” he blinks, recognizing his head servant as if she were some demon. “…Fulcire.”

The word seems to strike Ahsoka as an insult, though she does not reel back her fury. She begins to rant aimlessly in Latin, Rey only recognizing anger as she points a long, slender finger at the master like a mother to her son.

“I come to prepare your breakfast, to feed your horses, and what do I find? Some poor Egyptian slave woman reduced to sleeping on a stack of hay. You call yourself a man of virtue, forcing her out of your bed in the night?! I thought more of you, you cruel bastard!”

Kylo reaches his limit, peeling back his damp sheets to stand before her. As he does, he looks over her head, seeing Rey shrunken in the doorway. Her eyes, wide and fearful, lock with his, and he holds them thoughtlessly until a long nail jams against his naked chest.

The ferocious action pulls his gaze back to the old woman as she spits. “Tell me now, or so help me I will throw you into the fire of Vesta myself. Did you take that woman?”

Again he glances at Rey, who seems to have come closer. Her trembling lip and shimmering eyes betray her—she seems to know what Ahsoka has asked. Water drips from his hair as he masks himself in impassivity, voice low as he replies, “Yes.”

Ahsoka glares into the dark, imperial face of her master, taking a deep breath before closing her eyes. She shakes her head, looking down at the floor. “In all my years...”

She turns to look back at Rey, speaking to her in what must be the Egyptian tongue. Kylo catches enough to know she has sent Rey into the atrium to await them. His eyes trail after her.

Ahsoka’s, however, shine with curiosity as she faces him once more, bathed in a hidden wisdom he knows he will not escape, and growls, “Now. Tell me what really happened.”

Chapter End Notes

[Prostitutes in Rome would commonly wear sheer togas. However, they were almost the only women who would, because only men were allowed to wear togas at that time. It was therefore considered shameful for a woman to wear a toga, as it was affiliated with depravity and lower-class citizens]

[Light was considered a blessing in Rome, which is why oil lamps were often dedicated in temples as an offering]

[Silencer is a Kladruber, the oldest and rarest breed of Czech horse. These horses are famous for their friendly personalities and distinctly “Roman” nose. Plus, they come in shades of black or grey, which I’m sure the Kylo we know would appreciate!]

[The silver pieces in the bag Rey found were Denarii. The gold pieces were aurei, which are worth about 25 Denarii. Or, to us, about $100 each]

[“Es sturcus!”—translated from Latin—means “you shit!”]
The Latin “Fulcire” translates to “Fulcrum” in English, meaning “to balance.” It is also *SPOILERS SPOILERS SPOILERS* Ahsoka Tano’s codename in Star Wars: Rebels

The average lifespan in Rome was 35, especially for fighters. However, plenty of people could live at LEAST 40-50 years. Some gladiators even lived to the age of 90, so Ahsoka (at age 65) is considered elderly—but certainly not dead!

The fire, or flame, of Vesta was the Roman version of the Eternal Flame legend, which was never allowed to go out on pain of death to one of the Vestal virgin priestesses—more info to come later
Intrusion

Chapter Notes

*weeping* I love you all so much...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I already told you,” Kylo grunts, turning away. He plucks his wrinkled tunic from the floor, swiping it over his chest to catch chilled water droplets. “I know her. What else is there to say?”

“You could say the truth,” Ahsoka reprimands. “In the years I have known you, Young Master, you have never lied so blatantly to me.”

“It is none of your business—”

“If she is a slave in your household, it is!” She takes a deep breath, coming closer as he frowns down at her. She places a solid, warning hand on his arm, looking up imploringly. “She will be under my charge in this house if she stays, so tell me now. Why is she here?”

Kylo glances away, into the dead fireplace, and stalks over to the mantle. He braces a hand there, suddenly feeling weak. “Snoke.”

Her shoulders fall, but do not relieve their tension. “Emperor Snoke sent you a slave woman?”

“So it would seem.”

“Why?”

Kylo rakes a hand through his hair, then one more time for good measure. It does nothing to soothe his rising anger. “You saw how she was dressed,” he grounds. “She came in chains—chained to my…” he bites his cheek, shaking himself free of the image that seizes him. Now sober, aching, and—thanks to Ahsoka—wet, he is quite awake to recall the sight of Rey waiting for him.

Best not to dwell.

“There was a scroll,” he explains. His eyes flit almost helplessly to her. “She was a gift.”

The ends to these means meet between Ahsoka’s eyes, and she sighs deeply, sinking into his chair. She covers her mouth with her hand, as if her very words will bring curses. “I thought as much, but, as a gift from the Emperor, you know what refusing this could mean for you. Both of you.”

He nods and wets his lips. “I told her the consequences.”

She lifts a silvery brow. “You speak Egyptian?”

“Greek,” Kylo groans, leaning against the wall with crossed arms. “She is… knowledgeable.”

A look of pleasant surprise casts like a light over her face. “She’s educated?”

“No,” he shakes his head, hair falling limp and uncombed against his cheek. He leaves it be. “At least, not purposefully. I think she may have taught herself.”
Smart girl, Ahsoka registers, mind racing ahead of her and diving headlong into the potential of this situation. But she must restrain herself from making any more demands than he will tolerate so early in the morning. “What else did you tell her?”

Kylo blanches, freezing. In the senile state of his drunkenness, he’d made her a bargain—or, now, as he thinks about it, condemned her to slavery in his household. He tries to put it lightly. “That she would work here until she earned her freedom.”

Ahsoka rises stiffly in her seat. “Why would you tell her such a thing?”

He shrugs. “It was all I could do.”

Placing her hand over her eyes, Ahsoka fights the emerging ache. He’s right. Even if she worked herself to the bone, Rey could never earn her freedom alone. Even if she earned her wealth, Rome would never give her citizenship without the bonds of marriage to another freed slave. And given their severe lack of slaves among a pitiful count of servants, the odds do not bode well for her.

Ahsoka stands, adjusting her tunica. “Then, Young Master,” she drones dispassionately, “she will be put to work.”

Rey stands in the atrium, gazing around at the unique, open structure. Morning light shines through the open roof, a small pool of shimmering water dancing in the middle of the floor. The space is generous, and as she has more time to study it, gleams with a certain beauty.

She walks along the pool, considering feeling the water for herself, but decides against it. She looks up to see a curtain drawn over a large entryway. As she reaches out to feel the soft cloth, Rey realizes that it must lead to the rest of the house.

Her captors had not taken her this way, and as she is in a state of relative calm, Rey considers the curtain. She looks to the door at the side of the room, the one to the hall leading to his chambers, and hesitates. Perhaps there would be some time, before they return, to see what lies beyond.

Curiosity is an insatiable motivator. Pulling back the curtain, she peeks within to see a dim room, lit by oil lamps suspended from the ceiling by chains. The room is wide, only slightly smaller than the atrium, decorated in red walls and marble floors.

She enters slowly, almost reverently, as the light flickers resiliently against every nook.

As she passes the round table, she spots a chaise lounge, straight and flat yet elegant, resting quietly in the corner. Coming closer, she can see a slight dip and wear in the smooth cloth, as if a heavy body has spent many hours resting here.

Nearby she sees them—scrolls, perhaps hundreds of them, maybe more, stacked neatly into a carefully crafted hive of open shelves. Rey smiles, beside herself with excitement at this treasure she’s found. How many nights did she spend in the shadowy slums of Cairo, sneaking glances into the papyrus scrolls, picking them from the hands of the wasteful, scavenging the languages of the world? How much knowledge lies before her now, begging to be touched and consumed?

In her wandering thoughts, her hand had involuntarily reached out. But before she can touch any of them, she takes her wrist, stopping herself. She must remember her place in this house.

Diverting her attention to avoid temptation, Rey frowns. She should go back to the atrium. If Ahsoka says that man would remove her feet for trespassing in his stables, who’s to say worse will not happen for being here?
She turns, berating herself, and stills. Before her, resting upon a sculpted altar, is a man’s face with sunken, almost skeletal eyes.

Rey covers her mouth, backing away as her blood runs cold. A heavy red veil has been drawn back, revealing a wide orifice in the wall. Strange, dark portraits of a man and woman lie beyond the haunting, misshapen face, words scrawled underneath in Roman writing.

Her feet buzz with the urgent need to retreat. She spins to face the curtain, determined to return to the atrium and pretend she saw nothing, but is rooted still.

The man leans back against the wall, arms crossed tightly over his chest. His eyes bore into her, burning hotter than oil.

Rey swallows. He must have entered so silently, or perhaps she did not hear him over the pounding in her own ears. Not knowing what else to do, she bows her head, clenching white fists to her sides. The only thoughts she can muster race around the single, hollow thought that this man is going to kill her, and she doesn’t even know his name.

Kylo Ren lets his eyes sweep over her. In the low light of his Tablinum, her hair looks darker than it really is, the sun in her skin accentuated.

It makes her look soft.

He swallows thickly. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Rey’s eyes prick with tears, and all she can do is nod.

Uncrossing his arms, Kylo stalks closer, his heavy steps echoing along the floor. She closes her eyes under his intense stare, trembling with the weight of her mistake. He reaches out slowly, tipping up her chin with the broad crook of his finger, until her eyes meet his. He speaks softly, as he had the night before, only now she can see something else—a sharpness, a presence once missing. “I could punish you.”

His words send a shiver down her spine, and she looks away.

Sighing, he retracts his hand. “I’ve heard how well slaves are treated in Egypt, but Rome is different,” he murmurs, the Grecian tongue feeling strange in his throat. “There are expectations.”

Rey breathes deeply, as if released from a noose, the stinging in her eyes abating. “What expectations?”

“Obedience,” Kylo answers. “You may not question my will, unless permitted. You are no longer a person, you are property.”

The harsh words strike her anew, her wide eyes shrinking in pain. She nods understandingly.

Kylo frowns. This is not going well. It is for this reason he’s never owned slaves—his cruelty in the arena was only that. In his own home, where he has wealth to spare, he cares not for owning human beings. After all, why own their personage when loyalty is much better bought?

As he studies her this close, he can see how the neckline of her toga dips low, exposing her delicate collarbone. He steps back, waving a hand to usher her out. She begins to walk, slowly, but suddenly halts. “W-Wait…”

He humors her, lending his patient stare.
“What do I call you?”

“‘Master’ will do,” he murmurs thoughtfully, surprised by the thin thread of pleasure winding around his hubris. He schools his features quickly before her eyes find his.

“Just that?”

Kylo considers her before straightening. “...My servants call me Master Ren. I suppose, in this household, you could as well.”

Rey looks over his features. *Ren.* The name seems… strange. It reminds her of a cloud, grey and dreary, in a sky of blue. An oddity, a threat. And yet, as he looks at her, that strange intensity remains in his eyes as a tempest brewing on the distant horizon.

Returning to herself, Rey blinks, bowing in slight. “Alright… Master Ren.”

Kylo’s eye twitches. Her voice wrapped around his name sends a pleasant twinge of warmth through his veins, threatening to consume him in a strange sense of ease. Heat radiates from her body, the inviting sight of her toga distracting him.

His practice in maintaining himself resurges. Yes, there is a young woman in his home, but that is no excuse to entertain thoughts of a younger man. So he clears his throat, resolved to let this moment be all it is.

“Come,” he beckons, pulling open the heavy curtain. “It is time to begin your training.”

Chapter End Notes

[Female slaves were often unable to survive being freed without being married or united with a male slave]

[The tunica, or Greek "chiton", was cloth sewn and attached by metal clasps over the shoulders. I encourage you to look up an image of the "greek chiton" to get a better idea, because I'm terrible at describing clothes, but the tunica is what most women would wear in Rome]

[Atriums were the "reception room" of Roman households. They did not have a roof. The Tablinum (the room Rey poked around in) was the "study", where family records were kept]

[A chaise lounge is a long couch with a sloping back and "fulcra" slope, perfect for laying on one's side and looking sexy as hell]

[Bookshelves in Ancient Rome were often made up of square pockets—a lot like kindergarten "cubby holes". I chose this design because it would be easier to hold scrolls. Also, books weren't even invented until the 15th century]

[I would like to give credit to Blewinfromsomewhere for drawing attention to the Roman death mask, which made an appearance in this chapter. The Roman death mask was a cast of wax made over a dead man's face, which was immortalized in the home. For the sake of this narrative, I placed it in the Tablinum rather than the Atrium. Thanks again to the wonderful Blewinfromsomewhere!! You rock!!]
[Cairo was and still is the capital of Egypt. Egyptian slaves were also treated relatively well for the times, especially since Egyptians considered it "morally reprehensible" to treat a slave poorly. Apparently, the "free peasants" of Egypt lived worse than the slaves did!]

[Kylo was very honest when he told Rey she is now considered property. Slaves and servants were treated very differently—slaves never had any agency and lived in terrible conditions. However, educated slaves were more valuable and lived in the house doing whatever their master bid them, while less-educated slaves would work themselves to death on farms and in mines]
This has been such a wonderful week! You are all the best! We have breached 300 kudos and 60 bookmarks—which has never happened so quickly in one of my fics before. I want to thank the Writing Den for giving me a chance to bounce around ideas, where a simple AU prompt concept became the monster I can't stop thinking about.

And my dear readers—your comments inspire me to work hard and fast. There is nothing that brings me more joy than waking up to your sweet words. I love you so much, you have no idea.

Thanks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rey follows Ahsoka down the hall, where she leads her to a small chamber. Inside, against the wall, is a bed.

Ahsoka walks over to it, pulling off the cover sheet and flapping away the accumulated dust. “No slaves have lived in this house for almost thirty years,” she grunts.

Rey blinks. “Really?”

Returning the sheet, Ahsoka smiles kindly upon Rey. “Really. This will be your room, for the time being. It is closest to the young master’s, which should make things easier for you.”

Heat crawls to the surface of Rey’s cheeks. “O-Oh?”

“Well, you’ve known him, haven’t you?” Ahsoka smirks, crossing her arms. The gleam in her eye catches Rey off guard, and all she can manage is a stiff nod while the woman comes near, resting a hand on her shoulder. “Come. Let me show you the work to be done.”

When they exit, the door to his room is closed.

Rey looks curiously up at Ahsoka, who gestures dismissively. “He is likely dressing. The man can never make up his mind between tunics with cloaks or without,” she snickers.

“I thought Romans had attendants for that.”

“Many do,” Ahsoka replies, leading her down the hall and deeper into the house. As they walk, the hall opens into another space, and Rey freezes in her tracks to take it in.

At the center of the villa is a courtyard, stone paths creating a cross between swaths of rich greens and browns. Rey marvels at the lush garden of hedges and trees, yellow flowers in full bloom, resting in the shade. The stone paths lead to a shaded bench carved of marble, similar to the pillars holding up the awning all around the quad.

Ahsoka studies her, appreciative—perhaps mournful—of her youth and desire for life. “Egypt is
not quite so green as Rome. It is one of the few things I can remember to love about it.”

Rey and Ahsoka trek around the courtyard, a cool afternoon breeze sweeping through. The weather is colder than what Rey is used to and, clothed in this toga, every gust threatens her skin to shivering. She shows Rey every inch of the house in the rear, from the kitchen to the storerooms.

Once in the storeroom, Rey’s mouth begins to water as she stares into the open cupboard of bread. Ahsoka frowns, murmuring to herself about low stock, until she notices Rey’s hungry stare. Without hesitation, she plucks out a large, circular loaf, snapping it in half. She hands a piece to Rey, which lands hard and stiff in her palm. “Breakfast,” she winks.

Rey’s stomach growls, desperate for the feeling of its taste on her tongue. She sinks her teeth inside with a loud crunch, sighing at the relief of food. “Thank you,” she hums around a full mouth, already going in for another bite.

Ahsoka crouches, poking through a depleted supply of fruit, picking out the rotting morsels and setting them on the ground. Rey watches them greedily until the woman interrupts her empty thoughts. “You have lived in hunger.”

Rey, feeling relaxed, leans against the table to watch Ahsoka work. She feels the edges of her bread, folding her crumbed lips. “Yes.”

“How long were you a slave in Egypt?”

“I’m… not sure,” Rey answers honestly, starting to nibble again as Ahsoka gathers the fruit. They migrate to the kitchen, where she pulls a knife and begins to shed the fruit of their rotted portions, and mechanically adjusts them in a bowl, focused on her task. Rey continues. “Since I was young. My parents… left. I was taken in by an Egyptian slave trader, working in one of his shops as a cleaner.”

Ahsoka blinks her surprise. “You were sold by him, then?”

“Yes,” Rey nods, not knowing how to feel about the subject. “The men who purchased me were Roman, and I was brought here.”

“How old are you?”

Rey dryly swallows the last of her bread. “Not twenty, Ma’am.”

She wrinkles her nose. “‘Ahsoka’ is fine, and nineteen is young for one so knowledgeable.” She smiles knowingly, holding out a strange, golden fruit. Rey takes it gratefully, humming at the taste and puckering at the tart—which Ahsoka finds quite humorous. “In my sixty-some years, I have never met a slave more excitable about food.”

“It is all garlic and onion there,” Rey shrugs. “Tiresome flavors. Nothing like this,” she praises, eating the rest and sucking her fingers free of the sweet smack.

Ahsoka hums her acknowledgement and picks up the bowl of salvaged fruits, handing it to Rey. “Take these to the young master’s room. He may be hungrier than you are.”

Rey takes this a little less enthusiastically, obediently beginning her trek back to his chambers as Ahsoka lingers behind to clean. Her bare feet brace, strong against the hard floors, and her eyes linger admiringly on the courtyard. There is a well in the center, covered by a tarp, and she uses that as an excuse to cut through the yard, poking the grass with her bare toes and smiling at its tickle.
When she comes to his door she brushes a wisp of hair behind her ear, uncertain. She knocks gently, and waits.

She doesn’t have to wait long. His door opens, revealing him dressed in a black tunic and shin guards, his hair coiffed and plush-looking. He finds her face first, then notices the bowl.

“Um,” she stammers, bending down to place the bowl at his feet. He watches her, eyes lingering on the ground as she rises, before snapping back with a stony glister. “Ahsoka made you breakfast.”

He bites his cheek thoughtfully, and stoops down to pick it up. Rey loses the need to breathe at the sight of how small the bowl becomes in his hand, fingers long and elegant as he brings it up with him. He appraises it, seemingly pleased, until he frowns at her. “Why are you still wearing those clothes?”

Rey blinks. “I… I don’t have anything else to wear, Master Ren.”

A strange twinge yanks the corner of his cheek when she says his name, one she cannot decipher. His hand tightens on his food, as if it doesn’t matter as much to him as it would to her. He thrusts the bowl into her arms—which she catches with an “oof”—and paces back into his room. She hears rummaging and a small word in Roman that could very well be an open curse. Then he returns, taking the bowl back. “Hold out your hand.”

Swallowing, she does, unsure of what he will do. His fist is clenched, as though he is holding something small. And he is. Lifting his hand, as she does hers, he drops one of those gold coins into her palm.

His fingers are warm as he closes her fist. “Give this to Ahsoka. Have her go into the city and return with clothing for you before the day is out.” With that, he slams the door in her face, making her jump out of the trance of what just occurred.

She squints at the coin, toying it between her fingers. Was it customary for Roman masters to do such a thing? Perhaps Ahsoka will know.

Regardless, there is a certain, strange flutter in her heart as she walks through the grass with purposeful strides.

Chapter End Notes

[Roman beds had mattresses stuffed with either straw or feathers]

[Villas often had multiple sleeping rooms for servants, slaves, guests, etc.]

[Men would often wear cloaks with their tunics, which we will definitely see more of if I have anything to say about it]

[Rey was correct in her assumption that wealthy Romans has attendants to dress them. These attendants (handmaids), usually female, were called "Ancilla", which will come in majorly later in the story]

[The center of Roman houses had open courtyards of various shapes and sizes, depending on the amount of land, called the "Peristylum". The kitchen was called the "Culina", and the main sleeping room the "Cubiculum"]
[Roman bread was terrible and hard due to low quality flour. The yellow fruit Ahsoka gave to Rey is called a Quince—a tart pome fruit that tastes like a blend of apples and pears. Egypt did not grow much fruit, so Rey would have never even known what a pear was]

[Placing something down on the ground for the master to pick up, as far as I'm aware, was not a Roman tradition. That was just Rey trying her best]

[It actually WAS customary for slaves to go out and run errands for their masters. This often lead citizens to complain that slaves were nearly indistinguishable from legal denizens. However, the Roman government refused to allow markers on slaves, since the ratio of slaves to civilians was 5:3, and they wanted to prevent them from realizing their great numbers as to avoid a potential uprising]

[BONUS: Rey and Kylo currently speak Greek to one another. The title for "Master" is κύριε (kúrie) from the Greek κύριος (kýrios), which when spoken sounds strikingly similar to "Kylo Ren"]
Verdance

Chapter Notes

Updates may be a little rocky for a bit. Summer classes have begun and, alongside work and a hectic home life, demand some attention. I will update as soon as possible!

Your wonderful comments make my day. I so love hearing what you like and what you've learned. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ahsoka takes the aureus from Rey’s hand with a disgruntled frown. “I see. Did he give you any other instructions?”

“No,” Rey answers, shaking her head quickly. “He just doesn’t like this…” she murmurs, pulling at the silk. In all her life, it’s perhaps the finest thing she’s ever worn. She doesn’t understand why it would upset him so.

Ahsoka smiles something secretive, and shrugs. “Alright, then. I suppose it’s a trip to the city for me. Come, walk me out.”

Rey follows Ahsoka obediently into the stables, where she ushers out a beautiful dappled mare. Rey gasps at the sight, offering her palm. The beast nuzzles but does little else, swishing her tail and pulling at her reins. “What’s the matter?” Rey asks.

“She’s hungry.” Ahsoka turns and motions Rey over to a cluster of sacks. Pulling a small knife from the folds of her tunica, Ahsoka slices open the top. A smoky powder mists around their eyes like a shroud as Ahsoka reaches in and pulls out a palmful of oats. “Cup your hands,” she instructs, dumping them into Rey’s waiting palms. Their dry flakes itch at her skin, but the smell is rich and earthy, as though nature itself has been freed.

They both rise, and Rey approaches the mare carefully. Her bare feet sift over loose hay and dirt, but her steps are sure and slow. Rey holds out her cupped hands in offering, smiling brightly as the horse stoops her strong neck to swipe eager, hairy lips over her fingers. She giggles at the tickle of the mare’s strong tongue. “What’s her name?”

“Lux,” Ahsoka answers, petting the horse’s fine hair. Lux whinnies, as if acknowledging her own name, and Rey dutifully retrieves more oats by way of picking up the bag and heaving it over by their feet. As she feeds Lux more, a disgruntled whine sounds from the next stall.

The dark horse from the night before glares at Rey, huffing small, offended snorts. Ahsoka laughs. “The Young Master won’t be happy with a hungry horse. I swear, those two have the same moods…” she directs Lux to the stable door, her hooves clopping on the stone before it becomes dirt in the entryway.

When Ahsoka opens the door, Rey is assaulted by blinding light. As her eyes adjust beneath the shade of her slim hand, her heart begins to race.

In her journey from Cairo to Rome across the sea, her captors kept her blinded and chained, carted,
assaulted by unfamiliar smells and the dancing Roman tongues. But now, as the Roman
countryside stretches before her, she is overwhelmed with awe.

Green. Everywhere she can see, over a waving tide of long grasses swaying in the early Summer
wind, the blue of the horizon on the hills. The path to the villa winds and disappears beyond the
fenceline, her eyes trailing after it, yearning to know where it leads, and what other life lives
beyond it.

Ahsoka watches, pleased, as Rey squints out into the Roman countryside. In her own journeys to
 Egypt, she saw plenty of sand and dirt. In a way, she finds herself in kinship with this young slave
girl, who is so like herself.

More than she knows.

Clicking her tongue, Ahsoka pulls Lux into the open, mounting her with a practiced—albeit aged
—ease. Sighing, she takes the reigns as Lux steadies and looks down at Rey. “Tell the young
master I will return before sundown. And feed his horse. On a day like this, he may want to ride
the hills.” With an affirmative nod from Rey, she spurs Lux out into a gentle gallop.

Rey watches until Ahsoka vanishes around the bend, her heart beating soundly in her chest as her
mind wanders along the sweeping fields of endless green. She breathes it in deeply before turning
back into the stable, where the stallion awaits impatiently.

“Woah,” she coos softly, scooping a handful of oats and holding it up. The horse snorts at first,
kicking up dust, before he laves his chops over her pliant hands.

Rey repeats this process several times, until she is certain she should stop dipping into the oat
supply. Wiping her hands on her toga, freeing herself from the slobber and grit, she looks around
and spots the haystack.

The stallion whinnies, just above a whisper, soft and pitiful. He seems restless, still hungry, and her
heart pangs in sympathy. Oh, how she knows hunger well. Making up her mind, she moises over to
the bales, lifting a hook from the wall to stick in the nearest bound block. Grunting, she drags it
over the stone, picking it up and just managing to push it over the gate and into his stall.

His tail flicks in gratitude, his thick, sleek neck dipping gracefully to begin his pecking. Rey claps
the dust from her hands and plucks the hook from the hay, returning it to the wall just as the door
to the house opens.

Rey freezes, trying in vain to relax. Ahsoka said to feed the horse. Should she have continued to do
it by hand; were the wealthy stallions expected to be hand-fed like Roman Emperors? While these
thoughts buzz around her mind, like flies to carrion, her master speaks lowly.

“Has Ahsoka gone?”

She swallows, barely looking over her shoulder and bowing her head in a polite nod. “Yes, Master
Ren. She told me to tell you she will return before sundown.”

“Hm. Good,” Kylo hums, appraising her before turning to his beloved horse. Silencer’s ear
twitches, hearing his master approach, and lifts his head to meet the warm, outstretched hand.

Rey watches, fascinated, trying to mind her own business and tidy up the messy shelf. The tools
are in need of cleaning, perhaps she could—

“Did you remove the saddle?”
Her heart seizes anew. He does not sound angry, but she has yet to see the extent of his rage. Carefully, she turns and meets his intense gaze. “Yes. Last night… your horse, I thought…”

Kylo studies her, watching how the daylight from the open stable door plays shadows on her face. She seems afraid, and even so, compared to most who fear him, she does not cower. She meets his eye with a curiosity quite becoming.

His mask and winnings are still attached, it seems, perfectly secure and undisturbed, outside of the curious, tightly-wound knot neither he nor men of the palace would ever tie.

She had obviously seen what was inside.

He nearly shrugs to himself, looking away from her and continuing his smooth caress over the high arch of the stallion’s snout. Rey watches for a moment, lost in thought, until he speaks again. “A saddle is often enough for Silencer to bear overnight, but,” his dark eyes flicker to her, voice dripping, “I’m sure your intentions were honorable.”

Rey gulps, certain he will follow through on his threat to have her punished, but when he looks out into the open country, a sense of focused calm bathes his face.

In the silhouette of sunlight, Rey is given full view of his features, and ample time to commit it to memory. Last night, his dark eyes and Roman nose were easy to spot—and quite adamant to the eye—but here, in the bright light of day, she can see the creamy pale of his skin, the smattering of dark marks on his face and one above his lip, the striking roundness of his mouth and soft slope of his jaw. Some years ago, in her stolen moments lost in scrolls, Rey remembers seeing a portrait of a Greek god.

She is reminded of that image now.

“This is the first of June,” he notes, as if to himself. Then, with urgency, he opens the latch to the stallion’s gate, pulling him around the ill-fallen hay bale and out onto the hay-strewn stone. He turns to look at her. “Come, Rey. Hold him steady for me.”

His call is gentle and insistent, and Rey finds it unbearably simple to obey. As she nears, he passes the reins off to her. He abandons her to enter the stall, pulling the saddle from the stall as if it weighs nothing, and returns to crash it down upon the horse’s back.

As he fastens the clasps below, Rey stares into the horses dark eyes and long lashes bothered by mayflies. “His name is Silencer?”

“Yes.”

It’s an odd, somewhat menacing name for such a gentle beast, but Rey does not remark on it. She holds out her hand to stroke down his nose rather than up, as Ren had. The horse immediately stomps one hoof to bring himself closer to her. “Good, good, Silencer,” she whispers.

Kylo appears on the other side of the saddle, making final adjustments as he watches her. Here in the sunlight cast within the stable, he notices her eyes are not dark at all, but bright like honey and ambrosia. “You know horses?” he asks casually, tightening the stirrups.

Rey shakes her head. “No. I was forbidden to ride them.”

He cocks his head. “Why?”

She folds her lips. “My other master was afraid I would ride away... and never come back.”
So she was an Egyptian slave. Kylo rounds the front, catching Silencer’s jaw in his palm, but keeps Rey’s eyes. “Would you?”

Rey blinks up at him, squinting incredulously, until it dawns upon her his curiosity about her loyalties. She straightens her shoulders, shaking her head and looking out into the green, inexplicable heat creeping up her neck under those eyes. “Where else would I have gone?”

Kylo holds fast to the worried divets in her lip, how dry it looks. How many years did she go thirsty, how many nights did she lie awake and lonely, desperate to sleep yet dreaming of a world she will never see?

Deciding not to overthink, Kylo ushers Silencer into the trampled grass. The wind blows generously, sweeping along the tall grass blades and, to his chagrin, the loose silk of Rey’s toga.

She watches him from the massive doorway as he mounts, taking the reins with one strong sure hand. He rips the bag of his winnings from the side, tossing it to Rey who, satisfyingly, catches it.

“Take that to my chambers and leave it on the nightstand, and clean the bowl I’ve left behind.” He gives her a knowing look, his mouth tightening on the end in the barest hint of a smirk. “Then you can clean the tools.”

Before Rey can reply, he turns Silencer with a sharp tug, urging him full gallop along the path in the opposite direction of Ahsoka. Rey races out, her ankles kissed by sailing blades of green as he fades into the near horizon countryside.

Chapter End Notes

[LOOK AT THIS ADORABLE FANART BY THE WONDERFUL, SWEET, KIND-HEARTED nedi_nerferder!!!! THEY LOOK SO CONTENT!!! *gross sobbing* PLEASE SHOW HER YOUR LOVE!]

["Lux" is the Latin word for "Light", and also the name of Ahsoka's crush from the Clone Wars Series (which has been re-purposed for the sake of this narrative)]

[The Ancient Egyptians had two names for their land: "Red Land" and "Black Land".]
The Red Land was all sand or barren territory, while the Black Land was fertile by the Nile, where many crops were grown. Therefore Rey would know very little about green

[The "sea" Rey would have crossed is the Mediterranean Sea, which was a huge battleground for Roman armies]

[Rome had ridiculously good land and water conditions. Most of the land there was quite fruitful and, yes, green]

[Roman fences were not made of wood, but were low walls of stacked rocks]

[Upon further research I discovered that the toga in Rome was akin to modern-day underwear. So Rey is basically wearing lingerie at the moment]
Hey ya'll! Thank you so much for your continued support! I love you all so much; your lovely comments always put a smile on my face.

Speaking of, there is something I wanted to ask you. I don't respond to many comments on this fic because I do not want to inflate the amount seen on the title screen. I have this worry that people will think I'm doing it on purpose... please, if that sounds crazy and no one really thinks that way, let me know. I feel bad about not responding and I honestly don't know what to do.

Anyway—thanks for reading that! Please enjoy~ <3

He knows he couldn’t stay there.

Something is happening, he’s sure of it, and it terrifies him.

As Silencer gallops his usual stride along the glen, Kylo’s thoughts race like the wind. The anger he has known for years rises within him, churning, roiling as they collide and crumble and shift into new forms—forms like hers.

Huffing, he shakes his head, whipping the reins and sending Silencer careening. The air dries his eyes to tears, but he doesn’t dare close them, focusing on their sting, on the pain between his legs with gravity’s cruel, vigorous grip.

This is how he punishes himself, how he escapes, how he relieves the ache.

Under his breath he mutters curses upon himself, scolding for wandering thoughts and lingering gazes. The fine slope of her neck, the soft curve of her cheek, the simmering fire in her eyes. In all his life, no woman had ever—

He quenches the thought immediately, trying to think instead of Silencer’s beating heart—so fast beneath him, matching his own. He watches the greens and yellows in the passing farms, smells the crisp Summer air, opens his mouth just to breathe, even as air is rushed where his lungs can barely reach.

He has to remember what this is for. He has to forget who waits for him in that cold, lonely house.

Rey bounces the sack in her palm, feeling the slip and tickling edges of the coins through the cloth against her fingers. Entering her new master’s room is easier when he is not there, though doing so returns painful memories she’d rather not recount.

She makes for his dresser quickly, past his oddly massive bed, and trades the coins for an empty bowl. She reasons it must be his purse, and perhaps where he goes there is nothing to purchase other than a few moments of freedom and fresh air.
And the air *is* fresh. Crisp and warm beneath the sun, her nose is assaulted by something so distinctly *life*, she feels her impatient blood thrum with pleasure at the thought of it. In all her days as a slave in Egypt, she never knew how much she had missed.

And though it is enslavement, it is better.

Retrieving a bucket from the kitchen, Rey fills it with water from the well in the courtyard. Unlike those in her homeland, this well is high and cast in stone, and the water high. Mouth suddenly parched, she takes long swigs, gasping at the cool, refreshing slither down her throat.

After downing half the pail, she cleans and places the bowl where it belongs, and finds her way back into the stable with the water swaying at her side.

Setting it down, Rey claps her hands, rubbing them together with a strange sense of eagerness. Her muscles itch to *act*, her hands yearning to do what she knows. Perhaps it is for comfort that she eyes the tools with such a gleam in her eye, finding the brush quickly.

Though this villa does not seem to be one with farmland, there is plenty for Rey to focus on. She carries them in an armful out the door and onto the grass, then the bucket, and finally a cloth tarp lying buried among the shelving. She spreads it out upon the grass and sits, enjoying the warm prickle of sunlight and grass on her exposed legs.

She takes her time with the tools, admiring the shapes. Most of her old master, Unkar Plutt’s, tools were for controlling his subjects, or rather those he stole from them during their indentured servitude. Those tools were ugly compared to these, with their softer ridges and slopes, meant for repairing, caring for living things.

Halfway done, Rey sighs, looking out into the peaceful hillside. A small smile pulls at her lips, a coil unwinding from around her heart. Breathing suddenly feels easier.

Until there is a rustling behind her.

Thinking quickly, Rey snatches the polished hook from its place on the tarp, rising to brandish it against the perpetrator.

A small man with boyish features swallows, dark eyes wide as she holds the blade towards his throat. Her eyes are sharper than steel. She will not be taken anywhere if she has anything to say about it—but says nothing at all.

His leather tunic shifts as he holds up his hands. His fingers are shaking. *Ego nuntium pertinent Dominus Ren,* he stutters manically.

Rey lowers her hook, only slightly. None of his words sound familiar beyond one. “Ren?” she echoes.

He nods, reaching a hand into his tunic. His fingers are shaking. “*Ego nuntium pertinent Dominus Ren,*” he stutters manically.

Rey lowers her hook, only slightly. None of his words sound familiar beyond one. “Ren?” she echoes.

He nods, reaching a hand into his tunic. Rey holds up the hook once more, but relaxes as he slowly pulls out a parchment scroll. He says something else Rey does not understand and, with a patient sigh, she taps her ear and shakes her head. “I don’t understand,” she murmurs in Greek.

“Oh,” the man starts, wetting his lips. He gestures to her with the scroll. “I try. Greek not good.” He points to himself. “I am the messenger. Mitaka.”

At this, Rey’s arm drops harmlessly to her side. “Are you a slave?”

He gives her an odd, almost reproachful look. “No. Servant for the Empire, for Master Ren.”
eyes flit towards the house. “Where is he?”

“Riding,” Rey answers. When Mitaka seems not to understand, she points into the stable and empty stalls.

His frown deepens from worry to concern before he turns back to Rey, eyes mapping her face. He opens his mouth, as if to say something, then closes it again, promptly scurrying off and entering the house with a pink flush on his collar.

Rey trails after him with her eyes, wondering what the scroll could be. The man said he was a servant of the Empire? How could that be so, when Ren lives so far from Rome?

This thought puzzles Rey as she finishes her work. The sun falls low, turning the sky a myriad of rust and gold. By now Rey has taken to tidying up the stables, eager to see Silencer’s twitchy tail at the sight of all the hay she’s swept into his stall.

The steady drum of four hooves comes closer, and Rey stands at the door just in time to see Ahsoka come striding through with Lux. “Welcome back,” she calls, smiling and eager for praise.

Ahsoka dismounts, a bag slung across her chest, and nods. “Thank you.” Her eyes fall to Rey’s feet in their terrible state, and she grimaces. “Wash your feet and meet me in your chambers. I have chosen some items I think you will like.”

After Ahsoka enters the house, Rey puts away the broom and snatches the bucket, so eager that she scrubs her feet with her bare hands before padding in after her.

When she enters, Ahsoka has spread numerous items across the bed. “We are the same height,” Ahsoka shrugs. “That made it easy.”

Rey steps further into the room, ogling the clothes upon the bed. Her fingers reach out to stroke the soft, beige cloth, and she swallows back the lump in her throat. “I… I don’t know what to say…”

Ahsoka’s smirk melts into a pleased smile. “Try it on. Here.”

She helps Rey rid herself of her toga, the silk slipping onto the floor. Rey shivers, exposed, before Ahsoka hands her two slips of cloth. Rey eases on one between her legs and ties the other around her breasts, before slipping into the soft cloth of her new clothes.

Ahsoka’s eyes rove over Rey appreciatively. “Wait here,” she commands. Rey nods and waits, soothing her hands down her skirt over and over, before Ahsoka returns with a small hand mirror. “Look.”

Oh, Rey looks. Looks at the grime on her cheek, the mess of her disturbed updo, but also the slight dip of the dress, the way it hugs at her waist, how it leaves her shoulders and arms bare. Rey marvels at the sudden transformation.

“I had to guess the size of your feet,” Ahsoka continues, reaching over and pulling away a pair of supple leather sandals. She hands it off to Rey. “Hopefully these will keep them clean,” she winks.

Rey smiles, eyes stinging. “Thank you, Ahsoka.”

“Don’t thank me,” she replies, reaching out to take a loose lock of Rey’s hair, which she studies thoughtfully. “Hm. Turn around. I want to try something.”

Rey obeys without question, pivoting on her heel and jolting at the feeling of Ahsoka’s quick
fingers undoing her snares. She tugs, a bit harsh at times against the sensitive skin of Rey’s pulled scalp, but finally frees it to fall and just brush the top of her shoulders.

“Your hair is beautiful,” Ahsoka compliments, combing her fingers gently around the remaining tangles.

Rey hums, lost in the wonderful feeling. No one else has ever done such a thing, nor said such a thing, to her before. At least, not in her memory. The comfort warms her to her toes. “Thank you. I think yours is lovely.”

“I grew it myself, over many years,” Ahsoka recounts playfully, taking one of the bands and beginning to pull the topmost layer of Rey’s hair over her head. She fastens it into a tail, perfect for keeping hair out of her eyes while leaving her face framed in lovely dark strands. “There.” She spins Rey around, licking her thumb to wipe the grime from Rey’s cheek. Her bright eyes look up at her and, for a moment, Ahsoka feels a pang of longing resound deep inside her chest. She smiles warmly. “Perfect.”

A sudden wave of gratitude washes over Rey, and she throws her arms around the woman’s middle, holding her in a tight embrace. “I know you said not to, but thank you. I don’t know what I’d do without you, Ahsoka.”

“Probably still be barefoot,” Ahsoka chuckles. “Which you are. Put on your sandals and come with me to the kitchen. I’m starving,” she says, slowly separating herself. As Rey slips on her sandals, she follows after Ahsoka towards the atrium. Once the door opens, deep voices ricochet off the walls and she stands a bit straighter. “Oh. I didn’t hear him come home.”

Rey peeks around Ahsoka to see Ren, speaking heatedly with Mitaka. His Roman tongue is smooth and fast, echoing deep and mysterious in Rey’s ears. He seems angry about something, waving his hand in violent gestures, until Ahsoka clears her throat.

Kylo looks up from his rant to see his head servant in the doorway, prepared to demand she leave, until he sees her.

Rey steps out to stand beside Ahsoka, her hair loose and body adorned with a sandy stola. Its skirt falls down to her shins, her small feet hugged by strapped sandals.

She watches him carefully, feeling his intense stare scrutinize her new attire, and feels a strange warmth gather in her stomach as his lips part ever so slightly at the sight of her. He blinks, as if dazed, and dismisses Mitaka with a wave of his hand. He doesn’t bother seeing him out as he stalks closer to the women, his eyes never leaving Rey’s face.

His eyes fall on her. “...You cleaned the stables.”

“Yes, Master Ren.”

"Mm." He nods, seemingly pleased, and his lips fall open again. Slowly, in a shift of cloth, he
reaches out to pinch the fabric at her hip, rubbing the skirt between his fingers as he stares where she meets his hand. “Yes... This is much better,” he whispers, the deep cadence slithering into Rey’s ears.

Her heart hammers in her chest. Warmth radiates from his body like a second sun, a heady scent of nature and something else twining around her senses, clouding reality into a fevered dream.

Suddenly, he releases her, as if burned, and takes a step back. “Bring your toga to my chambers after dinner. I want it disposed of myself.” With that, he turns and parts the curtain to the red room with a strong swipe of his arm, disappearing deeper into the house, leaving Rey dizzy and alone in silence.

Chapter End Notes

[Egyptian wells were dug so deeply, they resembled pits or tombs, where people would have to go down stairs to get water. Roman wells were more diverse, and definitely shallower due to a higher water level]

[Egyptians were all about cleanliness. They even invented the first toothbrush!]

[Mitaka says "Ego nuntium pertinent Dominus Ren,” which is Latin for "I am the messenger of/for Master Ren”. Imperial slaves and servants were considered workers for two masters, so Mitaka delivers messages to and from Kylo and the Roman palace]

[According to Wookipedia, Rey and Ahsoka are both 5'7" (yes, at their current ages)]

[Rey’s new panties are called "subligaculum", and her bra is a "fascia", which could be made of either fabric or leather, and was tied around a woman's breasts]

[Her dress is called a "stola," a pleated dress commonly worn by women of virtue. While most slave women would wear a tunica, I found the style and symbolism of the stola ideal for Rey's character. Along with a stola, a married woman in Rome wore a "palla," a sash meant to symbolize honor—but Rey is just in a stola. I encourage you to look up an image to get a better idea~]

[Mirrors were invented by Egyptians as early as 2900 B.C. The Roman's called them "speculum", from the word "specere", which means "to behold."]

[Women's sandals were called "sandalia", and made of soft, finer leather]
Remnant

Chapter Notes

Hi, I'm back! Thank you all so much for your patience. Things are going to get a bit crazy around here, but I so appreciate all of you wonderful readers!

Since our last chapter I've decided to reply to comments. Your encouragements mean so much!

Another question for you: would you like me to write chapter summaries? So far I haven't done many of those, but as the story gets longer perhaps you may like them to refer back to. Let me know (if you want~)!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rey taps her fingers on her thigh, absently chewing her nail as she watches Ahsoka rotate the hunk of browning meat. The silence is comfortable yet charged, and Ahsoka stirs the coals under the trough to raise the fire.

Warmth bakes against Rey’s forehead, threatening beads of sweat that never fully emerge.

Ahsoka rises with a grunt, reaching for the wine she set aside and taking a delicate sip. Rey follows suit, tasting the sweetness on her lip as her mentor points around the kitchen, letting Rey know what every utensil is for. Rey, having never been fortunate enough to work in a kitchen—and thereby pilfer as she dared—takes everything in with about as much focus as a hungry lion next to a baking carcass.

When Ahsoka turns and catches Rey drooling, she laughs aloud. “The young master requires quite the diet. I’m afraid I can’t give you any of his supply until we restock.”

“And when is that?” Rey probes.

“Soon,” Ahsoka replies soundly, flipping the meat to reveal a honey-brown undercarriage. She encourages Rey to man the stovetop while she flits to and from the storeroom bearing plates and vegetables.

Rey watches her set out a head of lettuce, thinking aloud as she pushes the beef around with her spatula. “Does Master Ren require this for his size?”

Ahsoka offers a mirthful chuckle. “I’m sure that has plenty to do with it. Pass me the knife.”

Rey does, and listens to her rhythmic chopping with wandering thoughts. Plutt had eaten plenty, back in Egypt, forcing slaves to pick up his scraps—which is often how Rey managed to see the next day of work. Then, it was all lettuce and bread, but mostly the greens, which he would never give much attention.

But it would seem her new master doesn’t share that sentiment. Already Ahsoka has shown Rey their vast assortment of options, and yet the amount in storage is few. This leaves Rey with the theory that he uses his energy much more efficiently than Unkar Plutt ever did and, given Ahsoka’s testimony, has no one to share it with.
“The young master is wealthy,” Ahsoka elaborates, helping Rey place the meal of beef and salad. “Yet he does not enjoy the presence of many people. I’ve served him for three years.” She smiles wistfully. “He may not say it, but he is grateful to have a woman cook his meals.” She winks, “Though now I wonder if age will create a new preference.”

Rey waves her off dismissively. “I doubt it matters.”

“Tonight is your second night under this roof,” Ahsoka muses, changing the subject. “So far, I would say he has taken a liking to you.”

Blinking, Rey feels hot air rise under her throat, making it hard to speak. “O-Oh?”

Ahsoka sends Rey a bright, knowing look, and passes the tray off to her. “Take this to the Tablinum. He should be waiting there.”

Rey lifts her shoulders, stiff and questioning and nervous at the idea of going into that shrouded room again. “The Tablinum? Why not the Triclinum?”

Ahsoka shakes her head wearily, like an exhausted mother. “He never eats in the dining room, if he can help it.” Then she smiles with her pale, full lips. “We will have it to ourselves, so join me there when you’ve finished.”

Nodding, Rey obeys, carrying the tray dutifully across the darkened courtyard. The red curtain lies there, shifting slightly in the descending nightly drafts, and she clears her throat. “Master Ren? Your supper…”

“Come in,” his voice sounds from the other end, gruff with annoyance.

Swallowing, Rey elbows her way into the Tablinum, the darkness of night eroded by candlelight. Her eyes find him quickly.

He lies on his side upon the red-chaise lounge, arm propped along the side as his dark eyes continue to rove over what must be a particularly fascinating scroll. Paying her no mind, he gestures to the table and mumbles, “You never call me that, Ahsoka, I’m surprised.”

“Master Ren?” Rey queries, setting the tray upon the table nearby.

Kylo looks up, startled. “Rey,” he says, voice coated in surprise. Normally it would be Ahsoka within this sanctum, not her. He finds himself frowning at how easily he’d lost himself to his nightly reading. His eyes linger on her before following his nose, and he rises to stand and lumber over to the table.

Rey, waiting to be dismissed, folds her hands in front of her, waiting with folded lips as he looks over his meal. Eventually, the pendulum of his gaze swing to hers. “You made this?” he asks, gesturing slightly.

She shakes her head lightly. “Not alone, Master Ren.”

“Hm,” he nods. Then, with his long, thick fingers, he makes easy work of taking a segment of beef and lifting it to his lips. After a few thoughtful chews, he swallows and considers her. “Perhaps you should.”

“I’m sorry?” Rey sputters.

“Next time,” he rumbles, taking another piece, “I want you to make my meal. You may be a
knowledgeable slave, but language and cleanliness can only go so far in a house like this.”

Rey gawks, baffled by the sheer ludicracy of his words. Not because of their content—that much could be expected of any master—but the way he says them. Even now, in the flickering glow, Rey swears she can see the slightest of quirks upon the corner of his lip, not unlike before he left her to his ride along the Roman countryside.

Remembering herself, she bows her head. “Yes, of, of course I will. What would you like?”

Kylo pauses in his pecking, enjoying this more than he will betray. His gaze wanders over the gentle fall of her hair to her shoulders, the creamy expanse of her respectable stola. In all ways, she looks like a trusted servant, eyes wide and eager to please. His tone retreats to something soft and gentle, beyond even his own recognition. “Surprise me.”

Rey forces herself to take a breath, her eyes meeting his. “I will.”

A burst of pride sears through his chest on her behalf, and with that he waves her off. “You’re dismissed. Have your evening meal. And remember my instruction.”

_The silk toga._ “Yes, Master Ren,” she says, backing out of the room, careful to avoid the hole in the wall where the melted face had frightened her. She is to meet him in his chambers and deliver the toga she herself had been delivered. In an effort, he claims, to destroy it.

She wonders if this is simply a Roman custom, or perhaps a custom of what he called his “unwillingness to partake of flesh.” Rey remembers little of the night before, as his Greek was spoken quickly yet slurried, as though through a drunken and hateful haze. Yet, as she stands beside the curtain, watching him turn his back to sit and begin his ravenous eating, Rey marvels at the miraculous position in which she’s found herself.

It is with light steps that Rey joins Ahsoka in the Triclinum. Already there is a decent spread of fruits and steamy porridge, a small gathering of dates and figs in the middle that has Rey’s stomach folding with excitement.

They eat and speak of common things, Ahsoka telling Rey of her childhood home in Egypt. Apparently Ahsoka was a peasant, in her village, and lost her family when she was very young. At this, Rey shares the same, and after the look in Ahsoka’s eyes becomes strikingly soft.

Rey munches on the last fig, eyes fluttering shut in bliss. This place, compared to Egypt, is paradise. She can _feel_ the lingering tickle of the sunlit grass between her toes, the cool air on her shoulders, the striking mix of ivory clouds in the endless sky.

It has only been a day, but what a day it has been.

Ahsoka rises and dismisses herself, but Rey follows suit, struggling up from her position lying down—oh, how Romans eat like lazy Pharaohs!

As Ahsoka cleans, she sighs. “I’m quite worn down, Rey,” she smirks cheekily. “Riding home will prove a struggle with such a full belly.”

Rey could agree, but she is taken aback. “Home? But you’re already here…”

“No, Child,” Ahsoka correctly, laying a warm hand upon her shoulder. “I have a home of my own. If this were my home, I may not have been so surprised to find you this morning.”

“But, you can’t leave me alone with…” Rey trails off. Fear settles icy claws in her stomach. If
Ahsoka were to leave, what terrible things could come to pass in the night? She does not know this place, does not even know her own master—nor the endurance of his promises. “Won’t you stay?”

Ahsoka sighs, long and slow, as if waking from some dream. “It is not my place to sleep under a roof not my own. However,” Ahsoka says, “I’m sure I could get away with it. But I’m afraid it won’t make much difference, should Young Master give either of us an order to follow.”

Her voice is rich with meaning, and Rey’s heart sinks. “Oh. I see.” Even if Ahsoka wanted to, she could never stand between her and Ren. Yet that doesn’t stave off the feeling of security that envelops Rey whenever she is near. “I’d still appreciate it.”

Ahsoka’s gentle gaze wavers into something bordering the breakable. “Then I will prepare myself one of the spares.”

Rey smooths her hand over the silk, heart thundering inexplicably within her chest. Muttering a soft encouragement to herself, which could be an insult should someone else hear it, she snatches up the gown and makes for his chambers, carrying a candle to light her way through the darkness of doused oil lamps.

His room is mere paces from hers, yet the journey there seems long. Careful not to drop the gown, she taps her knuckles against the door, announcing her arrival.

The handle jiggles and Ren opens the door, looking down at her with a strange, tightly focused impassivity. “Come,” he motions her inside, stepping back and watching her as she enters.

His fireplace is lit, the terrace windows open and gossamer curtains dancing along the intrusive night breeze. Politely, she offers him the toga. “As you commanded, Master Ren.”

He takes it from her, bunching it gracelessly in his fist, letting it drop to his side. The fabric brushes along the floor as he holds it in a casual strangle. “Very good.” He is quiet for a long time as she waits for his dismissal, simply staring at the garment in his hand. Then, softly, “Tell me of your first day.”

Rey finds herself floundering, but finds her tongue and responds with as much earnest dispassion as she can manage. “It went well, Master. I… fed the horses, cleaned the stable, cleaned the tools…” she fights to hold back a flinch. If this master were Plutt, she may have been struck for such an inactive day.

But this is Ren, who may never fail to surprise her.

He huffs under his breath, as if amused—or perhaps bored. Then his brows pinch, concentrating hard. “And last night?”

Rey swallows, but it’s dry enough to scratch. “Fine, Master.”

Suddenly, he turns away, stalking closer to the fireplace to stare down into the flames. Rey watches them dance in the dark of his eyes, flicker the loose edges of his stray hairs.

Rey wets her lip. “Is… something wrong?”

He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose as though struck with a terrible headache. “Many things.”
Rey shifts her balance, feeling helpless under the sudden weight of his emotion. She takes a tentative step closer, and his hand twitches. “What can I do?”

Kylo sighs, thumb running absently over the silk of the toga. If he is not careful, his thoughts may tred dangerously into the lingering warmth within the cloth, or perhaps the soft, ignorant intimacy of her voice here in his room.

He overcomes it quickly, glancing at her and nodding to her attire. “This will be enough.”

Rey looks down at her skirt, smoothing it over with her free hand. “Thank you, Master. I… I have never worn anything so fine.”

His brow creases once more. “Then you shall never wear anything less, under my roof,” he says simply.

She considers him with open gratitude. How could a man who knows nothing about her, whom she’d attempted to concuss with what must have been an expensive vase, not to mention other actions likely warranting Roman punishment… be so considerate?

“Master?”

He looks in her eyes. Their wide curiosity makes her wobble. “Yes?”

“Why?” Her bold nature surges into her shoulders. “Why are you treating me with such kindness?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” he challenges. The flat tone of his voice betrays he holds no worth in one or the other, but is simply curious of what her answer will be.

“I’m just a slave,” she supplies thickly. “I know nothing of Rome, or who brought me here, and yet I am treated as any educated servant.”

He gives her a quizzical look, as though she’s questioned the color of the sky. “I treat my property as I see fit,” he mutters darkly, like a warning. “If I treat a slave like a servant, then so be it.”

Rey keeps herself calm, but the boldness is fading fast. Yes, in the end, she is only property. She must remember that, and yet, her voice comes soft and petulant, broken like a lost cry in the night. “But why?”

Kylo surveys her, and sighs. Ever one for the dramatic yet a harbinger of hatred for the insincere, he braces himself against the mantelpiece, staring deep into the embers. “It is as i told you before. I have no desire for the price which you were bought.”

Rey’s heart thuds, quite aware of his meaning, yet curious all the same. “You said you didn’t want to lose your virtue.”

“Yes.”

“Does that make you…” her thoughts race ahead of her dizzyingly, freefalling as his dark gaze bores into her like a spear.

Her master’s voice is hard and insistent, mouth etched into a thin line, while his shoulders wither under some great strain. “Yes.”

Rey is quiet for a moment. “I’ve heard of that. Men. In Rome. I suppose I’d never…” she holds her arm steady—the hand with her candle has begun to shake. She changes the direction of her words
with a clear of her throat. “Thank you.”

He lifts a brow. “What?”

“Thank you,” she repeats. She offers him something she never thought she’d give, under the circumstances of their first meeting. But as in his study, she marvels at the fortune she’s found—perhaps the only man in Rome who would refuse the gift of lust. The reason matters not, at the moment she does not care, and she can only bow her head and smile. “Thank you for sparing me, even with the cost.”

Kylo huffs, warmth spreading onto his cheeks. He turns from her before she can see. “There is no need to thank me for having no desire for you. I merely wish to keep that which is precious to me. Nothing more.”

Rey’s smile falters, but his brood will not taint her. She waits, bowed, until he dismisses her, and she leaves, closing his door behind her.

Kylo watches the door for several long seconds, the memory of her standing there seared into his mind like a brand.

Her smile. Her lips, surprisingly full, stretched into the round softness of her cheeks, her eyes alight with gleaming gratitude—for him. For such a simple thing.

Or, perhaps, not so simple.

He holds up the loose silk of her toga, studying the way it shimmers with the light. There are small dust marks on it, but otherwise still impeccable and in one piece.

Until he tears it apart.

He takes the cloth and grunts, corded muscles in his arms contracting as he repeats the process, scrapps and shreds floating into the fire—as is his will.

With every piece he makes a new vow to himself, remembering his place among the gladiators of Rome. He, the mighty warrior Kylo Ren, who has never been defeated in battle, shall not be bested by the flesh that binds him. As this toga, this temptation, is torn, so too his will to rebel that which he knows.

His strength is drawn from his rejection of such desires, the howling rage of denial trapped like a storm within his body. To unleash such power is to be victorious, to calm the storm a foolish act of temporary leisure that will lead to failure, which he will never accept.

No matter how soft she looks, or the lilted sweetness of her voice, nor anything else, he will not succumb.

Finally, he is left with one piece in his palm as the rest burns at his feet. He stares into the white silk, and hesitates. Then, following the tug of some invisible thread, he lifts it to his face, closes his eyes, and inhales.

Hay. Dirt. Something else, something distinctly feminine.

He inhales again, just for confirmation, before biting the inside of his cheek. The more he considers it, the better it may be to keep it handy. He stuffs it into the belt of his tunic, hidden from plain sight, and takes a shuddering breath. Reasonable. His decision is quite reasonable.
After all, there are worse things he could do.

Chapter End Notes

[Ancient Romans didn't necessarily cook over a "stove," but a trough heated by coals. For those who have worked in the food industry, it was sort of like the flat-top grill where all manner of foods could be cooked]

[Romans had all manner of dishes and hardware that we still use today, including pots, pans, spoons, and spatulas!]

[Most gladiators were slaves, and were forced to eat a lot of meat (protein) to build muscle and keep up their strength, while many other slaves would only be able to eat the leftovers of their master's]

[Again, the "Tablinum" is the study/record-keeping room of the Roman villa. The "Triclinum" was the dining hall, where Romans would lie down on couch-like chairs and eat from tables in front of them—especially when hosting guests]

[In Roman families, the woman was always expected to cook. However, a wealthy household had slaves to cook, which gave mothers more time to spend with their children]

[Figs and dates were a common desert in both Rome and Egypt, but especially Egypt, where fruit was scarce]

[Ahsoka, as a servant, could very well have her own home. In Rome, it was expected that Masters would make sure that freed slaves were well taken care of as they pursued their own liberties. Oftentimes this made freed slaves ("freeman"/"freewoman") more well-off than normal citizens (Plebs)!]

[A villa like Kylo's would have a few spare rooms for servants/slaves]

[Masters of slaves could set any standard they want for their slave's attire. Whether they worked in a toga or a tunica, or something in between, it was always up to the Master's will]

[In Rome, it was quite normal for even MARRIED men to have "intimate relations" with their slave women. However, contrary to popular belief, it was not the standard, as the majority of Romans held great value in monogamy (a lot like today)]

{The theme for this chapter is "Captivate You" by Marmozets. Listen to the Glory's Fray Spotify playlist [here](#)}
Thank you all so much for your wonderful support. I simply adore your lovely comments and eagerly await the time when I can respond to you. Please enjoy this chapter as we begin our transition into the plot-centric area of the story.

Thanks again for reading!

The time between sleep and wakefulness is scattered with visions forgotten upon waking, though when Rey lifts her head, she thinks herself in a dream.

She rises to slip her bare feet through her sandals, yawning into her clothes as she readies herself for another day in the Ren household. Rubbing crust from the corners, her eyes adjust from the bleary grey of sunrise to the yellow shine blooming upon the grass of the courtyard—as she crosses to the kitchen.

It would seem Ahsoka has not awoken, leaving Rey alone to collect her thoughts. She pours herself water—a few glasses—draining each until she is comfortable enough to take small sips as she paruses the supply in the storeroom.

They truly are running low, it would seem. At least by Roman standards. Rey pensively taps the shelf, weighing her options. She knew she would have to be creative, somewhat, when preparing her first meal for Master Ren.

He wanted a surprise, and surely he will get one. She just needs to discover what that surprise will be.

Running empty on ideas, Rey decides to busy herself with something else while she has time to spare. Snatching the pail, she fills it with water and makes for the stables.

Silencer is the first to greet her, turning his massive head to face her as she walks in. He nods a short rhythm, impatient, as Rey smiles and coos, slipping into the stall. She dumps the contents into his trough, patting his neck as he dips to take heavy laps.

She repeats the process until both his and Lux’s troughs are full, throwing strands of hay in alternating patterns until she is quite certain they will grow bored of it. Sighing, she leans against the stable, crossing her arms and letting her eyes wander. What could she possibly—

Oh.

Oh!

Rey’s eyes magnetize to the untouched sacks of oats, an idea forming at the base of her skull and taking light beneath her scalp. Filled with a strange energy, an eagerness she has yet to grow accustomed to, she snatches a heavy sack and makes her way to the kitchen with purposeful strides.

She sets down the sack of oats, pulling a small knife from one of the many on the wall. She stirs a
fire to life, and hangs a pot over the head of the flames, encouraging them to grow with gentle blows. Filling the small pot with water, she dumps a hearty amount of oats inside, and lets it rest as she sneaks into the storeroom.

With hungry eyes, Rey scours the contents of their remaining supply. Some fruit remains, not yet touched by the rot. The dates and figs have disappeared, and the greens shriveled and threatening yellow. The meat is also low, generously salted, but rank upon a whiff. Wrinkling her nose, Rey lets those rest, going instead for the fruits.

She recognizes none but one—the golden quince Ahsoka gave her. Rey inspects it, taking a cautionary sniff. Her mouth waters, mind clouded. If she were to take a bite, no one would know—

Rey halts that trail of thought. She remembers the taste, the sweet blend of tartness and ripe, the inexplicable pleasure melting on her tongue. To have a fruit such as this in the morning would stimulate the senses, and perhaps ready him for the day with clear thoughts and a satisfied belly.

Determined, Rey folds her lips and begins to cut into the skin, walking back into the kitchen. The oats have softened, and are almost ready to be taken out. Preparing a bowl, Rey finishes cutting the quince into careful, even slices, and sets them neatly upon a tray.

When she stirs the oats one final time, she pinches some in her fingers, “oof”ing at the heat before dropping it on her tongue. They are neither too hard nor too crunchy, sliding and squishing between her rearmost teeth with a soft, satisfying *skrch*. After a pinch of salt and, with her determination to be inventive, a few drops of honey, Rey takes a small piece of bread and rearranges until everything is just right.

She eyes her work approvingly, watching the steam float from the oatmeal as a throat clears behind her.

Rey turns to the doorway, startled. Her heart slows. “Good morning, Ahsoka.”

“Good morning,” she replies. Her tunica is different, Rey notes. A soft blue, like her eyes. It shuffles as she comes near to look down at Rey’s work. “I see you’ve made the Master’s breakfast.”

Heat creeps into Rey’s cheeks. “Yes. Will he… do you think he will like it?”

“Hard to say, he is a picky eater,” Ahsoka murmurs. But, after a few seconds of thought, the older woman smiles and rests a hand on Rey’s shoulder. “You will be fine. I’m certain if he has an issue, it can be redone, hm?”

Rey nods, still feeling sheepish. “Yes, you’re right. Should I take it to him now?”

“Better now than cold,” Ahsoka smarts, swatting Rey’s arm lightly as she makes for the storeroom. As Rey leaves with the tray, she can hear Ahsoka grunt with open disdain.

Rey checks behind the closed red curtain to find the Tablinum to find it empty, and moves on to her master’s chamber door. I remains closed, and she knocks softly. “Master Ren? I have your breakfast,” she calls. When she receives no answer, she tries again. Still nothing.

She looks over her shoulder, down the hall leading to the storeroom. Ahsoka told her to bring it to Ren while it was still warm. *Curses*, Rey nearly spits. She is a fool for making this meal before being instructed. Now she is left with two terrible options: let the food go cold—or worse, to waste—or awaken her sleeping master.
She makes her decision with great care, not making a sound as she eases open his chamber door.

The room is dark. The fire doused and curtain drawn. As she creeps inside, her eyes adjusting slowly, she makes out a lump upon the bed, dark hair strewn across a pillow.

Slowly, Rey sets the tray upon the mantelpiece, and considers how best to wake him. Definitely not with her voice—she is well aware the disorientation and unpleasantness of sudden sounds. Instead she goes to the curtains, reaching her hands to feel the gossamer silk before pulling them open to reveal the warm caress of sunshine.

Rey turns, the dust floating illuminated through the air, to see Ren lying face down upon his bed. His large arms cross under his pillow, and she can see the faint features of his face hiding beneath the messy mop of dark curls.

Unable to resist, Rey comes a little closer. The tip of his ear stands proudly from the curtain of his hair, a bit odd in shape but pleasant in humanity. His bare back rises and falls with deep, raspy breaths, and Rey cannot help but notice the pale expanse of it—the massive canvas of his body littered with small marks and minute, white scars.

Remembering herself, Rey shakes her head and retreats just as he grunts, shifting his long legs underneath the sheets. He lifts his head and stares down at the pillow, as if confused, before blinking sleepily at her. “You,” he groans softly, shifting onto his side. Rey gulps as the sheet falls around his chest, baring him fully to her. “What is it?”

“I… I brought breakfast,” Rey supplies dumbly.

Ren shifts once more, sitting up and lying back on his elbows. His eyes, though tired, gleam with interest. “Bring it to me.”

Rey nods, deep as a bow, and snatches the tray from the mantelpiece. With great care she presents it, holding it out to him.

He does not move, merely looks at her with his intense gaze. “On my lap,” he orders, tone dulcet and rumbling with sleep.

Rey ignores the twinging warmth in her gut at the sound, obediently placing the tray in his lap as he watches with lingering fatigue. He lifts his head and stares down at the pillow, as if confused, before blinking sleepily at her. “You,” he groans softly, shifting onto his side. Rey gulps as the sheet falls around his chest, baring him fully to her. “What is it?”

A blush begins to take form, embarrassment at her own thoughts. Before she can push herself further, she turns and murmurs, “I’ll leave you to your meal—”

Ren holds up his hand. “Stay.”

Rey pauses and returns to his bedside, meeting his curious eyes.

His gaze falls from hers as he picks up the spoon, dipping it into the oatmeal and stirring. “You made this,” he states, matter-of-factly.

“Yes.”

“Mm,” he grunts, bringing the spoon to his lips. Rey watches, stomach in her chest, as he turns it...
behind his closed, full lips. After a swallow, he glances at her. “Honey?”

Rey nods. “Yes. Is that… acceptable?”

He bites the inside of his cheek, as if considering it, and takes another mouthful, this time faster and more ravenous than the last. “Indeed,” he replies, taking a slice of quince and munching. His eyes light up as he chews, and Rey’s stomach rises to her throat when they turn on her. “Very acceptable. I’m impressed.”

Rey does not fight a small, pleased smile. She bows slightly. “Thank you, Master Ren.”

He waves his hand dismissively. “You may go feed the horses.”

She blinks. “I already have.”

“Oh?” he asks around a full mouth. His eyes find hers curiously, but she senses a flicker of pleasant surprise in his gaze, dipped in a honey-glow by the morning light.

Rey nods, folding her hands behind her back.

Kylo appraises her openly from his bed, noting the golden strands of her hair lit by the sun. Her face is shadowed as she stands before him, though not so invisible he can avoid the pleasantness of her features. He waves his hand again. “Then you may go and eat. When Ahsoka arrives, send her to me.”

Rey blanches. “Master Ren, Ahsoka is still here. She did not leave last night.”

His brow furrows and he stops eating. “Why?”

Swallowing, Rey considers lying, but by the burning of his eyes, melting right through her, she knows it would be useless. Instead she bows her head low, hiding her face from him as guilt uncoils like a snake in her belly. “Because I asked her to.”

Kylo leans back, considering her. He need not ask; the reason behind it is obvious. This girl knows nothing of his house, of himself. Why should he expect her to lose her fear so simply? Her strength and resilience of emotion are easy to see, but so too are her weaknesses and frailties, and he would be a fool to deny her both.

When he raises his hand a third time, Rey flinches, prepared for a blow, but it merely drops onto the cover of his bed in a defeated poff. “Then I expect you to bring her to me immediately. There is something I must discuss with you both.”

Unwilling to argue, heart racing at the speed of horses, Rey confirms obediently and leaves without shutting the door, feet carrying her swiftly to a new mission as an odd sensation descends upon her. An ominous, unpleasant emotion rises within her, one she cannot discern—a famine upon her sense of ease, as though what awaits in the near future offers nothing but misery and despair.

Shaking it off with a brisk rustle, Rey continues her mission, reminding herself of the slight quirk at the corner of his mouth and light in his eyes as soon as he ate the quince she spared.

Chapter End Notes
[Oatmeal and Porridge was a common breakfast food among the lower class, as it was easy to make and digest, rich with fibers and other nutrients]

[Meats in ancient Rome were "salted" (a method of preserving meat with salt and vinegar), which kept them from going bad before the invention of the refrigerator. In Rome, fish and pork were the most common meats to keep around due to their easy procurement and proximity to the Mediterranean Sea]

[Roman beds did not have large headboards, but a slight rise, almost like the end of a couch. Kylo's bed is shaped this way, although I had his adorned with four posts on each corner]

[Honey was an especially sweet treat in Rome. They put that shit on everything]
Hey everyone! It's been a few days. School is absolutely killing me over here. But! All of your wonderful support just keeps me going. I hope you enjoy the chapter!

Also, shout-out to RebelRebel, whom in my busiest hours helped stir the plot-pot of this monstrosity. The reason why it took so long also had to do with that. But—the plot is finished now, so it should be smooth sailing. Thank you all so much for your wonderful support! *hugs*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He stands with his back to them, hands clasped tightly as he stares into the atrium pool.

Ahsoka fixes him a wary glare. A sense of unease ripples through her. He’s quite the dramatic one—she blames too many Grecian plays—but by the tense set of his shoulders, she is reminded of someone far more sinister.

His frown deepens, eyes churning like the water. He sighs, and then he speaks. “I have been commissioned to host a revelry.”

Both Rey and Ahsoka straighten. Rey in confusion, as his words are distinctly Roman.

Ahsoka refrains a scowl, just barely. “When?”

He turns around to meet her charged gaze. “Five days.”

She swears softly in Egyptian, and Rey can no longer hold her tongue. “What is it?” she asks him.

When his eyes fall to hers, Rey summons her calm and attention, keeping steady as he retains a dispassionate, almost frustrated air. “We will have company in five days. We need to begin preparations.”

By his tone Rey is reminded of what Ahsoka said about him disliking people, and then the furious tone he took the night before as he argued with the imperial messenger. The frayed ends connect within her mind after a moment. “The scroll brought by Mitaka. Is that why?”

“Yes,” he says, somewhat impressed. Or so it would seem. His eyes flit about, as if distracted.

Ahsoka turns to Rey as well, speaking softly. Her quiet Coptic echoes sullenly, as if she too is put off by the very idea of others in this house. “We will need to get ready as soon as possible. It will be no easy task for just the two of us. Think you could manage some heavy cleaning?”

“Of course.”

Ahsoka switches to Roman once more. “Who are we hosting?” she asks her master.

He folds his lips for a moment, as if pensive, then releases them defeatedly. “General Hux.”
Ahsoka’s jaw tightens. “Ah. Then we’d better get started,” she drones. She takes Rey’s arm and begins to lead her away. “Come on, girl. I’ll have you get started on the courtyard. The plants could use some watering.”

At the mention of plants, Rey’s steps alight. “Yes, Ahsoka,” she says, trying and failing to hide the pleasure in her voice. As she leads her off, Rey looks back at Ren, who is already making his way to the stables.

He does not turn back to look at her, and for some reason her steps feel heavy once more.

As they step into the open air of the courtyard, Ahsoka pointing out the different faults in the grass Rey hadn’t noticed before, she uses a moment of silence to ask, “Where does he go?”

Ahsoka looks over, squatted beside Rey. Her tan fingers caress a soft leaf. “The city,” she says simply, turning her attention to a group of gathering weeds.

“Why?”

She yanks a handful from the soil with a grunt, avoiding Rey’s curious stare. “He receives summons from the Emperor.” Another weed. “To carry out certain tasks.”

“What kind of tasks?” Rey asks, just above a whisper. Her heart thrums with a strange eagerness to know more about her new master. She already knows, somewhat, what he is like. But what he does to earn the wealth she found eludes her still.

Ahsoka continues to ignore her, abruptly rising to her feet. Rey looks up at her, squinting as the bright blue shines above. “Whatever the Emperor demands. Now,” she fists her hips, smiling slightly. There is something dishonest in the pale stretch of her lips, a disturbance panging along the joints of Rey’s knees. “You water the courtyard, and then come find me for some breakfast.”

With that, she walks into the kitchen, taking Rey’s rumbling stomach with her. Most, but not all, curiosity’s fade after that, lingering in the back of her mind as she sets resolutely to her task.

By the time Master Ren returns, this courtyard will gleam.

He rolls his shoulder, breathing deeply, closing his eyes. The roar of the stadium fades to the back of his mind. The heat bakes even in the shaded sidelines.

Ematt comes to stand behind him. “Less bets against you, today,” he hums, crossing his arms.

“Hm.”

Ematt eyes him up and down, a mix of humor and skepticism in his gaze. “You still plan on wearing that? In this weather?”

Kylo eases in slight, studying his manager with significantly less humor. “I happen to prefer it,” he replies. His black tunic and chestplate has always been a symbol of his power in the arena. While others wear much less—a foolish idea—he keeps himself well-guarded.

“You will cook,” Ematt warns.

“So will they, covered in oil,” Kylo sighs. “Believe me, Ematt. The day I fight without my armor is the day I lose a battle. I will keep it on.”

Ematt merely shrugs. “Suit yourself.”
But Kylo does not suit himself. Male slaves approach to adorn him with his armored chest plate, a particularly young one returning with his sword. As the announcer loudly calls him forward, he dawns the iron mask and steps out onto the dusty field.

Two fighters, now. Novices in the arena, by the looks of them. War criminals? Beneath the helm, he glances at Snoke, who lies languidly upon his shaded throne, watching with interest. Beside him stands a lean man in a general’s uniform, pale features marred with disdainful amusement.

Kylo betrays nothing of his displeasure, senses attuned to the rising heat of battle boiling from the soles of his sandaled feet. He takes his stance, holding his weapon close, letting his enemy gaze upon the length of steel in awe—watching as fear begins to rise in their eyes at the sight of his mighty frame.

The one on the left is brave. Or foolish. With his gladius, he lunges forward, screeching. Unaffected by his infantile tactic, Kylo spins swiftly to avoid the blow, jutting an elbow to catch the man’s ribs. He coughs, but only that, continuing until the charge dies out into a trot.

The other man, his skin dark and greased chest hairy, holds up a pilum, prepared to throw it at Kylo with his muscular arm. Not willing to allow him distance to land the spear, Kylo strides forward, weaving into the man’s personal space and grasping the staff.

A dark hand punches at Kylo’s collar, managing to hit the exposed area above his chestplate. It knocks a growl from behind his mask, and he retaliates with a swift and brutal swing.

The gladiator tries to dodge, but his arm is caught by Kylo’s blade, cutting deeply into the flesh. He cries out, gritting his teeth to the sky. Blood spurts, turning the fine finish a bright shade of red, and the crowd ripples with mortified anticipation.

He manages to escape Kylo’s hold, releasing the pilum to instead hold his dangling arm together. It does not move nor obey him.

From behind, the other gladiator calls. “Saw!”

Kylo backs away, not letting his back face either of them. This Saw is nearly his size, and quite thick. Years of battle have waged before his eyes, and Kylo can see now how they dim like a distant star. Lost.

The other gladiator does not move to attack Kylo, instead running to Saw’s side, speaking urgently. He can hear Saw’s tired voice reply, “It is too late for me, Bodhi.” He hands over the spear, knees on the verge of collapse as his blood floods the ground at his feet. “Go. Fight…”

Kylo watches as the crowd does, waiting. As Bodhi stands to face him, dark eyes wide and terrified, Kylo notices how tight the man’s skin hugs his bare ribs.

He thinks of how long she’s been starving. Whether she’s eaten. If he should have waited for her.

He frowns behind the mask, spinning his sword at his side. The man, Bodhi, holds both gladius and pilum, standing tall as Saw finally falls to his knees and collapses in the dirt. Bodhi cries out in agony and rage, racing forward.

Kylo lets his legs carry him across the silt to meet him in a clash of steel. This man is smaller than his comrade, who was easily Kylo’s height, but what he lacks in mass he makes up for in raw emotion—something Kylo must admire.

They push off one another, circling as the crowd roars. Sweat pools at the nape of Kylo’s neck, his
hair sticking fast and itchy to the skin, but he merely lets it fuel the burning fire in his body. It roars and smolders under his hands, and he makes a point of spinning the blade once more, letting the fallen gladiator’s blood speckle the ground.

Bodhi notices, and throws the spear at Kylo’s head. He barely manages to dodge in time, the helmet’s edge taking the blow hard enough to knock it askew. He grabs the face to pull it off as the man attacks with a cry, and Kylo’s snarl is bared to the sunlight.

His attack follows through, but not before Kylo can raise his sword to deflect, his other hand rounding to knock Bodhi in the jaw with his helmet.

The strike is hard, and the man’s body is malnourished. He stumbles back, disoriented, and falls on his rear, then his back, unconsciously babbling. Kylo looks to Snoke, who waves his hand dismissively, and wastes no time. With a determined press of his lips, he strikes the man’s heart, ending it quickly. The crowd cheers heartily, slaves running onto the field to begin disposing the bodies.

He sighs, shoulders rising and falling. Heart slowing, but never stopping.

His sandals clap along the marble floor as he enters the throne room, the high arches lit with streaming sunlight. At the end of the room, upon a stage, Snoke sits upon a wide, velvet chaise. His guards stand post sporadically about the room, close to pillars and windows, scattered according to strategy.

Before the stage is a man with a shining galea tucked under his arm, orange hair blazing atop his homely, contemptuous face.

“Ah, Kylo Ren. Welcome,” Snoke croons, meeting his fingertips in an arch. “So good of you to join us. General Hux tells me you will be hosting a revelry in his honor on the second day of Vestalia.”

Hux’s slight smirk grows as Kylo tucks his own helmet under his arm. “Indeed, Master. I received the message.” He works his jaw. “My home will always be open to heroes of Rome.”

“I see,” Snoke says, wetting his lips. He glances at Hux, waving his hand dismissively. “Go.”

Hux turns, offering his chin to Kylo before moving out of the atrium. The door closes heavily, leaving Kylo alone with Snoke and his statuesque Praetorian Guard.

It is silent for a moment, Snoke tapping his finger along the arm of his lounge, before he speaks. “Your messenger tells me you received my gift.”

Kylo swallows, keeping his eyes down. “Yes.”

Snoke chuckles darkly, reaching for a nearby goblet of wine. “And…?”

He closes his eyes, fighting back the rising anger. Snoke is taunting him, now. Eager to see the results of his underhanded baiting.

He seems pleased, perhaps because of the rare blow landed on him by the weak Bodhi. Evidence of his victory in weakening him. Kylo is certain of it now, without even a shadow of doubt—Snoke wanted to make him fall. Make him lose honorably and join his guard.
If Kylo is not careful, if he does not feed into Snoke’s pliant pleasure, then he may face worse foes. So he reaches into his belt, fingers finding the soft piece of silk, and pulls it free.

Snoke cranes his neck, eyes glittering and mirthful as Kylo reveals it to him. “Mhm. Mhmmhmhm. My boy…” Snoke smiles. A sickening, craggled thing. “I knew beneath your surface lied a beast.” He chuckles into his goblet, the voice echoing along the marble pillars and painted archways. “I trust she was satisfactory?”

Kylo swallows, remembering the vase she threw at his head. The fear and fury in her eyes. The way she looked at him with the sunlight on her cheek.

“Yes,” he answers simply, stroking his thumb absently along the silk in his palm. Blinking, he returns to himself, stuffing the fabric in the belt of his tunic. “Very much, Master.”

Snoke continues to smile to himself, then gestures. An attendant is summoned into the room. “Take your winnings and go. I’m sure you will need them for your revelry. It’s a shame I cannot attend,” he grunts, rising to his full, imposing height. He bestows a graceful smile, holding his chalice in toast. “But be reassured. I am pleased by your gratitude. Return for another battle on the first of Vestalia. I want to see how my prized warrior fights,” he croons.

Kylo bows, a little deeper than necessary, and brings his eyes to meet Snoke’s. He offers no challenge, no threat, but within him the surge of anger rises once more. He plucks the sack of Denarii from the attendant, holding it limp at his side as he drones, “…I wouldn’t miss it for all of Rome.”

Chapter End Notes

[In Rome, having guests over was a HUGE production. But we will learn more about that later. As far as I know, "being commissioned" isn't a thing. I just wanted to create that for the narrative. (It's called Historic Fantasy, muahaha)]

[Coptic was/is the name of the Ancient Egyptian language]

[Vestalia was the celebration of Vesta, Roman goddess of the Hearth. It was also known as the Summer Solstice, and took place from June 7th to June 15th. We will learn more in the next chapter]

[It was commonplace for gladiators to be slaves and war criminals. Saw and Bodhi were war criminals brought back by General Hux for public slaughter, but gladiators could also be volunteers who play for money or sport... or another reason entirely]

[A "pilum" is an Ancient Roman spear, often used both in the arena and on the battlefield. It was a throwing javelin with an iron tip; the staff itself was somewhat bendable, and would be used for making an opponent's shield too heavy to hold, thereby lowering defenses]

[A "galea" was the general name for Imperial helmets. In movies, it's the helmet with the red mo-hawk style plume running along the center]

[Kylo's helmet is also called a galea; they were sometimes fashioned with coverings and even adorned with paintings of fish, and usually worn by a Myrmillones gladiator:
who fought in a loincloth and crest upon their arm]

[Emperors would sit upon a stage at the end of their atrium. The floor of the stage would be decorated with an ornamental rug and a luxurious lounge chair]
Vestalia

Chapter Notes

Hooray for several hours of research and Google Maps! Rome is HARD. Anyway, thank you so much for all of your support! *virtual hugs*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rey yawns, limbs stiff and worn, sleep lingering behind her eyes.

She sighs, walking out in front of the villa to admire the waving trees in the morning Summer breeze, shivering not with chill, but pleasantness—as if her body is settling into something new and comfortable. She toys at the new blisters and old calluses between her fingers, glancing at her wrists. The red marks from her chains are completely gone, now.

Her veins tingle with excitement beneath the paling skin of her arms. Five days of preparation have left the inside tidy and shining—and the courtyard garden looks quite nice, if she would say so herself. Even the master had that shadow of a smile on the corner of his lip when he toured the spotless halls. And when she spotted it, she kept a secret smile of her own.

A sweet wind stirs the hem of her stola, tickling against her legs as she closes her eyes and takes a deep, cleansing breath. The air alone smells green, here. She could never tire of that.

Today Ahsoka is taking her to the city. Rey’s heart squeezes within the grip of an anxious fist at the thought of seeing it for the first time. Questions race through her mind, wrapping around Ahsoka’s various instructions and warnings to keep close and keep quiet.

Returning a stray lock behind her ear, Rey turns on her heel and makes for the stables, where Lux and Silencer wait in silent commune amongst the flies. He nickers eagerly at the sight of Rey—he has been quite taken with her as of late. Lux too, for that matter. Likely due to Rey’s zealous feeding habits.

Taking a breath, Rey abandons Silencer to round the back of the stable, uncovering the small caravan Ahsoka showed her the day before. Rubbing her hands, she hoists the heavy wooden beam and pulls the sheltered cart closer to the stable door, forgetting her blisters entirely.

Kylo rubs his mouth, leaning on one arm of the chair. His gaze is dark and pensive. Distant. “...Snoke wants me in the arena.”

Ahsoka crosses her arms. “I’m not surprised; He usually does.” She studies him a moment more, eyeing the tense set of his shoulders. “You seem to think there’s something else at work.”

His frown deepens. “I know there is.” His eyes slide closed, as if in pain. “He claims he wants to see me fight, but there will be no battle today.”

She wonders a moment, but only that, and pales. “An execution?”

He nods once.
Her voice comes out an involuntary stammer, tan face turning red. “On the first of Vestalia? How… how could—”

“There were war criminals,” he supplies, clipped and impatient. “Four days ago. I have reason to believe they were prisoners of General Hux,” he nearly spits the name. “There is no doubt. Whoever remains of his captives will be made a spectacle today.”

“By you.”

He rises suddenly, looming over her. His eyes bore into hers, dark and dripping, leaking withheld wrath. She stands tall as he grits, “By Rome.”

Her eyes search his. He is so young, still. Unknowing of whom he so greatly resembles. She can see the same fire in him—the same raw, untamed power as her old master. “Why are you telling me this? You often leave this place without so much as a glance.” Her tone softens. “Why the change?”

A look of earnest sweeps over his features, but they return to marble once more as he passes her to stand in the open veranda doors. His turned back does not conceal the sudden change in his voice as he says, “I have my own matters to see to. Take her into Rome,” his cadence darkens, “but keep her away from the Colosseum.”

Understanding floods Ahsoka’s veins with its cool waters, and she bows her head. “Yes, Young Master.”

Ahsoka and Rey attach Lux to the caravan with a grunt. Rey smiles warmly at the woman who has so effortlessly become her mentor. “That was easy.”

“Now the real challenge can begin,” Ahsoka winks, drawing an eager giggle from her apprentice.

Ren enters the stable, toying thoughtlessly with his fingers. He catches sight of them, says nothing, and mechanically lets Silencer out of his stall.

Rey squints at him. “Good morning, Master Ren.”

He pauses and comes to stand next to them with Silencer's reigns in hand, looking down at Rey, who rises and rubs some loose dust on the skirt of her stola. Unperturbed, he nods, slight curls caressing his temple. “‘Morning.”

Ahsoka shoos Rey into the caravan and, after a pause, Ren mounts his horse in one, steady swing of his leg. Rey watches from the shaded cart, in awe of what exhilaration must come from riding such an exquisite creature. Ahsoka climbs to sit in the coach as he tells them both he will be home before dark.

From behind Ahsoka, Rey notices the strange look in his eye, as though something dreadful were about to take place, before he ushers Silencer onto the path.

She blames the revelry on its way, thankful it will pass soon.

He outpaces them easily on the road to Rome, leaving them behind to take their surroundings in stroll. Ahsoka claims Lux is faster than Silencer without the caravan, and Rey decides to keep blissfully out of any opinion.
She crosses her arms over the rear of the caravan, watching the countryside reel slowly before her with her cheek rested upon her wrists. She sighs dreamily at the wonder of it all. Everything is so different from her old home in Egypt. So much beauty. So much life.

Ahsoka looks over her shoulder, met by the round of Rey’s behind as she lies upon the caravan floor. She scoffs good-naturedly, but says nothing nor fights a blooming smile as she returns her attention to the path ahead.

As time wears on, morning hours fading, Rey begins to notice other travelers passing in the direction they came, many clad in armor—the sound of voices growing from murmurs to laughter, an occasional shout, a steady thrum.

She rips herself away from the back, crawling over the caravan floor to look out from behind Ahsoka. Her face loosens, jack slack in awe. “Is that…?”

Turning to look at Rey over her shoulder, Ahsoka offers a small smile. “Nothing like Cairo, eh?”

Shaking her head, Rey rises as far as possible to see over Ahsoka’s shoulder, heart swelling in her chest, eyes wide. They start to descend the gently sloping hillside, the road shifting from dust to white stone as they approach the gleaming gates of Rome.

From here she can see how massively the city spreads before them, buildings cluttered about like broken glass. People the size of insects flit to and from their hives, weaving an intricate tapestry of urbanity.

The view gradually fades as they descend the slope, nearing the gate. Men in shining armor and red skirts stand at attention, some speaking with people filtering in and out to sell wares along the street. Rey gawks at them until one of the soldiers stands in Ahsoka’s path. He holds up a hand, speaking with the same tone as an authoritative messenger of bad news.

Ahsoka straightens, hardening her stare, and replies. Rey silently sits back in the shade of the caravan, doing as Ahsoka instructed. Not speaking, but watching.

Eventually, Ahsoka says something, discreetly waving her hand, and the soldier straightens with a look of consideration in his eyes. Then he nods, waving her forward. She snaps the reigns, passing the soldier a flash of gold, before they enter the city.

“What was that?” Rey asks, eyes flitting about as Lux leads them down the road. The caravan begins to rumble and purr beneath her from the steady jarring of stone against wheel.

“They don’t allow wagons in the city. But since it’s the first of Vestalia, I managed to convince him to see things my way,” she winks.

“Won’t we get in trouble?” Rey probes nervously.

Ahsoka chuckles. “There is no man in Rome who can’t be bought at a price our master can’t afford.”

Rey wets her lips, reclining. “Oh. I see.”

The road is narrow as they continue, Ahsoka leading with a grim sort of determination as they pass rueful citizens who glare upon the wagon, but do nothing and eventually continue on their own paths.

Rey migrates to the rear of the caravan, remaining shaded as she observes the scores of people and
passing structures in wonder. It reminds her of the crowded homes of Cairo, of the sparse living conditions in the Jakku territory. However, unlike that cursed place, stifled with heat and bland sandstone, the buildings around shine brightly with polished rock and lime.

Within the hour they approach a grand, curved building, where citizens trudge in greater numbers. Ahsoka eases them into the entrance, where the sunlight and blue shows in the gaping space between columns. Romans chatter in Latin, speaking fast and loud, all a buzz to Rey’s ears yet a marvel to her eyes. “What is this place?”

“The Trajan’s Market,” Ahsoka replies, keeping Lux slow. The people here seem more preoccupied with their own matters to mind a horse and cart. As Rey looks, she can see a few others with wagons in their midst. Had they used the same method of persuasion as Ahsoka? Her thoughts are interrupted as the woman continues. “The largest marketplace in Rome. We should be able to find all we need here. Come, hop out. I’ll need your assistance loading.”

Rey nods, jumping out of the back of the caravan. She gathers a few looks from passing women in many layers of fine cloth and bright colors, who themselves trade giggling glances. Rey bites her cheek. No matter the language, all mannerisms are the same.

She rounds the caravan and helps Ahsoka down from the coach once they arrive close to what looks to be a stall of freshly-prepared food. The savory steam of smoked fish flows into her nose, and Rey almost whines with hunger. She keeps herself as calm and collected as she can.

Ahsoka turns. “Stay here with Lux until I come back. You can never trust everyone in this city,” she warns. She hesitates for a moment, looking Rey up and down, before reaching into the tucked folds of her tunica and withdrawing a small kitchen knife.

Rey’s eyes bulge. “What—”

“Hold onto this,” she insists, handing it over handle-first. Rey takes it as she continues, “I hope you won’t need it.”

Rey nods, gripping her new responsibility with white knuckles. “Thank you, Ahsoka.”

Her lips stretch into a warm smile. “I’ll be back in a moment. Time to exercise my talent,” she winks, holding up the sack of denarii before striding purposefully to the stall.

When she’s gone, Rey checks the bodice of her stola for a place to conceal the knife. She would never want to give anyone the wrong impression—despite her past as a ruffian on the Jakku streets. Eventually she creates a fold in her lap that heightens the hem of her stola but holds the blade fast and secure along the flat of her waistband.

That done, she looks around, easing soothing strokes along Lux’s soft, dappled neck and mane. The mare nickers softly, leaning in so far she bumps Rey’s cheek, making her chuckle.

There are many stalls and tables on either side of the ceilinged strip, goods and wares passed over into the hands of consumers at the trade of the coin. Rey watches as a kindly woman passes a man a woven basket in a nearby stall, their smiles simple and bright, and her heart floods with warmth.

Ahsoka returns, tapping Rey’s shoulder to bring her attention back. Behind her a few young men carry a crates of uncooked fish and pork, along with a smaller basket of shapely eggs. Rey helps them load the goods into the caravan while Ahsoka hands over the money. The men, like the women before, give her an odd look before returning to their stall, leaving the two of them alone.

Rey remembers what she was told, and keeps quiet as Ahsoka has her climb into the back of the
They repeat this process a few more times, each visit storing more into their caravan until the stock is brimming with fruits, vegetables, meats, and a barrel of wine.

They ease their way back onto the street out the other end of the strip, Rey walking alongside the caravan—for lack of comfortable space—as they are thrust back into daylight beneath a bright blue sky. Rey ogles the clouds as much as the sun allows her, admiring the scenery while Ahsoka leaves to retrieve one last thing.

As Rey looks to the east, she spots it. Taller than any other building, half a horizon away, is a curved tower with many orifices, shadowed and tomb-like.

Ahsoka returns to the caravan they parked on the side of the road, in the shade of the marketplace, holding what looks to be a thick sliver of meat impaled upon a thin wooden pick. She accepts hers gratefully as Ahsoka takes a bite, her eyes fluttering closed as Rey returns her attention to the ominous shape in the distance. “Ahsoka?”

“Ahsoka?”

Rey uses her morsel as a pointer, squinting. “Is that what I think it is?”

Ahsoka swallows, expression grim. “If you think it’s the Colosseum, then yes.”

Frowning, Rey glares at the structure—as if that alone could raze it to the ground. “I heard about it. A long time ago. Some traders in the plaza, they…” her jaw tightens. “They bought slaves to sell to the Empire. To make them fight.”

A warm hand wraps gently around her upper arm, effectively dragging Rey from the sinking sands of her own chest. She takes a breath as Ahsoka comes close, holding their bodies side by side in a companionable embrace. A sense of calm and ease sinks into where their skin meets, as if Rey can feel the years of wisdom and knowledge lulling her back into the present.

Rey smiles up at her, though it’s small, and looks at the strange meat in her hand. Unable to resist the savory smell any longer, she takes a bite. The meat is tough yet tender, peeling away easily in between her front teeth. A burst of flavor spritzes within her mouth, and she holds back a delighted moan. “What is this?” she asks around a full mouth, going for another bite.

Ahsoka laughs aloud. “I thought you might like it. It’s Flamingo tongue.”

“Oh,” Rey nods, swallowing. “...What’s that?”

Kylo exhales slowly, a dull ache throbbing at the base of his skull. As he looks out into the arena, Ematt standing beside him—along with many other gladiators—the deep-set animosity within him struggles to be quelled.

Ematt looks up at Kylo, then the gladius clutched tightly in the younger man’s hand. “Remember your duties, Master Ren,” he murmurs.

“I know what I have to do,” he grunts, almost a scoff. He has done it plenty of times before. Along with the others, he would execute the enemies of Rome in a mighty display of Imperial power. Of course Snoke would make him the forefront of this, as though Kylo Ren is no more than some prized racing stallion or, as of late, a stud.
The dim murmuring dies down, canvas tent-roofs flapping in the wind as a man in a general’s uniform struts into the tunneled sideline. He makes straight for Kylo, not bothering to take off his helmet. The plume barely bests his outrageous height.

“Ah,” he says, a pleased smile stretching his pale lips. “It seems I shall see you take to the battlefield again. I trust it will be illuminating.”

“General,” Kylo says.

A flicker ghosts between Hux’s pale eyes, shaded by the helmet. He cocks his head in slight, offering his chin as he had before. “You have my thanks for hosting my party tomorrow evening. I am so looking forward to it.”

“How could I refuse,” he deadpans in reply, struggling not to stare this man into submission. He does not have the station nor power to do so any longer—to resist could be a death sentence.

Hux scoffs, somewhat laughing as he looks about. The other gladiators have gone back to their own discussion, most likely listening in. But Kylo doesn’t care about that, only withstanding this as long as necessary. “I must say it’s an honor to finally,” he smirks, “meet Snoke’s once-mighty conqueror,” Hux drawls. “I’m sure dispatching of these degenerates is far beneath your potential.”

“I exercise my potential where the Emperor demands,” Kylo answers simply, tone dipped. “Nothing more.”

Hux smiles yet again, a bit wider this time. It digs high into his cheeks like the jaws of a snake, content in contempt. “Quite. Well then, I’ll leave you to it,” he waves of, turning and strutting back from whence he came. “See you on the battlefield.”

“If only,” Kylo grumbles.

Soon enough the Colosseum is roaring with excitement. In honor of Vesta, a mock flame is trotted out onto the field, dramatically worshipped by a group of younger Imperial slaves. When they leave, the horns blare, the drums beat, and a small legion of Roman soldiers march a parade of prisoners into the arena.

The announcer steps out, proclaiming that the enemy’s blood warms the fires of Rome’s hearth. Kylo closes his eyes, if only in an attempt not to roll them, until the gladiators are summoned.

There is no need for the chestplate, nor the mask, so Kylo holds steady his sword and leads the line of gladiators onto the silt.

The sun weighs upon his shoulders like a heavy burden. He recognizes the nationality of these people now. They are Phoenicians, denizens of Carthage across the Mediterranean. It would seem the general had captured half of an entire fleet—quite the victory.

Their skins and palors, like the two he fought the day before, are all various shades. Like Romans, they too must have seen the value in greater numbers, the sheer overwhelming might of an ever-growing empire.

He steps closer, his shadow falling dark upon a shriveled old man. He looks up to him from his chains, eyes sunken and pleading, clinging onto one last shred of hope.

But Kylo Ren knows there is none to be found.

The drums stop, the horns blare, the crowd roars.
The slaughter begins.

Chapter End Notes

[War criminals were usually made a spectacle of during the Roman Empire though either slavery or public execution]

[Romans would rarely travel just for the fun of it, so the roads outside the city were mainly used by soldiers. The roads within the city were also quite narrow, and it was illegal to have a cart because it would obstruct heavy foot traffic]

[Buildings in Rome were primarily build of stone, specifically limestone. This gave it its white, marble-like appearance. Cairo also used limestone as well as mud-brick and sandstone, thus giving it a darker, less pristine appearance]

[The Trajan's Market is known today as the "world's first shopping mall"; it was built to help sustain the rapidly growing Roman population]

[The reason why people are giving Rey odd looks is because of her attire. While Kylo has every right to make her wear whatever he wants, the Roman society would see Rey as a normal citizen at first glance, and subsequently Ahsoka as her servant due to the "shabbier" or more commonplace tunica]

[Bright colors and layers of clothing, especially for women, was a trademark of higher class citizens in Rome]

[Because of the massive population and density, Rome was innovative in many ways, including the culinary. They are known as the first culture to prepare food upon demand for customers, thus making them the essential inventors of fast food!]

[Flamingo tongue and milk-fed snails were considered savory treats in Ancient Rome. And, while flamingos are indigenous to some parts of Egypt, I doubt Rey has ever encountered one]

[Despite the class differences, many gladiators had a form of unionized brotherhood. For example, if a gladiator died, then the unionized gladiators would share some winnings to help out any family he left behind]

[Carthage was the major enemy of the Roman Empire. They would have primarily naval battles on the Mediterranean Sea due to, well, one of them wanting to conquer the other]

Personal note: Did you catch any of the double-entendres I slipped in here?
I just wanna say, thank you all so SO much for all of your amazing support. I'm almost done with my Summer courses (getting to the testing period) and I just want to thank you all for your endless patience. You're the best! 😄

I also noticed the "Glory's Fray" Spotify Playlist got five followers! Holy crap that's so awesome. I'm absolutely buzzing.

Also, just a bit of forewarning, a tag is violated in this chapter. ;) Enjoy~!

Ahsoka considers Rey silently as they continue through Rome, people passing almost merrily by the further they go. Unable to keep it from her mind, Rey eyes the Colosseum nervously.

At one point the buildings begin to cluster, the road growing narrower as it floods with weaving people.

Ahsoka pauses, collecting her thoughts, easing Lux with a stroke of the hand. They have all they need to return back to the young master's villa, plenty to feed not only tomorrow's guests but themselves for a days after. And yet, on this day, she cannot bring herself to leave Rome so soon. Not when Rey’s eyes have grown so big.

“We’ll need to go through the Forum,” she decides, motioning for Rey to stand in the back to watch for sticky-fingered passerby.

“Why’s that?” Rey questions, lingering to stand her new post.

Ahsoka smirks. “Rome is your home now. What better time to learn of it than the first day of Vestalia?”

“I suppose,” Rey agrees distractedly, keeping a weathered eye out. “But… what is Vestalia?”

She chuckles. “You’ll see.”

They continue on until the cluster grows too strong. They circle around the south, still heading eastward, closer to the Colosseum. The road widens here, and Ahsoka leads them to a building of wood walls and limestone foundation. Hay strews about the stoney road and Rey can smell the rank of animals before hearing the soft shuffling of heavy horses.

Ahsoka pays a servant, who waves them through. Slave boys come forward, assisting Lux into a stall and their caravan into a corner. Rey’s heart lurches as the sight, and in her mind she hopes they are as well cared for by their masters as she is.

They exit with light loads, Ahsoka with the denarii secure in her tunica and Rey with the knife tucked into her lap. Weaving through the crowd is much easier on foot, and Rey’s shoulders fall, relaxed as she squints into the bright-white walls of the city.
It’s less than a mile to the Forum. Like the Trajan’s Market, people flit about the smooth road, hopping from building to building with goods and wares carried in woven baskets. Little girls bob beside their mothers, helping carry them further to the east, where Ahsoka directs them now.

As they go, the crowd seems to coagulate before a circular structure with towering pillars. Women, all ages, carry baskets into the temple while others file out with empty ones. Ahsoka and Rey wait in the shade of a nearby wall, looking out into the courtyard of the building. A fountain bubbles and spits, carvings of a donkey etched with ivy along the base.

“What are they doing?” Rey asks.

“Giving offerings to the goddess, Vesta.”

Rey nods. She’d figured as much. They had some temples in Cairo. None this frequented, however. She keeps her tone light as she looks over to Ahsoka, whose eyes have taken on a distant, filmy blue. “What is she the goddess of?” Rey probes.

Ahsoka seems to snap out of it, meeting Rey’s gaze with a patient smile. Her Coptic tongue is smooth and steady. “She is the Roman goddess of the hearth, present in all warm and loving homes,” she explains, turning to gesture to the open curtain. “The flame within is cared for by the vestales. It never goes out.”

“Vestales?” Rey echoes.

Her gaze flickers, jaw tight. “The Vestal Virgins.” She takes Rey’s hand, her loose skin warm and soft despite years of work, a marvel as she leads Rey behind the temple to an ornate building with painted statues of well-covered women leading the way. The crowd is thinner, here.

They enter the garden and Ahsoka releases her to trail her hand reverently along an ivy wreath draped on the wall. Rey considers her, stopping, and realization dawns on her like morning dew, wet and cold and heavy, slow yet sudden. “You know this place.”

Ahsoka closes her eyes, seemingly losing herself in a memory as she rubs the parchment-thick ivy leaf between her fingers. “Plenty of Romans do,” she replies softly. “But yes. This is where I was raised to be a Vestal.”

Rey takes a step closer. “What are they?”

“Faithful servants of Rome,” she replies simply, but the cadence in her voice threatens something deeper. “Keepers of the eternal flame that keeps Rome alive. I was six years old when they took me. Plucked from an Egyptian home by the last Emperor and taught to sustain the flame.” Her eyes open. “And my innocence.”

Considering her openly, Rey moves to stand in front of her mentor, resting in the rippling shades and sunlight of the tree overhead. “Ahsoka… who are you?”

Ahsoka smiles sadly. “No one, Rey. Just like you. In all of this, all of Rome, we are smaller than we know.”

Rey swallows. “That doesn't take away who you are,” she persists. At Ahsoka’s deliberating expression, Rey suddenly sees a younger version of the woman in her pensive gaze. “Please?” she murmurs.

Ahsoka considers her a moment more, then sighs. “So persistent. Alright…”
She was raised here, in the House of the Vestals, from age six. Taught to become a virgin priestess, to never lay or marry, to keep the flame burning. Seven years passed in luxury among her Roman sisters as she steadily forgot the face of her own mother.

Until one night, the flame went out.

“They hunted the priestesses, questioning all six of them in trials,” she recounts, resting her hands in her lap as they sit on a shaded stone bench. Rey sits beside her attentively as she continues solemnly. “They all claimed innocence, but Rome demanded punishment.” Her eyes moisten, only slightly. “I don’t remember the name of the woman they condemned, only the fear. And her fate.”

“What did they do to her?” Rey whispers.

Ahsoka wrings her hands together, wiping them in the lap of her tunica and meeting Rey’s earnest gaze with one of longing and unspeakable loss. “They buried her alive.”

Rey is silent, heart sinking in a sea of dread, not asking questions as Ahsoka tells her what came after.

“The temple requires six priestesses,” she concludes. “They were going to choose one of us. I was thirteen… and I was afraid. Late one night, I snuck out of the house, stole a horse from the nearby stables, and ran. I didn’t know where else to go but where my skin could keep me hidden.”

“Egypt,” Rey supplies at length.

“Yes,” Ahsoka agrees, managing a stiff, gentle smile. She blinks, bright eyes clearing again, and the smile grows a little wider. “By the time I found my way into Rome again they’d forgotten all about me. And, well, here I am.”

Pulled by a strong, invisible force—or, perhaps, the crack in Ahsoka’s voice betraying something broken—Rey lurches forward, wrapping her arms around Ahsoka’s shoulders in a tight embrace.

“Oh!” she chuckles, patting Rey’s back. “Was it something I said?”

Rey shakes her head, pulling back after a gentle squeeze. “In a way. I’m just... thankful for you, Ahsoka. I don’t know what I would have done if you weren’t here to guide me.”

Ahsoka smiles, her eyes squinting slightly, and says nothing. Rey sees it, then, that there is something else she is not telling her.

But she will not press any more today. Already it appears the conversation has taken its toll on the older woman, her weariness evident in pale lips and sinking eyes. They rise and leave together, the temple still frequented but the wonder lost, and Rey follows Ahsoka’s gaze to a not-so-distant hillside draped in large, structured walls, shining like a pearl in the sunlight.

Rey closes her eyes as the sun comes from behind a sparse cloud to shine on her, the scents of dust and salt drowned by warmth and light. She breathes it all in deeply, her feet grounded in a pragmatic mixture of wonder and foreboding unspoken. What was once a ripe, sweet fruit has rotted, and she now understands why Ahsoka would strain to tell her why.

Ahsoka huffs, wearing a new air of contentment she had when they first entered the gates. “Rey?”

She turns to look at her. “Yes?”

“You told me that you were brought into a bathhouse before meeting the young master. I assume it
“Was small?”

Rey blinks, trying to remember. “It was dark, but I assume so. Why?”

Ahsoka smooths her hand along one of her thick, silvery braids, caressing the ridges, a rueful smirk digging into her cheek as she turns her gaze from the hillside to Rey. “Would you like to see a big one?”

They enter the palace grounds freely. The Emperor seems to have demanded the bathhouse be open to the public in honor of Vestalia. His home is glorified as the open curtain of a sacred temple. There is a nervous fluttering in Rey’s belly as they approach the gaping, steaming maw that will not settle. But she is strong, and knows she can push through the painful memories.

Ahsoka says it would be wise of them to clean before guests come, and that they may as well bathe in luxury while they can. Rey, at the prospect of cleaning herself of her own volition, agrees.

They enter and Rey turns to the left, but Ahsoka grabs her arm, halting her. “Oh no, that is the men’s side,” she says, pointing to a sign written in Latin. “I don’t think you’ll want to go in there. Come, this way.”

Rey nods obediently, following Ahsoka to the right. They enter a large chamber, the ceiling opened to the sunshine, tile floors accentuated in sweeping marble the color of jewels. They disrobe in the changing room, where a slave takes charge of watching their belongings with careful curtsey.

Exiting the room, Ahsoka leans over to murmur, “No one here needs to know your status. Understand?”

Folding her arms shyly over her chest, Rey nods and follows a shameless Ahsoka into a small room. There are quite a few women here, though not as much as there could be. The room is warm, and a sense of relaxation begins to seep into her bones. As they sit, Rey attempts to keep herself straight and respectable, like any free Roman woman.

Ahsoka’s calm eases Rey. They move on after a thorough session of warmth and into a room choked with steam. Sweat pools along the nape of Rey’s neck, plastering her loose hair to the skin. She is not a fan of this room—which Ahsoka finds amusing and reassures that she will enjoy the next one when the time comes.

Across the room, a lithe, thin woman with luxuriously-soft hair the color of soil stares at them. Her features are angular, lips pursed, eyes beady and dark as they peer straight into Rey’s. Unnerved, Rey shivers.

They move on to another open space, where the floor is lined with stone benches. Some women sit on the edges, female slaves scraping a shiny substance from their bodies with extreme care. One of them, her face round and soft, dark hair bobbing, approaches them with a polite smile and one of the sharp objects. Rey jolts, prepared to defend herself, but Ahsoka puts a soothing hand on her arm.

“Welcome,” the girl says, ushering them forth. “Please, come inside.”

Trying not to look to Ahsoka for permission, Rey follows, sitting upon the bench as the slave girl
reaches to take a bottle and dip perfumed oil into her hands. The scent is rich and lively, intoxicating. She jumps a bit when the girl begins to rub the oil methodically over her body, fighting to remain still. So unused to being doted upon, it takes effort. To distract herself—and because she’s curious—she asks the girl’s name.

“I’m Rose, Miss,” she says, a sweet, almost shy lilt to her voice. She carefully takes Rey’s hair from its tie, letting it down freely. She slathers more there, too, setting Rey’s skin alight down to her toes. After, Rose begins to work with her tool, gently, methodically scraping away the filth and sweat and oil to leave her skin smooth.

When she’s done, Rey rises. “Thank you, Rose.”

Rose blinks, looking up from her knees as though dazed. She smiles widely. “Of course, Miss.”

With a slight wave farewell, Rey follows Ahsoka out into the widest room of the bathhouse. The tile floor becomes a pit of water, flowing in and out with a constant supply from the rear. Mirrors line the walls as the sunlight casts down, illuminating and echoing each splash and sound.

Women wade throughout the pool, swimming, bobbing, laughing amongst one another. Ahsoka enters first, the green mog swallowing her voluptuous frame. Rey dips in a toe, whines a bit at the cold, but otherwise wades in to the waist, mouth gaping open and closed like a fish as she cries out in delighted shock. They smile and Rey is caught laughing at herself.

When they are dressed and free again, out into open air, Rey sighs wistfully, tired and worn and ready for a restful night in her bed. The sun has already begun its decent. They may make it back before nightfall, if they hurry, but the thought is swept away by the seemingly endless stretch of glimmering beauty before her.

Again, in the distance, Rey sees the orange glow of the sun blaze through the Colosseum, and her tongue sours. She swallows the bitter taste, intent upon leaving it behind in exchange for the green, rolling hills of the countryside.

Of home.

---

Kylo had hurried home after everything was finished, all too eager to escape. He can feel the weariness in his bones, every limb settling into the marrow like a tight vise.

He sits upon a chair in the atrium, leaning back, tapping an impatient finger against the arm of the chair. They should have been here by now. Ahsoka knows all the best traders in Rome. With her whiles she should have made quick work of the chore, especially with Rey there to help her.

His mind circles back to Rey, seizing. Could it be that something happened? It’s not unheard of that beautiful slave women are pulled from the side of the road by vile cretins of the city slums.

Kylo’s blood boils, heat rising in his veins at the mere thought of it. The sun must have cooked his brain in the arena, but even so he felt no such burning today until this moment. Against his will he imagines her, walking on the stone road, a man’s arms trapping her from behind, covering her mouth and dragging her into the shadows, pinning her down while she screams—

He wipes the sweat from his brow with a growl, almost gnashing his teeth. His fist trembles and he holds it tightly closed to his chin, urging it to remain still, for his pulse to calm, but it does not.
He is on his feet in an instant when the door opens to the sound of high-pitched chatter, the women walking in from the stables with smiles that fall as soon as he strides forward.

“Where were you?” he snaps.

Ahsoka pauses, Rey stiff beside her. “In the city,” Ahsoka says simply.

Kylo glares down at her, leaking an unstauchable anger. Every vein in his body is trembling under the weight of his relief, free from the strain of worry his most trusted servant has unwittingly placed upon him. However, there remains no room in his tone for mercy. “Doing what?”

Ahsoka’s Latin is tepid, her hands clasping in front of her hips as she answers calmly, meeting his eyes. “We gathered the supplies we needed. I took her to the Forum, then the royal bathhouse to prepare for our guests—”

“You… what?”

His snarl seems to catch her off guard. “I took her to the royal bathhouse, Young Master.”

Kylo’s eyes blaze with fury, and Rey blinks. His face, normally long and somber, has sharpened to the burning tip of a fire in the forge. His eye twitches as he rattles off in a slew of Latin and violent gestures, then the two of them are screaming in each other’s face.

When Rey moves to back away, Kylo’s focus snaps from Ahsoka to her. Suddenly, his face seems to soften, his heaving chest slowing, and the lock of hair strewn over his face ceases to quiver from his harsh exhales. He tears his gaze from her to Ahsoka’s feet, and at his quiet word Ahsoka turns in a huff and disappears towards her chambers, slamming the door behind her.

Rey swallows, looking down, keeping her hands at her sides, waiting for her turn to be repremanded.

But it doesn’t come. He wipes his mouth, righting his posture. “What supplies did you get?”

Rey tells him, recalling everything in as careful detail as possible.

“Good,” he mutters, breath finally evening. His eyes fall back to her. Her hair is still drying, in need of brushing. Her skin looks soft and supple in the gentle light of oil lamps. He closes his mouth, summoning his composure. “Go. Unload the supplies and see yourself to bed. There is much to do tomorrow.”

He turns away, prepared to lumber to his lonely chambers, when Rey calls out. “Master?”

Kylo pauses, looking back as she comes closer, her eyes searching his face and settling on his cheek. “You have…” she points. When he doesn’t understand, she stands before him, lifting her hand to wipe a thumb on his cheek.

He watches her face when she comes near, heart stilling in his chest. Everything freezes yet pulses too fast as the pad of her thumb caresses his cheek in one, two gentle swipes. Her scent wafts up to him, shooting through his body as he breathes in deeply, stealing away the rich, heady scent of perfumed oil and sunshine.

Rey can’t tell the substance. It’s dry and brown and crusty, like dirt. He’s disheveled and smells of exertion, the heat of his body distracting. With a nervous half-smile, she withdraws, stepping back, stomach fluttering. “There.”
He watches her go with wide eyes, unaware of his parted lips as she bows her head and turns, making her way to the stable. He watches her back as she leaves, gaze lingering on the hem of her skirt until she’s out of sight.

Like a sleepwalker, he meanders back into his room, closing the door behind him with a shaky breath. Her touch lingers on his skin, searing, hot as a brand. He touches it. The weariness he felt combats with a new sense of liveliness, every drop of blood at war with the other.

Sighing, he begins to strip, willing himself to calm. His panic over her echoes deep in his chest, palpitating, and he tries to smother it with the reassurance of her here in his house. Safe. He curses Ahsoka for bringing her so close to Snoke, where Rey could have easily been discovered. Who knows what would have happened to her, then?

He tosses his tunic onto his covers, but a flash of white catches his attention. The silk peeks out from underneath his belt.

He reaches out to pull it into his hand, thumbing over the silk. Her name plays over in his mind, and suddenly his heart is hammering again.

But the heat in his veins is different now. It’s a strangling, forbidden kind. The kind that swells.

Exhaling shakily, Kylo crashes down into his chair, fireplace mere embers as the darkness outside begins to settle into its bed on the horizon. As he stares into the fabric, an idea forms in his mind. A dangerous one, but an idea nonetheless.

And what an idea it is. Against his will he pictures her again, only now she is alone, shrouded by steam, her bare stomach glistening with oil.

His eyes flutter closed, his breathing growing shallow. The vision continues, his fist tightens around the cloth, clutching onto it as control begins to slip. Now she’s reclining, her eyes fluttered closed in bliss, her back arched as water rolls between her breasts.

He hisses, looking down. Unconsciously, his fingers have begun to stroke the rising bulge in his lap through the thin fabric of his loincloth.

Reclining, Kylo Ren considers himself, the war in his blood carrying its battle south. In the lapse of a second, the absence of any second thought, his long, thick fingers dip beneath the hem of his subligar.

With a grunt, he lays his head back, refusing to look at himself as he pulls free, shaking fingers wrapping loosely around the base of his member. He sighs, squeezing once, twice, each one sending a pulse of ecstasy straight into his chest, burning like coals in his abdomen.

His dark eyes screw shut, and he bites back a moan as he begins to move his hand against his length in long, slow pumps. Wetting his lips, his jaw goes slack as he returns to the image of her.

Her skin is rich and relishing, kissed by the sun, soft and pliant. Droplets cling to it, to the sweet, obscure freckles on her shoulders, over the swell of her breasts.

He begins to pump faster, clinging to the image of her emerging from the water. Her eyes are dark and consuming, looking at him from under her dripping lashes as she walks closer. A nymph, a siren, tempting him with the lush pull of a smile along her pretty pink lips, her slender hand reaching to beckon him to her.

A moan escapes him, built from the bottom of his throat. Lust spills molten lead down his naked
chest, a bead of arousal seeping from the head of his cock. He swipes it, returning it to his shaft as he pumps in earnest, the wet slap of his fist against his skin as he arches, every muscle tight, baring his teeth as the pleasure begins to mount.

She reaches up, cupping her breasts, thumbs caressing her peaks into a sweet pucker. Her head tilts back to expose her long, slender throat, and he is lost in a sudden rush of excitement. In one, swift movement, he lifts the silk in his hand to his face, inhaling the lingering traces of her skin over and over with every hushed, desperate gasp.

He begins to tighten, his body wild with traitorous intentions, and he clings to the sensation of her thumb on his cheek. The image of the wide, endless beauty of her eyes. The memory pushes him over, his seed rendered from him as he thrusts his head back against the chair, lost in lonely bliss as the thick strain streaks down the back of his knuckles, coating his thigh.

Catching his breath, his arm falls limp to the side as he slumps, loose fingers tenderly cradling the silk against his palm.

Chapter End Notes

[The Roman Forum, like a central plaza, is a popular tourist destination. It was the original marketplace in the heart of Rome, surrounded by various temples. It is located roughly two miles from the Colosseum]

[As mentioned before, Vestalia was the celebration of the Summer solstice. Also called Hearthswarming. It was intended to celebrate and give thanks to the Roman goddess Vesta (in Greek, Hestia), goddess of domesticity, the hearth, and virginity]

[Vesta's favorite animal is a donkey, according to mythology, as it saved her from being taken advantage of with its startling bray. The donkey also represented living plentifully, as they would help bakers by turning machines to make bread]

[The temple of Vesta was located on the Eastern side of the Forum, and opened to the public ONLY during Vestalia. It was round and tall to accommodate the flame that was never allowed to go out, for Rome feared that letting it die would bring misfortune upon them. So they appointed six Vestal virgin priestesses to keep the flame burning constantly. They lived in the House of the Vestals, located just behind the temple, where new ones would be trained in the event of a new one needing to be appointed]

[Ivy, an evergreen plant, is a symbol of fidelity and affection, while the wreath symbolizes eternity and victory over death. Vestals would hang ivy wreaths as a symbol of devotion to their faith]

[If the flame went out, the law stated that it must have been caused by a Vestal breaking her sacred vow. The one found guilty would be lowered into a tomb with some food and water, and be left to die. Or, alternatively, be forced to swallow molten lead]

[The hill where Snoke's palace (actually called a "Palatium") is located lies on Palatine Hill, a respectable wealthy neighborhood barely a mile away from the Roman Forum]
There were an estimated 900 bathhouses in Ancient Rome, all supplied with fresh water from the famous Roman aqueducts. The ones belonging to the wealthy had many rooms with various purposes, some with walls decorated with mirrors. The warm room, for relaxation, was the "Tepidarium", the second, a sauna to clear pores, was the "Caldarium", and the third, with the large cool bath for rinsing and socializing, was the "Frigidarium"

The tool Rose uses is called a "strigle", a sharp, almost scythe-like hook slaves would use to scrape dirt and sweat from the body.

[BONUS: Blood turns brown when it dries]

The theme for this chapter is "Fix Me" by 10 Years. Listen to the Glory's Fray Spotify playlist here!}


Thank you all so so SO much for all of your amazing support! June has been a really stressful month for me with my Summer courses, but giving my free time to all of you brings me such joy. Soon I will be able to pump out one a day like in the beginning—which I am looking forward to!

Also a quick update: The entire fic has been plotted. I'll keep it ambiguous for now as to how many chapters there are, but all I have to say is you may want to strap in for the long haul. *cringes at cliche* (please forgive me, it is 3am on a school night) >///< Anyway yeah I love you guys so much thank you for reading my trash.

WARNING: THIS CHAPTER INCLUDES AN ASSAULT OF A LECHEROUS NATURE. MOST OF YOU SAW IT COMING BUT HERE'S YOUR WARNING ANYWAY~

“Remember what I taught you?” Ahsoka probes lowly, lifting the testo with both hands. Steam seeps out, the rich scent of pork and beef flooding the Culina.

Rey nods, continuing her dispassionate chopping. The sun is already beginning to descend beyond the window. Their guests will arrive soon, and everything is almost prepared, yet her heart beats unsteadily in her chest.

“Rey?”

She snaps out of her thoughts, carefully brushing the cured olives onto a sorted dish of lettuce, melons, and mallow leaves. “Yes, Ahsoka. I remember.”

As she reaches to begin with the cucumbers, a warm hand wraps around her wrist, halting her movements. Ahsoka squeezes gently, her voice as low and firm as her grip. “Egypt and Rome are not the same place. These men are dangerous, Rey. Remember that.”

Swallowing, Rey nods, tamping down her nerves. “I will.”

“What was that?” a deep voice calls from the open doorway. Rey and Ahsoka turn to see their master, freshly-shaven and grim, crossing his arms.

Ahsoka says something in Latin, and his eyes fall on Rey.

She puts down the knife and stands at attention as he comes closer, almost looming over her as his tone darkens. “I want you,” he murmurs, “to stay in here. You will serve dishes when Ahsoka tells you. You will keep your eyes down and speak to no one—not even me. Understand?”

His Greek is so soft that every word feels like a caress against her cheek, and Rey suppresses a shiver. Meeting his intense gaze with a nervous stare, she folds her lips and nods once. “I can do it.”
Kylo’s eyes rove hers for a moment, searching, before he straightens. “Ahsoka, is everything ready?”

“Almost,” she sighs, rubbing the back of her neck. “The main course may take some time. But I trust your guest will waste plenty of that.”

He scoffs, turning away. “Very well. Just get it done.”

When he leaves, Ahsoka throws a nasty look after him. Rey notices, returning to her job, chopping faster. A part of her wants to ask if everything is alright, but the energy between her master and her mentor is far too palpable. It would be like offering her hand to a snake.

So, instead, she does what she is told. She stays silent, keeps her eyes down, and tries to slow her pounding heart.

Kylo stands at the open entrance of his villa, breathing in, summoning his composure. The breeze plays at his hair as he stares down the bend of the road, waiting.

His mind wanders back to the night before, and the heavy heat of guilt gathers in his chest. His hands tighten into fists, nestled into his crossed arms, holding the reproach close. It was a moment of weakness, he thinks. Nothing more.

She’s only a slave—not worth the temptation, and if that, not a second thought about it.

So why does he feel like he’s dishonored her?

The thunderous sound of galloping hooves roars over the hillside, three Imperial horses rounding the treeline and trotting up to the villa.

Kylo remains in the doorway as they approach, Hux at the front. Without his galea, the pale man drops down to the ground, his white toga washing away the slim pallor of his skin all the more. His orange hair ruffles in the Summer wind, blurring with the waning sunlight, casting shadows on his smug smile. “Master Ren,” he greets.

“General Hux.”

The other two men drop down from their horses. One an older-looking officiant in a tunic and the other a young, sharp-faced man wearing a short-sleeved linen tunic common among legionaries.

Kylo masks his face with as much pleasantness as possible—which is essentially the minute unscrewing of his tight frown. “Come,” he says. “Let me put your horses away.”

“Have you no slaves to do that?” The older man asks gruffly, squinting suspiciously at Kylo.

He doesn’t turn, continuing to lead them around the house. He can feel Hux’s beaded eyes focused intently on him. “I do. But I prefer to treat guests myself.”

“Ah,” the man replies, somewhat appeased.

As they enter the atrium from the stable, the two men introduce themselves. The first as the illustrious Captain Canady, now senator under Snoke, whom Kylo has never heard of. The second, Thanisson, a petty soldier in one of Hux’s legions. Though, by the approving glance from Hux, Kylo doubts the young man is entirely unimpressive. The boy seems wily—perfectly suitable for achieving his general’s less-combative goals.
There’s an air of succession about him, but Kylo says nothing about it.

Eventually Ahsoka enters, holding a clay jug by its base and slender neck. “My lords,” she bows, gesturing to the nearby foot table beside the atrium pool.

They make for the waiting chalices, Hux offering his first. As Ahsoka pours, he stares intently at her face, lips scrunched as if attempting to recall some distasteful parable. The moment passes, however, as the men take a tentative sip.

Hux hums, licking his teeth behind closed lips. “Very fine,” he praises, returning the rim to his pale lips.

“I do enjoy a good mulsum,” Canady concurs.

The boy says nothing, gulping his swallow with reddening cheeks.

“I’m sure you’re hungry,” Kylo says, turning to the open curtains. The courtyard lies visible beyond the Tablinum, coated with sparkling sunshine and gleaming in the emerging evening dim. “My house has prepared a meal for you.”

Hux’s eyes narrow in slight, but he follows behind as Kylo leads the parade through the courtyard towards the Triclinium with steps eager to get things over with. As they go, Hux appraises the various trees and well-kept footstones. “And you garden this as well?” he probes.

“That, General, is a task I leave to my staff,” Kylo answers, a dark tone of finality laced through each syllable. To his pleasure, the man offers no protest beyond a scandalized lift of the brow.

They enter the Triclinium, sandaled feet tapping along the mosaic stone. Rey and Ahsoka did quite well rearranging the place—as he hardly ever sees fit to use it—dusting off the floors and ornate tapestries of a time long before his life in Rome.

The men recline on their respective lounges, Hux taking his place on Kylo’s right as Ahsoka trails in after them to refill their goblets. She makes herself scarce, disappearing in the direction of the kitchen once the last drop is poured.

“I must say,” Hux drawls, swirling the wine in his chalice contemplatively. “For such a small staff, you keep your house well.”

Kylo forces his jaw to relax at the man’s back-handed compliment. “Indeed. You are quite perceptive, General.”

Canady snorts derisively. “One has to be to conquer so many of those filthy Phoenicians,” he grunts, the sound echoing off his mulsum.

“The general is very wise,” the boy, Thanisson, says with quiet resolution. Kylo is almost surprised.

“Well then.” Hux accepts their praises as his due, squinting with narcissistic pleasure as he lifts his chalice to Kylo. “I should thank you for your hospitality. As soon as I heard of your recent,” his lip quirks, “accomplishments, I felt the gods impart me the wisdom to personally thank the executioner of my enemies.”

“Jupiter was with us,” Canady nods soberly.

There is the smallest of twitches on Hux’s cheek that fades in moments. Kylo nods graciously yet
remains silent as the three men continue to drone on about Hux’s various successes in the expansion of Rome. Kylo can sense the man’s sense of strategy, his insides recoiling at the image of a winding snake. He sips his mulsum to wash it away, pressing his expression into one of impassivity and occasional contemplation—pretending to listen until the first course arrives.

Rey and Ahsoka enter together, the latter with a newly-filled jug.

“Ah,” Hux says, pulling out his napkin. The others follow suit. “Finally.”

Rey kneels before the table, keeping her eyes low as she silently sets the tray of fruits, vegetables, and boiled eggs onto the center. Ahsoka takes her stance behind Kylo, waiting with a wet cloth as Rey bows and scurries out.

Kylo’s eyes trail after her, pride and relief flickering in his chest. Though she is a defiant creature, she follows orders quite well. This night may go better than he thought.

Hux reaches out to take his picking with three fingers, not waiting for Kylo. Slurping the white of the egg into his mouth, the man chews with slow civility, then holds up his hand for Ahsoka to wipe quickly.

The woman continues her rounds in silence, occasionally drawing the glare of the guests when she is slow to wipe their sticky fingers clean. When they’ve finished she leaves in quick strides, returning alongside Rey for their second course of soups.

Rey sets the bowl before Kylo first, and he can see her fingers shaking even as her grip remains steady. A part of him, not as distant as he’d once thought, longs to reach out and still them.

Next she sets it before Hux. As his eyes fall upon the man, Kylo’s blood runs hot under the collar of his dark tunic. His guest of honor is staring openly upon Rey, the broad of his finger brushing transfixed along his lip. His bright eyes follow her out the door this time, drifting down until she’s faded from sight.

Hux inhales the heady scent of lentils and leeks critically as he drags the spoon to his lips, broth dribbling along the floor. He doesn’t notice Kylo’s glare.

Ahsoka does.

As an elder of his charge, Ahsoka knows quite a few things about her young master. One of them being when he is setting to do something he ought not. Seeing an opportunity to pacify it, she refills the goblets and makes for the Culina as Canady laughs uproariously at his own joke.

Rey jumps when Ahsoka enters, her eyes wide. “Are they already finished?”

“No,” Ahsoka grunts, coming over to inspect the final dish. It’s an elegant spread Rey has created, the various slices of fish and pork arranged around sweet plums and a clay dish of garum. “Ah, excellent work,” she beams, nodding with approval.

Rey gushes under her praise. “You don’t know how hard it is not to take a bite,” she chuckles.

“Oh, I see. Here,” Ahsoka shrugs, picking up a thin slice of smoked tuna and popping it in her mouth. “It’s not hard at all.”
Biting her lip, debating, Rey gives in, taking a chunk of pork she’s had her eye on since it finished cooking and slipping it past her lips, moaning softly as the rich juices seep deliciously to the back of her teeth.

“I will take this one in alone,” Ashoka says seriously, gesturing to the spread.

Rey blinks at her, gingerly wrapping the knife back into her stola after wiping it clean. “Why?”

Thinking it best not to unnerve the girl further, Ahsoka lays a warm hand on her shoulder. “The dinner is almost through. Soon the men will grow dizzy with their full bellies and retire, and the faster we begin to clean, the faster we can retire ourselves,” she winks.

Rey sighs, smiling softly. They have been on their feet since dawn, restless along the house making final preparations and carefully avoiding the tempest of their master’s lingering frustration, and to rest sounds like a long-forgotten dream remembered. But her thoughts return to Ren like a clap of thunder, and she stills. “Is that… alright with him?”

Ahsoka scoffs, more of a laugh. “Don’t worry. I’m sure he will want you to stay in here until they’ve gone.” With that, she takes the platter and strides out, leaving Rey to stare dejectedly after her.

When Ahsoka returns alone, setting down the tray, Kylo meets her eyes with a glimmer of gratitude, letting the silence pass between them in rectifying peace. Sometimes it feels as though she can read his thoughts. While it can be jarring, and a bit irritating, she never fails to meet his unspoken wishes.

He eats a bit more at ease now, sipping on mulsum and slathering his pork in garum, enjoying the pleasant taste as it trickles down his throat, falling into his warm stomach. He reclines further, letting Hux go on about some centuries-old poet Kylo long forsok for any measure of wisdom while Canady laughs uproariously at Thanisson’s red cheeks.

As he speaks, Hux’s eyes occasionally drift to the door. Kylo notices, pausing before a long drag of his wine. “Something wrong, General?”

“Mm, yes,” he croons, a mirthful glint in his eye. “Where is that girl? Your other slave. I could have sworn she would be serving dessert.”

The way he speaks returns the heat to Kylo’s blood, but he forces himself into stiff composure. “She is no one of consequence,” he murmurs, sipping casually.

“And still my hunger persists,” Hux says with a wave of his hand, a dark playfulness lilting his words with inquiry.

The heat grows to a boil as Kylo swallows, his mouth choked and dry, heavy with the honey-taste of the wine. He fixes Hux a warning glare. “Patience, General.”

Hux reclines in his chaise, gaze thoughtful, lip threatening a snarl before his feathers ease from their ruffle. Ahsoka glances at him warily.

After a moment, Hux places his goblet upon the table, moving to rise. Kylo halts mid-reach for another slab of pork. “Where are you going?”

Hux stands, pressing a hand to his belly, the cloth of his toga wrinkling. “I fear the garum does not
agree with me,” he says pitifully, as if mourning the imperfection of his evening. “Perhaps the cool
night air will put me at ease. I will return shortly.”

As he leaves, both Ahsoka and Kylo glare after him. Once he vanishes from sight, Kylo gestures
with his fingers, and Ahsoka does not hesitate.

Rey sets down the final crate in the storeroom, clapping her hands free of shavings and residue.
Everything has finally been put away, outside of a small plate Rey left for her and Ahsoka. Already
she can picture the gossip, picture the mirth in the woman’s face as she tells her how Ren managed
to bear their guests.

At that thought, her heart sinks. Ahsoka said Ren didn’t want her in the Triclinium. She’s done all
he’d asked. She didn’t talk, didn’t look up… had she failed in some way she doesn’t understand?
Embarrassed him, or worse, disappointed him?

Rey frowns as she rises from her crouch, torn. While the part of her that still resents being his slave
simmers like a coal in her belly, she can’t deny that he’s better than her last master. Or any she’s
come across, for that matter. Plutt dealt with traders, mostly, all whom handled slaves with much
less outward… tenderness.

Pushing it from her mind, Rey focuses instead on the food waiting in the kitchen, and exits the
storeroom.

There is a man at the counter.

Rey freezes, eyes wide. His head snaps up to look at her, bright, piercing gaze sweeping languidly
over her. Her mouth goes dry, heart hammering as she remembers her master’s instruction.
Quickly, she folds her hands in front of her, bowing her head and staring at the floor, hoping he
will simply leave.

But it seems fate would not be so simple. He slithers closer, voice oozing like oil from his lips. “Tu
ista.”

Rey swallows, willing her heart to slow. It disobeys.

His voice grows cold as he stops short in front of her. “Responde mihi, Servula,” He spits.

Rey stays rooted still, struggling not to run for the door. She can smell the wine on his breath, the
lingering stench of eggs and lentils, and something dangerously close to carrion. In her mind she
repeats her master’s instructions. Don’t look don’t speak don’t look don’t—

“Machilla,” he grounds. Suddenly, in a blur of movement, his arm snakes out, hand lunging to
grasp her throat. Shocked, Rey’s eyes meet his. They are blistering and blue, as unforgiving and
desolate as the Egyptian sky. “Quomodo tute me non consequi audesne?!“ he rushes, breath hot on
her face.

She gags and chokes, the sound cut off as he tightens his hold, pushing her back against the wall
and using his free hand to pin her right.

He chuckles down at her, hair falling in a single bright strand down his face. He’s shaking,
trembling as a satisfied smile plays on the edge of his mouth. “Ah. Serva… etiam… suffer meam
saevitiam,” he whispers, coming closer.

Her vision goes hazy as he tightens his hold, her instincts finally surging. Her free hand drifts to her
middle, fingers only just finding the hard edge of the knife, when the man is yanked back roughly by the collar of his toga.

Rey coughs, her lungs shuddering as she gasps, holding her heart inside her chest as her vision clears, and sees him.

All she can see of his face is the rippling, furious snarl before he wheels on Hux, shoving him harshly towards the door with both arms. They argue in Latin, the sound dim in Rey’s ears, as she follows them with her eyes. It feels like his voice is growing louder, or softer, or some combination of both. But her head is swimming, struggling to reorient.

When he returns she reaches for her knife, but upon recognizing the soft waves and dark eyes the thread of panic finally untangles, and she relaxes—as much as she is able.

His voice is clipped, hushed, like a warning or a threat. “Go to your chambers. Now.”

At his furious command, Rey finds no time to reply, prodding her tender throat and hurrying into the safety of her room, shutting the door tightly behind her.

Kylo Ren burns with intrepid fury, exiting the kitchen to find Hux skulking by the wall, watching him with smug contempt. “You should teach your slaves to be more respectable,” he says, picking off stray dust from his toga.

Like an enraged bull, Kylo’s chest and torso expand and contract with every breath. “She’s not yours. You have no claim to her.”

“I’d assumed my host would be more accommodating—”

Like lightning, Kylo lunges, grabbing fistfuls of the general’s toga and pulling him closer. The man is left standing precariously on his toes. Kylo's voice lowers dangerously, teeth bared as he growls, “Don’t... touch her.”

Hux’s impenetrable decorum suddenly addles. “But she—”

“I don’t care,” Kylo interrupts, eyes blazing as he releases the general with another shove. “She is mine. My property, which you will not steal from me.”

Hux looks him up and down before straightening, running a hand to smooth back his hair. He tugs his toga free of wrinkles. “Very well,” he says, clearing his throat. His face smooths down to an unreadable expression. “Shall we, then?” he gestures for the Triclinium.

“No.” He points to the entrance of the villa.

Hux fixes him a cold glare. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“I would,” Kylo says simply, hand clenching into a fist at his side. The vision of Hux’s hand around Rey’s neck makes him want to do the same to the general, to squeeze until his pasty face turns blue. His face twitches, neck trembling with his thin restraint as he enunciates, “Get out.”

Hearing the commotion, his two compatriots stand half-drunk in the doorway, confused as to why their host has transformed from complicit calm into an unholy rage.

Hux purses his lips. “You will regret this,” he threatens simply.

Kylo sucks in a breath, “Leave.”
“...‘No one of consequence,’ eh?” Hux murmurs, turning and beginning his trek through the courtyard. Silver moonlight fights with the shimmering oil lamps across his brow, shadows clashing against his face as he jabs a finger in Kylo’s direction. “In the words of Cicero, ‘the Brute is guided by Instinct, while the Wise are by Reason.’ I advise you remember that next time you see me, Solo.”

It’s the final straw. “Go!”

The other two almost leap into action, spurring Hux out through the Tablinum and past the atrium. The sound of horses riding fades into the distance, leaving them in silence beyond the flickering flames and ragged sound of Kylo’s breathing.

Ahsoka comes to stand beside him. “Young Ma—”

He doesn’t stay to hear the rest, striding forward purposefully to the closed door of Rey’s chambers. He doesn’t knock, either, pushing his way inside. She jumps, that knife still in her hand, the red prominent on her slender neck.

The sight alone makes him long for the arena.

She stands before him, bowing her head before he has a chance to speak. “I’m sorry, Master. Whatever I did wrong—”

“No,” he cuts her off, holding up his hand. “No apologies. Just listen.”

Rey nods, keeping her eyes penitently to the floor.

He sighs through his nose, heart finally slowing, and cards a thick hand through his hair. He bites his cheek. “Ahsoka told me what happened. I came when I could, but,” his jaw tightens, “I will not always be able to. You can’t speak Latin...”

Rey shuts her eyes tight, fighting back the sting. This is it. This is when he’ll say I’m not enough. I should have known he would never—

“So I’m going to teach you.”

Rey’s heart stills, and she rises to meet his eyes incredulously. “You’re... what?”

There’s a sudden seriousness in his eyes, grave importance shrouded with the brand of determination she’s come to recognize in him. “You need a teacher. Ahsoka will be too busy with her duties, so it will have to be me.”

Her mouth falls open as she gapes at him. “I don’t... I don’t understand... Are you saying you want me to stay?”

His face softens, the hardness around his eyes fading as he dares a step closer, reaching out. His fingers brush hers, warm and strong as he carefully pries the knife from her hand, voice low and intimate. “Of course I do.”

Rey could fill an ocean with all the blood her heart has pounded through her today, and when he speaks it feels any vein could burst. Taking a breath, steadying herself as he allows her space, she searches within herself, comforted by the memory of his actions, the warmth of his reassurance, and all her doubts of his tenderness are scattered beyond recollection.

So she nods once. “When do we start?”
[A "testo" was like the clay version of a pot cover meant for trapping steam]

[A Roman legion was made up of anywhere from 4,000 to 6,000 legionaries (or soldiers). It was not uncommon for some to be shown favor by their superiors and granted promotions]

[Mulsum is a white distilled wine mixed with honey. It was a year-round drink of celebration and good will]

[Jupiter (Greek: Zeus) was considered king of the gods, and most victories in war were actually credited to him rather than Aries (which is weird but okay)]

[The "Triclinium" was the formal dining room of the Roman villa. Three chaise lounges (called "klinai") formed a "U" shape with a square table in the center. Diners would recline on the couches as they ate and drank, eating from the center with three fingers]

[The orientation of the couches was an inclination of social status. The host sat at the middle, or "head" of the table, while a guest of honor sat on a lower-oriented kline at their "right hand", closer to the table and therefore the food]

[Slaves at dinner parties had two different jobs: Keeping things clean and bringing out food. Though it was customary for guests to bring their own napkins, slaves would use a damp cloth to constantly clean hands. (The napkins were brought to carry home extra food or, sometimes, a gift from their host)]

[In my research I found that a Roman dinner party had three meals and then desert. They would begin with a light salad and eggs, followed by a soup, then a meaty dish, and a fruity dessert. The food was cut into pieces so they could eat with their fingers more easily (spoons were only used for soup)]

["Garum" is a popular type of fish sauce. Originating in Ancient Greece, garum is fermented Mediterranean fish used for salting and preserving meats, soups, and sometimes vegetables]

[It was actually illegal to assault another person's slave. However, it wasn't a human rights issue so much as a property issue. To take a female slave against her master's will would mean the equivalent of stealing, punishable by death. That being said, it was commonly expected for male guests to be gifted "time" with a female slave in the house]

{I would love to thank Allytsuki for providing the Latin translations for Hux. The bashing against Cicero was especially for her, as he would constantly degrade other philosophers for his less-than-inspiring Ancient Roman Twitter handles. Here are the English translations in order:}

"You there" (speaking to female)
"Answer me, slave girl"
"Bitch, how dare you defy me?!!"
"Ah. Slave (female)... Yes... Feel my wrath"

Thanks for sticking through that, everyone. I know it's not always comfortable. Thanks for reading and have a fantastic day! *hugs*
See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Are you sure you can’t stay?”

Sighing, Ahsoka shakes her head. “I’ve already lost two days observing Vestalia. I can’t miss any more,” she says, smiling sadly upon Rey. The two stand in the stable on either side of Lux’s saddle, making final adjustments. “Besides, I have a house of my own to see to.”

Rey looks down, focusing on the slow work of her fingers. “I understand.” Silently, she strokes Lux’s mane, weighing her next words carefully. “...Are those the only reasons?”

“Perhaps.” The mentor’s bright, wise eyes hone in on Rey’s face. “I think it would be best if I return after the Ides. I’m sure you can handle him until then?”

Nodding, Rey pushes down the heat in her neck, leading Lux out of the stable and helping Ahsoka onto her saddle.

The woman wraps the reins expertly around her hand, a tight-lipped smile cast down into Rey’s nervous gaze. Lux sways impatiently. “You’ve lived here seven days, Rey. I know you can manage seven more.”

Rey looks out into the dawning sunshine, squinting as the cloudy horizon blue begins to clear. This will be her first day apart from the woman since her arrival; she can feel a primal fear bubbling under the surface of her skin at the thought of it.

Yet, with her words, Rey takes a breath, reminding herself of the truth. In this short time she has learned much. She keeps house, now. She cooks. She feeds the horses. She… pleases her master. It’s more than she’d ever thought possible, and it is hers.

“I will, Ahsoka,” Rey promises. “Even longer than that.”

They hold out their hands at the same time, grasping, squeezing a silent goodbye before Ahsoka leads Lux off to trot down the road, the echo of her hooves fading with the sight of her.

Rey waits several heartbeats before returning to the house—its walls suddenly dim, looming, and watchful. But it does not frighten her. She has scrubbed and polished its undercarriage like a newborn babe, seen its creases and crevices, and knows it cannot harm her.

Decidedly, she enters the culina, lighting the coals and setting to breakfast. Reading the short list Ahsoka left for her, Rey decides on one of the more interesting suggestions.
The instructions are easy enough. She gathers eggs, flour, oil, salt, and a small saucer of milk. Beating the eggs, she stirs in the rest, careful not to waste, and pours a careful sample onto the skillet. When the underside turns a golden brown, she smiles, flipping it over to finish and adding more until the batter is scooped out completely.

The smell is divine, and Rey’s mouth is watering by the time she carefully laves each layer with honey. A small light in the back of her mind says she would like to be more inventive, but following Ahsoka’s instruction is probably best on a day like this.

*You can’t understand Latin, so I’m going to teach you.*

He’d insisted her training begin in the morning, after she rest. The lingering ache of the general’s attack throbs against her jugular whenever she thinks about it, but is otherwise no more than some harmless after-effect. She’s faced more fearsome foes in the past, been dealt harsher blows. She can handle men like General Hux.

Master Ren, on the other hand…

He was ferocious. The image of his wrath still burns behind her eyes, heavy with an uncompromising, unwavering weight. Rey is quite aware of his strength and towering physique, yet the added intensity of his anger was a sight she felt no preparation for.

The way he’d so brutishly knocked her assailant away, as if he were no more than some meddlesome pest, had not registered its severity until late in the night as she lay awake in her bed, unable to sleep with it. The heave of his broad shoulders, the sheer might she had witnessed, was all-encompassing.

Her master had saved her—in more ways than one. She’d reached for the knife in her stola without thinking, prepared to retaliate. If she had somehow managed to stab the general, fatally or not… well, she wouldn’t have a neck to strangle anymore.

And now he wants to teach her, to prevent something like that from happening again. If she didn’t know better, she could almost convince herself that he… that he cares about her well-being. That he’s not just ensuring their secret isn’t uncovered.

Sucking in a steadying breath, Rey picks up the platter and makes for his room. As she comes closer, the door opens, startling her into holding her breath when he appears.

Master Ren steps out, clad in his usual black tunic. His hair is rumpled, she notes, his eyes sunken and sleepless, but otherwise maintaining their usual attentiveness. They fall to the plate in her hands and he blinks. He wets his lip contemplatively before looking at her, motioning towards the heart of the house. “I will take that in the tablinum,” he says, walking past her.

She follows dutifully, ducking under his arm as he holds the curtain open, and goes to set the stack of cakes on the table. However, to her chagrin, the table is cluttered with different scrolls, some blank sheets of parchment prepared before a stool.

A large hand snatches the plate from under her, and she watches as he bounces it in his palm. His eyes find her from beneath sooty lashes, lifted on the edges as if amused. “I take it Ahsoka left.”

Rey nods, fighting a nervous frown. “Yes.”

“Just as well,” he grunts, setting his breakfast on the chaise lounge in the corner. He looks over his shoulder, meeting her patient gaze. “Sit.”
She does, scooting closer to the table, feeling somewhat lightheaded. He comes to stand adjacent to her, weeding through the papers on the table, and sets two in front of her. One she recognizes as the Greek alphabet, written in neat, elegant script. On the second is a string of letters she doesn’t register, save for a few. She takes the second in her hand, scrutinizing it before glancing up at him. “It’s similar.”

A pleased lightness waves over his features. “Indeed.” He sets a few freshly-sculpted pens and a spool of ink on her right before retreating to the chaise in the corner, across from her. He sits beside his breakfast, long legs bent high at the knee, giving her full view of his calves. “Tell me what you know.”

“About Latin?”

He nods.

“Nothing,” she says, looking over the parchment once more.

“Latin is merely a derision of Greek,” he begins dourly, “which was taken from the Phoenician traders of old. You say you read Coptic?”

Rey nods, unable to tear her gaze away. “I do.”

“It’s the same. All of it comes from Greece.”

“Alright,” she murmurs, scanning the page again, almost unseeing.

Kylo looks over her, noting the soft pinch of skin between her brows, the determined press of her lips. His gaze drifts down to the slight bruising on her neck, the sight inexplicably hot behind his eyes. Tearing them away, he rips into his cakes, splitting them into sticky pieces. “You said you are knowledgeable, but not educated. How does an Egyptian slave manage that?”

Sighing, Rey lays the page back onto the table. “There were opportunities. Scrolls passing through, some that were thrown away.” She meets his eyes, daring a casual smirk. “I found them, hid them, and eventually was able to read them. Then, after Greek, the Hebrew workers wanted to teach me.” Her face falls. “They couldn’t stay.”

“They were sold.”

Rey meets his eyes at his cold statement, but only finds a look of reproach in his gaze. Her anger dies out almost instantly, reborn into grief. “Yes.”

Kylo swallows stiffly. Rey is obviously upset, and it doesn’t settle with him. He leans back against the chaise, changing the subject back to the task at hand. “You obviously have an affinity for languages. Learning this shouldn’t be too difficult—you just need practice.”

Rey fights the rising heat in her cheeks, but doesn’t manage to conceal her small smile. “Thank you.”

It wasn’t a compliment, just an observation, but he doesn’t fight her on it. She seems to be present again. He sits up, re-adjusting, and leans forward to watch her. “We will begin with the Latin alphabet. Pick up your pen, and write the pronunciation when I say.”

Nodding, Rey dips the pen in ink, readying the tip to the parchment under the first symbol.

Her master threads his fingers together. “Ah.”
Rey looks up at him curiously. “What?”

Kylo nearly smirks. “The first letter; pronounced ‘Ah.’”

“Oh,” Rey murmurs, embarrassed as she scribbles a note under the first letter.

“No,” Kylo rumbles. “Ah.”

Unable to help herself, Rey grins, a small laugh ballooning in her throat as she finishes her note with a determined swipe, meeting his warm gaze. “Ah.”

Kylo considers her a moment before withholding his pleased smile, turning his head and bringing another bite of her delicious cake to his mouth. “Very good.”

They go through the Latin alphabet in the span of an hour, his distance vanishing as he stands over her, watching her progress reciting and scrolling the letters with rapt attention.

“...U, Ex, I Graeca, and… Zeta,” she finishes, setting down her pen.

Her master appraises her work. “Good, but sloppy,” he mumbles. Rey shoots him an offended look, which he pointedly ignores. He bends at the waist, his face hovering above her shoulder. Taking the paper, he flips it over to reveal a blank side, and taps it with his finger. “Now, write your name.”

Rey blinks, a bit dizzy from the sudden warmth of him so close to her. Determination smolders in her belly as she takes up the pen again, writing her name in Greek first. "Rho, Epsilon, Upsilon…” she moves her hand beneath it, slowly and carefully copying what she remembers of the Latin script. "Er... Eh... I Graeca.”

He exhales, some curious blend of relief and awe that shoots straight to her toes. “Perfect.”

She turns her head, meeting his eyes. His face is so near, pale as a moonlit plain, but far more rapturous. A field would never be so consuming, nor compelling, nor make her bones feel as pliant and oozing as honey. She can see the color of his eyes like this, dark and deep yet full of scattered light, as if he’s trapped the night sky behind them, locked the stars away.

Kylo’s heart stirs deep in his chest, pounding assertively against his composure. So close, his mind screams, gaze drifting without his awareness down the sweet slope of her cheek, her lips. She’s not smiling now, but he wants her to. Such an odd thing to want, and yet he does anyway.

The moment passes, him rising to full height and Rey ducking her head, staring at her own name. Her mind races in circles, struggling to re-orient. Had she imagined the sudden spark in those eyes? The sudden, curious way their centers opened, widened when they met her own?

He clears his throat, turning to the shelf of stocked scrolls. He stoops to pull one from the bottom, blowing off the dust before setting it down before her.

She picks it up tentatively, unfurling the parchment as she looks up at him. “What’s this?”

“Your first assignment,” he informs dispassionately.

As it opens, her eyes roam over the seemingly endless stream of letters, and her heart aches anew with that same thirst for knowledge so long unquenched. What mystery lies here, just beyond her reach, finally within her grasp?
“The Greek and Roman languages are not the same,” her master drones. “While their letters are similar, and easy to write, there are still words and phrases you will need to comprehend if you are to live in Rome.”

“Ah,” Rey nods.

He lifts a brow, a warm sense of pride and humility warring within his chest. “We’ll start there.”

By nightfall Rey’s eyes begin to droop, her belly empty and mind full, her middle finger blooming with a strange new callous on her right hand. She toys with it idly and stands as he replaces the scrolls to their original place, his movements slow and reverent. He handles them with such care, she notices, the odd gentleness only reminding her of the night before with its stark, alarming clarity.

He rises, turning to her with thoughtful, parted lips. “You’ve done very well.”

This time it is a compliment, one which Rey accepts with a slight bow. “Thank you, Master.”

He narrows his focus, stepping closer. “Now, say that again in Latin.”

Rey folds her hands in front of her, voice dim in her ears compared to the sudden roar of blood rushing through them. “Gratias tibi, Dominus.”

“Utilis. Good,” he murmurs, considering her. His open gaze, the rise and fall of his chest, are distracting, but nevertheless he passes her, motioning for her to follow him. “Come. It is time for me to reward you.”

Rey watches him with wide eyes, shock winding cold through her gut. “What? Master—”

“No arguments,” he grunts, striding through the courtyard, making his way to the kitchen. He looks over and ducks into the storeroom, Rey standing outside as she listens to the clatter of him raiding the supplies.

“Master Ren?”

“In Latin, Rey,” he calls from inside.

She huffs through her nose, confused, frustrated, tired, and hungry. She switches to Latin as best as she can, defecting to Greek for the words she doesn’t yet know. It’s botched and horrendous, but it’s what he’s asked for. “Master Ren, what are you doing?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he replies darkly, emerging with his arm full, cradled soundly against his chest as he shuts the door behind him. There’s a glint in his eye as he studies her, full lips quirking ever so slightly as she gapes hungrily at his catch. “Rewarding you.” Without preamble, he dumps the ingredients onto the counter, gesturing freely. “Two portions. You will share the table with me tonight.”

Her mouth parts as she stares confoundedly into his unassuming face. He has no need to seem so smug, so arrogant, and yet so… earnest. But he does, and he is, and Rey tries not to think much of it.

They stand there in silence as he watches her expectantly. “Well?” he grounds.

“Well what? Oh!” Rey scoffs, shaking her head. Whether at her own distraction or the way he so
blatantly stares, or both, she had almost forgotten her place. She goes to the counter, surveying the ingredients with a bit thumb. Beef, lettuce, bread, figs… all simple things to work with and, given his experience in his own kitchen, Rey wonders whether he’s aware of it.

It’s clear to Rey when she lights the coals that Ren has no intention of moving from his spot at the counter, and the hair on her nape prickles. Though, to her surprise, the sensation is not unpleasant as she continues to flit about, keeping busy, careful to avoid meeting his gaze, not trusting herself to keep her wits if she dares.

She dips oil into the pan, breaking up the beef as the heat rises and begins to simmer and pop underneath, the crumbles turning brown. She stirs carefully, feigning obliviousness as a sudden presence comes closer to her.

“Here,” he says softly. “Use this.”

Rey studies the two small containers he offers to her in her hand, sniffing curiously. Salt and pepper together in beef? An odd seasoning combination, but… Her eyes flit furtively up to his and she nods, unable to deny her own eagerness to explore the new taste, the chance to try something new. She dusts the seasonings generously over the pan, earning a soft, chuckling scoff.

“That’s enough,” he instructs. He reaches out, stilling her hand and pulling it back to him, harvesting the shakers from her fingers. His movements are slow and careful, the warmth of his touch frying Rey’s nerves, the sudden, devouring look in his eyes overpowering. She might as well have jumped into the skillet herself—they could swallow her whole.

Mercifully, he doesn’t let them, returning the unused ingredients to the storeroom as Rey wills her heart to slow.

He reemerges with two chalices and a jug of wine, all easily carried in one hand. He sets them upon the counter and pours, drawing a stool to the tabletop, but does not sit. The meat browned and steaming the air with its delicious juices, Rey carries the skillet and carefully scoops them into two portions, a larger one for him.

Kylo watches Rey, finger drumming on the counter as hungry impatience builds inside of him.

He tells himself it’s only for the dinner.

When all is done and plated, Rey eyes the stool, then glances at him.

He lifts his chalice to his lips. “Sit.”

She does, easing into the seat and leaning against the counter. He pushes her chalice to her. Rey folds her lips, nodding her thanks before wrapping her fingers around the rim. She takes a careful sip, then gasps softly. The taste is like lightning through her veins, thick and heady yet sweet, almost creamy as she swallows. “What is this?”

“Mulsum,” he replies, reaching for the beef, placing some in his mouth. Rey follows suit from her own portion, placing her bread in the steamy juice to let it soften, before taking another tentative sip.

They eat in comfortable silence, Rey’s plate emptying faster than his own. The oil lamps gleam around them, soft copper and gold flickering along the walls, fending off the darkness. She looks at his face from time to time, just as she knows he looks at hers, both surveying the other. Content.

Kylo shifts slightly, the heavy weight of his body wearing the soles of his feet as he stands. But
this is meant to reward her, so she will sit.

In the occasional, well-concealed glances to her face—he’s quite sure she doesn’t notice—he can tell she is satisfied. It brings him no small amount of pleasure. Riding the high of her companionship, he chances a question he’s given thought to more and more as of late. “Rey.”

She looks up, mouth full.

He takes that as a sign of her attention. Focusing his dark gaze on her, attempting to be gentle, he probes. “How did you become a slave?”

Rey swallows, toying with that callus on her finger under the table. “Do you mean here, or… before?”

“Before.”

“Plutt said I was born into it.”

Her silence betrays her, and he now finds himself insatiably curious. “And?”

Rey sighs, reaching for a fig with hard resolution. “I found my bill of sale. I was traded when I was very young. Sold for a barrel of…” her gaze drifts to her chalice, dragging his with it.

There’s a part of him, another life, that almost commends her parents for getting something in return for a slave. But this is not something. This is Rey, and the life within him now suddenly burns with a rawness he hasn’t felt in a long, long time.

Compassion is beneath the warriors of Rome. Compassion is a weakness a soldier cannot withstand, a luxury even the wealthiest of gladiators will never afford. And yet, here she sits before him, glowing in the firelight and taking slow, unsteady bites, her hand trembling in something not entirely rage nor sadness, but some terrible blend he knows all too well.

Silently, he pushes the figs over to her, letting his hand rest close by. She looks at it, roving over his knuckles, and the quiet is broken by his firm, unwavering word. “It’s in the past.”

Tears gather in her eyes as she follows the line of his arm to his face.

It’s a kind, soft look, for how stern its owner is. It is the look of a man who knows nothing better to say—one she can be grateful for.

So Rey nods, offering a folded smile before she takes the chalice in hand. “You’re right,” she whispers, closing her eyes and taking a hearty swig. When she sets the chalice down it’s nearly empty, but her heart is full of warmth, as though baptized in good fortune and blessing. She hums her delight, feeling free to taste this present gift, and lifts it again.

Kylo withdraws his hand, taking his chalice and tipping it to her before joining in her quiet revelry, letting rare contentment wash over him once more in all its calm, burning sublime.

Chapter End Notes

["The Ides" refers to the halfway point of a month, usually the 15th. Vestalia takes place from the 7th to the 15th of June]
Pancakes have existed for thousands of years. Ancient Roman "wheat pancakes" were made of flour, oil, eggs, milk, and salt. The end result was glazed with honey and pepper.

Parchment paper was usually used to write laws and contracts, while normal, everyday writing would be done on wax tablets. However, because of his wealth, it's not unlikely that Kylo (with all his canon-calligraphic sexiness) would prefer using an ink pen on paper.

The Greeks were one of the first societies to develop an actual alphabet. They took said alphabet from the Phonecians, who were massive sea-traders and made use of trade documents via an inventive form of communication.

The Greek alphabet was so monumental that many other languages decided to use it, as well. All of Rey's languages are essentially based on the same system (Greek, Coptic, and Hebrew). This is because the Greek alphabet was very accessible, as it had a lower number of signs, making it easier to learn.

The Roman and Greek alphabets share very similar shapes, especially in regards to vowels. Some examples include "A", "B", "M", "N", "O," and "X".

It was common for slaves to be rewarded—if they were rewarded at all—with a fresh meal just for them.

Seasoning beef while cooking usually consisted of more salts than pepper (which is strange to me because they put pepper on pancakes!).

There was a practice for after babies were born in Rome: the newborn would be placed at the father's feet, and he would look at the child to decide whether or not to keep it. Baby girls were denied far more than boys, and either killed or abandoned as slaves—who would most likely grow into lives of forced prostitution. Slaves were not people anymore, so if Rey's parents traded her for wine, then they would have been commendable by Roman standards.
Son

Chapter Notes

This chapter is loaded with some vital garbage. Thank you all so so so much for your amazing support and comments! To my fellow Americans--Happy Independence Day! *freedom hugs*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They fall into a rhythm, of sorts, over the next three days. The sun rises and Rey with it, following Ahsoka’s instructions to make a breakfast her master never seems to finish. She always finds herself pecking at the scraps, uncertain whether the careful impassivity on his face has anything to do with it.

Now, as the morning light scatters and shifts lazily over the atrium pool just beyond the drawn curtain, a soft breeze stirs over Rey’s skin. Her body has grown used to the comparative cool of Rome, the lush freedom in the air so unlike the stifling desert sands.

As she works, slowly copying the script of his notes, learning Latin roots one by one, Kylo Ren glances up from his scroll. He lies on his side along the chaise, chin propped on his palm. The scroll itself is not that interesting—not so much as the way she bites the inside of her bottom lip and stares with such careful intensity, or how she enjoys the bowl of figs and quince he set at the table, or the way she quietly sounds out symbols and pronunciations when she finds something new.

He looks away before she can catch him watching.

Rey’s brows pinch. “This is wrong.”

Kylo scoffs. “Yes, I’ve often thought Latin is a doomed language.”

“No,” she persists, setting down his notes and pointing. “Look.”

Curious, and a bit offset, Kylo rises and paces over to stand over her shoulder. Following the path of her finger, his eye twitches and he snags the parchment away, scanning the sentence once more. He bites the inside of his cheek.

Rey fends off an amused smirk, watching as he stoops and snatches her pen to make a quick series of scribbles.

“There,” he huffs, going back to his corner.

Rey smiles behind his back, and scans his fix. After a moment, her practice begins to settle, her eyes adjusting to his confoundedly elegant script to sound out the words. Like a threaded spider’s web, the two ends meet gingerly to create something new and whole, and she reads, “‘As life condemns one to death, so too does the practice of life itself?’ What does that mean?”

His dark eyes rove over her face. “What do you think?”

She folds her lips. “That… everything dies.”
He nods.

Rey studies him a moment, as she has many times before. As it was then, it is now; his expression somewhat sullen, yet gaze full of some somber curiosity, as if he is clinging to some unseen thing within her own. It’s not enough to rattle her, not anymore, as she runs her hand over the ragged parchment. “This is yours.”

“Everything here is mine,” he says softly.

“I mean, you wrote this…” she nods to herself, not waiting for his admission. His silence says it all. Suddenly, the curiosity, the revelation, is too much, and Rey cannot hold it back. “Is this what you are?” she smiles slightly. “A philosopher?”

Kylo frowns, still standing, and almost sways under her scrutiny, as though some inane force has cloaked itself around her, forcing him to reply. Her giddiness doesn’t help considering the gruesome truth he has managed to hide from her. “No.” He casts his gaze down, pouting slightly at his feet. “Not professionally.”

Slowly, carefully, Rey rises and steps closer. The distance fades fast, as it often does as of late, his height nearly towering as she comes near enough to capture his gaze and return it to hers. As she peers inside she feels no fear… at least, not within herself. But there is something else hidden inside of him, something she suddenly must know, and her voice drops to a whisper. “Then what are you?”

Perhaps he should tell her. What could she do about it, besides continue to do as he commands? Many things, all he has considered from their morning lessons to his afternoon rides and in the early glow of evening, when he returns to find her waiting for him.

To think of one such possibility where that no longer exists alarms him.

So he deflects. “Your master, your teacher,” he smirks slightly. “In public, your…” he gestures to her lower body, and it works. She backs away, frowning and flustered, as disoriented as he wants her to be.

Just as she bumps into her chair, the slapping sound of sandals echoes along the floor, and Dopheld Mitaka appears in the open curtain, looking in owlishly. “Ah, Master Ren, there you are…” he greets, standing at attention.

Kylo glares, torn between anger and appreciation at being disrupted. The former seems more inviting. “Mitaka.”

“Good afternoon, Mitaka,” Rey smiles, waving slightly.

The young man blinks, head cocking to look at her as red creeps up his neck in a gentle flush. He seems to recognize her, clearly, and seems almost shocked. “Oh, you speak Latin?”

“It’s…” she glances furtively at her master, who’s fisted hands clench at his sides. “A new development.”

“I see,” he nods, politely dismissing her as he holds a note aloft. “Master Ren, this summons has come from Emperor Snoke. He wants you to—”

“Hush,” Kylo orders sharply, striding forward and plucking the note from the newly-frightened Mitaka’s hand, spinning him by the shoulder and nearly shoving him out into the atrium. Kylo turns, avoiding Rey’s befuddled stare, and closes the curtain. He takes a breath, wheeling and
whispering heatedly down at his messenger. “Have you no discrepancy?”

“Apologies, Master. It’s just, you’ve never——”

“I’m very aware,” Kylo growls. “Don’t speak.” As Mitaka obeys, the apple of his throat bobbing in the nervous waves of obvious discomfort, Kylo scans his eyes over the letter. His frown deepens. “A play, this afternoon?”

“Yes, Sir. The Emperor, he,” Mitaka briefly glances at the drawn curtain before lowering his voice, leaning in. “He said it was urgent, Sir. Something to do with the general.”

Kylo’s blood freezes in his veins, and for a moment his surroundings blur.

He has been dealt plenty of verbal lashings from the Emperor for his less-than-adequate social interactions. His mind recounts a certain revelry in the early days of his imperial service, where he punched a male slave for commenting on the size of his ears. Though Snoke was quite amused, the senators present didn’t see the benefits in his brutality. Kylo had been admonished in private then, in the atrium of his master’s palace. Now he wonders what Snoke means by inviting him to some Grecian play.

He has little time to dwell on it, here. The afternoon sun is rising fast, and he’d best begin his journey to Rome. Nodding his dismissal to Mitaka, Kylo ducks into the tablinum to find Rey still standing with her cheeks stuffed full of quince. It would be amusing, if not for the piercing frown in her eyes.

She swallows. “What’s wrong?”

He holds the note where she can’t see, deftly shifting it between his fingers at his side. “Nothing,” he brushes off, keeping his distance. “I’ve been called into the city. Translate the entire scroll, as much as you can,” he orders, parting the curtain to leave. He looks back at her. “I won’t be long.”

He disappears, leaving Rey alone as his heavy footfalls fade. Her curiosity does not follow, though something else, something deeper, does.

The air grows hot and humid as the sun rises high in the afternoon sky.

Mitaka joins him on his journey into Rome, delivers him to the surprisingly humble amphitheater just south of Palatine Hill, next to an inviting-looking fruit cart Kylo gives some passing thought to visiting. No doubt the house of some senator bent on gaining the Emperor’s favor, a vendor selling to wealthier patrons.

He files into the stands with a stiff sense of casualness, led by Roman guards to a shaded box seat at the center of the rise. Female slaves fan Snoke as he reclines in his cushioned seat, a tray of meats and cheeses sitting limp and languid alongside him.

Stepping under the shade, just below its height, Kylo bows his head. “My Lord.”

Snoke offers a low sound, something between a groan and a growl, crooking his finger without even glancing up. “Sit, Boy.”

He obeys, keeping his gaze down as he settles into the less-ornate seat beside the Emperor. What would normally seem an honor, to him, feels more like a curse. There is a heaviness in the air, a foreboding he can sense wafting off the old, shriveled creature not an arm’s length from him.
“The general says your party was… enlightening.”

Kylo’s head snaps to look at Snoke, eyes wide. “How so, Master?”

Snoke chuckles, revealing his rows of small, crooked teeth. “Tell me… have you ever heard the story of Icarus?”

“A Greek legend,” Kylo nods, stomach knotting.

“That is what this play is about, you see,” Snoke gestures down to the amphitheater stage, where the masked figures continue to belt their psalms just within earshot. “My favorite legend from the Greeks. A tale of a man’s frailty; his weakness in the face of power.”

The way he speaks is reverent, as though one of his many gods has granted him some great revelation. Kylo says nothing.

“Look here now,” he smiles fondly, pointing to the actor holding two large, winged props. “Daedalus is sending his own son to fly before him on wings made of wax. Would you say he is wise, or a fool?”

Kylo recludes, slightly, feigning only mild interest. “A fool. He sends his son to die.”

“Ah, but,” Snoke wets his lips, watching as the actor flaps his glorious wings, trotting about the stage. “Icarus disobeyed his father’s instruction. The boy, caught up in,” he sneers, “rapture, flew too close to the sun. One may say he is the fool.”

Kylo rubs his fingertips with his thumb, fighting to restrain himself from labeling all of Greek legends useless myth, but manages a civil, dulcet tone. “Then he is.”

“There is much we can learn from the Greeks,” Snoke grunts, readjusting himself in his chair. He pivots his waist to lean on his arm, craning his neck to glare openly at Kylo. “I suggest…” he leans forward, rancid breath bathing over Kylo’s open face, “…that you do the same.”

He searches the Emperor’s eyes, voice quiet. “Master?”

“Hux may not say it, however,” Snoke murmurs dangerously, his deformed face steeped in thinly-veiled rage. “I know when someone is lying. Whatever happened that night is between the two of you. But mark these words, Kylo Ren…” His knobby knuckles curl over the arms of his seat as he glowers down upon Kylo’s attentive expression. “…Don’t fly too close to the sun.”

Kylo withstands the assault of his Emperor’s words, soaking them in carefully before lowering his gaze in submission. It would seem Hux deigned not to share his attempt of theft within Kylo’s household. If he had admitted to the Emperor his abuse of Rey, the general would have more than his host as an antagonist.

His heart beats unsteadily in his chest despite what calm that should bring, throat strangled, barely allowing a whisper as he returns his attention to the man who lay dying, drowning. “Yes, my Lord.”

Rey tosses the last fig back and forth between her hand, pacing contemplatively around the tablinum. She’d finished the scroll quite fast, making out some of her master’s drabble. The whole thing seems quite melancholy, rich with diverse vocabulary she’s almost certain will enrich her tongue. With the slim translation she managed alone, the content revealed a sense of loneliness and longing, deep emotions and anger. She wonders if he will let her know the rest.
And now, she finds, she is growing… bored. Silencer is gone, so there is no horse to feed and entertain. The house is swept well enough, the pillars scrubbed and polished. The garden grass is green and growing, and she paces out of the open tablinum curtains to gaze upon it longingly before continuing her endless trail back inside.

Perhaps he wouldn’t mind if she transcribed another? He would be impressed with her ethic, she’s certain. He may even reward her with something new this time. Cakes in the evening? The idea alone is mouth-watering.

She munches her fig as she peruses the shelf of scrolls. Looking over with a critical eye. She’s not fully aware of his particular style of organization—while she gets the sense that the man is quite fastidious—but looks instead for something to catch her eye.

There, on the bottom, almost buried, is an intriguing-looking specimen. The edges are yellowed and torn, poking out with a sudden, heretofore unnoticed pride. Carefully, wiping the last of her snack along her skirt, she stoops and peels the scroll out from under its companions.

She turns and sits, brushing it open slowly, relishing every crinkle and pop. Her blood is roaring in her ears, a sense of discovery bringing life into her chest and careening out into the rest of her body.

With eager eyes she scans the parchment scroll, but her mind stutters. It is not his Latin script, but some smaller, even finer pattern of Hebrew letters to form words she doesn’t know. Words that become, all at once with stunning clarity, names.

Anakin Skywalker
Padme Amidala
Luke, son of Anakin
Leia, daughter of Anakin
Han Solo

And just beneath that, the name incompletely crossed out with ragged stains…

Ben, son of Han

This… this is a family line. Scrolled so carefully in Hebrew, but she would recognize it anywhere. The lines are too similar to the lineages of slaves who would come through Niima, leave Jakku with only their names to cling to. But now her eyes, her heart, clings to the name at the end of the line, and the war of understanding bristling through her like thorns. That her master—

“What is that?”

Rey gasps, dropping the scroll on the table, hands and face burning as she jolts to her feet. She scrambles for some cause, some excuse. Why can’t she speak? There was a perfectly good reason, she’s certain, but for the life of her she can’t remember.

His eyes burn as he looks down at the scroll, recognition stoking it to a roaring flame. The basket of fruits in his hand falls to the ground, forgotten, as he strides forward, snatching it up and rearing on her. He holds it crumpled in his fist, fighting to control his breathing when that dark gaze finds her again. “Why?” he chokes.
The anger and… betrayal in his voice send Rey reeling. “I just… I was trying to—”

“What did you see?” he grits out, almost looming over her. The heat of his body is almost stifling, the sun caught inside the fabric of his tunic, of his flesh.

She opens her mouth to speak, but closes it again, looking down at their feet. She shakes her head, tears stinging in her eyes, throat swollen, as if he is the one to strangle her now.

Kylo exhales heavily, shaking with the effort to remain composed, but fails. Rey has seen… she…

He snarls, turning and stalking out to the atrium. Anger, fury, frustration ripples and spills over in his chest, out of his hands. The heat of Vesuvius is within him now, pouring like led and aching to destroy all that led him here to this wretched, broken place.

“Master?”

He tears the scroll to pieces, throwing it into the atrium pool, grunts and snarls ripping from his throat, clawing, consuming and vile.

“Master!”

When there are none left it’s not enough. He stands there panting, watching them drown—

“Yes!”

His name.

He turns and sees her. Only her, standing alone in the shadow of the curtain, the red behind her like fury and flame. Breath leaves him empty, shriveled, a husk of all he’s made himself to be. By this woman he has been laid bare, and now it is too late to revive that which he has so long denied.

She steps closer, unafraid despite that small light of uncertainty in her eyes. But she holds her ground like she holds his gaze fast to her own, the broken pieces of her understanding merging with his to create something new.

She opens her mouth to speak, but no words come out.

He finds some of his own, willing them from him with all his remaining strength. “That man is dead.”

“He doesn’t look like it to me,” she whispers, her voice heady and rich in Hebrew.

He frowns at her, but it is more in hurt than anger. “He is to Rome,” he replies, matching her tongue. “You must never speak it outside of this place.”

There’s a glimmer of hope in her eyes as she looks at him, as she steps back and lets his own follow her. She looks to the pool behind him, then back into his face as a ripple of recognition, of knowing passes through them. He is caught in its tide, confounded, battered, bruised, and yet she stands unwavering, her voice strong as it echoes along the atrium walls. “Cognovi, Dominus.”

Chapter End Notes
Amphitheaters were almost as common as bathhouses in Rome. It was not uncommon for the wealthier Roman patricians to have an amphitheater in their own backyard.

Ancient performances of Greek and Roman plays were depicted with large, expressive masks over the actors' faces. One to several narrators would read the lines while the actors moved in slow gestures so that the audience wouldn't miss any of the "action".

Icarus was the son of Daedalus in Greek mythology. Daedalus and his son were trapped in a Labyrinth that Daedalus invented by King Minos of Crete. To escape, he fashioned two pairs of wax wings that they could use to fly over the Labyrinth. He warned his son not to fly too close to the sun, but Icarus didn't listen, too high with the feeling of flying to obey. As he got close to the sun, the wings melted, and he felt into the sea and died by drowning. The story serves as a lesson not to test those more powerful, and to faithfully obey one's master or face fatal consequences.

Mount Vesuvius is the name of the legendary volcano responsible for the destruction of Pompeii in 79 AD.

"Cognovi" means "I understand" in Latin, referring to comprehending an order, whereas the alternative translation, "Intellego" refers to understanding someone's reasoning. [Thanks again to the lovely Allytsuki for the Latin translation!]

"Solo" is a name of Latin origin from the word "solus," meaning "alone." "Ben" is a name of Hebrew origin, meaning "son"
Guys, I just want to say (again) how grateful I am to all of you for your amazing support. Your bookmarks, kudos, and comments give me such motivation to keep this story going.

To the ladies at The Writing Den, thank you so so SO much for drowning me in your friendship and support. You girls are just the sweetest!

To all my readers, today is my 20th birthday. I couldn't think of a better way to spend it than sharing this story with you. Thank you all so much for being so amazing and encouraging!!! *hugs*

He crashes down upon the atrium chair, a ragged breath abandoning him. He covers his quivering lips with his hand, scraping shaky fingers along the outside of his mouth.

Rey watches him, still standing, her heart heavy with emotion. Before her, this man…Ben, her Master, rests weary, and she knows not how to comfort him, nor why she would want to.

But even so, she remains until he finally speaks, his gaze lost and distant along the floor as he releases his flushed lips to her view. “Tell me what you saw.”

Rey lowers her head, shame hot under her cheeks as she replies in Greek to mirror him. “A family line,” her eyes dart, scanning her memory. “Five names, and one crossed out. Partially.”

“…It was mine,” he admits.

When she looks up his eyes are waiting for her, dark and intense, peering through her skin to the marrow of her bones. But she will not retreat. “I know.”

Both of his large hands wrap around the arms of his chair as he leans back, lifting his chin. Something like rage simmers underneath, dangerous yet quelled, for now. Dignity and violence crash like warring waves beneath his surface, held at bay by will alone. As her eyes hold his, his heart hammers furiously against his chest, his body rebelling the sense of defeat his mind so ardently projects.

In his silence, Rey sighs softly, chest constricting under the heavy weight of this circumstance. She can think of no other way to unwind it than do what they have done in these last few calm, capturing days.

Ask.

Rey steps a little closer and sits along the side of the atrium pool, bending her knees and hugging them, holding his eyes as he watches her attentively. “Why ‘Ren?’” she murmurs.

The pool laps softly against the stone in the silence, flickering the last gasps of light across their faces from the early evening sun. He considers her for a moment, weighing his words on the
scales of his discernment, and lets them tip in favor of her open, vulnerable face. “It was a simpler change,” he mutters, grip loosening.

She holds onto her wrist to keep her arms locked around her body, and nods. “Were you born in Rome?” she asks softly.

After a pregnant silence, his deep voice utters a quiet, “No.”

Feeling a bit braver, she offers a small, tender smile. “You left your home?”

His hands ball into tight fists, shoulders stiff. “No. This is my home,” he huffs indignantly.

Rey considers him for a moment, then, in a shuffle of cloth, rises to stand before him. He looks up at her with a different face, a gaze almost fearful, open and wide. Her smile remains yet flickers as the words within her spill from someplace deep inside. “Then you are Ben.”

His mind blanks, torn between meeting her challenge or falling into the way she looks at him. “What?”

“If this is your home…” Rey murmurs, trailing off. Without thinking, her arm moves out slowly, her small hand resting over his fist. It goes slack beneath her, and she fights to keep breathing, holding his eyes steady. “…should I not call you by your name?”

The rusted glow of evening dances over their faces, casting half in shadow, half in light from the reflective waters of the pool. Mind spinning, he looks down where her warm hand rests so gently over his own. Turning his wrist, unfurling his clenched fist, he feels the soft skin of her palm slide against the ridges of his own. Heated blood rushes through him, each tip of her fingers pressing into his hand, searing the skin and sucking the air from his lungs.

He grips them gently, their thin length and hidden elegance capturing his gaze. She is so small, here, where he can hold her. Touch her. Feel the warmth of her skin, where her tenderness and his walls meet.

Her eyes are pleading when he finds them again, trailing up the smooth expanse of her Summery skin, her soft shoulder, her slender neck, the gentle slope of her cheek.

Ben’s voice comes hoarsely, as if he has not used it in many years, as though she has awakened him from some deep slumber. He rises, keeping hold of her hand, squeezing as he swallows down the gathering residue of foreign fears, and whispers, “You shall.”

In the morning Ben closes the tablinum curtain, claiming that once a week Rey should stick to her regular chores—especially in Ahsoka’s absence. Rey finds no room to argue, doing as he instructs with an odd sense of eagerness thrumming through her veins.

He follows her around the house while she works, however, which is new. His eye seems critical yet passive when he leans against a pillar of the courtyard, the afternoon sun drifting lazily between the clouds as it casts light upon Rey as she prunes the greenery.

She tells herself he is only ensuring the work is done properly.

“You have a knack for it,” he remarks after a long, sullen silence.

She sits on her knees, squinting at him through the midday heat. “Knack for what?”
He steps into the light, heavy footfalls muted by grass, striking hair glowing gold where strands fly loose. He comes close enough that she has to crane her neck up to see his face, and even then it is too shaded to see the slightest of smiles stretching the corners of his lips. “Plenty. Cleaning, language, and now,” he thumbs a leaf from the nearest tree, admiring it openly, “cultivation.”

Rey rises, dusting off her stola. His face comes into view now, suddenly close. “I enjoy it,” she shares simply.

Ben ducks his head, studying her eyes. “You do?”

Nodding, Rey turns to survey the other plants, ensuring no weeds have breached the surface. She sighs, almost dreamily, as she strokes a vine hanging from the trellis. “There was no green like this in Egypt. It was just sand and stone. Nothing felt… alive.”

He lingers behind at a leisurely pace, keeping to the shade. “And now?”

Rey smiles back at him from over her shoulder, a bit sheepish under his intense attention. “I can feel it. Life.” The grass tickles her toes even through her sandalia, lush and sharp and wonderful.

He stops when she stops, staring for one moment, until the stars in his eyes seems to ignite. “Come with me,” he orders, passing her and lumbering towards the stable.

“What are we doing?” Rey asks curiously. She’s already fed Silencer, and her master never makes her escort him out on his afternoon rides.

Ben, face set in sharp determination, lifts the bar to Silencer’s stall and ushers the stallion out with an urgent tug of the reigns. He doesn’t answer her, pushing open the stable doors to expose the verdant country hillside dappled in the light and shadow of fast-moving clouds.

When Rey follows him outside, her tone is steeped in worry. “Master B—”

“Stand here and lift your knee, facing away,” he instructs, pointing in front of him.

A thrill of intuition shoots through Rey, and she cannot contain her nervous gulp as she moves to stand before him, her back to his chest. She lifts her knee, her foot hovering in the air.

The warmth of his body sinks into the cloth of her stola as he leans down, lips dangerously close to her ear. “Trust me,” he urges softly, warm breath stirring the hair at her neck.

She barely contains an involuntary shiver. “I do—gah!”

Suddenly she is in the air, an impossible power hoisting her by the sole of her raised foot. She flies up and over, her muscles taking control as she turns her body, spreading her legs wide enough to land in the saddle with a hard thwump.

He reaches out to steady Silencer, who wobbles to accommodate her. When Rey grasps her bearings, she looks down, a wild, insane laugh belting from her throat in a single scoff. “This is… it’s so high!”

Ben’s lip quirks as cool pride runs through him. It’s remarkably easy to avoid the way her skirt rides up her thigh for the look of pure joy spreading over her face. “Yes,” he agrees soundly.

Rey pets Silencer’s mane, feeling him rear appreciatively under her caress. She looks around then down to catch Ben’s eye, shaking her head with gleeful incredulousness. “I don’t understand.”
“You will,” he promises. He reaches out to press the reigns into Rey’s hands, closing his own over them until she is holding tight. “Trust your instincts,” he instructs. “Feel his life in your hands, and let go.”

His hands are so large, warm and encompassing, muddling her thoughts as she blinks at him. Nerves begin to creep up her ankles, the chill climbing to challenge the comfort of his touch. “I don’t know how,” she mutters, but it’s too late. The light in his eyes burns amber in the sun as Ben releases her, standing back and smacking Silencer’s rump.

She screams as she lurches, Silencer’s immediate jolt catching her off guard. He gallops forward with strong legs, jumping over the stone fence and racing down the hillside.

Ben steps forward to watch her go, his eyes following, heart soaring. He can almost feel her elation, the sheer ecstasy thrumming through her that he once felt so long ago, the first time he’d flown upon the back of a horse.

Rey. What strange lightness fills him, just at the name. It is not like before, when it was heavy and sordid. When it was new. Now it is… an indescribable thing.

Silencer continues his wild rampage through the tall grass, turning and weaving as Rey still scrambles for control. Ben’s amusement rises close to the surface, but suddenly drops as she yanks hard, turning him onto the path and disappearing around the bend.

His heart freezes, blood running cold. Has she…?

Rey bursts from the foliage closer to the villa, careening toward him. Thinking fast, Ben backs away as she and his horse streak past him in a furious gallop.

She has never felt so alive! Her thighs clutch tightly to the saddle, her palms sweaty and cramping but strong as she holds firm to the reigns, urging Silencer on, on, faster, faster still. The beast snorts beneath her, complying as her confidence takes hold, as Ben’s instructions to let go echo in her ears.

Air brushes past her in a whirlwind of sight and rushing sound. Her eyes water at the sting, but she cannot bring herself to care, the marvelous green of the countryside laid out before her in all of its majesty. Even the brightness of the city, the great pyramids of Egypt, could never compare to this.

With gentle yet compelling control, she pulls the reins to lead Silencer back towards the stable, pulling hard to slow him down. His heart is racing almost as much as her own, the thrill of the ride catching up with them both as he trots back to the dusty entryway, where Ben stands waiting.

“I did it!” she cries jubilantly as he brings Silencer to full stop. “It was incredible. I was flying!”

Silently, with a strange, tight seriousness, he rounds over to Silencer’s flank, reaching up to grasp Rey’s waist. Too stunned to gasp, she quietly lets him slide her off the saddle, bringing her down to stand before him.

He doesn’t remove his hands from her, and Rey’s heart thunders violently in her chest as the warmth of his palms spreads outward, a compelling heat ripping through her chest and forcing her eyes to meet with his.

The intensity of his gaze is overwhelming, a look of hunger she has never seen before reaching into her body with its piercing claws. Her arms find rest in his, cradled soundly in the crooks of his elbows, her hands resting on the twin-knotted muscle of his bare skin. Her breathing is too fast to contain behind closed lips, leaving her in sharp pants and restless lungs.
A dangerous thread links them, unraveling, re-threading, roping. Ben can feel it, a tether to this one moment in time, pulling him closer to her. Her upturned face in the shade of his home, of his body, shielding her from all other gazes but his.

In this one place, where darkness cloaks them despite the light of day, they know each other’s names.

There is a strand of hair caught in her mouth. He lifts his hand to brush it aside, taking in the apple of her cheek, the soft damp of wind-stained tears under his thumb. Her lashes are dark, her eyes bright, and her lips… flushed. Parted. Inviting.

A dark looks falls over his face, the compulsion strong, the tether unyielding. He feels weak, her hair caught in his fingers, her waist trapped beneath his palm—her hands resting on him, her body trembling. There is no longer strength in his neck. His bones have gone pliant, his eyes fixed on her face as it pulls his own closer in an aching slowness he cannot control, cannot contain. A fire yearning to rise.

To burn.

His voice is just above a whisper. “Rey—”

Suddenly, the rolling gallop of hooves startles them from their trance, Rey’s lidded eyes parting wide as she backs out of his hold, and he follows suit.

Filled with fury, Ben turns to see Mitaka’s horse trotting up the bend.

Silencer wanders off to graze as Rey waits until Ben’s back is turned to cover her heavy breaths. Her every limb lingers with a phantom fire from his touch, her subconscious stirring reality into the brew of her emotions.

Had he tried to…?

Mitaka nearly falls from his horse, running a hand over his short, dark hair to make himself presentable. “A letter, Master Ren,” he says, jumping when Ben snatches it from him.

Thankfully the messenger doesn’t relay details in the presence of company.

Snoke will be hosting a revelry to celebrate Vestalia’s end, a prelude to a grand battle in the Colosseum. Ben frowns. He should have known this period of rest was only to build excitement among the citizens. The attendance will be immeasurable.

Rey waits in the shadow of the stable door while Ben dismisses Mitaka, and refuses to meet his eyes as they are left alone once more. He is only an arm’s length away. Will he try to touch her again? Will she let him?

The thoughts alone are not so confounding as her answers to each.

Ben studies her, noting the flush on her cheeks, and sighs. The moment before has passed, and he should be more thankful for it. But he isn’t, and here they are, distanced again.

Rey clears her throat, looking up but still avoiding direct eye contact. “What was in the letter?”

He decides to be honest, yet omit. She may know his birth name, but she’s yet to know the name bestowed upon him by Rome, and for what reason. “I’ve been summoned to the city.”
Now she meets his gaze, determination tight in her neck. “I’m coming with you.”

“Rey,” he groans, walking inside. “You are not ready for—”

“I am,” she persists, following him into the villa. They pace through the atrium as he makes for the kitchen, determined to ignore her. “You’ve taught me enough. I should go with you to Rome.”

“No.”

“But—!”

“I said ‘no,’” he grunts, wheeling on her with impatient eyes. When she folds her lips resolutely, he bites his cheek, huffing. “You don’t understand.”

“Then tell me,” she insists, voice gentling as she steps tentatively closer. The shortened distance seems to wear down his resolve—a notion as terrifying as it is exciting. “Please. Help me understand.”

Ben’s hold on the letter tightens, nearly crumpling, before his resistance dies out under her wide, pleading eyes. “It’s an invitation to the Emperor’s palace. He wants me to attend a revelry for Vestalia.”

Rey’s eyes widen. “But he’s…”

“Yes,” Ben huffs. “The one who bought you. The one who brought you here.”

Rey looks down, scanning the stone floor at her feet as her stomach rolls. The Emperor of Rome had her brought to Ben as a gift. That much she remembers. But she also remembers the secret they share, and that he alone must bear it in the public eye.

She can’t let him shoulder it. Not alone.

“I can still…” she murmurs, eyes leveling with his chest. “I can still go.”

Ben considers her with narrowed eyes, curiosity intermingling with the myriad of thoughts cascading through him.

His first instinct is to say no, to deny she go anywhere near the Emperor. The danger is too great. However.

The memory of the day before remains seared in his mind, the thought that Snoke may indeed be doubting the loyalty of Kylo Ren. As he should—he had broken his Master’s trust as soon as he knew he could not take Rey as his… own.

Ben sighs softly, carding a hand through his hair in frustration. If he were to bring Rey, to continue the charade before Snoke’s own eyes, then perhaps their chances of survival would grow.

Looking at her now, it could very well be worth its dangers. As long as she can be convincing.

His decision made, he points a thick finger in her face, voice lowering dangerously, eyes black as coal. “You will do everything I say. Everything. You will not question me, you will not protest, and you will never leave my side. Is that clear?”

Rey’s eyes gleam as he speaks, and she nods once, determination primed in her every joint and hackle. “When do we leave?”
Ben settles back, appraising her. This girl… it seems there is as much to teach her as there is for
him to learn. He turns away, stalking into the kitchen. “After.”

Rey follows in after him. “After what?”

He smirks at her over his shoulder, enjoying the look on her face far more than he should.
“Lunch.”

Chapter End Notes

[No notes today! :D]

{The theme for this chapter is "Stardust" by Gemini Syndrome. Listen to the Glory's Fray Spotify playlist here!}
Ya'll. YA'LL. I CANNOT. I CAN'T.

You are all SO wonderful, oh my goodness. I was completely FLOORED by all of your amazing support for the last chapter! Seriously guys, best birthday ever. Thank you so much for being the best readers I could ever ask for. T_T *gross sobbing*

This is without a doubt the longest chapter in the story thus far. Sorry it took so long! Now, enter DRAMA! (ノ◕ヮ◕)ノ*:・ﾟ✧

“When is the revelry?” Rey probes curiously between bites.

Ben’s concentrated frown deepens. “Tomorrow.”

Tapping her fingers on the tabletop, she considers the overturned letter beside them. With his agitation, she’d assumed he was summoned today. Could it be that her urgent pressing goaded him into taking her early?

As if reading her thoughts, he rises to stand—having since brought a new stool into the kitchen some time ago. Rey follows, taking the plates to be cleaned as he explains, half-pacing, “There is much you know, and even more you do not,” he mutters darkly, his gaze prickling at the back of her neck. “It would be best to enter the city together.”

She looks at him as she dips the dishes into the water basin. “Why?”

He seems tired when he crosses his arms and leans against the wall, long legs stretched in front of him. “I’ve decided to make you my attendant. You will need practice in public to understand the weight of the situation.”

Rey swallows, a nervous heat spreading under the faded bruise on her neck. “I… I see,” she murmurs, turning back and scrubbing the residue from their lunch.

“Rey,” he sighs softly, seriously, beckoning her to look at him. She does, his dark eyes intense and imploring, the strength of it threatening to knock her down. He uncrosses his arms and stands to full height, and for a moment it looks like he’s going to come closer, but hesitates. After a second of thought, his eyes narrow, and he makes for the exit. “Meet me in the stables when you’ve finished.”

She watches him go, pushing down her nerves by shouting her affirmation after him—in Latin, of course.

Ben manages to wrangle Silencer back in front of the door, and Rey comes in while he’s removing the saddle, replacing it with a thick cover-blanket.

“What are you doing?” she asks, coming closer.
Ben is tempted to smile. Even her accent has begun to lilt, her rolling consonants and thick vowels reaching deep into her voice in a way he tries not to think about. He passes the saddle to her, and she grunts when she takes it, yet bears the weight all the same. “Making room,” he says simply, gesturing for her to take it inside.

Rey’s arms go limp, holding the saddle down over her thighs as she squints incredulously at him. “Can’t we take the cart?”

“Can’t. Not allowed in the city.”

“Ahsoka did,” she huffs.

He turns, one hand on Silencer as he leans down, meeting her eyes. Though he attempts an intense air of authority, the amusement still flickers in his gaze, distant like a star fading in the blue morning. “Ahsoka,” he murmurs, “isn’t here. Now, do as I say.”

Rey pouts, turning and fleeing him with steady strides, entering the stable. She notices that his helmet is still gone, and wonders if she should ask him why he would need such a thing at all—or if she imagined it. However, the strange, lingering heat in her legs and under the tender flesh of her lips distracts her.

Ben had almost kissed her. She’s either certain of it, or in some form of denial far too deep to imagine. He does not see her in such a light, and he has certainly not touched her with any lecherous intent. Curiously, slowly, she looks back from the hanging saddle, her hands holding on to steady her.

His wide back is silhouetted in shade, the afternoon sunlight cascading through the open door casting her view in darkness. Silencer waits patiently, pliant under his master’s long, soothing strokes. Rey watches his hand as it moves, broad and strong. She remembers those hands on her, holding so tightly she felt she may never escape.

A rush of heat rises into her face and she greedily takes these last moments of observation as she returns, determined to keep her composure. He turns to study her, and when she meets his eyes Rey is struck with a sudden revelation.

She had never considered how handsome he was.

There are many men she has seen in her lifetime. Many shades of skin, hair, eyes and teeth. Many sizes, from the meek to the more intimidating. Though as she looks at his face, the soft relaxation of his jaw, the caress of his dark, contemplative gaze, Rey cannot fathom how she has never realized before how inexorable he is in… every way.

“It’s time,” he says, patting Silencer’s flank. His eyes harden the way they do when he’s being earnest, and her heart flutters in response. “If we do this, there’s no turning back.”

“I’m ready,” she replies gently, moving in front of him. She turns her back, lifting her foot, and takes a breath before he effortlessly lifts her again. However, he turns her, forcing her onto her side, her rump landing astride Silencer’s powerful spine. She looks down at him, confused, as Ben lifts the reins over her head to fall around her waist. “What’s this?”

“My woman must ride like one,” he says deeply, tone rich with meaning.

Rey understands immediately, her flush ill-receding. “Ah. I see. Well then—oh!”

Silencer bounces under her, and she blindly reaches out to snag Ben’s hand, holding tight. “What is
he doing?” Rey cries softly, a bit bemused, looking down to watch as Silencer trots in place.

“He likes you,” Ben replies soundly, placing her hand onto the reins. His touch lingers a moment; he watches himself let go and moves behind her, swinging himself onto Silencer’s back with practiced ease.

Rey sucks in a breath, holding fast to it as his impossibly warm, solid chest meets her arm, her waist. His legs stretch on either side, brushing against one of her own. When the skin touches she looks away, willing her heart to slow down as his heat sinks into her, the scent of his tunic deeply masculine, his hands reaching to take the reins around her and hold loosely, urging Silencer forward.

The pace is slow, the journey wrung on by lengthy plains of green and an even lengthier silence.

Ben fights to keep his breathing even. For her first time riding saddleside, he didn’t want to risk her falling off and injuring herself at such a critical time. But he feels her body adjust, the in and out of her breathing bumping against his hand, and knows after this he may not have so good an excuse.

Every now and then Rey remarks on the changing landscape, the generous brush of clouds as the day carries on around them. He hums quietly in reply, content in the quiet and closeness of their bodies. When seated so close, her head rests at his chin, every breath a sweet Summer breeze or the intriguing scent of her hair. It’s a challenge not to close the distance, to drink it in and give it a name.

Rey figured it would take more time to arrive in Rome, but the arrival is roughly the same as Ahsoka and her caravan. The soldiers straighten when Ben comes near, and she feels him go stiff beside her, sense of superiority and thin malice washing over her with strange intensity.

As the polished and bright stone of the city envelops them in sight and sound, a parade of dancers and horses tramp down the main road, heading east toward Palatine Hill. As Ben detours onto a winding side road among other foot-travelers, parallel in direction to the parade, Rey whispers hushedly to him. “Where are we going?”

“The Circus Maximus,” he replies gently, keeping his mouth movements subtle. Already they are gleaning peering stares from the sparser civilians and slaves below, all on him and her pressed together on Silencer’s back. “Surely you know the chariot racers?”

She waits a beat until no one can see her speak, much less her tight, controlled smile. “Not personally,” she jests nervously.

He doesn’t seem to find the humor. “I do.” He sighs through his nose. “There is a race today, which is fortunate for you.”

Rey piques her brow, silently asking his elaboration.

“If wait,” he orders stiffly, letting Silencer move faster. Rey is thrown against his chest a moment, her nose buried into the shoulder of his dark tunic, before she rights herself indignantly.

The Circus Maximus is a grand structure, nestled in the valley beside Palatine hill. Rey gawks as the distant walls grow higher, the massive scores of people flooding into the gates. Ben halts Silencer, hopping down. Rey pulls the reins off her as he reaches up, taking her waist again. Sliding off is easier, this time, his touch not lingering. “Come,” he says, face stony. “Stay close to me.”

Rey nods, keeping her expression as passive as possible despite the fantastic sights around her. She
follows him as he leads Silencer to a nearby stable, where other, wealthy-looking Romans pass on their horses to the bustling attendants. She notices a place beyond a far open door, a grazing green plot of shade and sunlight.

They leave the stable for the gate, Ben entering with her just behind, hot on his sandaled heels. When the standee asks for the fee, Ben carefully digs into his belt, as if avoiding something, before producing two denarii. The standee waves them inside.

As they go, Rey looks back, noticing how the majority of Roman civilians don’t have to pay. She resolves to ask him about it later, but otherwise keeps her head down and eyes open.

“This way,” Ben says, guiding her up a steep slope. There is a shaded area here, where other patricians have taken their seats along the benches, their attendants around them cloaked with quiet attentiveness. A few glance at her, then gape at him with expressions of sudden recognition and awe.

Rey only has a moment to brood her curiosity before she races to catch up with Ben, following his gesture to sit beside him. She looks down upon the Circus Maximus, eyes devouring the grand spectacle of filling seats. Men and women file inside, sorting themselves as the sound and tension rises. The track stretches before them, sand and dirt old and trodden, waiting to be tossed and torn asunder.

“Master?” Rey cautions, keeping her voice low.

He turns to look down at her. “Mm?”

Her wide eyes rise to meet his, led astray by the loose tendrils of his hair caught by the breeze until she returns to his face. She keeps to Latin as much as she’s able, knowing what’s expected of her. “Earlier, as we came near… the people acted strange.”

He feigns nonchalance. “Oh?”

“They were looking at us.” She scans his eyes worriedly. “And you.”

For a moment he seems fearful, expression wide, until he blinks, with her again. “Those with eyes may look, but will not always see,” he whispers at length, heat and gentleness mixing with the warm Summer air between them. “I could not care less for them. But you…” He cocks his head slightly, appraising her with the smallest of smiles. Here in the shade, no one knows but her, nor feels the way her insides shift under the sudden softness. “Tell me, what is it you see?”

There are a great many things Rey has seen of the man beside her now. In the beginning she saw only darkness, a mysterious void of the unknown. And yet, as time passed, as days wore on, here she sits beside him with memories of his gentle touches, the echoing dulcet of his voice, rich with lingering traces of sleep in the early morning. She has seen much, learned much, felt fullness. Contentment. Purpose. Peace.

Now she sees him. This man, her master, Ben. That mystery still lies just beyond her reach, but even so, in the shade of the day, concealed from the burning sun and searing gazes, Rey sees only his face. The constellations of marks scattered over its pale expanse, his generous mouth and aquiline nose—but his eyes, most of all, their ridges angular yet soft, beseeching, learning, knowing, see into her more deeply than she could ever hope to go.

She opens her mouth. After all this time, all those years alone, waiting for some great end to the fear and emptiness, the one who sees her is—
Horns blare, snapping all attention to the main gate. The host holds up his arm, releasing a cloth. As soon as it falls, the gates at the extended end of the track spring open, and four chariots burst onto the sand.

Rey sits up, gasping as one chariot knocks into another, brutally shoving it towards the inner wall. The racer recovers quickly, just before they turn along the curve and begin to approach them.

Of the four teams, Rey notes that the leading chariot is not carried forward by white horses, but two stunning black stallions with high rumps and slim snouts. The crowd roars as the rider passes, his hand up and waving—as though his life were in no danger at all.

The racer just second of him is not so fortunate. As they begin another lap, the third team swerves into the second, carriage corralling him against the inner wall, shattering the left wheel and forcing the chariot plummeting into the sand. The force of the fall bounces, twisting and taking the man screaming down with it.

Rey’s heart blows wide, horrified as the crowd boos and cheers. “That’s so…” she mutters, tears pricking her eyes. She looks down, covering her face at the terrible loss.

A warm hand folds over her shoulder, squeezing lightly. “No. Watch.”

She shakes her head, voice small and stomach churning. “Please... I can't.”

“He's alive,” Ben explains, watching as Rey stops, looking down onto the track. Though the chariot remains in shambles, the man is dragged behind the horses, sawing at the reins around his body with the telling shine of a knife. When he tumbles loose he breaks for the outer wall, leaping to safety just as the black-lead racer emerges onto the stretch, the chariot's remains blown to smitherenes.

Rey exhales shakily, her nerves on fire.

And it's... exhilarating.

Watching the horses race, their strong legs beating relentlessly against the ground, Rey is caught by the simple majesty of the sport. The three remaining racers bounce and bruise at the other, only one more falling—who cuts himself free.

Ben watches the track impassively, uncaring of the sport. Instead he glances at Rey, noting the wide wonder of her eyes as she remains dutifully silent beside him. Thankfully this race is less brutal than the others. It is clearly easier for her.

When it ends the victor steps down as a parade of attendants surround him, cheering, touching every part of him. A woman bares her breasts and Rey barely restrains her mortified scoff. Ben seems less than enthused. In fact, as Rey glances at him, he seems contemptuous of the man as he is presented his winnings, adorned with ivy as the crowd roars.

When they finally leave the stadium, Rey keeps close to Ben’s side. The strangers' stares remain, though they are fleeting, all the way to the stables. Her thoughts are derailed when a woman with straw hair and small lips steps in their way, round eyes attentive and piercing. “Master Ren.”

He tenses.

She ignores him, turning back to gesture further into the stables, towards the open door leading to the green pastures Rey noticed before the race. “My master requests your presence.”
“I refuse,” Ben grunts, lip curling briefly as he brushes past her to retrieve Silencer.

The woman frowns after him before she looks at Rey, scanning her face to feet and up again. “Are you his Ancilla?”

Rey blinks, offering a polite smile. “His what?”

“Ancilla,” the woman repeats, somewhere between patience and ire. “His personal attendant?”

Rey recalls him saying so, as long as they are in the city, and nods once. “Yes, I am. Who is your master?” she tries, attempting to change the topic.

The woman follows her lead with a twinge in her lip. “The winner of this chariot race,” she claims, gesturing to the wide stable. “The owner of this building.”

As she speaks, Rey’s heart pounds. Her master wants to talk to Ben? She can’t imagine why, but the idea is enticing. He seemed quite popular—and with abilities like that on the track, Rey can’t help but share the audience’s enthusiasm—for the most part, anyway.

Ben returns with Silencer’s reins in hand, glaring down at the woman. “I thought I told you I refuse his request.”

“You know how persistent he can be,” she warns, not without amusement. Rey considers her thoughtfully.

“I’ll take my chances,” he says dismissively, turning to Rey. When he sees her, prepared to order her on Silencer’s back, he notices the crestfallen look on her face, her wide eyes pleading when she looks up at him through her lashes.

After a moment, he sighs through his nose. It’s not a good idea, he knows that, but he can feel the warning heat prickle in the back of his neck. There is something disturbing her, and leaving her in unrest would only impair her focus. So far she has made good work of seeming no more than his loyal servant, doting and obedient in his wake. Already he is certain the murmurings of Kylo Ren with a female attendant have begun gaining ground. All to their advantage—because of her.

“...Very well,” he grumbles to the woman. “Bring us to him.”

She smiles in relief, her smooth cheeks lifting before she turns on her heel, ushering them forth. Excitement glazes Rey from knees to ankles, her steps light and airy with eager trepidation. The stable ends and reveals an open courtyard spotted with shaded lounges and tables made of limestone, women in white tunics drifting about like migrating spores to serve the few men reclining among them.

“Well, if my eyes don’t deceive!”

The three turn to find a young man with curly raven hair approach them, a winning smile stretching brutally into his cheeks.

“Poe Dameron,” Ben grunts, staring dispassionately down at the shorter man.

Their height matters so much as an ocean swell to the mainland for all that Poe is deterred. A flicker of blatant contempt flashes in the man’s eyes before it’s masked with tepid friendliness. “Master Ren, this is a surprise.”

“You summoned us,” Ben remarks dryly.
Poe scoffs, resting his hands on his hips. The ivy wreath around his neck sways. “Indeed. Or, rather, I summoned you.” His gaze drifts lazily over to Rey, appraising her slowly. “Not that I’m complaining.”

Rey flushes, averting her eyes.

Mercifully, Poe shifts his attention away from her to find Ben’s hard glare—in either bravery or ignorance of the latter’s rising anger. “What do you want?” Ben huffs.

Poe scratches the stubble on his cheek. “Must we suffer through the formalities? Come,” he waves, walking towards one of the tables. “The evening will approach soon, and I intend to celebrate my victory. Connix, the wine.”

As he sits, the woman—Connix—leaves and returns at maddening speed, placing three chalices before them and filling each with a rich, red wine. Silencer goes off to graze among the other loosened horses. Before Connix leaves, Poe catches her wrist, pulling it to him to kiss the back of her hand. She smiles, tapping his jaw before she leaves for other matters.

Poe sighs contentedly, sitting back and admiring the enclosure as bugs flit about in the sunlight beyond their shade. “Kaydel is perhaps the most capable of my slave women,” he remarks soundly, tilting his chin to scrutinize Ben. He lifts the chalice to his lips. “I must say, I didn’t take you as a man to own one.”

“What you take is no concern of mine,” Ben growls darkly.

As the men continue their banter, Rey struggles to hold onto their Latin tongues moving beyond the reach of her understanding. Instead she sneaks furtive glances at the chariot racer, wondering what could possess a man to risk his life for such a violent sport.

After a while she looks around the enclosure, admiring the standoffish horses and mingling Romans. It seems quite peaceful here, her chest unwinding as the open air breathes its life into her body.

Suddenly, a man with flawlessly dark skin strides forth from the stable, a look of determination on his face. He stops behind Poe, resting a hand on his shoulder. Rey hears him say there is an issue demanding his attention.

Poe nods, rising. “It’s an honor to have the infamous Kylo Ren in my stables, but I’m afraid we should celebrate some other time. At the revelry tomorrow, perhaps?”

Rey pauses, his words rolling in her mind. It passes over the revelry—should she be surprised one beloved by Rome is invited?—in favor of the name spoken. Kylo Ren. It must be related to his Ren title, some misnomer proclaimed to disguise his birth name... but infamy?

When he leaves them, Rey looks up at Ben, her yearning to know his mind halted by his unreadable expression. “What does he mean?”

Ben’s lip plumps slightly as he shrugs a shoulder in casual disregard. “Nothing important.”

Rey watches the apple of his throat work the words from his lips, but does not remark on it, following him into the pasture to take Silencer.

As she trails behind him, a young stallion trots towards her, his hooves lifting much like Silencer’s, wide, dark eyes intent on her as he nears.
Rey freezes, immediately beaming as the beast stops next to her, his snout pushing on her shoulder, huffing hot against her skin. She giggles, turning to catch and appraise the beautiful coat under her palms. The older colt is mostly white, his bulbous rear end arching high and bouncing. Brilliant orange patches bloom from several sprouts along his body.

“Where did you come from?” she asks, reaching to scratch a fly from his ear. It flicks under her attention, the horse nickering and curiously sniffing her face. She cringes gleefully. “Hey, that tickles,” she coos, petting soothing circles along his cheeks, easing him off.

“I see you’ve met my Bambino,” says a voice behind her. She barely has a chance to turn before Poe Dameron moves to stand beside her, resting his hand along the young stallion’s back. “I bred him myself. In one month’s time he’ll be the fastest horse in all of Rome.”

Rey nods politely. “You must be very proud,” she says slowly, measuring her words.

He offers a smaller smile, one more amused and heartfelt than the others before.

She can see why people are so charmed by this man. There is an archaic charisma about him, friendliness translating into compulsion. Rey doesn’t share the same sentiment as the flashing woman on the field, nor the gentle affection of Kaydel Connix. Merely an openness, a willingness to learn more.

He turns his attention away and Rey follows him, not stifling her giggle as Silencer trots just beyond Ben’s reach. Even from this distance she can see his composure slipping, his frustration taking shape in his lumbering limbs and swinging arms.

They chuckle together, and Rey returns to petting Bambino’s soft orange mane.

Poe considers her openly. “How long have you been with him?” he asks politely.

“No, not two weeks, yet,” she replies, smiling to herself.

A looks of concern clouds his face. “And he treats you well?”

Rey looks at him, a confused tightness squinting at her eyes. “Yes. Very well.” Her heart begins to thud inexplicably, the grip spreading dangerously. “Why wouldn’t he?” she whispers.

“I,” Poe grimaces, tussling his hair as he glances back at Ben, who just misses taking hold of the reins. “I suppose I’d assumed otherwise. Roman gladiators aren’t well known for gentility towards others. Kylo Ren, especially.”

Rey’s mind muddles, a terrible fog spreading, every thought murky and still as his words sink into her skin like the cold dew of morning.

She looks into this man’s eyes, wishing they were someone else’s, yet unable to hold fast to any word other than the one spilling forth from her lips. “...What?”
Chapter End Notes

LOOK AT THESE ADORABLE DOODLES OF REY, SILENCER, AND BAMBINO!!! *heart eyes* PRECIOUS BABIES! Check out the equally sweet Laura on Twitter @sketchesbylaural!

Kladrubers like Silencer may be good runners, but their true talent actually lies in strutting. They are showy horses who led parades and carried the wealthy, able to cart immense weight with their strong backs. They can also trot in place when they are happy.

Chariot races were a huge spectacle, usually beginning with a parade where the racers would travel to the Circus Maximus nestled in the valley between Palatine Hill and another rich neighborhood called Aventine Hill.

The Circus Maximus was over 2,000 feet long (650 meters) and could seat 250,000 people. Plebians were allowed in for free because it was one of the only entertaining things they could do (meanwhile Patricians paid for shaded seating). Races were so open, they were the only sport women were allowed to watch, and the fans would get so heated they sometimes broke into massive fights.

Usually the Emperor or host of the race would drop a cloth called a "Mappa" to signal the simultaneous release of the chariot racers. The spring-loaded gates called the "Carceres" (Greek: "Hysplex")

The inner walls of the track were called the "Spinæ," and it was a common strategy to knock other charioteers (called "Aurigæ") into the wall in hopes of incapacitating them. Being incapacitated was called "Naufragia," meaning "shipwreck".

Unlike the Greeks, who held onto the reins by the hands, Romans wrapped them around their bodies to secure themselves. However, if they were in a wreck, they would be dragged until they were either freed or killed (mostly killed). They carried a curved knife called a "Falx" to cut themselves free in the event of a Naufragia.
The survival rate of Aurigaes was so short, to survive was to earn fame. The more races one (or outlasted) the more popular the racer grew. Many Greek racers were slaves, while Romans competed for glory.

Women exposing their breasts in Ancient Rome was not so much a sign of sexuality as much one of submission or mercy, as a way to communicate pity or praise. Sidenote: having small (or "inoffensive") breasts was seen as more preferable, since larger breasts were deemed unsightly due to male actors who would dress in comically-oversized drag.

Poe's twin horses are called Arabians (the third fastest horses in the world and native to the ancient Mediterranean) named "Nigreos" and "Unus," which when put together mean "Black One".

BONUS: "Bambino" is Italian for "baby." I know it isn't Latin, but I wanted to pay homage to Italy as the home of Rome as well as give BB-8 a believable name.
Hello, everyone! I'm really sorry this chapter took so long. And for such a small word count... But this was a bit draining to write, among other things. I have a few other projects going on right now but your continued support has kept me going more than you know! I love you all so much; hearing from you brings me such joy. <3

ALSO. ALSO. HAPPY TWENTY CHAPTERS, EVERYONE! Oh wow, I am just blown away by how insane this is! 200+ Bookmarks, 700+ Comments, and OVER 1,000 KUDOS?? I kid you not I am tearing up right now. I can't thank you all enough. Whether you've been here from the start or just got here, I want to say thank you all so much for giving me the amazing opportunity to give you my love for writing, Star Wars, and the Reylo community.

Another special thanks to the ladies at TWD for being so amazingly supportive and encouraging.

I love you all so much! T_T *hugs*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Roman gladiators aren't well known for their gentility towards others. Kylo Ren, especially.”

Everything goes still under her skin, her ears popping as the sounds of life and speech blur, honing in on those words alone, desperate to cling into any foundation. “...What?”

Poe offers her a quizzical look, a crooked smile in the face of her shock. “Gladiators are rarely so gentle.” The smile falters in her silence. “Surely you know this,” he murmurs.

She doesn't. She didn't. She couldn't… had never comprehend… “No…”

Now is his turn to look confused. “Come again?” he urges, ducking to listen.

“No. That's not, he's not…” she shakes her head, taking a step back. It's the wrong choice. She nearly sways as the world tilts beneath her, nausea breaking the barriers of her rationale. “That’s not true.”

Aside, Ben huffs, finally snagging the reins, yanking down and hissing a meaningless reprimand. Silencer flattens his ears briefly, nickering in dismay. Only somewhat satisfied, Ben turns, running a hand to right his mussed hair, and frowns.

Rey backs away from Poe Dameron, holding her arms. The sight of her shrinking enlarges something in Ben, taking control and spurring him on with heavy steps, hesitation abashed.

“Rey.”

She jumps, turning to look at him, confusion, anger and hurt swirling in her eyes. The fire in him grows and he snaps an accusing glare down at Poe, letting his free hand reach out to corral her closer to his side, effectively placing himself between them. She flinches under his touch—
whatever happened in those brief moments has obviously rattled her—and the rage he feels blurs
the line between his mind and clenched fist.

Seemingly sensing the danger, Poe puts distance between them without hesitation. He bows
slightly.  “Evening, Master Ren.” His sable eyes drift to her, twitching an invisible apology.

Schooling the man a dark look, Ben ushers Rey ahead of him, herding both her and Silencer back
to the stable. Fury chokes him, barely restraining his silence. But he must remain calm. Whatever
has frightened her can wait until they return to the villa, where his anger won’t draw attention.
Where she can feel safe.

Once inside and well-distanced, Ben turns to Rey, bending to lift her up and place her on Silencer’s
back in one, smooth movement. She is silent and limp, complying by taking the reins and lowering
them over her body.

Ben considers her, but for only a moment. She doesn’t look in his eyes, her own haunted and
distant, their light dimmed. For another moment he considers finding Poe Dameron and wringing
his neck, but decides against it. It would be unwise to resolve his anger that way. Instead he scours
his mind for some hope that she will return to herself. Perhaps she is hungry—an issue he can
resolve when they return home.

With that he mounts behind her, bidding Silencer forward. The ride through the streets is less
eventful, and he keeps to the outskirts. The sense of unease ripples through him, casting an aura of
discomfort from her, and he puts distance between them and the city as quickly as possible.

The country roads are mercifully empty, the steady sounds of Silencer’s hooves keeping a steady
beat in the quiet. And yet, the woman in his arms does not settle as she had before. She doesn’t
lean closer to him to speak, doesn’t look up from the grass, her mouth pressed firm.

It concerns him. More than it should.

Rey’s mind whirls, caught in the storm of realization, battered by the terrible truths that reveal
themselves to her in the crashing waves of memory. The helm, the denarii, the favors to the
Emperor. The strange smudge on his cheek she touched with her own hand…

Everything suddenly seems so clear to her now, as if waking from some fevered dream to this cold
reality, as hard and true as the arms around her. Caging her. Suddenly she is a captive again, but not
in the way she has grown used to. Not by the patient instruction, the comfortable company. Not the
depth of his voice nor fathomless scape of his earnest gaze.

No. What captivates her now is not the sort she’s grown to long for—instead, it is a crippling, base
fear. A terrible instinct. It feels like her insides have been rung of their sopping hopefulness, left
rumpled and alone to dry slowly, torturously in the unforgiving sunlight. She fights to retain her
composure, not to let it melt her onto the ground below and consume every last inch of her
numbing body. Though now, moreso than ever, the thought to run assaults her, gathering from her
coiling jaw to the soles of her feet.

In time both spanning eternity and a second, they return to the villa. Ben sighs himself down,
pausing to look up at her. Mechanically, Rey lifts the reins from her body, letting them rest as she
falls to her feet. Her knees ache, but not so much as her heart. They go into the house when
Silencer is put away, Rey aiming for her small chambers with rapid steps.

“Stop. Wait.”
His command is soft, but its presence made painfully known as she obeys, as he comes around to look at her. The orange light of sunset beats over them, the shadows returning. Frightening.

She cannot bear to look at him now. She must escape this, get away to clear her mind, to think.

Deftly, he lifts his fingers to her face, but holds just short of touching her cheek. "Something is wrong," he murmurs.

The heat of his hand smears against her, singing and unmerciful even without the contact of his skin. The war in her wages, the battle won by her overwhelming emotion, and she pulls away.

Waves of hurt echo from him. “Rey, what is it? Tell me.”

She couldn’t even if she wanted to. Her mouth won’t move, her throat is swarmed with bees, the honey once inside her swallowed up. Dry desert sand. Emptiness.

“Rey—”

“Is it true?”

When he doesn’t reply beyond a cautious tilt of the head, Rey finally finds her courage, rides the rising steam of her fear until it becomes hot anger, meeting his eyes with a challenging, reproachful glare.

“Are you a gladiator?”

He swallows thickly, the loose hand hovering balling into a tight fist as he stares widely at her face. Rey doesn’t see it shake.

He is silent.

She blinks, something cold washing down the back of her neck, dripping over her heart until she’s left drenched and shivering inside. “You are,” she whispers.

His hand lowers to his side, shoulders stiff, his breathing uneven. “I am.”

The cord between them snaps, ringing in Rey’s ears as she takes a wary step away from him, her every vein clenching as the horrible confirmation grips her. What was once the fear of knowing has become only fear, the fragile trust in this man torn asunder by the hardness in his voice, the darkness consuming his eyes until she is left only in the night. She takes another step back, holding her arms as she looks into the eyes of Kylo Ren. “How could you?” her voice trembles.

“You keep asking questions,” he grunts, voice straining under its own weight, teeth flashing in a condescending scoff, “but fear the answers you don’t understand—”

“I understand plenty,” she hisses, earning a shocked pause from him. Riding her fury, she bares her fangs and snarls, “Now I know everything I need to know about you. You’re a liar. A murderous snake!” she sobs dryly, uncaring of the anger and hurt swirling around him. Good. Let him hurt, the hidden, dark part of her soul screams. He hurt you. He lied to you. He made you think he cared.

“I didn’t lie,” he defends darkly, shaking his head. There’s a cold casualness about him now, the air stiff and chilled. “You know the truth. It’s there, in your eyes,” he says, searching them, the odd reverence of the action nearly disarming her. He takes a step closer while she remains rooted still. “...Say it,” he commands.
She scowls determinedly at him, the sting beneath her lashes burning on the border of control.

His voice falls dangerously soft. “Say it.”

Rey takes a shaky breath, leveling him all the hatred, all the hurt she’s held inside from the moment she learned what she was all those years ago. In his face she sees the man she’s come to know overshadowed, her master, her teacher, drawn down by the blood of the innocent, his mask unveiled to show what he truly is. “You’re a monster,” she spits.

He goes very still, only the rise and fall of his chest betraying his dragging breaths, the flare of his nostrils throbbing until he snaps from the stillness, turning from her to grab the atrium chair and thrust it harshly to the side, sending it into splinters against the wall with a shout.

With his back turned, he continues to rage, heading next for the table and throwing that aside, too. His hair falls in tatters over his face, hunched and heaving visage blurred in darkness. Rey jumps. Horror grips her at the sight, his true form finally revealed to her, and she obeys the instincts of her feet and flees.

She runs to her chambers, closing and bolting the door behind her. His vigorous assault on the atrium continues, loud enough that she can hear him even as he moves into the kitchen.

Leaning against the door, Rey covers her mouth, gasping. What have I done? she mourns, closing her eyes, willing the thoughts away. They do not leave her.

This is all her fault. Had she not been content, here, in ignorance? Before she learned his name everything was so simple. But since, speaking it aloud, it has only made this pain worse.

With weak knees she moves to her bed, kneeling before it, too weary to lie down, too distraught to stand. She buries her head in her arms, the dark of night rising in her window, the blue light of dusk shrouding her as her lips quiver and peel back in her mournful grimace.

And, for the first time since her arrival, Rey weeps.

Chapter End Notes

[No notes today~ ♥]

{The theme for this chapter is "Over My Head" by Ecosmith. Listen to the Glory's Fray Spotify playlist here!}
Chapter Notes

Well this is the longest chapter yet! hopefully it makes up for the lack of word count in the last one, haha. Seriously though, guys, this has been quite the week. I honestly NEVER thought that this story would get as much support as it has. Just one more way (upon the MOUNTAIN of ways) that you are all so amazing, encouraging, and overall wonderful to a romantic sap like me.

(Just a quick side note, everyone: I'm making steady progress replying to your amazing comments. I adore and read—then re-read and re-read...—each and every one. Right now I'm trying to focus on getting these updates for you, so I appreciate your patience in that regard!! :D Thank you!)

In the near-three decades of his life, Ben Solo has made many choices.

He remembers the days of his youth in passing. The sunlight, once so innocent, was eventually tainted by its own heat, his growing awareness that with its usefulness also came its sacrifice. Is man so different? he had wondered. Am I?

Oh yes, he has made many choices, when not all were his to choose.

But her...

For six years he sacrificed himself to Rome, doing the bidding of those who would seek to control him, to use him for their will. He let them, willingly bowing his head. What else to life was there than that? In obedience there was contentment. Of all the choices taken from him, he held fast solely to one—to sacrifice his body only for what it could withstand.

Violence.

Rage.

War.

It built then, by the hand of his manipulators. His commanders, his generals, and then, almost imperceptibly, himself. In the midst of the fray, the blood on the battlefield, the encroaching might of the empire, he had risen from the ash anew. The boy and his scrolls were gone, his will eddied, his surrender complete.

Almost.

Perhaps it was the struggle within him that fettered so fast to his minute desire for control. Like the sun always returns on the horizon, constant in its chase with the moon, so too was his humanity always in pursuit of the immortal and unseen. With his sacrifice came his yearning to hold on to one... just one thing. And if his body, if his mind, if his soul belonged to others, he would keep pieces for himself. Small, shattered, and broken, but his.
And so his celibacy began, his innocence lasting while blood bathed him in glory. From the infantry to the arena, it was all the same. Pain, death, and in it the sharp, dreadful reminder of life.

*As life condemns one to die, so too does the act of life itself.*

All who live will die.

Whether they live or not.

The morning comes in darkness, the sound of birds calling, trilling, yearning beyond the walls. He stalks through his home in a haze, the shadows and pillars looming and unfamiliar. His feet lead him to her door, his hand heavy as he quietly pushes it open.

He peers into the room before entering fully, finding her collapsed on the edge of her bed, the window above bathing her in the morning grey. He steps closer through the glimmering dust, watching the steady rise and fall of her curved back, the pinched frown of discontent lingering between her brows.

He is quiet for some time, simply watching, before he knows he cannot stay. And though he knows her newfound hatred for him—the malice and scorn in her eyes that will return when she wakes—he will not deny himself the fall to his knee, taking her gently into his arms as she slumbers.

The longing to wake her, to apologize, lingers within him. The close warmth of her body shudders into his bones, the addictive proximity more than his rage and weariness can contest. Her head falls to his shoulder in one, fleeting moment of stolen bliss.

Slowly, carefully, he stands, holding her fast to him before placing her down on her bed. Her head cradles so well in his hand as he lays her to rest, her soft hair spilling through his fingers, spearing through him. The sensation lingers as it leaves her, her head turning to the pillow after him, the tightness in her face finally easing into peaceful sleep.

His empty hands ball into fists at his sides, the war within him waging as he gazes upon her.

Tonight, he will do what he must. But for now she must sleep, dream, before his sacrifice swallows her in the consuming nightmare of Rome… just as it swallowed him all those years ago.

Rey wakes with a spot of sunlight on her cheek, rousing her from the murky mires of a forgotten vision. She wipes her eye dispassionately until she remembers the events of last night.

Her blood freezes, the sudden grip of anxiety holding tight. She recalls the truth from Poe Dameron—that her master is a gladiator. Kylo Ren. *Master Ren.* She nearly shudders. How often had she called him that name in ignorance of its meaning? And then to call him Ben, thinking it his real name… she is not sure what to believe anymore.

She rises and stretches, her back aching—though not as much as it could. It seems, in half-wakefulness, she had crawled into her bed. The door is still closed, undisturbed, and it only works to prolong her dread at venturing beyond it.

So she doesn’t. Instead she sits, ignoring the hunger gnawing at her belly. If her master wants her, then he should come on his own. The terrible ache in her heart throbs as time wears on in silence, her guilt and shame for trusting him so easily wringing her chest with his massive, warm hands…

Rey sighs solemnly. It was foolish of her to protest him so ardently last night, but she cannot bring
herself to regret that now. She knows of the gladiators, their tales of violence and cruelty spanning the world. But, unlike the slaves forced to fight, to die, her master is well off.

She frowns. Yes, he is a free man, a patrician. To live as a gladiator is mere pleasure to him. Nothing more.

The thought pulls relentlessly in her mind, paining her neck. When she makes to rub it the door opens, jolting her.

He enters, clean shaven and tired, meeting her eyes. They collide like stones, hard and grating on the other. There is water shining in his hair, dripping onto the cloth of his tunic. Somehow his voice sounds rougher. “Come.”

Rey glares.

His hand tightens on the door, pale knuckles whitening. “This is no time for your petulance,” he exhausts. “Come. I have drawn a bath for you.”

Flushing slightly, she rises, but does not obey. “What for?” she questions shakily.

He looks at her as though she’s told him Silencer’s pelt is white, expression wide and impatient. “You will not be seen by the Emperor in that state.”

Rey looks down, bemused. Her stola is smudged and wrinkled, her arms and legs lacking the clear luster they held only a few days prior. Without looking she knows her hair is a mess, and sighs defeatedly. A pang of curiosity ripples through her. “So, I am going with you?”

“Obviously,” Ben huffs. “You’ve been seen with me as my Ancilla. You will be expected to attend.”

Her eyes slide closed. It all makes sense to her. Of course. She had wanted this, hadn’t she? To help shoulder the burden of their secret? She nods, following him to a door leading behind the west side of the house, still shaded from the rising sunlight. Gnats buzz about in lazy circles, enjoying the lingering cool as Rey steps outside. She looks to see one of Ahsoka’s pristine tunicas waiting for her.

“Wear that when you’ve finished,” he orders sternly.

Now she turns to look at him, her hand clutching possessively to the skirt of her stola. “Why?”

“That’s not customary,” he explains, glancing at her hand. Something in his gaze hardens when it returns to hers. “Take it off. Bathe yourself.”

Rey pales, left in shock as he leaves her alone with those words, closing the door behind him as he disappears into the house. She frowns, eyeing the still water incredulously. The basin is rather large. She’s used it before in the afternoons her master went on his rides, using the solitude to her advantage on the rare days she would clean herself.

What was once peace has again turned to frigid uncertainty, leaving her dispassionate as she peels away the sleeves over her collar, shimmying out of her stola. She begins to unbind her breasts, but pauses, looking over her shoulder. No one is there, but the fear of being watched without her knowledge is far too prevalent to ignore. She faces the door as she continues, stripped naked as she settles into the water.

Rey shivers, chilled, and scrubs her body with the dry rag beside the basin. She spots a damp one,
layed flat to dry, and stills. He had used this water before her. She scoffs. At the very least it is better than having the water after her previous master. She tries not to think about how much sweeter this water smells, how cleansed her skin feels when she’s finished and slips out.

The water is cold, the morning air making her shudder, her breasts overly sensitive to the temperature. With her trembling fingers—not aided by her more recent anxieties—she struggles to bind her breasts as quickly as possible, but the fascia slips from her grasp and floats into the water.

She gasps, snatching it back, but it’s too late. The band is drenched. With an arm concealing her chest, she groans, slapping the band onto the bench to dry next to the rags with a damp suwap. She refrain a curse upon the thing, her nerves fried. Hastily she retreats to the small crate of stored undergarments, and nearly whines her dismay. Ahsoka must have taken the last breast band, leaving only subligaculum.

Deciding not to remain vulnerable any longer, Rey quickly snatches one of the garments, sliding it up her legs before throwing the tunica over her arms. Luckily the fabric is thicker, open and flowing over her frame, and covers her quite well. Thankfully, she and Ahsoka share the same build… minus a few certain assets.

With a ruminating caution, Rey steps back inside, making for her chambers. As she passes his room she finds the door open, and—against her better judgement—glances inside.

She halts.

The rising sun bursts through the open doors, casting golden lining around his lifted, shifting arms as he combs and manages his hair, his back to her. The teeth rake down slowly, perfectly arranging each raven strand as they end at his nape, the skin bare and fanning out to the strong set of his shoulders.

Rey stares, forgetting herself as her eyes fall down his back. She’s known since she’s met him his massive stature, but somehow she had not quite considered its appearance. Now she is granted full view of the stark paleness of his body, the thick build of his waist, the generous dark markings creating hypnotic constellations along his taut, muscular build...

As if sensing her, he pauses, turning with a caught expression. Rey swallows, urging herself not to gawk at the impressive span of his chest. Heat creeps up her neck, drops down to her feet. Before she can think to flee, his eyes flit to her hair and back. He lowers his arms, silently extending the comb to her.

Slowly, her fear still simmering, she reaches out like a cornered animal, taking it from him. She looks away sheepishly as he stares, lifting the comb to begin loosing the snags. “When do we leave?” she queries softly.

Ben considers her a moment, admiring the tunica. She wears it much better than Ahsoka, her smooth, peach-golden skin flattered by the clean white linens. “After you’ve dressed me,” he replies casually.

Rey pauses mid-stroke, staring widely at him. “Come again?”

“As my attendant, you’ll need to erase all illusion of privacy,” he says darkly, stalking closer. His shadow falls over her, and Rey struggles to maintain her composure as he comes near, clad only in his subligar. His dark eyes smolder like coals, burning into her with their intensity. “And as my slave,” he reaches out behind him, taking the dark tunic from his bed, and offers it to her, “you will do everything I say.”
Raking the comb through the rest of her hair one last time, she begrudgingly complies, tossing it
upon his sheets to take the tunic from his hand. She has never washed this one before, does not
recognize the careful hem and dark, almost imperceptible embroidery along the shoulders.

He ducks his head, command stern and soft all at once. “Dress me,” he whispers, the heat of his
breath and body surrounding her.

Rey shudders as it sinks into her flesh, but forces herself to remember her place. And his. With
little gentleness in exchange for rapidity and tact, Rey finds the lip of the tunic and pushes it over
his ducked head. He rises fully, making the job easier for her as she slips his arms through, trying
and failing to ignore the heavy weight of his arms, or how their swells overflow her palms.

Finally done, Rey exhales impatiently, all too eager to escape the charged silence of the room. He
breaks it with a gesture. “My pallium.”

Rey offers him a dubious look, though his remains impassively expectant. She goes to his bed,
finding yet another dark length of cloth. Carefully she steps behind him, reaching up to draw it over
his shoulder and tie the end, careful to avoid touching him.

When it's finished, he seems nothing like she knew him to be. Her mind says his name, but she
pushes it down, instead scrutinizing the pristinely patrician garb as he faces her. The grandeur
seems a bit much, but then again, so too would a gathering with the Emperor of Rome.

“Rey,” he says, the call breaking her thoughts. In a shift of cloth his hand rises, stopping just below
her chin. The effect does as intended—she tilts up to resist his touch. It sends a wave of pain
through him, burying his hesitance under the crushing swell of resolve. “I mean what I say. You
must obey me. No questions. No hesitation.” His eyes tighten. “Do you understand?”

Rey swallows. The curve of his knuckle is like a blade at her throat, but the threat beyond him is
far worse. This secret they share cannot be known by anyone, must be completely imperceptible to
all who surround them this night.

To Rome he has known her.

To herself, she has never known him.

And that, in this moment, as she finds only darkness in his gaze, is the cruelest type of wisdom.

Defeated, she closes her eyes, lowering her chin onto the broad width of his warm, curled finger.
She nods. “Yes... Master.”

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After a small, late breakfast, Ben adjusts the blanket upon Silencer’s back, ensuring all is in place.
With a wave of his hand he summons Rey over. She doesn’t respond beyond the affirmative when
he tells her that she will ride behind him this time, her eyes cast downward.

Something twists in his chest at the sight, but there is no time to dwell on that now. He swings his
leg over, mounting Silencer fully, and lowers his hand to her. She stares at it blankly before slowly
placing it in his own, her slender, warm fingers sliding against his palm. With a grunt—and her
added agility despite the intruding skirt of the tunica—Ben tugs her behind him until she is seated
firmly.

Unlike when she rode before, he does not encircle his waist with the reigns. He turns his face to
Rey pauses, hesitant to touch him, but remembers his earlier command. If she resists him now, then she would only open herself to rebellion later. In the midst of the Emperor, that could only bring misfortune. So she inches closer, the heat of his back radiating through his cloak, and carefully moves to take him in her arms.

When her small hands rest against his stomach, Ben’s skin burns under the pressure. Heat rises, threatening to bloom on his face, but he forces himself not to dwell on the steadfastness of her unintentioned embrace. He snaps the reins, Silencer nickering knowingly as they travel once more along the path to Rome.

They enter the city along the same path, the roads becoming familiar to Rey. Now she understands the wide stares upon her master—they knew him. Or, knew of him, far better than she had. The thought makes her sick.

As they ascend to Palatine Hill, Rey recognizes the ornate structures of the road and crammed buildings. The architecture captures her in the afternoon light, bright and pearlescent as they pass by. This is where she and Ahsoka bathed, where she felt the looming despair of the Colosseum.

She refuses to look at it, now.

They enter a grand courtyard between other arrivals. Many travel on foot, the esteemed guests flanked by one or two slaves. She notices a litter being set down, the woman inside helped out. Rey recognizes her, but knows not from where, and has no time to think of it when a mass of servants in togas come towards them.

The men speak to Ben and he dismounts, not offering her help nor taking her waist. Rey slips down just before Silencer is led away, falling in line beside Ben as they make to enter.

His pallium stirs imperiously around him, his large frame encompassing the other arrivals. As they enter the massive, chalky pillars, Rey looks around, stunned by the glittering archways and ornate tapestries, the smoothly-painted statues and neatly-trimmed houseplants leading their way. She has never seen such a marvelous building, and knows she may never again.

Resolutely they follow the crowd into a massive atrium, the sunlight filtering through the pillars along the mosaic of the floor. A few young men approach Ben, mentioning something about outrageous prices for lamb. As Rey makes herself incompetent, she listens attentively as her master speaks idly with them. Every word sounds forced, false, and the smallest of prides forms in her mind at the notion of knowing so.

Until she remembers what he is, and then she regains her impassivity.

It continues that way for some time, it would seem, servants offering the distilled wine, pointedly ignoring Rey. At one point she tries to make eye contact, to feel like she is seen, but to no avail.

She is only property, after all.

When one of the patricians leave Ben for some other social affair, he leans down ever so slightly to mutter a command in her ear. “Look in the corner there.”

She does, seeing a small circle forming of women in tunicas much like her own.

“They are palace slaves. They do this often before the revelry starts. You might find their company more enlightening than mine.”
She dares a look in his eyes. “Is that acceptable, Master?”

Pursing his lips, he looks down and nods, turning away from her to sip his wine. Feeling unleashed, Rey obeys, putting distance between them. If finally feels like she can try to breathe again when she comes closer to the women, who open their circle for her.

Rey glances around, but does not see the sweet girl Rose among them. Her heart sinks in dismay, but nonetheless she opens her ears to catch the floating Latin traded in waves around her ears.

She doesn’t speak, merely listens, enjoying the company. When one says something, about washing her master’s feet, gesturing to her, Rey nods. “Yes, I have,” she lies, grateful in her heart she’s never had the command.

As she listens to the women’s off-handed complaints concealed within open praises for their master, Rey considers them curiously. The things they are made to do remind her of her station in Egypt, only with far worse affair. Their misgivings about Emperor Snoke and his lurid attempts settle like a stone in Rey’s throat.

She remembers last night. The fear she held for her master… the man who spared her, sheltered her, taught her, protected her… It’s all so confusing, all so disorienting, she loses herself to her thoughts until the women suddenly fall very quiet.

A familiar presence appears behind her, his voice rough and demanding as a large hand takes her by the elbow. “Come.”

Their eyes fall to her, stunned, as Rey leaves them, trailing beside as he leads her back into the mob of massing patricians and their Ancilla. As they go, she can hear the women begin to whisper, a strange, hollow agony digging a pit in her belly.

“The banquet is about to begin,” Ben states dispassionately, not looking at her. “We will be led to our seats, and you will go with the other ancilla to retrieve the food.” The hand on her arm tightens, but not painfully. “Move quickly, speak to no one, and return to my side when it is done.”

He doesn’t release her until she says she understands, and even then he squeezes once before letting her go. The gesture is oddly comforting. Rey chooses not to dwell on it, merely follow beside him as the palace servants begin to lead them further into the palatium.

The open courtyard at the center of the structure spreads before them, green grass laid flat and plain, no plants to adorn it, merely a throne and small, ringed fence. Rey eye’s it curiously as they pass column by column, until they are ushered into what must be the grand triclinium.

While their home has only one set of three klinon, this room is speckled with them, all arranged around their own tables. Jagged paths are left around them, which must be easy for servants and slaves to maneuver amongst the guests.

They begin to take their seats, Ben following a guide into the near-center of the room. Rey eyes everything with suspicion and awe, the brilliant scarlets and golds of the chaise lounges distracting her.

Sighing, Ben sits, leaning against the back of the lounge. He casts his arms along either side, his long legs bent. He seems bored, almost, his ever-present frown lingering beneath a thoughtful gaze to the rear courtyard garden beyond the window.

Rey remains standing, watching him when he looks up at her, the coldness in his gaze ripping into her. He looks at her like she is a stranger, and her jaw grows tight and heavy beneath its weight. Of
course. It never mattered what he was like before she knew what he was. Why should this hurt her? Now he is a stranger to her, too.

He sucks in a shaky breath. “Make yourself useful… bring me more wine.”

Blinking back traitorous tears, she bows her head. “Yes, Master,” she drones, departing towards the waiting jugs. They seem free to pluck from. She finds herself weaving through the crowd, lost in the massing swarm of chattering bodies.

As soon as her hand wraps around the neck, music begins to play throughout the room, perhaps the most beautiful she has ever heard. Flutists and harpists weave their way inside from the garden, as if from a dream, their rich robes flowing languidly around them. The scent of flowers breezes along as they pass her, taking her breath and rapture with them.

All at once, the patricians and their ancilla depart. The latters’ steps seem practised as they begin to file out another door. Rey jolts, realizing that the banquet must be beginning. Setting down the jug, she hastily pads over to tail the parade towards the kitchen.

They pass through a darker, narrow hall, arches leading them with looming shadows. Rey reminds herself that this moment is merely temporary, and yet it does not quell the sense of unease.

Her mind betrays her. Surely in an attempt to soothe, but the vision now brings only pain. She remembers the smell in the garden of his home— their home—the sweetness and reassurance of his presence there beside her.

Rey sighs. If she continues to think these thoughts, then she will surely—

Suddenly, from the darkness, a blur lunges forward just beyond her vision. In less than a moment her mouth is covered by a hot, wet hand, her waist encircled as she is dragged muffled and screaming into the shadows.

Chapter End Notes

[For the ump-teen amount of vocab words in this chapter, please partake this little list: Ancilla: a personal attendant, usually female Stola: a simple tank-sleeved dress worn by respectable Roman women Tunica: a common gown similar to a toga, fashioned over the shoulders by chains (Greek: "chiton") Subligar: underwear (plural: "subligaculum") Fascia: brassiere (bra) Pallium: cloak (typically worn by upper-class) Palatium: palace (grand villa) Triclinium: a formal dining room Klinon: the individual chaise lounge used for dining (arranged into a "u" shape around a table)]

[Revelries thrown by the wealthy typically had a vast array of entertainment, including musicians, poets, gladiator battles, dancing women, and trained animal circuses to name a few]

[The courtyard in the middle of the palatium is actually not a courtyard, but an]
amphitheatre. Many wealthy patricians (as we learned from "Son") had amphitheatres in their backyards or homes, where they could provide entertainment through plays, poetry readings, and even gladiator fights]

[Snoke's palatium is based on the Ancient Domitian Palace on Palatine Hill, which overlooks the Circus Maximus]
*sing-song voice* It's three a.m. and I feel like I'm dreamin', 'cause when you give you're lovin' I don't feel like sleepin'

Please excuse me. I'm just so happy to have you all here. Thank you so so SO much for all of you OUTSTANDING support for this story. Seriously, everyone, you are just... wow. I don't have the words. *hugs*

(Also congrats to those who guessed Rey's "assailant" correctly! Ya'll are so clever <3 I love how much you pour into this)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rey spasms, ripping an arm free to claw blindly behind her. Her nails scrape skin and stubble, a grunt of shock echoing in her ear before the grip around her waist slacks just enough for her to slip free.

She makes to sprint down the hall, back into the grand triclinium—she dares not think to who—when a hand snags her wrist. "Wait!"

The voice is familiar, Rey realizes, just as she’s tugging against his hold. She pauses, staring incredulously at his face. "Master Dameron?!"

Poe Dameron winces, the scratches on his cheek blooming red, but not bleeding. He releases her immediately, wiping his clammy palm on the refined skirt of his white and gold toga. "Apologies… I didn’t mean to frighten you,” he stammers sheepishly.

Rey considers him as coldly as she dares before regaining her composure. She doesn’t want to be alone with this man. Though she shares the same sentiment for her master, she remembers his command not to speak to anyone, to stick to her duties and finish this night without incident.

So she bows slightly. “You need not apologize to a slave. Please excuse me—”

“Hold on,” he commands, lifting his hand. “Just listen. This will only be a moment.”

“I shouldn’t,” Rey contests, backing away, but he follows her a step. He doesn’t touch her again, for which she’s thankful, but the action makes her flinch.

“Please," he says sincerely, almost urgently. “I really didn’t mean to frighten you. I just needed to make certain we were alone.”

“We won’t be,” Rey nearly hisses, turning and stalking away with rapid steps, keeping her senses alert in case he decides to lunge again.

He doesn’t. Instead, his voice echoes along the marble arches, nailing into her ears. “Wait—I know about Ben!”

Rey halts, shock spearing through the soles of her feet. *He knows? What could he know?* She can
feel his smugness before she sees it herself, stretched along his tanned, muscular jaw. “What do you want?” she chances quietly.

“To apologize,” he explains, stepping closer with great care. He keeps his hand between them as though she were no more than a trained beast. “I didn’t know you, well... didn’t know. About him. I had assumed everyone in Rome would recognize Kylo Ren.”

She gives him an unconvinced look. He’d only called him “Ben” moments ago, and now he calls her master by that name? Being reminded of it only serves to dampen her already soggy mood. “Well, I didn’t,” she snips.

“I’m aware,” he replies, that roguish smirk resurging. “Let me make it up to you.”

She doesn’t see how he could. The chill sinks into her again, her insides recoiling from the terrible memories of last night. She holds her arms, cradling herself close, trying to savor the last traces of warmth. “What do you want?” she repeats.

The distance closes by one step, his arrogance overshadowed by a sudden, inexplicable chivalry she only glimpsed briefly before. He keeps his voice low. Secretive. “To purchase you.”

Rey blanches.

“I know the rumors about him,” Poe elaborates steadily. He seems almost eager to convince as he continues. “He lives alone, no slaves to speak of. And then you suddenly appear... It all seems like terrible circumstance. Those marks on your neck?” he gestures.

Rey self-consciously covers her throat with her hand. She’d thought the bruises had faded far enough, that no one would notice them. Revulsion curls around her spine like a snake at the memory of the man who attacked her, even more so that anyone would think her master capable of...

She frowns.

Poe takes her silence as agreement. “I can make him an offer. Really, money is no issue. You would be safe with me and my household.”

Taking another step away, Rey exhales shakily, needing room to think. Confusion eddies her mind, making everything foggy and dim. There is sense in what he says, a promise of safety. With this man there are no surprises, no mysteries that she can feel writhing beneath the surface. Only an open, naked honesty.

But was Ben not the same?

She shakes her head, holding herself tighter. “I should go,” she insists. “I’ve already been gone too long—”

“Consider me, then,” he interrupts soundly, letting her move away. “At the end of the banquet, I’ll find you again. And if you decide to live in my house, then I will make him my offer. Agreed?” he asks, holding out his hand.

Rey studies him openly. To extend his hand in trust and respect... to a slave? It’s almost unheard of. And yet it is done. Begrudgingly, she outstretches her own. This man has offered her something she now knows she must consider. To remain with her master as they are now... She does not know him. Perhaps, if she were to disappear, to leave him alone, they would finally be free of this madness.
She lets Poe clasp her hand, their thumbs resting on the other’s to seal her spoken concession. “Agreed.”

Ben reclines amidst the warm expanse of company, neighbored by a few other prominent gladiators he has fought and beaten without bloodshed. Their incessant badgering leaves him room to lose attention, his eyes gravitating to where the ancilla file out with the first course.

Those with masters approach them, offering succulent dishes and silver trays upon the tables. Palace slave women deposit their offerings and leave, one by one, but Rey is not among them.

When the last of the ancilla enters the grand triclinium, Ben’s eyes hold fast to the door, his every muscle primed for action. His thoughts circle him like vultures, concern and anger warring for control over his clenching and unclenching fists.

Has she run from him, fled him at last? The notion smothers him in hot, foreign agony, a fear he cannot comprehend. He stands, prepared to run to the stables, when at last her slender form emerges from the culina.

He watches her approach, easing back into his seat, reclining as she presents the food to the table. She carefully avoids his gaze—as he assumed she would—but the sight of her manages to calm his racing heart, pumping his veins with cool relief. He feigns disinterest in her for the food, the gleaming milk-fed snails lying limp and luscious amongst the garum and eggs as she comes to stand beside him.

He, with his fellow fighters, takes the offered silver cochlear and lifts one to his lips, chewing and swallowing fast. Given recent events, he has no appetite worth savoring. The sooner this night is over, the sooner they can return home in the peace and quiet, return to the way things were. Perhaps there will be some resolution, some reprieve from the ache within the fragile remains between them now.

He tells himself these lies shamefully, daring an indulgent glance at her face.

As small as the moment is, he notices something off. Her usual anger, even her dispassion, is not present so much as a strange, wary consideration as she stares across the room.

Poe Dameron lounges on his side, laughing with his companions and sponsors, the young African among them bursting into fervent laughter. The small Kaydel woman lifts her chalice, their cluster a beacon of pure enjoyment and toast before they drink.

The racer glances at Rey, tipping his chalice with a smile. Ben looks to her, not knowing what to expect, but her slight smile and sparkling eyes render his every sinew tight, the grip on his cochlear hard enough to dent the handle.

He slams it down on the table, the clatter casting silence among his compatriots. Jaw tight, he grounds, “The next course. I want the next course.”

A small wave of nervous agreement ripples around him, the others suddenly far less interested in their meal, favoring drinks in large dregs. His timing is excellent, it would seem, the main course drawing the ancilla back towards the culina.

He need not motion for her to go—she does, and he does not miss her forcing her eyes away from
Poe Dameron, Ben’s wrath snarls, a dark shadow ever-present in the rear of his thoughts. He glares at the racer who sits sipping his wine, so unaware of the rising animosity spearing towards his smug, unassuming, preferable face.

This rift is his doing—Ben is no fool. In the slightest of moments when he let down his guard, that bastard wedged himself where he didn’t belong. Now Rey is distant and fearful of him, and it’s all his fault.

His veins buzz as he downs the last of his wine, the distilled alcohol doing nothing for his massive body. Of course she would prefer him, with his more “honorable” sport, his handsome features and magnetic charisma, the stouter stature befitting the majority of Roman men.

He knows his intimidating appearance. He has used it to his advantage more times than he can recount. But now, as he sits alone, his heart pounding steely fists against his throat, he realizes that he must have been monstrous to her all along. It only took her fear to give it voice.

The notion hollows him, the tides of his anger ebbing, replaced by the flow of biting, cold resolve.

When she returns the music shifts, the main course of rich and decadent pheasant gleaming in oil and butter glaze. Slices of apple and pomegranate surround the bird, creating a nest of rich, sweet flavor. The men reach for their shares from their attendants, threatening murder in the arena for the exchange of dark, tender thighs.

When Rey stoops to set his tray before him, he holds up his hand. “On my lap,” he orders.

She considers him before shifting to place it over his legs, but he holds up his hand again.

“No,” he murmurs darkly, fixing upon her all the heat within his body. “You.”

Rey’s heart seizes in her chest, his words churning and settling in her mind like a stone in a riverbed. Reality sucks her from the miry depths and returns her to the hard intensity of his dark, endless eyes.

There is only a moment of resistance before his earlier warning echoes in her mind. All her life, she has worked to preserve it. Did what she must. And yet, for this, she knows not which fate is worse, only the numb floating sensation of her feet as she moves closer, as his arm opens to accept her.

She settles her weight over his legs as she had when they rode Silencer into the city, left unbalanced as they dangle over the dizzying mosaic floor. He does not recline, adjusting to sit up and keep her near. The closeness buries that of their rides in dust, the warmth and hardness of his body making itself known all around her.

She shivers—for a reason she dares not consider—when he splays his hand along the small of her back. The proximity bleeds through the fabric, as if he is touching her skin. She fights to remain unaffected, to make it appear that she has been just this close before this one, unending moment.

A few of the other guests send him appreciative looks, an aurei passing between two nearby onlookers. Rey keeps her eyes down, trying and failing to ignore the rippling sensations of his touch as it slides up, up, and down again in easy strokes.

She suddenly understands why Silencer enjoys such attentions.

The harpist plays a slow, melodic tune over the chattering din. The bright afternoon light flickers
along the pristine walls, framing the serene strength and beauty of her face as he watches her reactions to his languid caress. She is doing well to avoid suspicion, her face the perfect balance of practice and pleasure. Were she a man, she would make a brilliant actor.

For himself, he is not so certain. He must refrain gawking at her in this state. It wouldn’t do to let his mind and intentions… wander. He simplifies the touch to a stroke of the thumb over the ridge of her spine, her slight shudder wavering against him. In an effort to distract, Ben looks away to see that the male slaves have begun to serve the wine.

One saunters over to them, his eyes on Rey before he catches her master’s murderous glare. He skittishly fills Ben’s wine and leaves.

Placing the newly-filled chalice upon the table, Ben leans to murmur into Rey’s ear, his lips brushing the sensitive skin send her scent into him, falling down his throat to meet a more primal side. It makes his voice deeper, as if of its own accord. “Feed me.”

Rey inhales shakily, bending away from him, eager for the distance—anything to ease her pounding heart—as she takes his portion from the table, plucking a tender chunk of fowl to place against his waiting mouth.

He takes it slowly, barely brushing against her slim, warm fingers. The hand at her back slows to steady circles, a hidden encouragement that what they are doing is working. Already he can sense the whispers, that of the many women on men’s laps within this very room, Kylo Ren has one at last. Bets and scores are sure to be settled by it, but he can’t be bothered to care, not when she is finally, finally looking at him again.

Rey gulps, feeling a bit dizzy as she struggles to grasp her bearings. His touch both eases and unnerves her, the intimacy of the gesture defying the smoldering resentment in her heart towards this man who holds her so gently to him. She takes a sample of pomegranate seeds from the spread, offering them to him. He looks at her, his sooty lashes thick and inviting before they flutter closed, his neck craning to take each fully into his mouth.

His lips, wet and heatedly silken, slide along the ridge of her knuckles, casting impossible shockwaves to her very core when the cool air kisses them again, drying the evidence of his mouth on her fingers. The juice of the seeds leave them red and plump, contrasting the ivory of his skin, the haunting ebony of his hair.

He drinks the wine of his own direction, however, likely privy to Rey’s trembling hands—which would do no good for tipping back a chalice.

As the main course finishes, the collection of pheasant and thrush, venison and wild berries consumed, the ancilla rise again for the final serving of dessert before the comissatio revelries. When Rey makes to rise, the hand on her back snags around her, holding her by the waist. “No,” he grounds, his large hand nearly encompassing her middle. “Stay.”

Everything in Rey wants to protest, but she bites her tongue. It’s clear he is hiding something from her. The way he clings to her reminds her of when she rode Silencer for the first time, the way her heart soared and flew beside, beyond her body.

It feels so similar now, the way he touches her, that her mind begins to wonder how her master’s hidden places, when unveiled, could change so little about him.

Rey’s eyes flit away from him as he broods, simply holding fast to her. His attitude darkens considerably, and before she has a chance to question why… she sees it.
In the corner of the room a man and a woman wrap around one another, lying brazenly upon their chaise. Flickers and moments of similar affair weave in and out of Rey’s sight, scandalizing her like hands around her throat. She looks down at her lap, her thoughts buzzing like flies yet mute all at once.

As the dessert arrives, so too do the palace dancers, the extravagant festivities weaving around them. The women weave about the tables, brushing their hands over men’s ears, throats, and clothed genitals, their brazen smiles met with grateful stares.

Horrified, Rey averts her eyes from the spectacle, noticing that the shirtless men who served the wine have begun doing similar things to the unattended women, stroking their stomachs, necks, and covered breasts. The sight of it sickens her as the thread of probing servants slowly weaves towards them.

Ben’s hand tightens possessively over Rey, shoulders stiff. He normally leaves at this point in the yearly banquet, slipping out into the garden where he cannot be bothered. But he was… distracted, and it seems far too late to make any subtle escape. He thinks of what Kylo Ren would do, and sighs, urging Rey to look at him. When she does, he meets her eyes intently, keeping his voice low. “Touch me.”

Rey blinks, trying to respond, to focus. “Wh… Where?” she sputters, struggling to maintain her composure.

The dusting of red on her cheeks is utterly captivating, drawing him closer to her. He swallows nervously, keeping her eyes. “Anywhere.”

Understanding, Rey finally manages a nod, lifting her hand. It brushes against the cloth of his tunic, sapping the generous warmth of his body.

Her mind fades, her sight surrounded only by his face as she presses her palm against his cheek. The look in his eyes when she touches him is wide, as if she has struck him. They twitch as though in pain when she moves up, finally touching the inane softness of his raven hair.

Ben closes his eyes, leaning into her touch, barely withholding a pathetic whimper as the sweet sensations overpower him, the gentle caress of her nails against his scalp leaving him bereft of thought. Only a want, charged and possessive, claims him with clasped hands, one of his coming to rest on the wondrous softness of her covered thigh as he surrenders to the pleasure of her wandering fingers.

Rey gapes openly at him, watching as the stony hardness of his face melts, his plush lips forming incoherent, soundless words under her ministrations. He looks to be asleep, or in prayer, of somewhere in between, his head heavy and trusting against her lean wrist. His hair is softer than linens and silk, and when she buries both hands inside to take in its lushness, a soft groan rumbles from his throat.

Feeling his composure beginning to slip, Ben’s eyes pry open, the murky haze of her touch stilling when he reaches up to grasp her arm, allaying her movements. He swallows thickly. The look of wonder in her eyes, the weight of her in his lap almost perfect upon his member, drives a steak of possession so deep within his body that he feels renewed—the fire and fury of battle combating the calm of her presence, creating something new.

Like instinct his gaze flits to Poe Dameron, who is observing them with considerably less glee. Oh… yes, Ben likes that. The hand still around her waist tugs her pointedly to his chest. The man can see it now, can’t he? That Rey is his. Her slight gasp ricochets through his body, the sound of
her surprise—which is not altogether unpleasant in nature—encouraging this maddening rage burning inside, the desire to lay claim impossible to resist.

The feast is not over, yet.

He returns to her eyes. Their fields of sweet amber and wheat beckoning him to walk through and taste. His eyes twitch, the heat unbearable as her hand hails from his hair to his shoulder. “Master?” she chances quietly, searching his face.

“Keep still,” he commands in a voice not his own, the hand on her waist slipping to the small of her back, smoothing along her spine until it cups the base of her skull. She jolts slightly as the warm pads of his fingers brush the finer hairs at her nape, her reactions echoing through him in delicious pulses.

Ben reminds himself that he has seen this plenty of times, and should be able to reciprocate it well enough. Gently, he winds fingers through the soft strands of her hair, tilting her head and baring her throat to him. It quivers under his hungry gaze and, like a predator unleashed, he descends upon her, covering her with his mouth.

Rey’s lips part in shock and mortification at the sudden sensations warring within her body, spiraling down her every limb until she is left trembling. The heat and stiff prod of his tongue shifts down her throat, every thought and feeling pinning itself beneath the mercy of his mouth. When he reaches the hollow of her throat, her grip on his shoulder tightens, her toes curling into her sandalia without her consent.

And suddenly, Rey is very aware of what these indescribable stirrings are.

Arousal dances under the lolling stroke of his tongue, the mouth he used to eat from her hand sending the stars to shine in her flesh. He so carefully caresses her bruised skin, laving her with—if she did not know better—something like affection, washing away the lingering traces of her pain and shame to bear them. The feeling is good, too good—the lingering traces of a name rising from some forgotten grave in her heart, yearning to resurrect and find its way into her arms again.

Ben groans softly, lost in the taste. The taste. Her skin is taught, the sweet essence of pear and pomegranate lingering within her, the feminine musk of her body awakening the part of him long ago sacrificed. In his bleary vision he looks down to her chest, cock twitching at the sight of her from beneath the fabric. She had forgone her fascia. After drawing a shuddering breath, he returns for more, hands and mouth suddenly eager to show her just how preferable he can be.

When the drums start he stops, ripping himself from her with a sudden forcefulness. In the dwindling space between their bodies, he had almost forgotten its purpose. Another glance at Poe Dameron reveals a face pale and mortified, and Ben is left with the sense of smugness as Rey steadily recovers in his arms, her eyes disoriented and hair ravished.

Ben finds he quite enjoys that look on her—and wouldn’t mind being invited to another revelry so long as he could see it again.

Rey rights her hair with a casual fussiness, cheeks burning as the pleasure continues to linger in her body. Her throat clenches, her withheld sounds seeking release and finding none. A strange sense of nervousness grips her, anxiety digging talons into her shoulders and pecking her eyes as they water. But she doesn’t cry. She cannot cry—not here.

Such confusing things should be left in private, where her life is not at risk, nor the life of the man she does not know.
The drums continue to pound as a litter enters from the garden, the late afternoon light shining gold upon the robes of the emperor.

Rey goes stiff, Ben’s hand holding her steady. The emperor dismounts as the crowd applauds, beginning a droning speech of which Rey only understands some. He speaks of plentiful, of celebrating the end of Vestalia, and hosting a grand battle at this time tomorrow.

When he says the last, Ben’s shoulders stiffen, his face hardening once more into careful impassivity.

Rey’s gut falls at the sight—when she realizes why.

He does not kiss her again. In fact, he maintains a cold and careful closeness, his hackles raised so long as the emperor is among them.

They watch the dancers perform, Rey’s rear aching atop his strong thighs after some time has passed. When poets recite their lyrical ballads in honor of their goddess, Rey cannot help but remember the quiet mornings with her master in the tablinum, learning from the words he’d written. She wonders if he has ever held the stage in peace—if ever he would prefer it.

Ben keeps his eyes on Snoke, the uncertainty pooling in his chest as he and Rey are ignored. Perhaps he did not see them? The thought is not convincing, but he disappears from sight when the banquet ends, when he has sapped all the praise from his loyal patrons.

It leaves them both in a wary sense of relief—until a servant approaches them, his face calm and placid. “Master Ren? Emperor Snoke has summoned you to his chambers.”

Ben’s hold on Rey tightens briefly before he releases her, letting her off so he can stand. His pallia sways regally around him as he towers over the man. He nods once, following him and leaving Rey alone.

She sways slightly, watching him leave. The sun has begun to set beyond the window, the sweet scent of flowers too imploring to ignore. As the slaves and their masters scurry about, impatient to return home to their beds, she walks out into the smaller courtyard, letting the warm Summer air take her into its welcoming embrace.

The fountain trickles as she passes, admiring the blooms as shadows grow. She comes closer to a bed of bright yellow flowers, their bulbs shrinking ever so slowly as the light begins to wane. She leans down to caress it gently, to feel as the silken petals flee from her touch.

“Have you made your decision?”

Rey jumps, turning to meet the unimposing sight of Poe Dameron, his easy smile traded for a look of wariness and concern. She rights herself, meeting his eyes. “About whether I will go with you?”

He nods.

Rey looks down. Down at her feet, strapped in sandals bought with the blood of innocents. She looks at the skirt of her tunica, remembering the suffering and fear of Ahsoka’s youth. She thinks of herself and all she had learned, all she knows now.

All she cannot leave.
She smiles softly, and shakes her head. “Thank you for your generosity, Master Dameron, but I must refuse.”

A look of grief passes his face, but it is hollow—as though one of his horses has fled the stables. It’s reproachful, piteous, but unconvincing. And with that look Rey’s hunch is correct—she would simply be another woman brought into the fold. He seems kind, and altogether friendly, but she knows that he could never be…

“May I ask why?” he chances good-naturedly.

“I don’t have an answer for that,” she says simply. In her mind she recounts Ashoka’s warm presence, her master’s gentle guidance. The quiet and green of the peaceful countryside, the ever-constant way Ben had looked at her, treated her with such gentleness. “If you’ll excuse me,” she starts politely, bowing and beginning to head for the grand triclinium, “my master will be returning soon. I don’t want to keep him waiting.”

As she passes, Poe reaches out, placing a heavy—but not crushing—hand on her shoulder. His normally friendly eyes harden like dark garnets. “I think I understand what’s going on here, Rey. You won’t need to explain. But there is one last thing I want you to remember before you decide to trust Ben Solo.”

She meets his challenge daringly despite his unwanted touch, her insatiable curiosity nipping the tips of her fingers. “And what’s that?”

He smirks. “That you will find hope in the Senate and People of Rome—not in him, or the Empire he serves. When you realize that… well, we’ll be waiting for you.”

Rey considers him curiously, not understanding but keen to escape. His presence, once so friendly, has become suffocating in its viewpoints and riddles. “I’ll be sure to,” she says, nodding once more and leaving him in the garden, alone.

Ben finds her in the stables, waiting with Silencer. There is an odd serenity in her face he cannot place, and is too weary to try. As he nears his gaze wanders over it, exploring its features and the curved slope of her neck. A familiar pang of desire strikes him, like a bell, but he ignores the call, mounting his horse before helping her onto it behind him.

If he thinks about it hard enough, he can almost feel her small, pert breasts pressed against him through his cloak as she slowly wraps her arms around him. It certainly does nothing to retain his calm, but in the gesture there is something different. Not the ease or tenderness there was before, but a blooming flower budding under the light of the sun. An openness of what was once sealed away.

A sudden lightness finds him, then, when she rests her head against his back.

Though things will never be as they were, what’s to come may be better than before.
Chapter End Notes

[This SENSATIONAL mosaic piece is by Jen Thompson—also known as kyloreniyn on Tumblr. She has made so many amazing works for the Reylo fandom, all of which so perfectly capture the dark/ light balance of their (as of 2018) tragic relationship. I bid thee go forth and lavish praises upon her!!]

[This BREATHTAKING DIGITAL ART FOR THE REVELRY EMBRACE is by the renowned Afterblossom, whose works have been praised by Rian "Reylo" Johnson himself! This art was weeks in the making—Blossom was thorough in her research of]
both history and Glory's Fray costume design (even hairstyles!) which has simply left me gasping. Please follow her on her Tumblr and her Twitter and leave her the love she deserves]

[The so-called "Roman Handshake" (in which two people clasp arms) actually has no historical backing, despite what the movies say. The handshake has been depicted from as early as 500 B.C. The evidence was found in Greece, where the handshake was official when the thumb was resting fully on the other's hand. It is believed that the handshake was not only meant to approve of deals (and even marriages! *Reylo alarm bells*), but demonstrate goodwill via lack of a weapon]

[There were many different types of "banquets" (or "convivium," meaning "living together") in Roman revelries. This one, open to a private group by a wealthy host, is called a "cena," which is a dinner party held in the late afternoon, followed by the "comissatio" ("drinking party")]

[There are three courses to a cena: the "gustatio" (appetizer), the "mensae primae" (main course), and "mensae secundae" (dessert). Like the Greeks, Romans would oftentimes have a symposium after the meal where guests could recite stories and poetry while they drank wine)]

[Milk-fed snails, much like flamingo tongues, are a popular delicacy from Ancient Rome we tend to gag at today!]

[Wealthy Romans (especially from Pompeii) liked to show off their fancy dining ware. The most popular of these were silver, gold, bronze, and even semi-precious stones]

[Only men were allowed to act from the beginning of the play's invention well into the Shakespearean Era]

[It was common for wealthy hosts to use young, attractive, well-groomed men for serving wine to offer an additional form of "distraction" or "entertainment"]

[Though Hollywood likes to pay attention to the scandalous nature of Roman culture and sexuality, the actual practice of orgies and whatnot were greatly exaggerated by Christian (then later Catholic) themes—as to discourage debauchery. That being said, some of the more wealthy parties would hire prostitutes or use slave women/men to go around and touch the erogenous zones of the guests]

[The golden flowers Rey observed are marigolds, which are ingenious to the Mediterranean. The marigold represents passion, creativity, cruelty, grief, and jealousy. They are also associated with lions due to their large, golden plume that emerges under the sunlight]

["Senātus Populusque Rōmānus" is a Latin phrase meaning "The Senate and People of Rome," (also known as SPQR), which expresses a belief that Rome does not belong to one ruler, but to the people. After the overthrow of the Roman Republic in 27 B.C. in favor of an imperial regime, the emperor was considered to be "the voice of the people," so the phrase persisted, but arguably lost its founding principles]

{The theme for this chapter is "Possession" by Evans Blue. Listen to the Glory's Fray Spotify playlist here!}
Oil

Chapter Notes

Everyone, I have said it before and will say it many times again, as long as you let me. Thank you so SO much for all of your amazing, unending support. I would have never made it this far without all of your encouragement and love for this story.

There is a scene in this chapter (where its title earns its name) that began the entire monstrosity that is (and will be) Glory's Fray. A giant thank you to Stories_in_my_Head for being the one to feed my gladiator dreams with such stark imagery. I hope I did it justice.

This chapter is also dedicated to House Swolo of The Writing Den, and all of the other wonderful ladies I have the privilege of sharing the Reylo community with. I would especially like to thank gopherbroke, who created a STUNNING fanart that made me weep tears of joy. Gohper Mom, you are amazing <3

Thanks again to all of you. Thank you so, so much, from the bottom of my heart.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They ride as the night begins its descent, the heat of day dissipating into the threat of falling dew. All is quiet on the road save the bugs, and the steady beat of hooves—and his heart against her ear.

Rey swallows, holding loosely to his body, her thoughts finally catching up with the momentum of their actions.

Everything happened so fast, her will rendered useless when caught in the midst of his intense attentions. For the briefest of moments she had almost believed them to be earnest. Even now her skin remembers the sensation of his lips, the wet warmth fusing to the tender sinews of her throat. The span of his hands on her leg, on her neck...

She mustn’t think about that now. Despite the thrill of the feeling, she knows in her heart none of it was intentional. It was simply a ploy, a way to solidify their secret. No more than that.

“What did he say to you?” she asks, trying to get her mind off the subject.

Ben is silent for a few moments. Then, “Nothing of importance.”

*He’s lying,* a small voice warns. She considers her options. The more they prolong this, the more everything entangles. She knows the snare of their intentions has tightened tonight by what they've done, leaving them fettered and unbalanced.

When they return home Rey hops down first, moving to stand in front of him, her hand on Silencer’s neck as she catches her master’s eyes. “We can’t keep doing this.”

He swings off, landing heavily before her. “I’m afraid you don’t have a choice,” he murmurs darkly.

She frowns at him. “Not that. *This,*” she grunts, pointing between them. “Telling me ‘nothing of
importance’ like I don’t know you’re lying.”

“What I said was true,” he contests. When she lifts her brow he pouts at her toes. “From a certain point of view.”

The sudden shift from awesome power to petulant childishness comes close to unnerving, but is not unusual. There’s something almost frightening about how accustomed she’s grown to his fluctuating levels of maturity. Irregardless, she holds her ground. “From your view.” She leans as close as she dares, dragging his eyes back to meet hers in the dim, flickering light of the stables. “Not ours.”

His eye twitches at the word, a surge of impatience rising to its surface. He shifts his weight, passing her hurriedly as he moves to unfasten his pallium. “I’m not discussing this,” he grunts, lumbering into the house.

Rey scowls after him, dutifully helping Silencer into his stall. She removes the blankets from his back, patting him soundly, before following Ben into the house. He stands in his chambers, stowing away his cloak with harsh, jolting movements as she enters brazenly, undeterred. “Why not?” she challenges.

He scoffs, tossing the pallium without any pretense of patience. “Why should I?” he combats indignantly.

“Because you and I have an agreement.”

“What happens between me and the emperor is no concern of yours,” he warns, turning to face her. He begins to close the distance, trying to intimidate her. It won’t work—he’s been closer to her than this, and if she managed to withstand that, then she can withstand him now. She holds steady as he continues, leveling a large finger at her face. “You’re on dangerous ground. Don’t forget your place.”

“’My place,’” she echoes, the word ringing in her ears. She takes a step back, studying him warily.

The coldness in him now is tight, controlled, contorted beneath the weight of his anger. But her own misery breaks through the heavy stone—casting her weightlessly into new, groundless territory.

She glances away, unable to look at him anymore. “Of course.”

Of course. That’s all she is, isn’t she? A slave, meant to keep her place. To wait patiently. For others, for orders, for anything. She swallows, the gathering tears from his actions, her heart, and the misery they have made together threatening to resurface.

Even after all this time, after everything… that’s all she should be to him. His slave, his property. His liability. How humiliating must it have been for him to touch her so unashamedly before his peers, to lay his hands on her. If not for his status, then the hidden truth of his celibacy. His virtues, defiled.

It only makes sense for him to see her this way, not…

She holds her arms, voice small. “Is that all I am to you?”

He goes very still. “…What?”

Rey stands rigidly, feeling warm as a foreign mortification washes over her. “Nothing,” she
murmurs dismissively, turning away. Her heavy feet carry her swiftly towards the door, guilt and shame warring, churning within her soul. The need to flee is all-encompassing. She should have never given these thoughts room to grow, to spread their thorny, traitorous tendrils through her heart. “Goodnight, Master Ren—”

It happens so suddenly. His large, warm hand snags her wrist, squeezing more tightly than it ever has, rooting her in place. His fingers loosen, but only in slight, enough for him to keep hold and come to stand between her and the door.

Eyes sweeping over her downcast face, Ben’s jaw tightens, each muscle twisted with some cruel, intangible revelation.

He’s hurt her. Again.

He exhalles shakily, his anger evacuating, but doesn’t let go. If she wants to know the truth, then damn it all, she will get what’s she’s asked for.

He wanted to keep her away from it, to shelter her from this, but not anymore. He sees now he was foolish to ever think he could.

“The emperor’s will,” he begins stiffly, “is absolute. You know my place. And its name,” he murmurs.

Her broken eyes find his again, resolution dim, but there and radiant. She nods.

“Tomorrow is the last day of Vestalia,” he informs, his grip lax, his voice at last regaining it's familiar softness. Her fingers fall into his hand and he takes them, the only anchor he has now beyond the fragile sliver of their success. “He has prepared the Colosseum for a great battle.”

“You’re going to fight,” she says simply, leaving herself no room for disbelief.

It pains him for a reason he can’t explain. He searches her eyes, watching them as they sharpen, their telling animosity against what he is, the gladiator, clouding the tenderness they once held. “Yes I am.”

She slips her fingers from him; he lets her, feeling empty, but free of the burden on his conscience. Or, perhaps, only less aware of it. “What else did he say to you?”

“That you are to accompany me.”

Taking a deep breath, Rey’s face pinches closed, a wave of sorrow washing over her. She should have known that tonight would not be enough, that this sordid emperor would demand such a thing to torment them further. Anger, hurt, and fear swirl inside her, the urge to cry pressing on her again. She trembles with the effort to hold that weakness at bay—she will not let him see it.

His voice drops to a whisper, something rasped and solemn. Regretful. “These things you want to know do no justice to you.” His hand curls into a fist at his side, the urge to reach out and touch her, comfort her, strong. “As your master, I must be the one to shoulder this burden. Not you.”

Rey considers him openly, her lips parted. Their softness speaks promises to him, the inclination to feel them for himself leaning on him with its weighty temptation. But she interrupts his wandering thoughts, crossing her arms over her stomach. “…No.”

Her denial strikes him like a blow. “What did you say?”
“I said ‘no!’” she cracks, hands flying up in the air beside her head. She bares her fangs at him, her anger spiking, hitting him with the full force of her unbridled tongue. “No—you can’t. Don’t you see? You would leave me unknowing, useless. I won’t know what to do or what not to do when you aren’t there to ‘teach me,’” she spits condescendingly, her voice deep, as if to mock him.

Her honey-wheat eyes ignite in a furious blaze, burning into him with their wrath, leaving him attentive yet unsteady, watching her pace about his chambers. Her words ring true in his ears, but still his worry and pride claw through him, scaling his body until her anger only serves to feed his own. “You don’t understand,” he repeats, brevity drenching his voice in its black oil. “This thing I am, what I do—I will not let you interfere with it.”

She stops pacing to stare at him—as if he were a stranger.

And, perhaps, he is.

A chilled spindle of hatred dips into her, writhing like ink in water as it sinks into the pit of her stomach. “I understand,” she replies coldly. Poe was right about him. And yet she held on to her hope, onto the way he fed her, taught her, touched her. She had yearned to know more of this world, this man, by now—but not to follow those yearnings blindly.

When had she grown so confused? Just when did she fool herself into thinking he saw her as his equal?

“No,” Ben mutters, eyes intently focused on her own, meeting their challenge. She is still so unaware of the dangers surrounding them, pacing like lions in the shadows of her ignorance. For all her wisdom and insight, the cleverness that kept him in quiet longing for her company, it is in this one place he cannot ensure her safety—the one place he would not let her go, until it was too late.

And now she begs for danger, for him to put her at even greater risk by exposing her to the darkness in his soul. It’s more than he can bear.

His voice darkens, defeat pushing him aside. “But you will,” he huffs, the urge to break something, everything, rendering him trembling and immobile. “Tomorrow,” he promises heatedly, chest heaving, “you will.”

Rey glares at him, lifting her chin. Though her heart hammers unsteadily, its beat heavy and uneven, a thrill of fear and disparity rushes through her as she realizes immediately what he means.

Tomorrow, they will have no choice. He will no longer be able to hide who he truly is—and she, in return, will finally see the truth of the man she calls master.

And yet, as she slips into her room, closing the door behind her, the victory is as hollow as the heart in her chest.

Rome teems, abuzz with sunlight and energy, blistering heat beating down over the rippling crowds flooding the streets with glee and dancing and idle chatter. Some funnel into the Colosseum, trekking to find their seats, all smiles and eagerness in the stands.

In the wings, Caluan Ematt sits under the shade, watching them from beneath the canopy. The gladiators haven’t done battle in days. They are fully rested, freshly fed, all aware of their matches. Some of the more wealthy fighters retain headaches from drunkenness, others a permanent smile from more... pleasurable company. No doubt from that damned banquet at the palace—Ematt is glad to have missed it.
Kylo Ren should be here any time, now. He frowns. Whispers have reached him that he, too, shared the company of a woman last night. An odd thing to hear, when the young man was so adamant about retaining his virtue. A part of him looks forward to taunting the boy, learning piece by piece the appearance of the woman who could have captivated him so.

When he looks up, he knows he will not need to wait long.

A tall, slender woman with quiet beauty files in behind Ren, almost shaded by his ridiculous height. Her eyes flit about with a cruel dispassion, as if she were Lustitia herself peeking from her fold upon a murderer in the midst of trial.

He sighs when they approach, realizing with great clarity that this exchange will not end in kind.

Ben rolls his shoulder, stretching his arm over his chest, keenly aware of Rey’s nervous attention. “Should I be in here?” she queries.

“As my attendant, you should always be at my call,” he replies smoothly, meeting her wary gaze. “Unless told otherwise.”

She nods, attention returning to the gathering crowd beyond. “How much longer?”

He finishes his exercises, coming to stand beside her and observe the others beyond. “Not long. Come. There is someone you should meet.”

Rey stiffens at the idea, but complies nonetheless, following him into the tented, oblong space of the sidelines, where she can see the battlefield just beyond the iron gate. Her stomach recoils at the sight, revulsion rising at the thought of all the blood that has been spilled and covered, wiped away as if it all meant nothing.

A man with striking white hair rises, coming closer to them. His aged beard ruffles under a yellow-toothed smile when their eyes meet, greeting her own with a surprisingly pleasant friendliness. “Why hello,” he rumbles, the depth of his voice sinking her into an odd sense of practiced ease. “Who might you be?”

“My ancilla,” Ben answers for her, snagging the man’s attention.

A look of shock opens and immediately closes on his face, quickly tempered by one of understanding. “Ah. I see. Then welcome, both of you.”

Ben grunts. “When does the fight start?”

“High noon,” Ematt replies, waving dismissively. “But your match is not until the end, Master Ren. It seems Emperor Snoke has something planned for you.”

Rey flinches, overhearing him. The lingering anxiety begins to fill her empty spaces with its cold numbness, each muscle primed against some unknown entity she could never hope to defeat.

Beside her, Ben stiffens. Snoke’s order the night before was so similar to the others, not warranting memory beyond the dread that sank into his bones—as his master tends to inspire—when he ordered his gift be present. It would seem Snoke is keen on prolonging his gladiator’s turmoil, parade around the shame known only to himself.

And now, Rey.
He looks at her, stealing a furtive glance. Her hatred and fear spill from her like a flood, filling him with its frozen ire and crippling loneliness. That part of him he thought so long forgotten rises to the surface once more, floating on the shores of her distress, longing to dive in recklessly and pull her from the agony that crushes her beneath its battering waves.

But he cannot. He knows that, now. If she is to swim, then first she must drown.

“Very well,” he says, making to retreat further into the shade, away from the boiling sun. Already he has begun to perspire. “Bring my armor and my sword when it’s time.”

Ematt bows. “Of course, Master Ren.”

He gestures. “Come, Rey.”

She obeys, following him to the waiting area, seating herself across from him. She keeps her hands in the lap of her stola, fingers interwoven to hide their trembling.

But Ben can see them, and were they alone would reach out to still them—but he doesn’t. Instead they wait in silence, then beyond the roaring din. The sound of music and festivity echoes, ringing in their ears. The first gladiator leaves. Then the second. A third.

The fights are intermittent, and Rey watches in horror as the seats once holding strong, ready men lie waiting, but remain empty.

Rey focuses on her hands until she can no longer bear the silence between them. “How long have you done this?” she asks shakily. She needs to know. How long has he fought? Slaughtered? Survived?

He sits back, answering in feigned aloofness. “...Three years.”

“And before?”

“It doesn’t matter now,” he says, his raw expression a plea for her to stop, to let secrets lie where they are.

She doesn’t miss it, chancing a glance up at him. His eyes meet hers, pain knifed so deeply inside. The stars she once beheld seem so distant from her now. Dimmed… extinguished. She blames herself for it, then this place. The Colosseum. And all else he still hides from her.

As he sits now his hair falls over his eye in slender strands, masking his cheek in shadow. Stricken by an indescribable whim, she reaches behind her head, pulling the bind from her hair.

Ben watches transfixed as her hair falls loose to kiss her shoulders, skimming like fingertips over her smooth neck and collar. When she rises his gaze follows her, dazed when she comes near. “What are you doing?”

“You have hair in your eye,” she says gently, moving behind him. When the small pads of her fingers probe and stroke along his scalp, he shimmies up until his posture re-acquaints itself with her touch, drawn into a sudden, ignited bliss. As she smooths his hair from his face, drawing it back, his breath hitches. The sweet, innocent pleasure of her working hands leaves him immune to all thoughts but her, worries fading, spirit yearning for more.

“Rey,” he sighs, eyes fluttering closed. “You don’t have to do this.”

“...Neither do you,” she whispers at length. They are alone now, the canopy fluttering over them,
the shade and spotted sunlight warring upon the floor. “And yet, it never stopped you.”

At first he thinks she speaks of his status, his service to the Colosseum, until the tender caress of her nail sorting and parting his hair makes him think otherwise. He realizes then that it is not his cruelty she speaks of, but the opposite. “Why should it?” he rasps, breathless.

“Because I’m a slave,” she answers honestly, moving onto the rest of his hair with quick, calculated twists. “No one.”

A strange pain strikes against the bones in his chest, the compassion he fought for so long floating beside him, drifting on the tide.

He cleaves to it as she finishes and comes to stand before him, admiring her work with a broken appreciation. “There. You’re ready now.”

No. He’s not. He never could have been ready for this—for her. Not the confounding beauty of her fury, the gentle sensitivity of her emotions. All of her stands above him now, and though the truth may deny it, he feels it to be her rightful place.

Ben rises, holding fast to the endlessness of her face. Her dark hair framing her lovely jaw, the slightest of divots in her cheek begging to be touched, the firm set of her mouth betraying nothing and everything to his hungry gaze.

He opens his mouth to speak when Ematt appears in the entryway, waving him over. “It’s almost time. We have your armor waiting for you.”

When he vanishes, Rey breaks their contact, stepping back from him. “…We’ve run out of time, haven’t we.”

It’s not a question. And yet, as much as he wants to deny it, he knows there is truth in her words. When he steps onto the silt, Ben Solo will be dead to her. Her illusion shattered by the veracity of what he must do—the terrible might of Kylo Ren.

The decision to hide has been stolen from them, his every side now laid bare before her. But he must not feel the shame, now, only the necessity that this purpose brings. “Come,” he commands, “stand by the gate. Let the emperor see you there.”

Rey nods begrudgingly, following him to a dark chamber where male attendants wait with armor heavy and sagging in their arms. They stare at her openly before coming back to themselves, suddenly careful to avoid looking straight at her.

Ben holds up his hand as one of them attempts to adorn his chestplate, leveling him a warning glare. “Leave us,” he orders. The men look to one another before setting down his faculties, leaving Rey alone with her master amidst the flickering torches.

“I won’t know how to dress you now,” she cautions.

“There will not be a need,” he says simply, crossing his arms over his hips. In one, smooth movement, he takes the lip of his tunic and tugs, pulling it and the belt over his head.

Rey blanches. “Whuh,” she clears her throat. “What are you doing?”

The most fleeting of amused smirks crosses his features when he looks at her, his torso bared fully to her view. “Preparing.” He meanders to the nearby table, withdrawing a pteruges and gesturing to the corner. “There is a jar of oil. Bring it here.”
Averting her eyes as he slips on the dark battle skirt, its leather lappets swaying around his massive thighs, she turns and quickly retrieves the jar, placing it on the table beside him.

He looks at it, then to her, before snatching it up by the neck and closing their distance in one, long stride. “Cup your hands,” he orders. She obeys, understanding pooling in her like the smooth, clear oil coating her waiting palms. He tips it away, halting the flow, and speaks lowly as he sets it back on the table with the effortless sway of his pale arm. “You can start with my back.”

Rey stares at her hands and finds her resolve as slippery what’s inside them. She sighs defeatedly, looking up to meet his expectant stare. “Really?”

He bites the inside of his cheek, as if to hide a smile, before wordlessly turning around.

Knowing she won’t be getting out of this, nor have her heart slow its damnable racing, she grasps her bearings and extends her hands, letting her fingers brace the taut wings of his shoulder blades.

Ben struggles not to groan as her hands weave their impossible comfort along his back, her warm palms seeking him, touching him in full. Her movements are swift, hurried but effective, and he can feel the Summer heat sink into his flesh with its armored weight.

Rey reminds herself to breathe, distracted from her work by the sudden proximity between them. She has never been so close to him this way. With her hands she spans the intricate tapestries of his speckled marks, each one surrendering to the mastery of her fingers. The striking pallor of his skin clashes against her own, the honeyed flesh of years in Egypt only reminding her of where she is now, what she’s doing with him.

The surreality is daunting, and to keep herself immune to the newfound sensations spreading within her body, she continues on to his sides, unintentionally capturing each strong inhale through his monstrous torso.

As she moves, Ben sucks in a breath, both relishing and relenting the sweet caress against his sensitive flanks. But she is careful, in fact she is slowing, her strokes losing their initial momentum.

Finished, Rey retracts her hands. “There. It’s done.”

“No yet,” he chides brusquely, turning to face her fully. He gestures to the jar. “Take care of the rest.”

“The rest?” Surely he couldn’t mean—

“Yes,” he grunts, pushing the jug into her wet hands. She nearly drops it—and he almost hides his amusement. He rights his posture, staring off into the wall behind Rey, as if to ignore her. Yet his voice is, quite apparently, the opposite. “Unless you can’t handle it.”

Rey frowns at him. Never one to back down from a challenge, she huffs, replenishing her hands, rubbing them together as she gets into position. I can do this. I can do this… she thinks, her palms hovering over his bare chest. She hesitates—then lays them on him with a soppy slap. Heat rises on her cheeks as she moves in steady circles, careful to do a thorough job—lest he ask her to redo it, of course.

Ben preens under her attentions, enjoying this more than he will admit. For the first time the bite of her hatred comes without sting, filling him instead with an odd, prideful amusement.

She’s flustered, and the notion that his body alone could make one as strong as she so nervous, well… it’s yet another development he could get used to.
Rey’s slender fingers splay down the taut skin of his body, her eyes captured by the sight before her. Suddenly every movement loses its initial hesitation, a primal urge to explore overcoming her rationale. Her palms brush over his nipples, tight and rising as he shivers ever so slightly.

His reactions, though minute, unleash in her some terrible beast that must be tempered. So she remains slow, covering his arms, careful to avoid his eyes as they burn into her. His stare is fiery—she can feel it singing her lashes, itching at the base of her spine, urging her to look up and meet their awesome strength with her own.

But she doesn’t, needing this to end before her thoughtlessness betrays her. She must remember that the man she touches now is not the one she’d yearned to, in the rear of her mind. She sighs under her breath, mournfully, her hands drifting down to complete her task along his abdomen.

Her touch overcomes him, the sadness in her eyes taking over the brief pleasure they’d afforded him in these few, final moments. The tips of her fingers brush over his middle, the sensation glorious as it knifes through his body to the places he cannot share. In a flash of movement he grips her wrists, halting her there. Her eyes rise to his in shock. In wonder. In fear.

He can’t bear it any longer, hiding such truths from her, hurting her so when all he longs to do is lay them bare.

And if this is his last chance to do so, then...

“Rey,” he swallows. “I’m—”

“Master Ren!” Ematt calls from the entryway. Rey immediately snatches her wrists from Ben’s hands, holding them innocently behind her back. Ematt enters and appraises Ben with open shock. Then he squints, his hairy lip quirking with secretive amusement. “You’re up.”

Ben frowns dangerously at him, only deflating when he has gone. When he turns back to Rey, her eyes meet his. They are so wide, and he knows why—is all too aware of the fear within her that she may never again look upon his face and see the man she once called Ben.

She looks away, blinking and cold, wiping her hands on her stola. “You should go.”

His eyes twinge at her words, a desolate ache rippling through him. Silently, with the last of his resolve, he moves back to his tunic, reaching inside the small fold beneath his belt. When he returns to her his voice is low, like the way he spoke to her in the mornings of their lessons, the nights of shared meals in candlelight. When she was Rey, and knew his name. “Take this,” he murmurs. Confused, Rey watches warily as he comes closer, his hand slipping something soft into hers as it rests at her side. His lips duck next to her ear, the warmth of his breath and heat of his body drowning her in foreign longing. “Keep it safe for me.”

With that, he backs away, the sudden space sucking from her all the air she has to breathe. He watches her as he steps to the door, his eyes dark and imploring, vulnerable, leaving her knowing nothing but the terror inside of her that she may never see them again.

She follows after him when he turns his back, watching as he goes to stand before the gate, male attendants coming forward to adorn his shins and right arm in black leather guards. His muscles ripple, shoulders hunched as though strained, when he takes a long, terrible gladius from the hands of Caulan Ematt.

He refuses something with a wave of his hand before taking his sheild, and when the attendant passes with the subject of his refusal Rey is caught by the endless eyes of the dreadful masked
helm she saw in the stable on her first night—before she knew how much she would grow to loathe it.

And, remembering the object in her hand, Rey holds up her arm, uncurling her fist to reveal a wrinkled sliver of white silk.

The realization is as jarring as the opening gate, the iron crossbars shuddering upward to disappear into the building, framing his back in shadow as he walks into the light, taking her heart with him.

Ben steps out onto the sand, the crowd roaring and hollering down at him from their seats. He looks up at them impassively, scrutinizing their forgettable faces and shaking fists of unsatisfiable bloodlust.

Snoke sits in his shaded box, his fingers steepled, lip curled with blatant enthusiasm. Ben bounces his gladius from hand to hand before twirling it at his side, letting its tip strike dust.

Taking his signal, the gate on the opposite side of the battlefield slides open. Ben squints in the bright sunlight, readying his defensive stance as the crowd falls into deathly silence.

Suddenly, a powerful roar echoes from the darkness, as if a bear has been released from below the stadium. It is not a bear that emerges, however, but a towering giant clad in furs, face concealed in a menagerie of leather and iron, an ax with two blades held fast in its mighty paw.

From beyond the gate, standing next to Ematt, Rey shivers, her hand fisting around the silk. Her heart hammers as she whispers, “Goliath.”

“If only it were so easy a foe, young one,” Ematt grumbles.

Ben shifts his weight, taking in the appearance of his opponent. Its bulging legs and upper body befit a man of immeasurable power. If Kylo Ren is to defeat it, then neither strength nor defense will do much good. Thinking quickly, Ben decides it’s in his best interest to wear the beast down—until he can land the fatal blow.

Taunting is unnecessary, it seems, as the giant careens forward with impossibly long strides, closing the distance in moments as it lifts its ax to strike.

Ben ducks, holding the scutum over his head, absorbing the blow. His arm screams under the sudden bash, but holds firm. When his opponent pauses to gather itself for another strike, Ben takes the opening and pushes his shield up and into the giant’s chin with a grunt.

Just as he thought, it does little to fend the giant off. It growls, swinging its ax to slash Ben’s exposed ribs. He only has a moment to defend himself, but he is quick—the scutum following the blow to harmlessly bruise his side.

Ben grits his teeth, growling as he backs away, desperate for distance. His chest rings from the collision. But the creature doesn’t let him go. It follows, swinging again and again, leaving Ben’s left arm and torso red with more unborn bruises. Sweat pours down his neck and face, every inch of him grateful to have his hair kept at bay by her band.

At the thought he finds renewed energy surge into his legs. He dashes behind his opponent just long enough to strike the first thing he can—the thing’s buttocks. It yelps its groaning cry, the audience cheering, writhing with amusement.

But Ben knows better than to let his guard down. He maintains the distance until the beast comes
for him again, all the fury of the earth in its lunging body. It sweeps a long, hairy arm to Ben’s right, and he barely has a moment to think before the ax catches the lip of his shield, tearing it out of his grasp and sending it flying out onto the sand.

Rey gasps, placing a hand over her mouth. Horror lights deep in her gut, every sinew, every chord of her heart hammering as though it can no longer be contained in her chest. She watches as he backs away, holding his gladius in both hands, his eyes wide and fearful.

Ematt tenses next to her. “Come on, boy…”

Ben bares his teeth in a snarl, trembling with rage. He feels his anger begin to mount, tapped into the pain throbbing along his left side. The cool sensation of power resurges, and he twirls his gladius, curling back his lips in a battle cry.

Rey watches from the sidelines, transfixed as her master’s transformation takes place before her very eyes. With a predator’s precision he maneuvers along the sand, powerful muscles flexing, straining as he swipes for the giant’s belly. The opponent deflects, but seems disoriented, forced into a defensive position as he is assaulted again and again by rapid, ruthless blows.

Ematt relaxes beside her, but only slightly. “Good. He may stand a chance after all.”

Rey glances at him, torn between her desire to stop watching and inability to look away. “Does… Does he normally win?”

“I’ve never seen him lose,” Ematt shrugs, crossing his arms. “In the three years since the emperor forced him into the arena, that boy has won every match without fail.”

The blood in Rey’s veins freezes, her hold on the silk whitening her knuckles. “‘Forced…?’” she echoes.

Ematt sends her a pitiful glance. “Indeed. He may not have been brought in chains like the rest of them, but make no mistake. That young man is as much a slave to the emperor as any of us.”

*Slave.* The word rings in her ears, bounces off the walls in her mind, shattering everything it touches until she is left empty of all thoughts but one.

*He did not choose this.*

The thought is all at once crippling and revolutionary, the chains of her traitorous heart unbound, her shackles falling as she looks out into the arena. She watches the sweat roll from his temple, drip from his chin, the oil on his body shining in the sunlight like a beacon. He deflects, he parries, he lunges with all the fury trapped deep within, a fury she knows lies within herself, too, locked away inside.

Her eyes sting with burning relief and she clutches her fist to her chest, tears of sorrow and solace rolling down her cheeks. She knows now the truth he’s kept hidden. Even if there are many others she’s yet to know, this alone rings true—that all along, they were the same.

On the battlefield, Ben turns on his heel. He’s made gradual progress towards the shield resting in the sand. His arms are beginning to grow weary, yet the giant will not relent.

He takes several steps back, preparing to attempt a blow to the beast’s exposed neck, when he sees her there.

Her lips are quivering, her eyes red and weeping as she looks at him.
In that moment, all he can think is how much he has hurt her, remembering when she would smile.

And then only white, searing pain.

Rey gasps.

Ben cries out as agony claws through his side, the blade of the ax wedged just beneath his ribs. Its ripped out with a sluggish sqwuelch, blood hot and flowing down his hip. He gapes, mouth open in silent, twisting shock as he loses all feeling in his left side, crashing down to his knee.

No.

Trembling, he manages to hold his hand over his wound, the blood pulsing through his fingers, warm and alive and dying. His gladius goes limp against the silt as the shadow of the beast looms, as the crowd’s roar dims in his ears, only one word breaking through the listless noise.

“Ben!”

“No, girl! Come back!”

Rey races out onto the sand, not caring where her feet take her after, if they ever take her anywhere at all. She doesn’t think, only runs.

The giant lifts the ax over his head, ready to deliver the final blow, but she is faster. She lunges through the silt, the Egyptian desert strong in her stance, and stands between them with raised arms.

She catches the barbarian’s wrists, softening the blow as the sheer might knocks her down to her knees.

Her arms tremble and her lips curl back in a furious snarl as she looks up into the sightless eyes of the mask. Her native tongue sprawls out, low and curdled and unbending. “I won’t let you take him!”

The beast only growls, knocking her down further. Her heart hammers in her ears, the strain ripping through her shoulders. “Gyah!” she cries out, trembling under the weight. She won’t be able to hold him off much longer, the sudden, impossible power she’d surmassed fading fast.

Thinking quickly, her eyes fix to their level, and she doesn’t hesitate. She swings her fist and it collides between the beast’s legs. It doubles over with a mewling roar before her hair is snagged in the grip of his giant hand, pain striking like a hammer to hot iron as he yanks her to the side, sending her sprawling into the dust.

Rey pants, her bones weak and numb, shaking as she tries to pull herself up. Heavy footsteps stalk closer, a mighty shadow cast over her quivering body. Her muscles won’t obey, every nerve shot. She looks up at her pursuer, glaring with open hatred. She won’t be afraid of it—to die for this.

But when the behemoth lifts its arms to strike her down, the blow does not land.

A blur of black and flesh collides into the beast’s stomach with such force that it loses balance, stumbling down into the dirt. Rey blinks, bewildered and blinded by the rush of sand, until the shape comes into view.

Ben clambers atop the beast, both hands fighting for the hilt of the ax. His hair, now loose, sways over his face as he struggles through gritted teeth, wrenching it with effort. The might and fury
ripples over his body as he quakes, a force to rival Mars in the merciless grip of his hands. After a moment he strikes the masked behemoth with a bloody fist, making the large body jolt from the blow.

As it’s disoriented, Ben tugs the ax out of its grasp, tossing it far away from them. With heaving, animalistic breaths, his hands reach to each end of the mask, lifting the creature’s head and turning it viciously to the side in exchange for a resounding *snap*.

Rey watches, weak, as he rises shakily to his feet. The crowd erupts into vigorous applause, their cheers spilling like a flood into the arena, drowning her ears.

Ben steps away from the dead gladiator, turning to face her. Relief and regret fill her, but none so much as the first when his eyes meet hers, warm and gentle and *his*.

Until they go dim.

Ben sways, the world spinning out from under him as he clasps a hand over his side, falling to the sand. Blood continues to pulse raggedly from his open wound, spilling through his fingers.

He hears his name from her mouth, fading in his mind like a distant dream. And suddenly she is above him. An angel of light and fury, come to take him at last.

His hand reaches for her face, her name caged behind his trembling lips.

And then he is lost to the darkness.

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**END ACT I**

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Chapter End Notes

[Fanart by the amazing gopherbroke! Includes shirtless gladiator Kylo Ren/ Ben Solo in his arm guard, leather pteruges, and sandals. He holds his specially-crafted long gladius in his right hand]

[Lustitia (Also known as "Justitia," or "Lady Justice") is the artistic representation of Justice originating from Roman culture based off the Greek goddesses Themis and Dike. She is shown blindfolded, holding a sword in her left hand and scales in her]
[The "pteruges" is the Roman battle skirt, and the "lappets" are the leather strips allowing for freedom of movement]

[The "scutum" is a Roman shield that can vary from a rectangular to ovular shape]

[Rey’s mention of "Goliath" is a reference to the legendary height of Goliath the Philistine (at roughly 6'9", which was massive at the time), who featured in the Biblical story of David and Goliath]

[During the Iron Age, the Mediterranean areas (particularly Rome) designed all manner of weapons. Among these were special, double-bladed axes called "labrys." The Barbarian tribes that the Romans encountered north of the Alps (where the "Chewbacca" of Glory's Fray got his inspiration) used many iron war axes, swords, and spears]

[Mars is the Roman god of war (Greek: Ares). Because the Romans relied on war for their immense power and prosperity, Mars was seen more as a father figure than the warrior modern media tends to propogate. It is because of this that, in Roman art, he is depicted as less aggressive in physical form, demonstrating a more calm and understanding nature]

{Theme of this chapter is "Waking Lions" by Pop Evil. Listen to the Glory's Fray Spotify playlist here!}
Hello, everyone! I just got back from my Summer getaway. Thank you all so much for your patience, and for spoiling me with your amazing reactions to the end of Act One! I was so pleased to read your surprise, fear, eagerness, and love for this story.

As you've noticed, Glory's Fray is (at the moment) seventy-five chapters long. I so appreciate your willingness to stand by me and our characters as they continue through the story. Thank you all so so so so so SO much for being the most AMAZING readers I could EVER ask for! *hugs*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Awake, north wind, and come, south wind!
Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread everywhere.
Let my beloved come into his garden
And taste its choice fruits.

"My beloved is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand
His head is purest gold;
His hair is wavy, and black as a raven.
His eyes are like doves by the water streams,
Washed in milk, mounted like jewels.
His cheeks are like beds of spice yielding perfume.
His lips are like lilies
Dripping with myrrh
His mouth is sweetness itself;
He is altogether lovely.
This is my beloved,
This is my friend, daughters of Jerusalem.
"Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you:

Do not 'rouse or awaken love

Until the time is right."

—Song of Solomon (NIV), Verses: 4:16 | 5:10-13, 16 | 8:4

· ACT II ·

The darkness rises, ebbing and pulsing like waves. Yet within it, there is light. Faded and grey, images of things long since passed.

Pain smears along the edge of his soul, corrupting his flesh, making him weak in waking until he is left falling into the loose fist of slumber. It does not keep him, only hold him, pulling taut the reins of his consciousness.

The stench of sweat and blood surrounds him, the uneven rattle of wooden planks and plush bedding swaying beneath his useless body.

His eyes crease open, only enough to feel the heated sunlight bearing down, make sight the blurry shadow of her, before he is claimed again.

The party rides in sullen silence, Rey watching worriedly from Silencer’s back as Ematt’s physicians tend to Ben’s wounds. The man leads them out along the grass on his order to bring the fallen fighter to his home, to rest.

It seems only moments ago that Rey’s heart fled her body—when she held her master’s face in her hands, watching the life drain from him. Rey frowns. She had never felt more helpless than in that moment, never more savage when the men came to take him away.

She tries to halt her trembling with a firm grip on Silencer’s reins. Hours passed before the blood was staunched suitably enough to move him out of the Colosseum ward, and from here she watches carefully, horror threading its icy claws through each vein in her body, knowing any breath could be his last.

Though Ematt reassured her upon their departure from Rome that her master would be well again, Rey’s certainty rests far from her. To sustain such a blow and still rise to fight? It all seemed so impossible. And yet, by some miracle, it was done.

He had saved her life, even after she’d cursed his.

Shame descends on her shoulders, resting its heavy burden like a vulture come to tear at her remains, pluck at her watery eyes. She knows her place as a slave, has known it all along, yet acted with such childish petulance in the face of that she could not change. She had taken advantage of his patience, and in doing so parted them both from the reality she denied.

Had she not yearned to know his soul, would he have been spared this pain?

Tears well in her eyes, but she blinks them away before the men can see. In her panic she had
abandoned the silk piece he’d given her, the remnant of the toga he said he’d destroyed. What it means baffles her still, as does the painful memory of his anguished gaze when she’d called him a monster—her heart sinks to know that neither of those fragments will ever be reclaimed.

It renders her every thought useless on the back of his horse. The joy she found in riding saps like the blood in her face, and still she watches him.

Under the partial shade of the caravan, the sun still beats down over his marbled body, shining and pearlescent with drying sweat. An attendant begins the sticky process of replacing his bandages, red ooze flushed out with water from a clay jug before fresh cloth can be applied. Their hands are practiced and precise—unaffected.

Rey winces at the gruesome marring of his exposed flesh, the blood bright and urgent despite the pressure placed there. He seems more pale than ever before, his energy subdued by his own mortality. The sight of it pulls her instincts far from where they’ve always been, a longing to close the distance and restore what is his tugging the frayed ends of her dwindling energy.

The villa comes into sight from around the bend, Ematt jumping down from his horse to walk alongside the wagon. Rey watches attentively, pleading with her eyes that he give her some manner of direction to make things right.

Her attentiveness is short-lived.

A voice calls from above, familiar and tinged with rage. “What happened?!”

Rey looks away to see Ahsoka pacing towards them in long strides. Her eyes, wide and blue, are enough to send Rey careening from Silencer’s back and into her arms, racking with rattled nerves. “He’s,” she sobs, “He’s hurt.”

Ahsoka stiffens, enveloping Rey as Ematt comes closer. She nods to the door. “Bring him inside.”

Ahsoka holds fast to Rey as they enter behind the men, who lift Ben’s unconscious body on a gurney. Rey can only steal a glance before her eyes water again, guilt seizing her control and rooting her still.

As they go further into the house, warm hands find her shoulders, summoning her back to the present when her mentor’s wise eyes find her again. “Tell me what happened, Rey,” she orders, voice calm and quiet.

Rey swallows thickly. “They were in the Colosseum. The giant…” she sucks in a shuddering breath. “I couldn’t,” she sniffs wetly, “I couldn’t do nothing—”

“Calm yourself,” Ahsoka urges, smoothing her fingers over Rey’s loose hair. At her command, Rey fights the war within her, more tired than she’s ever been, yet manages with what little strength she has. Ahsoka brushes a stray tear from Rey’s cheek. “Start again. What happened while I was gone?”

It spills out of Rey like a mighty flood, washing away any secret held fast to her heart. She speaks of the way he taught her, the meals they shared, the quiet peace she’d never known. Then his name, the summons, the Circus Maximus, the truth of his servitude… then the revelry, the battle—all of it.

By the end she is trembling again, not in fear of what has transpired in these seven days, but the selfish grief of all the memories within them she’d so readily tarnished.
Ahsoka listens silently, nodding as Rey speaks. When she finishes, the woman crosses her arms, revealing her displeasure in the firm pucker of her brow. “When I returned this morning I did not expect to find the culina in such a state of ruin,” she murmurs. “Now I understand the cause.”

Rey looks down sheepishly. In the haze of her disbelief and hatred, she’d not thought to cleaning her master’s mess. She blinks, glancing at the shattered remains of the chair lying still and lifeless in the corner of the atrium.

“But to hear that you would do something as foolish as jump into the arena?” Ahsoka fumes, glaring openly at Rey like a mother to her disobedient child. “What were you thinking?! You both could have been killed,” she hisses.

“I,” Rey begins helplessly, lowering her chin. Her voice drops to a whisper alongside it. “I didn’t think. I couldn’t let him die.” Her fists tremble at her sides. “And… I won’t apologize for it.”

Ahsoka stares at her, and Rey prepares for another verbal lashing. But she recieves none, instead a hand in her hair, bringing their heads to touch. “I missed you, little one,” Ahsoka murmurs, a pleased smile shining through her lips.

Rey manages the same, closing her eyes to accept the fond embrace, breathing her in. She smells of linens and dyes, of Summer flowers and sea spray. More like home than anywhere else.

Footsteps echo along the atrium walls, drawing their attention to Ematt, who clasps his hands behind him. He sighs, shaking his head. “He’s awake.” His eyes find Rey’s with no small amount of gloom. “He’s asked for you.”

Heart hammering, Rey nods her understanding and follows Ematt down the familiar hall. He waits outside the door as his attendants file out with their supplies, and she steps inside.

It’s as it always is in this room—dark save for the daylight streaming through the open terrace doors. The hearth simmers with untouched embers, every carve and carpet and stone blurry in comparison to the way he looks at her.

When she walks in the tightened features on his face relax, fear abandoning his eyes to let relief take their place. He lays back down on his pillow when she stands over him, their eyes never parting, mouths never speaking as she sits on the stool next to his bedside.

The smallest of smiles quirks on her lip. “You’re awake.”

He nods slightly, eyes roving her face. “I am,” he agrees, voice rasped. Concern laces his brow when his gaze lands on the blooming bruise on her cheek. “Are you alright?”

She catches his eyes again with the smallest of laughing scoffs. “I could ask you the same thing.”

He frowns, but it’s more beligerant than angry. “I will be,” he says softly, expression easing to one she has never seen. It’s like pain, or sorrow, or some cruel mixture of solace. But as she is caught in it, his hand lifts to find her cheek with his fingertips, the chill of his skin both sapping her warmth and returning it tenfold. “Thanks to you.”

The sting of tears returns to her eyes, but she folds her lips, blinking them back as she takes his wrist in hand, closing her eyes to savor the gentleness of his touch.

Ben watches her in fascination, unable to look away. He remembers, drawn from the mires of his memories, the way she’d rushed so furiously into the arena. In the midst of his pain and defeat, she was there, standing over him, between him and the axe.
The final blow would have been his end. And this slave, this girl…

Rey…

...saved his life.

When he thought himself far from her grace, when he’d left all he had to give with her, when Ben Solo was to die, when she was to watch on in her hatred, when she was to forget… she hadn’t. She came for him, gave her strength, and in that one moment it was enough.

It was enough.

Her warmth rushes through him, the simple touch almost more than he can bear, and yet he continues, the pad of his thumb sliding over her cheek. Her lashes flutter closed; he feels their soft caress like a breath, and with every second he feels the compulsion to savor and remember it all.

They need not speak anymore, now. The truth has been made clear. Apologies, words of thanks… all speech is useless in the profound silence, the awesome power in the slightest brush of her lips against his palm. His heart swells against the throbbing pain, but he ignores the strain in his arm, the angry sting in his side, if only to prolong this.

Rey jumps when Ahsoka strides in, her hold on his wrist absent as she moves away, folding hands in her lap. Ben lets his own fall over his face, already awash in the heated wrath of his head servant. “Stercore,” he mutters.

“You… foolish,” she scorns, smacking his covered leg, “pompous, stubborn ass!” Ahsoka moves to stand over him, ignoring Rey, blue eyes blazing wider than the sky. She smacks his leg again for good measure. “Bringing her to a battle?! Have you lost your mind?!”

He groans, glancing at her. She has no idea how right she is.

“It was expected,” he sighs. “But that’s passed. Now we will have time to plan accordingly.”

Rey leans forward. “What do you mean?”

Ben lays back, struggling to find comfort as his body comes fully awake to the pain. His expression pinches with effort to fight it down. He rests his hand over the scratching bandages, feeling a disconcerting heat pulse against his fingers. “I meant to keep the issue as private as possible—”

Now Rey stands as well. “You told her?”

He winces, eye twitching.

“I figured it out myself,” Ahsoka frowns, crossing her arms. Rey follows suit, leaving their master to flounder under their attention. “The two of you are clearly lacking the knowledge you claim.”

Rey blushes to her ears. Ben barely manages to temper his own. A part of him boasts the revelry the night before, the memory still hot in his veins, but he schools his features. “After today, I doubt it will matter.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because of Rey,” he answers simply.

“Because of me,” Rey scoffs, avoiding eye contact. She’s suddenly quite aware of his lacking
dress, and with the lingering sensation of his touch in her skin finds it best not to stare.

“Yes.” He levels his wandering eyes on Ahsoka. “Snoke watched her risk her life. I doubt he will be making any assumptions that could disadvantage us.” Leaning back, Ben’s eyes flutter closed, fatigue flooding his body in a numb light.

Ahsoka sighs. “He’s right,” she murmurs, turning to Rey. She’s met with a hurt expression. “I withheld the truth from you. And for that I’m sorry.”

Rey smiles sadly, nodding her quiet forgiveness. She understands why they did it—though it does not take away the betrayal so much as this apology from her generous mentor.

There’s a light rapping on the door, and Ematt enters. He fists his hips, scrutinizing Ben’s bandaging with weary eyes as he comes closer. “Well, my boy... how do you fare?”

Ben scoffs in response, though it tapers into a soft groan.

“Hm. I see. Ah, well, that’s expected,” Ematt shrugs. He turns his attention to Rey and Ahsoka. “I’ll send one of my physicians to check on him when I return to Rome. For now, this is the best we can do.” His eyes glint when they find Rey’s. “You will need to care for him yourselves until then.”

“That won’t be an issue,” Ahsoka replies, ignorant the way Rey has found the will to watch Ben’s taut... expression. “Come, let me walk you out.”

They leave, speaking to one other with hushed voices. Ematt chuckles and touches Ahsoka's shoulder before they vanish from sight.

Rey drops her arms, turning back to find Ben staring at her. A thick headiness gathers between them, her brief anger dissipating. “Are you sure you’re alright?” she asks softly.

Ben shakes his head. “It’s little concern now. Given time, it will heal.” His voice dips with promise as he gazes up at her, the endearing crookedness of his teeth peeking from parted lips as he speaks. “All will be as it was before.”

Pensively, Rey folds her lips. Slowly, hesitantly, following the intangible thread that fetters them still, she reaches out, her fingers brushing over his knuckles. He turns his wrist, feeling her stroke his palm before capturing her gently.

She shares her warmth with him, breathing out in the small consolation of his touch, and meets his eyes with a blooming smile, finding in him the Ben she knew—and longs to know.

“I’m glad.”

Chapter End Notes

["Song of Songs" (also known as "Song of Solomon") is a book in the Old Testament about the earnest love of two people divided, until they are united in body and soul. BONUS: "Footnotes" by Camucia is a Reylo fanfiction that also implements themes from Song of Songs, and is worth a read!]

[The Colosseum and gladiators had their own specialized emergency-care team on]
standby for medical emergencies. Rome also had hospitals, but were primarily used for soldiers and slaves]

["Stercore" is a Latin swear word, meaning "Shit"]
Care

Chapter Notes

It's official, ya'll—we are a THIRD of the way through Glory's Fray! I couldn't have done this without your amazing support. This is now my longest fic to date, and I am so happy to be able to share this experience with you. You're just INCREDIBLE!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Irru—ugh! Unhand me, woman!”

“Oh, quit that whining,” Ahsoka tuts, wringing out the bloody rag in her slender hands. “This has to be washed out. The physician will be here soon enough.”

Ben scoffs, blinking at the sweat on his brow as he lays down, trying not to move while Ahsoka continues her work. The sting of air on his open wound spreads weeds of fiery poison across his side, winding around his ribs, planting thorns in the sinews of his chest and arms.

Rey enters with folded linens, and he closes his eyes, trying to breath evenly, but only panting as the pain grows worse, the Summer heat suffocating in the darkness of his chambers.

She sets them down beside Ahsoka, glancing worriedly at her master’s marred torso. The lamplight flickers its soft glow across his skin, a shroud of shadow turning his leaking blood into black oil. “How is it now?”

Her mentor sighs, wiping her forehead with the back of her arm. “Same as only minutes ago, Rey,” she snips wearily.

Ben glares at Ahsoka before he hisses, her precision sharp as a blade as she clears his skin of any remaining crust.

Rey flinches, feeling helpless as she stands over them. It must be well past the middle of the night—every bone in her body is exhausted; her bruises finally bloomed their violet petals from cheek to temple, matching her elbow and palm. The tug on her hair, however, has subsided to a dull throb along her scalp, her scraped arm and hand just a small sting. But treating those can wait. “What can I do?”

Splaying the rag over his wound—while Ben exhales in reprieve—Ahsoka leans away, slouched over her knees on the stool. “I’m afraid there is little we can do. Ematt said he will send a physician from the north. She should be here in the morning.”

Rey pauses. “‘She?’”

Giving her a tired look, Ahsoka smiles. “Is that so impossible?”

Ben shifts, frowning when Ahsoka catches him, pushing him down onto his back. He growls at her, low in his throat like a cornered dog.

“I don’t think so,” she grunts. “No tossing and turning. You need to rest this way.”
Ben groans, peeking at his wound before letting the rag rest. He holds out his hand, closing his fist a few times towards the new linens. “A small one, Rey.”

Rey nods, thumbing through the folding to pull out a smaller cloth that he immediately uses to wipe his head, neck, and the crevices of his chest.

She tries not to stare.

“The cut is deep,” Ahsoka observes, shaking her head. “It won’t staunch tonight. I’ll have to wash it until sunrise,” she says, cut off by a wide yawn she buries in her arm.

Rey rests a hand on Ahsoka’s shoulder, letting her instincts guide her. Perhaps there is a way she can help after all. “Ahsoka, you’re exhausted. You both are,” she nods to Ben, who’s lost to his own quiet anguish. “Let me do the rest tonight,” she smiles gently, squeezing.

“Rey—” Ahsoka starts.

“—Please,” she interrupts sincerely, meeting Ahsoka’s eyes. In her own foggy mind she prays the woman can see what this would mean for her. That she blames herself for the harm that’s come to their master, the shame burning in her far more painful than her own minor injuries.

Both Ben and Ahsoka look at her before Ahsoka grunts to her feet, knees not as spry as they used to be. “Alright,” she says simply, granting a satisfied smirk. “You can handle it?”

Rey nods, finally relaxed. “Yes.”

“Fine then,” Ahsoka waves her off, shuffling towards the door, murmuring under her breath. As Rey takes her place on the warm stool, readjusting the lamp on his nightstand, Ahsoka returns, hands washed, and lies a fresh pail of water next to the bowl at Rey’s feet.

They trade a silent nod, and then the woman is gone, leaving them alone.

Taking a breath, Rey gingerly lifts the damp cloth from his wound, spots of fresh blood holding fast to it. She pushes down her compulsive gag at the sight of his gash, instead immersing herself in its study. The wound is deep, his loose skin a ghostly white as it hangs over the pink flesh like a torn curtain. The meat of his injured skin fades into spotty scratches and black bruising, the shadows spreading to his ribs.

It pulses towards her with his deep breaths, but Rey will not be afraid. She pours fresh water, retrieving a new cloth and wetting it, and starts to dab gently around the edges, soaking up the weepiest spots.

Ben watches her in silence, the crackling flames of his fireplace tapping their silhouettes along her soft slope of her cheek. He notices her bruise again, now fully formed and coupled with raised scratches, and his frown deepens. The same marks riddle her arm. “You’re hurt,” he rumbles.

“Not as much as you,” she chides quietly, wetting the rag again and returning it to his wound. He stiffens, a trapped grunt in his throat. She almost smiles—he must be healing already.

He exhales, the heat of a Summer wave sweltering in the room. That, and the pain, don’t help his perspiring cease. He does not want to alarm her with his weak vocalizations, keeping quiet despite the occasional sting.

Rey notices him drop the damp towel to his side, and hands him a new one.
“Thank you,” he murmurs, pressing it to the shining hollow of his throat.

Rey’s eyes only linger on his prominent collarbone for a moment before she averts them, reminding herself to stay true to her task. “Of course, Master.”

Ben narrows his eyes at her in a half-hearted glower. The stress straining, pushing down his voice. “Don’t do that.”

She pulls the cloth away. “Sorry—did I press too hard?”

“No,” he grunts, reaching out to take one of her wrists. The muscles in his arm scream with the effort, but he pays them no heed, holding fast to her eyes. “Calling me that when no one’s around.”

Rey blinks, dazed as his words run through her in a dashing whirlwind of confusion. Under his gaze in the near-darkness, his lashes shadowed over the fermented amber of his eyes and chest rising so steadily from his bed, it’s hard to find any rational reply.

So she nods. “Alright.”

Ben relaxes, tugging her slightly towards him to continue her work. Unlike Ahsoka, her touches are slow and careful, almost hesitant. As she rinses and compresses his body, the striking pain miraculously seems to dull, as though her fingers carry an elixir of life and restoration.

His breathing evens, heart beating soundly in his chest, head swimming as the pain comes and goes in waves. But with her so near to him, the silence thick and comforting, he feels himself pulled back towards the weightlessness of sleep.

After some time, Rey sighs, wiping his blood from her hands before reaching back to work out a tightness in her shoulder.

The flow seems to be stilling, the edges around healing from the water treatment. A soft snore rumbles through the air, and she looks up to find him asleep.

Rey smiles, the blur of exhaustion edging her sight as she gazes on his sleeping face. He seems peaceful—his lashes flitting with dreams. His lips lie parted, soft breaths and deep, hushed snores passing under the gates of his blunt, peeking teeth.

Caught by some urge she is beginning to grow accustomed to, she moves the stool closer. In the dying firelight she traces his cheeks with her eyes, mapping the strong ridge of his nose and brow, wondering, remembering how it felt when it brushed the skin of her neck.

Rey stills, a wave of warmth spilling over her, slick and oozing like honey in her stomach, in her legs. She swallows, heat rising in her cheeks as she looks away—but it is of no help. In her skin the only place left to look upon is his bare chest, his thick, muscular stomach, and… the edge of his blanket, hanging dangerously lower than she’d noticed before now.

Closing her eyes, she takes a breath. These thoughts and lingering traces of fleeting feelings should be only that—fleeting. That night, last night, during the revelry had been a farce. A method, an act to trick those into thinking them loyal to their places. To Rome.

And yet.

And yet he never forsook his gentleness towards her. Never changed—not really. The only thing that truly changed was the way she saw him.
She was a fool for thinking such a secret would change the truth of her curious master. That here, in the quiet privacy of their equally curious relationship, he would ever change who he is.

Ben.

She smiles again, laughing softly as a deeper snore snags him, and lets herself return to his face. Though his affections last night were under expectation, and a touch mortifying, in the end he did what was best. She can only hope now that it was enough for the emperor.

And for her.

He awakens to a savory smell, rich and sweet. His eyes crack open and he rubs them, groaning at the movement and general displeasure of rousing.

“Good morning,” her voice calls softly, beckoning his attention. He follows her call to his nightstand, where she’s placed a bowl of the first breakfast she’d served him those weeks ago. Her face comes into view, tired eyes sunken, but brighter than suns. “Here,” she reaches, taking his shoulder in her warm, strong hand. “Let me.”

He blinks groggily, pushing himself alongside her efforts to sit him up. He grunts, the taut skin around his injury nearly making him gasp from the incredible ache.

Her hand slips, wrapping around his bicep, and the muscle flexes without his instruction. He thinks little of it through the pain, though her touch is welcome. And surprisingly lingering.

She retracts her hand, focusing hard on his face with wide eyes and tense cheeks, as if she’d done no such thing. “The physician is here,” she informs dutifully, a bit rushed, face flushed—from her sleepless night, no doubt. “But I thought you might take breakfast first.”

He chuckles lowly, shaking his head in near-disbelief. What a change there’s been in this woman—from fury to obedience to rage… to this? “You know me well,” he remarks, resting his better hand on his empty stomach. “But will you feed me well?”

Rey is set to glare at him until she sees it—the crinkling in the corners of his temples, the slight lift of his lips, the playful glint in his eyes. “You weren’t complaining at the palace,” she counters, wondering where her sudden boldness could possibly be coming from.

The smile widens, almost imperceptively, as he takes the bowl from her offering hand. “Indeed.”

A shadow passes through the doorway—Ahsoka enters, changed from her bloodstained clothes into a soft-looking yellow tunica. It contrasts starkly with her darker skin, showing Rey the finer details in her aging arms. “Oh, good, you’re awake.”

Ben doesn’t reply, feeding himself as he ignores her in quick, hearty scoops of his honeyed oatmeal.

Rey turns her smile to a more serious one, intercepting Ahsoka’s impatient glare. “Yes. He should be finished with his breakfast soon.”

He offers her an offended yet reproachful look before swallowing, letting the bowl rest in his lap as he meets Ahsoka’s eyes. “The physician is here?”

She nods. “Yes, Young Master, she is.”
“Bring her in, then.”

Suddenly, a remarkably small woman strides into the room, her petite frame lumbering in with gusto as she cradles a wooden box in her hands. “No need to ‘bring’ me anywhere, young man.”

While Rey marvels openly at this little woman, Ben seems unimpressed—yet intrigued at the same time. “You’re Ematt’s physician?” he rumbles, tone pitched low, as if she were more an intruder than assistant.

She rests her box on the ground with a grunt. “Indeed. Though, one may call me more a midwife than approved physician of the Empire,” she remarks casually, lifting the lid to reveal a menagerie of colorful and fragrant medicines and plants. “But you, child, may call me Maz.”

“I see,” he murmurs, watching her as she moves over to inspect him. He takes another bite of his breakfast, nearly spitting it out when her wrinkled fingers trace a swift circle over the perimeter of his gash.

“A deep wound. It will need to be closed quickly. You, girl,” she addresses Rey, her thin lips firm and serious. “Have you any honey in this house?”

“Yes,” she answers, catching herself. “I just used some this morning. There’s plenty left.”

“Hm. Good. Fetch it. It’ll be needed,” Maz orders, pulling a small vial from the wooden box. When Rey is gone, the midwife pours some into a cloth and immediately begins to press it on the wound.

He hisses as it stings his exposed flesh, gripping tightly to the bowl in his lap with gritted teeth.

Rey enters with rapid steps, offering the woman the honey. “Thank you, child,” Maz nods, taking good portions and pasting it over the seam of his cut, gradually basting inwards. “This will help with the healing and pain. The redness here will go away, and help close the wound. Keep it well-applied and well-wrapped. Thrice daily,” she commands, holding up an instructional, shriveled finger.

Ahsoka nods with Rey as Ben finally begins to untense, letting the woman do her work on him. She waves Rey away, digging through her medicines with a lighthearted humming as the three look on darkly.

“Ah, here it is,” she chimes, smiling to herself. She pulls out a dark, powdery substance, dumping it into the empty water bowl, and adds a few spices. Rey catches the strong perfume of frankincense, watching raptly as the small vial of clear liquid is blended and mixed into a grainy, odorous plaster.

“What’s that?” Rey queries gently.

Maz dips her finger and swirls it, touching it to her tongue and shivering with a delighted smile. “Just right, is what this is,” she chortles, beginning to dot his glazed flesh. “The mix of land flowers and beasts alike,” she answers. “Making use of the world ‘round us to bind our flesh. Quite poetic, wouldn’t you say?”

“I would,” Ahsoka replies from the hearth. Rey merely nods, understanding little from this cryptic, eccentric slip of a woman.

She likes her immediately.
“There we are,” Maz sighs, appreciating her work. Ben glances down at it from where he sits, eyes scanning worriedly. She catches him, cooing while she works to wrap him, forced to lean over his torso as she winds the bandages around. “Now, now, I know I am no Galen, but this will aid in closing your wounds. It may take time, but to be alive with a scourge so deep is beyond medicine’s power. You have someone watching over you.”

His eyes flit to Rey’s briefly, her heart stuttering in her chest until he looks away, back into the healer’s small, shining eyes. “How much?”

Maz waves him off, finishing her work. “I will not take money from a wounded man. Ematt will be the one to give me portions of your winnings when all is done.”

Ben nods. “Very well. Rey will see you out. Ahsoka,” he grunts, rising fully. The blanket shifts dangerously around him, peeking the dark leather of his subligar. “I will require your assistance.”

“Of course,” Ahsoka bows, coming forward to help him from the bed. Rey watches as she takes Maz out, affording worried glances at his bandages and heavy limp, grimacing as he visibly trembles with the pain.

When they reach the atrium, exiting towards the stables, Rey blinks. A saddled ass stands picking at the long weeds outside the stable walls, chomping contentedly.

“Thank you for helping him,” Rey offers as Maz sets to strapping her box onto the donkey’s saddle.

“You’re quite welcome, child. You are clearly a slave who cares for her master,” she chuckles, offering Rey a probing smirk.

Rey flushes, blaming the heat. “Well, he is a good master.”

“I’m sure,” Maz smiles. “Oh, there’s one more thing.” She turns, rifling through her things, and supplies two small sacks—one tied with twine, the other in parchment. “Here,” she urges, handing them over.

“What are they?” Rey asks, taking the containers. They are light in her palms, wafting thick, sweet fragrances.

“That is Opos,” she explains, pointing to the twined bag. “The man will likely overcome his shock and begin to feel a pain to rival death. In that case, give him this. It will lessen his suffering.”

Rey nearly dashes it away, overwhelmed with disgust. “It will kill him?” she snarls.

“No,” Maz replies, her smile unwavering. “It will only ease the pain. He will not die. Just ration it carefully, or he may forget to breathe.”

Relieved, and somewhat curious, Rey settles again, a bit embarrassed by her outburst. She considers the other sack, the one tied in parchment, as Maz mounts her steed. “And this…?” she asks, holding it up.

Maz shrugs. “Pennyroyal. Wouldn’t want any unfortunate circumstances, now would we?” she winks.

Rey pales, trying to school her features as her arms drop to her sides. “I... I understand. Safe travels...” she trails off, mind spinning.
Maz seems unaware of the girl's plight, or is at least willing to forgo anymore conversation. She kicks her ass onward, ushering him out with a tittering farewell and a reminder to keep the honey and water nearby.

Rey wanders back into the house like a sleepwalker, dazed, before stopping in her chambers.

She considers the bag of parchment in her hand, heart racing, and quickly stashes it under the mattress of her bed when a familiar presence stands at the door.

Ahsoka crosses her arms. “What’s that?”

Rey rises, holding tight to the opos. She turns and acts like all is well. “Maz gave it to me. For his pains.”

“Oh?” Ahsoka murmurs, striding inside. Her bright eyes bore into Rey’s. “And why are you in here, not giving it to the young master?”

Rey fights the desperate urge to wet her lip and avert her eyes, meeting Ahsoka soundly. “I was going to change my clothes first,” she replies, motioning to the blood and grime caking her beloved stola, “and I dropped it.”

“Hm,” Ahsoka grunts, scanning Rey’s body. “…Very well. I suppose I should set to the chores while you bring it to him. I will be cleaning the culina if you have need of me,” she informs, leaving and closing Rey’s door behind her.

When it shuts, Rey’s heart doesn’t slow. Her fingers shake as she peels off her stola, changing back into the borrowed tunica of two nights prior. She combs through her hair and scrubs her face—along with the more visible imperfections—dabbing her own scrapes with water and honey before she returns to find him lying on his back, staring out into the morning sunshine beyond his open terrace doors.

“Is it better?” she calls softly, coming to stand beside him.

He turns to look over at her, his gaze open and welcoming. Her traitorous heart falls to meet her stomach, the memory of what lies under her mattress returning vengefully at the depth of his voice. “I believe it will be.”

“Good,” she sighs, sitting in the stool. It seems that Ahsoka had changed his sheets as he relieved himself, and his perspiration has lessened somewhat. A hopeful sign. She produces the bag in her hand, showing it to him. “Maz wanted you to have this. She said it would help ease the pain, if it’s too much.”

“Opos?” he questions, taking it from her. He brings it to his nose for a brief inhale before lying the bag on the nightstand, disgruntled. “I see. It seems I will be bedridden for some time,” he frowns.

Better than being dead, her soul says, but she remains quiet. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Yes, actually,” he glances up at her, that spark returning to his eyes, though the light seems dimmed. “Your Latin. We’re not done with it yet. Go. Retrieve your notes. We will continue your lessons here.”

Filled with a sudden excitement, Rey nods, dashing from his chambers and into the triblinum, taking all she can into her arms.

Perhaps he was right—things truly will return to the way they were.
Only now, they will be new.

As the day wears on the strain on his features grows more and more, but he pushes through, instructing her on proper pronunciations between her dozing lapses. With little space to write, the lessons must rely on the tongue. Ben admires her skillful articulation, and tells her so when inclined—which is often. She is a truly gifted slave, her mind and instincts sharper than iron.

Rey recites for him as the sun begins to set outside, lighting the hearth and turning to find his breathing uneven, his lips folded, eyes shut tight.

Sympathy washes over her and she comes closer, dragged by some invisible tether between them. “Ben? Are you alright?”

He waves his hand, weakly. “Yes. Fine—Just need rest. That's all for today. You may retire to your chambers.”

Rey frowns at him, worry slapped on her face. Her eyes fix on his nightstand, and she reaches for the bag, beginning to unfasten the twine with determined fingers.

He shakes his head. “I don’t need it—”

“You do,” she presses, sitting down in the stool. “I need to replace your bandages, anyway. This will help with the pain.”

“I can handle pain,” he grunts. But as he speaks, the cords in his neck strain, a sliver of agony rippling down his chest and into his aching side. He goes to cover it, putting down a relieving pressure, but not so quickly Rey missed his obvious omission.

Left without much choice, Rey reaches out, bracing her hand over his. He’s still colder than usual, but alive and soft beneath the knuckles, the touch stilling them both. She meets his gaze softly, her tone a whisper. “Please. I…” she swallows her pride, but not the sting in her eyes as she confesses. “…I don’t want you like this. Not when there’s something I can do.”

Ben pauses, studying her. How is it that those eyes always compel him so? He sighs, turning his attention to their hands. She is so much smaller than he, to see and feel her this way... it's a marvel. Her warmth sinks into him and all he can manage is closing his eyes in weary ascent and a stiff, “Alright.”

A small smile blooms between her cheeks as Rey returns to opening the bag, emptying the waxy seeds into her palm. She offers him as much as he will take, watching hopefully as he pops them into his mouth and chews, chasing it with wine.

She helps him lie down, noticing his attentive eyes loosen around the edges, pretty lashes fluttering with slowed blinks. He looks up at her like she’s a stranger, until recognition buds deep inside. A light smile etches onto his face as his tense body relaxes into the sheets.

She finds respite in his newfound calm, smiling back. “Is it better now?”

“Mm,” he hums sleepily, low and deep in his chest. She feels it rumble in her ears.

“Good,” she nods, sitting in the stool beside him. Orange light casts a glow over his chest, the finer hairs illuminated, distracting her for only a moment. “I’m going to change your wraps, now. Try to hold still…”
He doesn’t reply, staring at the ceiling, at the fire, at her. When his eyes land on her they don’t leave. She tries not to feel unnerved, his attention like a looming mountain set to fall, to crush her under its weight.

With her knife she’d found in his dresser, she cuts him free, tossing off the bandages still trapped under his heavy body. She washes the honey and poultice from him, applying more water before copying Maz’s movements from the morning. Ben doesn’t stir; his breathing evens, filling him and leaving with a newfound strength. She tugs the long string of dressing from under him, realizing that replacing them may prove more difficult than she thought.

She rises, gathering the length of their replacement in hand as she hovers over him, analyzing her options. With him flat on his back this way, she won’t be able to bind him. She tries ushering him to sit up—but he doesn’t, looking about with bleary eyes, as though in a trance.

Rey sighs. At least he feels no pain. As she scrutinizes, she notes that it will be impossible to reach the other side of him from here—and she can’t push the wraps under him for fear of ripping the skin. She could maneuver around his bed, but that would take too long, and she doesn’t want to leave him uncovered.

Maybe she could…

It’s mad. Ludicrous. Utterly foolish.

But it’s the best way.

Resolute, she gathers her courage, placing her knee onto the bed and swinging her leg over, kneeling on either side of his legs. She hovers carefully over him, wary not to touch as her tunica drapes over his lap.

He follows her with his eyes, seeming a bit more awake. A look of pleasant surprise crosses his features, a quirk on the edge of his lip. “What’s this?” he slurs.

She refuses to let him see her nerves, while doubting he has much processes anyway. She jolts when his hand touches her folded leg, tempering herself as he strokes her so brazenly. “I’m,” she frowns, “I’m going to need you… to lift.”

He considers her for a moment, looking down where she hovers over him. After a slow blink, he seems to tighten his focus, and brings his hips flush with hers.

Rey gasps, unprepared for the sudden contact—the sudden split of her legs by his massive midsection. Her borrowed tunica spills over him to bare his wound, but she nearly doubles over as a strange sensation spears through her body.

His hold on her leg tightens, and for a moment she swears she can hear the word “Beautiful” muttered under his breath, but deigns to ignore it. She must remember her goal. With him still pressed to her, holding himself up remarkably well, she leans down, her hair falling over her shoulder as she loops his bandages around his torso, her trembling fingers brushing against silken, damp skin.

As she goes higher, the angle forces her down. His breath is warm, snaking over her throat, under her chin, as he lifts his head, the tip of his nose grazing her ear. Rey exhales shakily when his hands find her legs, holding fast, sneaking upward. “Mm,” he moans softly, the sound melting her every thought. “Puella,” he whispers, his hips shifting, sliding against her.

Rey shivers, finally finished, and practically leaps from the bed, breathing hard. He watches her as
she backs nervously towards the door, his eyes drooped and content where hers are wide, uncertain, trained on his waist as it sinks back down to the mattress. “I should go,” she stammers, ramming her side into the doorframe as she scurries out.

Ben misses her instantly, wishes she would come back to his bed. She was so warm… His mind fogs, every muscle tired, overworked, yearning for sleep.

But before he fades his fingers drift with blurry inquisition over his subligar, ignoring his burgeoning erection, to find a curious trace of wetness.

Chapter End Notes

[The word Ben was saying before he cut himself off was "Irrumer," which is Latin for "fuck me (that hurts!)"]

[Physicians in Rome were predominately male. However, their feminine counterparts were mainly midwives, who knew most about medicines, herbs, and remedies (sometimes called "poisons")]

[To continually flush a wound with water is a healing tactic attributed to Galen, a famous historical physician and surgeon from Greece who worked for gladiators in the arena and later for Emperor Commodus in 169 A.D., during the Second Antonine Plague. He also shares the same moniker as Galen Erso from Star Wars: Rogue One]

[The box Maz carries is called a Physician's Wooden Drug Box (clever) and is made of limestone wood to preserve the herbs inside. Most physicians carried one intended to grind their medicines and administer them on-site. Boxes to hold liquids, however, would usually be encased in tin or copper]

[Honey has acted as a profound medical property for thousands of years. Not only does it carry amino acids, vitamins, and proteins, but a pH balance with a remarkable ability to help reduce pain, redness, and chance of infection while stimulating regrowth of skin cells]

[The mix of triturated myrrh, frankincense, and ground snails was a popular method of closing wounds. The vinegar is added into the mix to create a paste that will staunch blood flow and speed the healing process (according to medicinal journal entries of Ancient Roman physicians)]

[“Opos,” or "Opium Poppy," is the main ingredient in Opium and is abused at a high rate in Eastern countries due to it's addictive properties. It is highly effective in flooding the mind with euphoric pleasure, slowing body functions to relax muscles and create a sleepy effect, making it one of the most powerful short-term painkillers (please don't do opium okayloveyoubye)]

[“Pennyroyal” is an ancient tea made from weeds. It has a spearmint flavor and was one of the most common methods of birth control in Ancient Rome]

[“Puella” (pronounced "pweh Lah") is a Latin term of endearment with many translations, all meaning some variation of "Maiden," "Girl," "Virgin," "Beloved One," and "Sweetheart"]
Enlightenment

Chapter Notes

Everyone, words can't express how amazing, how wonderful, and how utterly stunning you are. No matter how many times I write it, or read your comments with tears in my eyes, I feel like it's never enough to tell you how much your support means to me. AND TO HAVE 300 BOOKMARKS, 1,500+ KUDOS, AND NOW OVER 1,000 OF YOUR BEAUTIFUL COMMENTS???? (╥﹏╥) MY HEART CANNOT ENDURE!!!!!

I'm sorry that you've waited so long for this update. This chapter, like you, is very special to me, and I wanted to make it perfect for you. As many of you know, I am a college student, and hopefully when I return a few weeks from now I will continue to post as frequently as we're used to.

That said, a friend of mine recently introduced me to the idea of creating a Ko-Fi account. As someone who enjoys creating content, I was wondering what you, my readers, would think about me starting one. There would never be any pressure to join, of course, but I would so appreciate your input.

Thank you all so much for your amazing, unending support. You give this story life! ᅠ*(T ヮ T)* ᅠ*hugs*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He falls to his knees, his skin burning, flesh falling, the bloodshed his own at long last, and thinks perhaps it is better this way.

She will never look at him the same.

The shadow of the axe rises, looming over his head. He bows before it, trembling, waiting for the final blow.

Home will not wait for him.

Not when it is finished.

But the finish never comes.

He finds the strength to look up, to open his eyes, and sees... her. The sun glares through the golden pillars of her arms, quivering yet strong. Her hands hold death itself at bay, this Persephone, the life of Spring in her fury as she falls, as she strikes, as she is cast aside.

Spellbound, lost and bleeding, he watches. Darkness gathers, spreads its wildfire haze into the colors of silt and sky. But when death turns, when it comes for her, there is no pain. No weakness; no greater will then his shuddering breath, his aching legs, screaming side as he moves to stand.

From the earth he is born anew, charging forward, and with what little remains of his strength does all he can think to do. He collides into death, knocking it down, its wall crumbling to the blasting horns of his racing heart—his wrath.
His hands possessed, he does what his blindness commands, the darkness gathering, dim and dull yet piercing. He snarls, a beast, the hound himself, and with his claws rips life from death—and all at once, it is done.

When he rises, she is there.

And he must go to her.

Her heart hammers in her chest, insatiable as she tosses and turns fitfully through the night.

“Ugh,” Rey groans, pressing herself facedown into the pillow. When she comes up for air she frowns at the peaking midnight through her window, hating it for its obliviousness to her insufferable distress.

A cool breeze wafts inside, stirring the hair at her temple, the thoughts in her mind. Only hours ago her master had…

She turns once more, closing her eyes, trying to will away the memory in exchange for sleep, where no compromise, no more thoughts are needed. But sleep does not come, and she is left staring at the wall, acutely aware of the small secret hidden beneath her body.

She flops onto her back, blinking at the ceiling. The Pennyroyal. Rey is quite aware the effects of the brew—in her old master’s slave trade, young women would be forced to drink it for reasons that made her stomach coil, and still do.

A sliver of moonlight casts its spear along the wall, and she stares at it, remembering. To give her master the opos was no matter. It relieved his pain—gave him the gift of temporary oblivion. For that, she feels no remorse.

But for herself…

Rey closes her eyes again, willing back the sting of anger and frustration in her eyes. The feeling that washed through her, nearly possessed her, when their bodies touched was so similar to that of his kiss upon her neck. Though, from between her legs—and even now—the aching pain of desire cannot be mistaken.

She sighs, tossing to her side, swallowing hard with the effort to push away the memories of her master’s touch, the husked timbre of his intoxicated whisper in her ear.

Puella.

Her thoughts circle around that word, her heart rendered at the intangible sound of his voice in her mind.

Ben was clearly delusional, thinking Rey as someone other than herself. As she knows him now, in his proclaimed virtus, could it be he was not always so—had deigned to live his life anew, leaving this “Puella” behind?

She burrows her face into the linens at the thought of it, her body gutted from the inside, tortured by the hand of her own loathsome regret. These thoughts, these feelings, should be unwarranted. In his moment of weakness he’d said something she was not meant to hear, and by hearing has allowed herself to wallow at the terrible crush of claws around her chest, her ribs sharpening into her flesh, making every breath slick and heavy.
But her master has not wronged her. He gave her shelter, sustained her in her hunger, granted her the knowledge of his library. From the beginning, when his very life was at risk, he did not take her body. Though a selfish act to protect his own ambition, he had—in his way—saved her from the terrible fate of the Pennyroyal women.

Her breathing evens as logic begins to spread its cool balm over her mind, her lashes fluttering as she looks about behind closed lids, flitting like insects between Summer flowers.

Perhaps it is not a true desire she feels. The flesh is, of course, untrustworthy. And she is young, inexperienced in all ways but second-hand knowledge and spinster’s tales. There is no one to say she is in yearning but herself.

Rey sits up, struck, managing a smile at herself, like a wizened man at his youthful, ignorant pupil.

Of course! It is not desire she feels, merely… respect. Loyalty to her master. Would no other woman be grateful to a man like Ben, who welcomed her into his home, gave her such privilege, and treated her with kindness? His eccentricism in the Roman ways is a good one, one she is grateful for.

And gratitude, Rey knows, is only that.

Her mind returns to the Pennyroyal, which has now lost its hold on her, grip slack in the wake of her newfound resolution. She need not worry over its use. Though he may still hide many things from her, as she hides her own from him, in her heart she is grateful enough to trust in his promise.

He gave her his word that neither of their virtues would be lost—and so she’s no need for the sack under her mattress, no use of the temporary, false desires in her body as the night wanes on, watching silently as she lies down and falls contentedly to sleep.

Sighing, Ben pants, wiping the sweat from his brow as the dream fades from him, his heart and breathing even. He blinks, straining to recall last night, but can remember nothing beyond the seeds in his mouth and the open look of concern in Rey’s eyes.

Alone, he glances towards the windows to his terrace, catching the burgeoning fuscia of dawn. He must have slept from dusk—his bones retain their relaxation, his muscles more rejuvenated than before, yearning for movement before they lose their form. He stretches carefully, pushing himself upright.

His eyes flit expectantly to his door, a thought of childish mischief playing at the hanging threads of his waking consciousness. Perhaps, were he to feign sleep, Rey would chance to stay with him, to sit and lead their silence undisturbed, not knowing he is awake? It’s a tantalizing idea, so he lays himself down again, resting his head back upon the pillow, and waits with closed eyes.

In the still moments before she arrives, he recalls his dream. Beyond the nonsensical blur of oft forgotten visions, his was a memory, instead. He frowns, off-put. The memories of war can sometimes haunt him, and the Colosseum as well, but even in those nightmares he’s never felt such an eviscerating fear. It was living her danger anew, the terror awash through his body.

She knows that her choice was a fatal one, and yet she’d made it anyway. Had he perished there, would she not have been rid of him? Better off?
He sighs, pushing the thought away. As much as he tried to be tactical with her rash decision, seeing it as a benefit to keep their secret from Snoke, a less-strategical urge to consider her motives rises over the ridge of his mind like the sun beyond his terrace doors.

Though Rey is an educated slave—brilliant, in fact, for her status—Ben doubts her decision was made in an effort to fool the emperor on his behalf. Rather, were it not for his distraction over their gashing rift, she would’ve had no reason to act at all.

It’s then that he realizes she must have acted on instinct. Of course she had. When it comes to defense, Rey is one for the offensive. Throwing his vase—which was honestly quite hideous, he’s glad to be rid of it—brandishing the knife he’d not known she had after Hux attacked her… Her survival instincts must have shaped themselves well in the stormy sands of Egypt.

He wonders quietly at her strength before moving on, resolved to uncover what her reasoning could be. Yes, he is her master, and her loyalty is one he rarely questions, but in her anger towards him he never would have suspected that loyalty to persist. And to such a degree to risk her life…

To sacrifice it.

He couldn’t let her die there—not for his sake. He can admit that much to himself, but the idea that she would stand between him and death buries its talons into his mind like a hunter’s falcon, relentless and hungry in its pursuit to tear its purpose apart. To understand.

Thoughfully, his hand moves over his bandages. They feel somewhat loose, but he doesn’t think much of it, thinking instead of the one who wrapped them. That midwife and Ahsoka aside, Rey has proven herself quite capable of not just her anger, her fury, but her compassion. Her tenderness. Her… care.

He pauses, still, as realization threatens him, seizes him by the throat. Could it be that it was not just loyalty, not solely her mercy that drove her onto the battlefield? No, he shouldn’t think so. But… could it be so wrong, to hold onto such a small hope…?

His thoughts go unfinished as the door to his chamber opens, and he goes carefully still, evening his breathing. It’s no effort to keep his face, placid and tight and frowning, as he imagines his sleep to be. The sound of her footsteps comes closer, and the idea of her eyes on him, sweeping over his bare body clad only in the thin sheen of sweat, wrappings, and loincloth makes his heart pound surreptitiously in his chest.

He hears her sit in the stool, pooling water into the bowl. Upon a curious, carefully concealed sniff, he senses no breakfast. That’s unlike her, but he won’t question it. He listens as she shuffles, wetting a rag. His blood thrills at the prospect of her changing him in his sleep, both eager for her to touch him again yet dismayed that she would allow him to miss it.

Suddenly, a smattering of water droplets spits onto his face. “I know you’re awake. Get up.”

He groans, wiping his face. “Ahsoka,” he greets darkly, opening his eyes to find her wet fingers return to her rag.

“Good morning,” she chirps, unable to conceal her smirking smugness. She assists him in sitting up, hands him the damp cloth, and moves to unravel his wrappings.

He watches her as he wipes the sweat from the back of his neck, cleaning off the sticky residue. The heat will return with the afternoon, but for now this will do. When his wound is bared he chances a look, finding the redness greatly reduced. The yellow and black of bruising under his
ribs remains adamant, but otherwise the gash is healing nicely. From his previous experiences—not
his own, merely observations—he guesses he has a fortnight or so before he will be healed enough
to walk without limping.

“Where is Rey?” he asks casually.

Her smirk falters as she runs water over the dry, crusted poultice, easing it out of his loose skin.
“Asleep. I let her be—the poor thing is exhausted looking after your sorry state.”

He sighs, leaning back. His head thunks against the curved headboard; he resentfully welcomes the
pain. “I see.”

“Disappointed?”

His eyes snap back to her, wide, before he scoffs. The sound barely convinces him. “No.”

Ahsoka shakes her head, but smiles nonetheless, as if privy to some secret. She changes the
subject. “Then I suppose you will be. I doubt these supplies will last long. The herbs, maybe, but I
will be leaving to bring more. Given your permission, of course.”

His answer is immediate. “Granted.”

“Hm,” she grunts. “I thought as much. My house is closest. I won’t be long. Shall I instruct Rey to
prepare your breakfast?”

He frowns, deliberating. “No. Let her rest. I’ll wake her myself, if need be.”

With less care than her counterpart, Ahsoka smooths a pat of honey over his wound, adding the
ground herbs. She is much less liberal with it than Rey, he notices, but says nothing about it. In this
case, he’s hardly going to complain about her absence, either.

He watches Ahsoka, leaning forward so she can wrap him tightly, then frowns at his knees. Words
pull at the base of his throat, hot and weighty, but he knows they must be said. Here, in private, it
becomes easier—or just less difficult. “I owe you an apology,” he murmurs.

She stills for a moment, as if surprised, before she continues her wrapping. “Oh?”

Petulance coils like a snake in his chest, but he manages to tame it, turning to meet her bright,
knowing, attentive stare. “I pushed you away in anger, on the first of Vestalia. Since then, it hasn’t
been right. I know that.”

She folds her dark lips, nodding for him to continue.

He leans back again, taking her hand. It’s soft and slightly calloused, loose wrinkles light as a bird
in his large fingers. He brings her knuckles to his head, bowing into the small bones, feeling her
cool skin relax his hot pride. “Forgive me. Without you, this house would be bereft.” His frown
unscrews. “As would I.”

Ahsoka’s hand shifts, pulled from his grasp to cup his face, urging him to meet her patient gaze.
She smiles at him then, the folds of her eyes creasing, reassuring in their brightness. “There is
nothing to forgive,” she whispers, rising from her stool to press a soft kiss to his hairline. She
squeezes his cheek, pinching the loose skin before she releases him. “Fear is a powerful thing,
Ben. I endangered her—I should not have placed the same blame upon you. I can only hope you
have forgiven me.”
He nods, swallowing his reservations. “Of course.”

She smiles again, a bit tighter this time, before moving to the door. She goes to his closet, pulling free the loose cloth of a dark subligar, and tosses it to him. When he catches it she smarts, “I won’t be long,” and leaves him alone.

Huffing, relieved that the exchange went well, he moves his sheet away. With swift hands he unfolds his loincloth, replacing it with the long, clean strip, and relaxes as he tosses the old garment to the floor. There’s a curious sense in him that says something more lies with it, but it goes ignored as his rumbling stomach calls him to move.

For the first time in almost two days, he turns his legs, pivoting to sit on the side of the mattress. He gasps, stifling the sound as the ache in his muscles and sides crash together in his bones. Breathing slowly, determined, he wraps his hand around the post by the head of his bed, straining his arm to pull himself up. It works, as well as it can, trembling with the effort until he’s on his feet.

He stares at them, willing feeling back into his toes as he shuffles forward, out the door. His gaze flits immediately to Rey’s chambers as he leans against the wall, pausing. It couldn’t hurt to pass by, make sure she’s resting well.

As quietly as he dares, he shifts to her door, peering inside. The rising sunlight drifts over her body, her back to him. His eyes rove over the rise of her shoulder, her hip, the slope of her shape enticing. He watches as she breathes, the steady bob of her bare shoulder a sight more reassuring.

He wonders how many times he’s dreamed of her and forgotten.

Suddenly, from further inside the room, he spots a shuffle of yellow cloth, and jolts. He backs away from open sight, heart pounding.

When he slyly shifts again, eying inside, he notices Ahsoka—on her hands and knees, peering under Rey’s cot. Her braids fall limp on the stone floor before she seems to give up, rising to her feet. As soon as she does, Rey shifts, moaning as she turns over, eyes creaking open.

Ben moves away before either can notice him, leaning against the wall in the hallway. He hears Ahsoka’s voice come softly, innocently. “Good morning. I’m leaving to bring the Young Master more medicine. I should return later today. His changing has been done—you are to do breakfast and laundry. Understood?”

He hears Rey yawn, the creak of her bed as she moves. “Understood. Travel safely, Ahsoka.”

That’s his cue. As fast as his side will allow, he limps back into his room just before Ahsoka exits Rey’s chambers. He makes for the terrace doors, ready to pretend a simple gaze out upon the Roman countryside, but goes unconfronted.

Though the master of his house, there is something curious going on with his head servant he felt disinclined to interrupt. He wonders, however, if Rey has any part of it, despite Ahsoka’s pretense.

“Oh!”

He turns, finding Rey in the doorway, hair rumpled on one side. Her eyes sweep over him once before returning to his, and warmth blooms in his chest. It is a similar feeling from her touch before the battle—a strange pride in his appearance he’s never felt before. “Good morning.”

Rey wets her lip, the skin suddenly tight and dry. Though exposed to him in his near-nudity before
the first time she ever saw him, in fact, which she repressed until now—to see him standing again is quite the… spectacle. She forces herself to keep his eyes, pushing down the mad flutter in her chest as last night’s encounter plays over in her mind. “Good morning. I was,” she fights for the words, “about to ask what you’d like for breakfast.”

By the way he looks at her, she wonders if he can spot the lie, if he somehow knows she was coming to check on him despite Ahsoka’s reassurance. He leans against the terrace window, mapping her expression as though reading her, before moving to push his hair out of his face. “Mm, I see. In that case… come here.”

She blinks, but obeys. “What is it?”

As she comes closer, his eyes seem to burn into her, much like they had last night. Suddenly he is bathed in lamplight, his hair strewn, pupils blown, lips parted and whispering in her ear.

He turns to face her fully, watching as she glances worriedly at his side. “I’ll need your assistance. Take me to the culina.”

She blinks, startled from her fantasy with a heated flush. “Oh, right. Here,” she murmurs, offering her arm. He moves closer, her shoulders fitting under his arm as it drapes over her neck. She acts as the perfect crutch down the hall of the villa.

Ben hisses over her, Rey slowing down for him as they make steady progress through the house. It’s good, she thinks, for him to walk, regain his strength. Already he’s shown such great progress. She wonders if it was mere talent that got him through his battles rather than a remarkable ability to heal.

She keeps her breathing shallow, her face set resolutely towards the culina. As they enter the courtyard, the soft morning air wraps around them, bringing his scent to her. The flesh of his chest brushes against her bare arm, and she represses a shudder as the contact rushes through her. He’s regained some of his warmth, she notes. Her hand around his arm seems to help his posture, the heady aroma of his skin enveloping them in a new heat she tries to ignore.

Once in the culina, Ben reluctantly separates himself from her, going to sit on the stool at the counter. The lingering sensation of her touch shines under his skin, making time slur in fluid motion, a strange clarity when he finds her eyes again.

“I’m thinking eggs,” Rey mentions offhandedly, making her way to the storeroom. She looks at him over her shoulder, lips a strange, almost nervous quirk. Odd. “Unless you’d prefer something else?”

When she speaks, he swallows an abrupt gathering in his mouth, suddenly preferring something distinctly not food. He brushes aside the intrusive thought with a wave of his hand, tearing his gaze from her. “Eggs are fine.”

She leaves him, and he glances at the sunlight streaking in from the East, watching the dust motes illuminate as they float lazily by. He hears her moving about, struck by the spike of desire that filled him so fully. Her words alone were innocent. He knows that.

Sighing, he leans his elbows on the counter, hunched as his aching side begins to settle. His fingers curl into fists as he loses himself in thought.

“She we are,” Rey hums, carrying a crate of eggs with her. She fills a pot with water, placing it over the hearth, stirring the fire to life under the iron. “It will be good for you, I think,” she
mentions, glancing at him. “I hear meat is good for healing wounds.”

He nods, but doesn’t reply, simply watching her as she prepares a few dishes for their breakfast. She brings freshwater and wine, unaware of his stare as she pours into his chalice.

Ben is quite aware of Rey’s beauty. He has been for some time—since seeing her that day, touched by the sunlight. Her gentle face, firm jaw, the soft slope of her cheek. Her dark hair illuminated by the strand, strays glowing over her ear. The slender form of her body that’s since filled, bringing a lovely roundness to her hips, her long, graceful legs…

Perhaps this temptation began then, or later, as they spoke, as she met his eyes with that strength, the simmering power hidden inside. As she revealed to him her knowledge, her quick wit and talents. Or perhaps it was the way she would look at him, and continues to—with a warmth and compassion he’s never known.

He remembers the shame of using her image, the silk of her toga, to relieve the tension in his body on the first of Vestalia, and sinks into it, mulling over his reckless thoughts. Unlike Ahsoka, he could never apologize to her for his secret shame—to tell her would only bring trouble. And here it continues, relentless and persistent under the unwilling nurture of her soft, tender hands.

She places the chalices in front of him, going to check the water. Now boiling, she drops the eggs inside, careful to avoid the splash. He watches her, stomach beginning to twist, and realizes that it may not have been a good idea to send Ahsoka away after all.

Rey focuses on the boiling pot, watching the eggs as they sink, trying to cut the silence with something meaningful. She comes away for want, unable to scrounge all but the slightest, innocent glance at the table. “Are we to continue our lessons today?” She turns from him, wincing. “...I’d presume so, yes.”

“Right,” she murmurs, cursing herself. Her eyes move pleadingly to the ceiling before she closes them, struggling to regain her control. How could it be that speaking to him, looking at him, has grown so difficult. Centering herself, she remembers her thoughts last night before she slept, willing herself to calm down. It is not nervousness she should be feeling, but gratitude. The more she averts her attention from the strange, confused sensations in her body, the more they will fade. In time, she will feel only the loyalty of her station. Nothing more.

And yet, as silence drones, she can think of nothing else. Her curiosity is insatiable, the words he’d spoken playing over in her mind like an unsolved riddle.

So she remains facing away from him, keeping her voice calm and impassive. “Who is Puella?”

Ben pauses, his brood brought to a jarring halt. He lifts his head, eyes boring into the back of hers. Throat tight, he croaks, “What…?”

She cringes at the hurt in his voice, ashamed at her carelessness. Whoever this Puella was, he must have cared deeply for her. To bring it up may have wounded him—like thinking of it wounds her. “Sorry,” she rushes, staring down into the boiling pot, suddenly wishing she could throw herself in. “It’s nothing—”

“Why did you say that name?”

Her mouth opens, like a fish lost from sea as she turns to face him, equally helpless. His eyes, dark and intense, sear into her with a foreign, molten heat. It melts her to her place, leaving her silent.
His hand curls into a fist on the table, knuckles white. “Tell me why."

Heart on her tongue, her words come heavy and rushed, yet clipped and slow as she carefully
dances around the less… salient aspects. “Last night, when I was… wrapping.” She shrugs, gaze
falling. “You… called me Puella.”

Ben stares blankly at her, wide and confused, as if she’d told him he’d died in the arena.

Summoning the courage, the gratitude, she meets his gaze again, her curiosity winning out. “Who
is she?” she asks, finding the will to offer a small, encouraging smile.

He opens his mouth to speak, and now he is the one to close it, watching dazed as his fist unfurls
upon the counter, long fingers braced uncertainty against the wood. “My mother,” he murmurs.

Rey takes a step back, aghast.

“No,” he sighs, the rising panic in his throat only falling when she settles, fixing him a fretful look.
“No, she…” he struggles to form the words, surprised at this news. He remembers nothing of it,
but doubts Rey could know this. Taking a breath, he finds her eyes, letting her see the truth in his
own. “…was called —’Puella.’ By my father.”

Rey blinks, reconsidering him. Very few times has she witnessed her master open himself in such a
way, much less speak of his family. She finds herself coming closer, laying her hand on the table,
as if to reach out and console him. She offers a small smile. “Your father was Roman?”

He searches her eyes. “Yes.”

“And your mother?”

“Greek,” he supplies at length, shoulders falling. She moves to sit across from him as he goes on.
“She was born in Greece.”

Rey’s heart begins to pound, awash with a newfound excitement. “Were you?”

He nods once, almost gravely.

Given his expression, she decides not to press further on that issue, no matter how much she wants
to. “So, your father, he spoke Latin?”

Ben’s frown sours into a withering scowl, as if the mere mention of his father has angered him.
“Among other things.”

Rey blanches a bit, but pushes it aside, deciding on a new tactic. Anything to steer him away from
upset. Her thoughts, her tongue, latch onto the only thing they can find. Something they know.
“What does it mean?”

At this, Ben goes remarkably silent, his gaze calculative as he looks at her.

The heat in his eyes has dispersed, now, replaced instead by a strange sense of lightness, as though
she has revealed some great secret to him about himself. He swallows, moving his lips
thoughtfully, the movement distracting until he speaks, voice hushed and words Greek, as if he too
has a secret to share. “A few things. Girl. Woman… Sweetheart…”

Rey smiles, both amused and deliriously disconcerted. His neck and cheeks have grown the softest
pink as he avoids eye contact. “Oh?”
He frowns away, suddenly quite interested in the wall. “Forget it. It was a mistake—and it won’t happen again,” he snips.

Rey’s smile falters, her gratitude and loyalty resurfacing as she looks upon him. In his way, he bared himself to her. Not only in body, but in the soft spaces of his heart she has only glimpsed in the past. She cannot let him think her humor is one founded on cruelty. Slowly, she reaches out her hand, stopping it just before it touches his fingers. They twitch, but do not move away, and in the new, charged silence she whispers, “...I wouldn’t mind.”

His head snaps up, full of energy and loss when he meets her eyes again.

She keeps her hand where it is, letting her heart pound as she breathes deeply, once again finding the ease to sit with him, to speak or be silent. “I wouldn’t mind.”

They remain like that, his hand and hers untouched, but the feelings thick and palpable. In his eyes she can see it, the recognition of her acceptance, the willingness to listen, to know the deepest parts he keeps locked away. And the secret thrill within her, she hopes he sees, to be called by her name—and one of his own.

It’s only when she remembers the eggs that she rises, leaving to drain the water into the washing basin, to cut them free of their shells and place them sliced before him, the stiff yolk and shining whites pleasing to the eye and stiff to the touch.

They sit and do not speak, both keenly attuned to their food as they chew. Though Rey feels comfortable in this strange, buzzing sense of ease, she cannot tell what her master is feeling, and does not question it.

When they’ve finished, Rey drops their plates in the still-steaming water, only needing a brief rinse. She cringes at the burning heat, but with its touch is suddenly reminded of Ahsoka’s instruction. “I’m to do laundry today,” she reports over her shoulder to Ben, who downs the remainder of his wine.

He grunts in reply, rising unsteadily to his feet. He uses the counter, then the wall, to bring the chalice to her, and she takes it. The warmth trapped in her skin bleeds into him with the slightest touch, leaving his fingers wet and aching to feel more.

He doesn’t tell her that he knows, that he overheard Ahsoka’s instruction, merely leans back against the wall for support. He watches her work, wonders at the redness in her hands, and wonders if it’s painful for her, and she is merely good at masking her inconveniences. Regardless, he listens to the sudden urge in his body, the compulsion to lean closer as he says, “What can I do?”

She glances up at him, her eyelashes entrancing. “I’m sorry?”

“To help you,” he murmurs, voice lowering of its own accord. Bowing to her. “What can I do?”

She frowns, and for not the first time he catches sight of her pretty, pink lips. “You’re injured,” she rebuts.

Ah, but her voice wavered. Sensing a pattern, he rises to stand, letting his strength carry him a step towards her, the limp almost imperceptible. As he nears, a most inviting look of uncertainty crosses her face, her eyes betraying for only a moment their inability to ignore his state of undress.

The proximity seems to be enough. She turns away, set to lie down the last of the plates upon the rack, when he catches it in his own, surrounding her. It’s a powerful, heady feeling, one he intends
to explore in this sudden development.

Feeling brave, he leans down, near her ear, and keeps his voice low. “Let me.”

She shudders, releasing the plate and spinning out from under him, drying her hands on her borrowed tunica. She takes a breath, scrambling for composure as she rights herself, smoothing a hand over her hair. “Very well then,” she splutters. “You can gather your soiled clothes and bandages while I heat the water.”

Ben finds he enjoys this, setting the plate on the rack with a restrained smile. “Good. I will return shortly,” he affirms, making gradual progress from the culina.

As soon as he’s gone, Rey snarls and smacks a damp hand over her chest, demanding her heart to slow.

Gratitude.

It’s only gratitude.

They meet in the rear of the house, the grass still shadowed by the villa walls. Having dumped the last pail of steaming water, Rey sets to work soaking. First his tunics and garments, then her stola.

As she organizes the bandages, Ben sits in the cooler shade of the house, watching her from his perch in the doorway. He leans his head back against the frame, his hair a tickle on his shoulders as he watches her.

The activity of gathering clothes has left him bereft of energy, and he marvels at how Ahsoka could manage this for three years on his account. It’s like he fought a long battle, but the reward was more than worth the fight.

He lets an arm rest over his stomach, feeling deftly at his wound as she works. His bleary thoughts return to her confession.

Puella. It is a name he has not heard in years, and yet here, inexplicably, it has returned. From his own mouth, no less. The notion is baffling.

So he considers. He doubts he would call her a virgin woman without provocation, which he doubts Rey would provide on her own, much less when he’s succumbed to opos and her mission is to do her work and sleep. The other translations are similar, but to say Puella?

The coincidence is unthinkable.

In his senile state, he must have called her that for a reason. Ben knows his own mind—he would never call a woman that unless…

Unless…

He stares at her, watches as she moves, unaware, remembering all that’s transpired between them. Images flash through his mind like a blow to the head, hard and fast. Bright.

He remembers the first time he saw her—the blaze in her eyes, burning down her fears. The fight. Even then, half drunk and stripped, drenched in his wallowing virtus, he’d found her beautiful. Had impulsively sent her to sleep in the stables to keep any lingering temptations at bay.
He remembers her amazement at the open countryside, the wonder at the sprawling, endless green. Even in her sorrow, her captivity, her eyes shimmered as she looked beyond, met his eyes. The sun on her face, the light in her gaze, had flickered within him, catching fire.

He remembers her curiosity, her willingness to speak with him when others would flee. Her strength of will, her hunger for knowledge in the face of uncertainty and humiliation by the hands of a Roman general—and that as well, the desire to fight. And her wisdom, her ability to learn, her openness to seek beyond herself that reminds him of his youth, his hopes he thought abandoned long ago.

He remembers her eagerness, her obedience, her patience. Her even pace as she stood beside him, the feelings she inspired as she rode for the first time upon his horse, her face free, full of joy.

He remembers holding her, touching her, the warmth of each contact as it spread through his body, leaving him not violated, but yearning. Her slender back against his chest, her small hand wrapped in his fingers. The taut flesh of her neck beneath his tongue, the softness of her covered thigh beneath his palm. All of it—all of her, he recalls with such sudden, impossible, indescribable clarity.

He remembers. He remembers it, the looks, hard or soft, closed or spoken louder than words could ever be. Her anger, her fear of him—her fear for him—shadowed by her will, her purpose, her unwavering loyalty to their promise. Her alacrity to jump into the battlefield, to stand between him and death, and take the blow. Her sacrifice—her strength.

And now. Now, as the sun rises, as its light spills over her face like parting clouds, she looks up at him and, when their eyes meet, she smiles, the sight the most beautiful vision he's ever beheld, and ever will.

Because though he rests in shadow, a new, warm light casts upon him as well—the answer to his question, the solution to the hunger in his heart, the emptiness of her absence at his side.

As their eyes hold, Ben Solo realizes one truth—one that stands above all others, even when he can’t:

That he has fallen in love with Rey.

Chapter End Notes

[Persephone (in Roman: ”Proserpina”) is the famous wife of Hades (Roman: ”Pluto”), whom he stole while she was picking flowers. He carried her on his golden chariot, led by four immortal horses: Orphnaeus (”savage and nimble”), Aethon (”swifter than arrows”), Nyctaeus (”glory of the Underworld”), and Alastor (”branded by tragedy”)]

[”The hound himself” is a reference to Cerberus, the three-headed dog and guardian of the Underworld. Though Romans took many of the Greek legends and myths, altering names as they willed, Cerberus is only present in Greek mythology, not the Roman interpretation]

[The phrase ”its wall crumbling to the blasting horns” is an indirect reference to the Wall of Jericho story in the Old Testament book of Joshua, which fell under the faith of the Isrealites as they walked in silence around the great city for seven days before
blowing their horns, the sound and power of God bringing down Jericho's impenetrable defenses]

[Boiled eggs was a common breakfast (and healthy snack!) in Rome. As far as healing wounds, soldiers in the Roman armies would eat meals mainly of protein to give their bodies more nutrition. According to the "four humors" (blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm) or "main fluids" of the body discovered by Hippocrates, such nutritious foods were essential to the healing process]

[The way Roman's did their laundry, at first glance, is quite disgusting. However, the treatment and efficiency in their hygiene helped to encourage longer lifespans and comfort. To launder clothing, Romans would use boiled urine and water to sterilize the clothes, with added flowers and sometimes perfumes to give off a more pleasing scent. In public laundries, servants called "fullers" would take from public urinals while the men would "stomp" on the soaking clothes to make sure they were "properly sterilized" before being wrung to dry]

){The theme for this chapter is "Some Kind of Heaven" by Hurts. Listen to the Glory's Fray Spotify playlist here!}
Cleanse

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your patience in this chapter! Family issues, school prep, and other responsibilities (such as being elected Pres. of my University's English Club. Hooray!) have kept the progress slow, but I sincerely hope the end result pleases you. You are just... so amazing. I have no words to describe how wonderful your encouragement is, and how it makes me feel (╥﹏╥)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With sudden revelations comes a sudden inability to breathe, it would seem, as Ben struggles to remember how.

When their eyes break he continues to stare, his mind drifting further into a strange, misting steam. It clouds his vision before he blinks it away, a surge of newfound burning in the tips of his fingers, white and hot—like a weapon unforged.

Steadily, he eases himself to stand, tearing his gaze from her, willing his heart to slow. It pulses against his ribs, the seams of his bandages, chafing. His hands itch to rip them off. Rip everything off.

Which would be... unwise.

He hears a sloshing, then her voice, so innocent and unaware. “Where are you going?”

Ben turns from her, bracing himself against the doorframe, suddenly weak. But he knows he can’t stay here and think clearly. He needs time alone, time to process this new, powerful knowledge inside him. It’s what he’s always done—what he must do, as much as it pains him to be apart from her. Physically and otherwise.

He waves his free hand dismissively, keeping his back to her, throat closed as he moves into the house. He feels ill as he shuffles across the stone towards his chambers, swaying yet urgent as thoughts, memories, and emotions collide in his gut.

He loves her. He loves her. Or—as much as a man like him can. He exhales shakily once in the safety of his room, brushing a hand over his mouth, as if to rub away the disbelief, the confounding trace of shock on his lips.

His fingers scratch slightly against a lengthening bristle, and he pauses. Ah. It has been a few days since he last shaved. Or groomed his hair, for that matter.

Wrought with a sudden urge, he limps to his bedside table, rooting through the drawer until he finds his hand mirror. He holds it to his eyes first, frowning at the deep sagging over his cheeks. As he studies himself, he likes what he sees less and less. His lip and chin have grown a coarse patch of hair, face sullied with sweat and natural oil. His head is a mess of unkempt strands, dark and tangled, limp and greased from immobility.

He sighs, letting his arm fall, heat rising in his neck. Though never a fan of his reflection, he’s
always tried to take a certain pride in his appearance. He hadn’t considered that his sudden amoration would only serve to wound it.

He is certain he could look better.

Gingerly, he places the mirror on the stand to take his comb. As he strokes it through his hair, easing out the nests hidden inside, each slide meets less and less resistance. His rationale begins to surface—as it often does in panic. After all, it would only make sense to take care of himself. If he can walk, he can make himself presentable for her lesson.

He pauses. Her lesson.

Scowling, Ben shuffles across the room, wincing at the pain in his side as he lifts his arm to continue impatient work on his hair. She could finish the laundry at any time. The overpowering inclination to ready himself settles like a stone in his throat, the newfound desire to impress sifting along the riverbed of his shallow hubris.

With his raised arms he catches a hint of himself on inhale, and works his lip in building frustration. He slams the comb onto the mantle—he can’t go back to her like this.

Glancing down, he studies his legs, his subligar, his stomach and chest. He looks weak this way. Vulnerable. And somewhat daunting, he realizes, as he continues to ponder. Decision made, he retrieves one of his skirts from his dresser, wrapping it soundly around his hips and fastening a belt carefully over the bandages. It only presses slightly—nothing too concerning.

This will certainly put her at ease. But the smell. He cringes, running a hand through his freshly-combed hair. The gesture is calming—not nearly so calming as when that hand was hers—as he tries to think. There is no time to bathe, now. The best he can manage is—

“Hm,” he grunts, following the thread of his idea to the small chest in the corner of his chambers. He crouches carefully, sunlight warm on his knee as he lifts the lid, rooting through its contents.

Inside is little more than the occasional trinket or gathered garb. Artifacts and small treasures he doesn’t keep in the tablinum, where strictly ancestral relics and literature belong. A splintered arrow once lodged in his armor, the ashes of some enemy general gifted to him years before, a map of the Roman roads stretching North… useful sentiments.

He finds it after no small amount of digging—an old gift from a patron friend of Ematt’s. Won in a bet, no doubt, and never used, but now far more beneficial than sitting uselessly in storage.

As he uncorks the stopper, Ben takes a whiff, remembering Ematt’s barking laughter as he scoffs. The perfume is heavily musked, a bit overpowering, but undoubtedly better than his body’s less aromatic alternative. Dipping some into two fingers, he dabs it strategically about the pits of his arms, then behind his ears, letting the scent cloak him.

Yes. This will certainly be better.

Ben itches his cheek, unable to leave his facial hair at rest as he mindfully walks into the inner courtyard towards the tablinum. On a whim, or some great stroke of genius, he walks through the grass, feeling the stick of small blades against the soles of his feet as he makes slow progress to the culina, instead.

He quickly gathers their familiar peckings, silently thankful for the small amount of figs he scrapes together. He eyes it proudly, praising his past self for the foresight of learning her tastes as he maneuvers to the tablinum, his heart racing when he draws back the curtain.
He breathes out. “Rey.”

She looks up, distracted from her intense gaze upon the wooden table. A small smile quirks into her cheek before her eyes seem to take in his new state of dress. But whatever she is thinking, it is well concealed from him. She seems to struggle, however, for a reply, but settles for a blessed, “Ben?”

Swallowing the gathering in his throat, he maneuvers himself to sit beside her, pulling out the chair and landing with less grace than the bowl upon the table. She ignores the food and watches with worried eyes, as if prepared to rush to his aid. A truly thrilling prospect, were he to entertain its possibilities, but for now he must focus on the lesson—not the way her hair comes loose from its bind, or the soft sunshine lingering on her bare shoulders, sharing its warmth with him in their closing space.

Rey wets her lip, glancing away. She’d been concerned for a moment when he left, but chose not to question it. Stiffly, she relaxes into her seat, easing into the old familiarity of their positions. Having him beside her like this, after all that’s happened, offers a strange comfort that blooms in her chest, leaving her wondering how she could breathe without it.

As he prepares a new scroll for her, separating a Greek translation from the mix, Rey is reminded of his earlier declarations. So he’s Greek, she thinks, smiling softly to herself. She glances at his face, tautly focused on his task, plump lips pursed thoughtfully, and recalls one of her earliest revelations of him and his appearance.

It would make perfect sense for him to have Grecian roots, among the inscrutable Hebrew. His broad nose so becoming of soft cheeks and jaw, the dark hair that curls slightly as it meets its end. As she glances at it, she notices how long and luminous it’s become, brushing against the base of his neck, the tight muscle of his shoulders…

She averts her eyes before they can wander any further. For now, in this calm, it would be best to focus on the task at hand.

But it’s a hard task, indeed. Finished with his work, he pushes the translations closer. Simple couplets, more in prose than the usual theoretical observation. She skims through only some before she realizes that it is not philosophy, nor any historical records from the Roman Empire’s rise, but…

She lifts a brow to him, sharp with the pleasant surprise seeding through her. “Poetry?”

His intense gaze wavers with pouted lip and he glances down, as if embarrassed, before it chances to rejoin her own. “Unless you would prefer less casual affair?”

Amused, and a bit bewildered by the new subject, Rey shakes her head. “No. No, this is fine,” she offers a scoffing chuckle as she holds the parchment for her inspection. “Did you write it?” she asks, eyes flitting, but not reading, as her ears strain to listen.

She can feel him fix her one of his odd, scandalized looks. “No.”

“It’s in your handwriting.”

“Most of these are.”

“Hm,” she shrugs, setting it down, glancing at him. Her gaze and stomach are pulled by the figs, and she lets her hand reach to pull one free and begin to tear into the rind. “I…” she murmurs, choosing her words carefully. Something about him seems… off, all of a sudden, and she wants to
avoid any misunderstandings. “...I suppose I assumed. You do write some philosophy, after all.”

He sits back in his chair, the width of his chest distracting as he breathes in. “I did.”

Rey takes a bite, a bit ruffled by his casual ascent. “I know, I’ve read them. They w—”

“Poems,” he interrupts, catching her with his dark stare. With mouth full and expression wide, Rey can only watch as a shadow flickers over the intensity of his face. “You assumed correctly.”

She swallows, the sweetness overwhelmed by the new sensations in her mind. A part of her preens at her prediction, shallow as it may have been, while the rest of her grows insatiably curious. Always curious. Her voice lowers, as if secretive. “You wrote poetry.”

“Some,” he replies, searching her face. She suddenly realizes that she’s leaning closer, that he is hunching to do the same, eyes never leaving hers. But he blinks away the spell, eyes falling as though in shame. But his voice does not leave her. “Years ago.”

Rey recalls the philosophies and theories he’d authored, the scrolling lettering and hollow tones, colored in the greys and blacks of emptiness and solitude. As his voice softens, her chest does with it, leaving her in the lingering, heated urge to offer him solace.

She lifts her hand, intent to lay it against his face, but pauses to brush a hair from her own, instead, chastising herself for her madness. There are still lines she must not cross. So instead she takes up the translation, pulling it into her sight, and reads:

“\begin{quote}
I stole a sweet kiss while you played, sweet Iuventius,
\begin{center}
one sweeter than sweetest ambrosia.
\end{center}
Not taken indeed with impunity: for more than an hour
I remember, I hung at the top of the gallows,
while I was justifying myself to you, yet with my tears
I couldn’t lessen your anger a tiny morsel.
No sooner was it done, then, your lips rinsed
with plenty of water, you banished it with your fingers,
so nothing contracted from my lips might remain,
as though it were the foul spit of a tainted whore.
More, you handed me unhappily to vicious love
who’s not failed to torment me in every way,
so that sweet kiss, altered for me from ambrosia,
was more bitter than bitter hellebore then.
Since you lay down such punishments for unhappy love,
now, after this, I’ll never steal kisses again.
\end{quote}
As the words leave her with their coarse finality, Rey leans back, a heavy sense of sadness washing over her as she reads it again in silence. She pictures this man, so in love, met with hatred for a stolen kiss. Though she understands this Iuventius, who was taken without warning, her heart still lies low with pity.

Ben watches Rey carefully, finding her crestfallen, and scorns himself. It is a poem he’d translated to Greek long ago, while he still sought the secrets of its written script. He gave no thought to its meaning beyond a reminder of his own wants, which had been cast aside in favor of virtue and battle.

But now, as the words fall from her lips, the thought of kissing them lifts such banishments.

The hand on the arm of his chair tightens along the wood as he reigns in his control. His body cries out against it, the sudden urge to steal her mouth consuming all idea of temperance. But he must regain his composure—must not frighten her, nor betray himself so soon. Calmly, Ben leans away, averting his eyes from her, reminding himself the fate of Catullus, who was disparaged for his appetites.

Best to heed the warning and avoid a similar fate.

To do so, Ben knows he cannot remain close to her for too long. Not this way, with the strange warmth gathering in his throat, along the ridge of his neck. As she sets to her Latin translations, the ink of her script slowly beginning to take a more elegant form, he is careful not to seem too eager to offer his advice, merely murmuring that which she needs when asked.

Rey sighs, trying to focus, but finds herself unable. While she appreciates the variety of their lessons, the more musical quality of Latin’s otherwise depressing connotations, she cannot ignore the sudden, stark difference in her master’s usually tepid demeanor.

They went over many new facets while he was bedridden. Numerals were easier while he was concealed by his sheets, but here, as he manages to sit upright, his bare skin so close to her own, an oddly beguiling, heady musk wrapping slowly around her…

It’s distracting.

Thankfully, after some time has passed, something in his mood seems to wear to the marrow when she accidentally brushes his arm. He steals it away quickly, as if burned, before curling both hands over his knees, knuckles white.

“That’s enough for today,” he grunts, pushing himself to rise.

Rey watches him, dumbstruck. “But—”

“I have a different task for you,” he says gruffly. Rey blinks in the face of this change in his attitude. Something not quite anger, but remarkably close, simmers under his open face. He swallows thickly, eyeing the curtain, as if waiting for her reply. Or trying to come up with something to say. It’s then that he turns to her, face a mask of professionalism. “Silencer.”

Rey rises, trying to read his indecipherable expression. “What about him?”

Ben rests his fingers along his wound, tapping soundly with his thick pointer. “This state leaves me weak,” he explains. “I cannot ride Silencer in this condition.” His eyes take on a shining, almost blazing quality, the stars flickering to life. “But you could.”

Her mind lingers on his shifting moods, though all sense of hesitation flees her as hopeful
excitement takes its place. “Yes. I could,” she agrees, glancing to the curtain. Already her sandaled feet itch to leave the ground, to feel the wind on them again.

He resists the urge to move, to take her chin in hand and taste the curve of that peeking smile. Forcing himself away, he steps back, almost colliding into one of the standing lamps. “Go now,” he murmurs, gesturing out the curtain.

Rey nods again, taking to the exit, pleased to have a most pleasant chore, when his voice calls for her to wait.

When she turns his gaze is intense—grave. “Take the knife with you. Don’t lose sight of the house. Understood?”

His orders don’t deter her. In fact, she’s almost certain they are meant to defend. She smiles at him, bowing slightly. “Yes, Master.”

He scoffs, her playful tone doing nothing to quell the throbbing compulsion in his arms. “Go on,” he grunts, returning to the table to file away her latest scroll. “We’ll lunch when you return.”

Even more of an incentive—she is out the door in moments.

When she is gone Ben sighs, weary and worn from the new sensations warring within his body, the sudden pounding in his skull. He moves his hand over her writing, noting the uncommon care taken in her written kiss, and ponders.

And in that pondering, takes action, a fire long doused now stoked to flame as he sits at the table, pulls out fresh parchment, and begins to write.

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Silencer knickers when she returns, beckoning her closer with a bob of his head. She obeys, closing the distance with an open door, leading him out by the reigns.

She straps on the saddle, as she’d seen Ben do, mounting like the sun mounts the sky’s apex. The bright blue of day, the rolling green of Summer hills, and the fresh scents of distant farms and flora all merge before her, and with no small amount of eagerness, she kicks Silencer’s side, urging him on.

Unlike her first time upon his back, Rey prepares herself for the lurch. Back then, she hadn’t braced herself, her mind sloshing like upset waves. But now she adjusts her body to the power of Silencer’s, feeling his life bend beneath her command—the one thing in this world she can control, if only for so long.

As Silencer begins to pick up speed, his hooves hammering into the earth, she breathes in, fighting the winds for power over her nose. She closes her eyes as Silencer takes the lead, craning her neck to welcome the gust, to feel.

Her mind wanders to Egypt, to a place she does not miss. For not the first time she is reminded of how different things are here, how what she’d once thought a curse became something blessed and sacred to her heart.

Only weeks ago she was bound to the sand, going to bed with a dry throat and empty stomach. Met with only cruelty by her old master, and despair from those who fell too far into his clutches.
But things are different here. She is well fed, taken care of, looked after. Here she is taught with patience, gifted with knowledge, praised for abilities she once thought so little of—as she'd thought of herself.

And were Ben any other man in Rome, she knows it would not be the same.

Opening her eyes, Rey urges Silencer on, her thoughts racing alongside them while her heart thunders ahead. *Ben.* Surely it must only be gratitude she feels for the kindness he has shown, the undying tenderness he offers. What slave could say she has been treated so fairly, when never working on her back? At least, not in reality…

Suddenly, against her will, her mind rips a garish hole in the drawn curtain of her darkest soul, pushing upon her a sudden vision. It falls on her with great weight, a conjured image of him beneath her, his hands on her body, their lips merged.

She shakes her head, brushing the thought away with a snap of the reigns. The bend is nearing, and she will need to steer Silencer towards the villa to keep it in sight. She cannot—

A blur of white streaks from the trees. Silencer lurches, whinnying. Rey blinks, just managing to lean away before his head can collide with her chin. The momentum tosses her back, the earth pulling her as Silencer rears on his hind legs, and she falls.

Her back hits the ground, knocking the wind from her lungs. Sunlight dazzles her for only a moment before Silencer’s shadow comes crashing down. Thinking quickly—or not at all—she rolls away from the path and into the grass, lifting her head to glare at the cause of Silencer’s nervous outlash.

When her darkened vision begins to return to normal, she sees a slight man tugs his dapper stallion away from Silencer. And as the blurry haze of dizziness fades, Rey recognizes him. She rises unsteadily, nearly falling, as he slips down, coming to stand by her as Silencer paces away to fitfully study the long grass. “Are you alright?” he calls.

“Yes,” she grunts, dusting off her skirts. Hopefully the blood in her stola has vanished by now. She longs to wear it again. “Hello, Mitaka.”

He seems to bristle at the way she addresses him so brazenly, though it is a subtle, glaring kind that is sure to be forgotten. While she took him initially as the fearful type, perhaps that is only in the presence of certain company. Regardless, his eyes flit about her face, honing in on her chin. “Your lip,” he gestures.

Bemused, Rey touches her tongue to her lip, tasting the iron swell of blood. She must have bitten it on her fall. Shrugging, and rubbing at her aching backside, she moves for Silencer, who mopes guiltily in the shade of the trees. She glances at Mitaka over her shoulder, calling, “It’s been some time. What brings you?”

“He shuffles awkwardly, twitching his neck like a bird, as if concerned they will be overheard. “A message for Master Ren.”

Rey pauses when she takes Silencer’s reigns, his soft knicker as foreboding as the pulse in her ears. “From the emperor?”

“That,” he considers carefully, “is between my master and his company.”

Rey sees in him a certain anxiety that she will not press against. She’s seen Ben cross with Mitaka before, and can guess the reason why. He seems to be one that has spilled a secret or two, and
though he seems well-mannered enough, Rey can tell where this... imperial messenger’s allegiances lie.

“Shall I escort you, then?” Rey offers, gesturing to the hilly slope of the villa.

After a moment of deliberation and silent awe, Mitaka nods, urging her on as he follows behind, both leading their horses to graze beyond the stables.

Mitaka continues to stare at her as they enter the atrium, his voice tepid and probing. “I heard you saved Master Ren’s life.”

Rey pauses, halting to meet eyes with the man’s feet. Humility. She must feign humility. Though her words are not without their truths. “I merely did what any slave would do for her master.”

He opens his mouth to retort, but the sound of lurching footsteps preludes a familiar voice from the hall.

“Rey?”

Mitaka freezes as Rey turns to look, bowing a throbbing head to her master with a pleasant, stinging smile. “Mitaka has come with a message, B—Master Ren,” she catches.

Neither he nor Mitaka seem to notice her near-slip as Ben limps closer. Suddenly, the warmth of his finger bars under her chin, tilting her head to meet his eyes. His dark gaze moves down to her mouth, and Rey is caught in a sudden storm as they change, roiling with hot, static anger.

He wheels on Mitaka, exchanging Rey’s jaw for the man’s collar, dragging him to meet his snarling scowl. “You did this,” he accuses darkly.

Mitaka gawks, gasping like a beached fish. “Di-Did what?!”

Ben grunts, rage like magma in his veins as he motions his hirsuted chin to Rey’s face. “Tell me what you did. The punishment may be more bearable for you—”

“Master,” Rey nearly shouts, managing to suppress her disbelieving scoff. *What has gotten into him?* “It was an accident...!”

He stills, not releasing Mitaka’s tunic as he meets her eyes, the change instantaneous. He eyes her lip as though it will peel back to bite him before meeting her gaze. He reminds her of his horse, his expression wide, mouth pouted in slight, as though remorseful. “Was it?”

Mitaka nods fervently, but Ben ignores him, waiting.

Rey feels the sudden, express need to sigh at this foolishness. Perhaps he will stand to listen to her now. “Yes. I fell. Nothing more,” she gives him what she hopes is a subtle, pointed look, “Master.”

His lips screw into a frown, tasting her explanation on his tongue. Unsatisfied, but willing, he releases Mitaka with a slight shove. The man straightens his wrinkled tunic, eyes wider than a fawn’s when Ben grunts, “Give me the message.”

Mitaka nods once, avoiding looking to his master as he pulls free a folded note of parchment from the folds of his sleeve, holding it out. Ben approaches it warily, his fingers taking it after the briefest moment of hesitation.

Rey watches them tremble before he drops his hand to his side, pinching his temples. “Have you
“Nuh,” he clears his throat. “No, Master Ren.”

“Mm,” he grunts, rubbing the back of his neck. He meets Rey’s gawk before turning away with casual aloofness, waving the scroll dismissively. “Take him to the culina. Make sure he’s fed before he leaves.”

Rey frowns after him, once again left in the wake of his curious nature. But she can’t ask after it, not with Mitaka here. “Yes, Master,” she murmurs.

When she faces Mitaka he is ashen, lips parted and hissing for shallow breaths. She silently directs him towards the kitchen, a mix of pity and shameful amusement in the wobble of his legs. But he is unharmed, for the most part—if not shaken—as he takes a seat.

He swallows, wiping his palms on the cloth of his skirts, breathing deeply while Rey goes into the storeroom. She assembles a small, simple meal of fruits—despite the glaring disappearance of figs—and bread, carefully placing it before him.

He tastes it peckishly, his blunt teeth cutting at the hard crust while Rey diverts her attention to today’s meal. Ahsoka should return at any time, though Rey would not be disinclined to make something worth more effort.

As she considers fish a viable option, Mitaka lifts his head. “You were on his horse.”

Rey turns to meet his dark, boyish eyes, her mind buzzing. What could he mean by asking this? She must tread carefully. “Yes, Sir, I was.”

“Were you in flight?”


“Ah,” he murmurs, nodding to himself. “I see.”

She watches him curiously before deciding it would be best to let him eat alone. Though a mild-mannered servant, there is something off-putting about this Mitaka that Rey would rather not test with her presence. She excuses herself with a slight bow, fleeing unsteadily into the courtyard.

As she nears Ben’s chambers, the sound of pouring water echoes in her ears. She rounds the corner, standing in the doorway to find the shadow of his back on the terrace as he hunches to touch something beyond her sight.

“Master?” she chances, stepping inside.

He stiffens, standing fully upon the stone terrace, looking in to find her with his pensive expression. “Has he gone?”

“Not yet,” she reports, coming to peer outside. His body blocks her view, though she spots the handle of a bucket in his hand. “What are you doing?”

After a moment of silent deliberation, Ben steps aside, revealing a basin half-filled with clear water, and lets the sight answer for him.

Rey frowns at him, gesturing to his bandages. “Is that wise?”
“Alone, no,” he says noncommittally, meeting her eyes. He hunches his neck, leveling them, as though scrutinizing her. “But I will have assistance.”

Balking, Rey almost takes a step back, but finds her heels rooted to the ground. She fights the rising flush of her cheeks at the prospect of… of…

“Of course,” she murmurs, looking down. It’s a mistake. Her gaze casts over the lip of his skirt, down to the strong muscles of his legs. She keeps her eyes trained on the floor, instead, willing herself to calm. She’s seen naked men before, had the egregious task of bathing her previous master—and all his deeper crevices.

And yet…

She can’t—won’t—think about that now, too dazed to marvel at this happenstance, the throb in her head finally subsiding. With a distant voice she hears him say to fetch him a rag, and she goes, trying and failing to slow her pounding heart.

Once alone, she takes a deep breath, closing her eyes. *It’s just this once, she reasons. He’s bathed himself before. It won’t happen again. He only needs help until he recovers.* Retrieving a clean rag from the closeted storage space along the wall, she nods to herself, resolute. If she can run into an arena for him, she could certainly bear his nudity.

Again, the image from her ride resurfaces, the memory of his hands on her, and she swallows it down. “Gratitude,” she whispers, a quiet reprimand as she returns to his chambers.

She finds him placing a jug of oil onto the stone terrace, the shade of the oning cast over his shoulder when he moves to glance at her. If she knew nothing of him, she would say he looks conflicted by her presence.

So she says nothing at all.

He straightens, turning from her as he begins to work at the fastenings of his belt. His voice comes clipped and strained—from exhaustion and lingering pain, no doubt. “I need only your assistance in the places my arms cannot reach. The rest I will do alone.”

Rey nods, but realizes he can’t see it, and croaks, “Of course.”

She keeps saying those words, she notices, but her rising unease is met by an even greater attention.

In one, smooth movement, he unfolds the binding of his subligar, peeling both its cloth and the skirt away. The loose fabric hangs limp in his hand and Rey follows it, caught off guard by the sudden exposure to his full backside.

Rey sucks in what she hopes is a quiet breath, turning her head to avert her eyes as she hears him step into the water. She closes them, folding her lips to bite the visage away, but the image remains burned behind her lids. The taut muscles of his back, the slim girth of his waist, the marless skin of his shapely—

She sighs, returning her gaze to find his back to her as he waits in the water. She grips the rag like a sword and moves closer, summoning her courage, prepared to do battle.

Ben swallows as he hears her come near, keeping a loose grip on the rim of the basin. The cold water sinks into his bandages, into his bones, combating the hot rush of his pulse.

He hadn’t intended for this to happen, but he was reckless. And slow. He’d secretly hoped she
would return to find him bathed, clean and polished, to be thrilled from her ride and join him for a peaceful meal. To sit and talk as they had before. And... whatever else came after.

But when she returned, Mitaka at her side… the new, raw emotions left unforged rose to the surface in blind fury. To see her lip torn and bleeding had unleashed something within him, a rage he hadn’t felt since his days in the infantry.

Now the letter rests upon his mantelpiece, unopened, for he knows what lies inside, and wants nothing to do with it.

Especially not now, as the sound of her hand plunging into the water rings out from the stone wall, bouncing off the wind. Droplets fall as she wrings it it damp, the cloth bracing cool against his bare back. He leans forward, grunting with the ache under his ribs, giving her better access as he leans on his arm.

Rey keeps her eyes trained carefully on her task, swiping away the thin sheen of sweat and grime from his spine, the prominent wings of his shoulders. As she works, she wonders if the oil she’d anointed is lost with them, wiping clear her past hurts and anger.

The water stirs in slight as he shifts, and she waits for him to get comfortable before starting again. She keeps her voice low. “Does it hurt?”

Ben closes his eyes, feeling the soft touch of her careful, steady hands. Yes. It hurts. This raw, untamed, alive side of him that yearns to tell her, to show her this pain he feels, so much deeper than wounds. This ache in his bones to learn what loving men know.

Yet he shakes his head, the heat in his body clawing over his throat. He clears it softly, remembering her lips. He frowns over his shoulder. “Do you?”

Rey pauses. Will there ever be a time when someone’s concern for her won’t leave her in surprise? “I’ve had worse,” she murmurs, moving to his arm.

“Mm,” he hums, reaching back to take her fingers. He pulls them closer, scrutinizing her scraped arm while she stares at the wall over his head, warmth spreading from his careful touch. “Have you treated them?”

Her stomach flutters. “Yes.”

He is silent for a moment before pulling the rag from her hand, leaving her palm wet and cold. “I’ll take this. You won’t need it.”

She glares at the back of his head, hating it when he speaks so cryptically. “For what?”

His pleased expression is audible. “My hair.”

“Oh,” she mumbles, retracting her hand. “Right.”

The water sloshes as he leans back, the damp ends of his hair hanging over the lip of the basin in his recline. Struck, Rey gapes at the new angle, his neck bared and long body sprawled before her.

She doesn’t let her gaze wander far, but restrains her sigh of relief at the blurry sight of the rag over his lap. A brief moment of thought brings the idea that this was purposeful, but she pushes it away, resolved to complete her task and leave him be—then forget it happened at all.

Her fingers damp and shriveled, she reaches for the jug, pouring the oil into her hands. It’s a
familiar motion with him now, though the thick, hot swim of thoughts in her mind are far too addling to let any sense of nostalgia thrive. She coats his neatly combed hair, teasing straight the dark, soft curls. Large ears peek from their damp, curtained confines, returning her to a strange ease, the tender impassivity of caring for one so human.

When her nails thread along his scalp, a soft sigh spills from his lips, closing his eyes with it. “You’re good at that,” he murmurs.

His encouragement brings a small, satisfied smile to her face. In a moment of daring, she lets the back of her finger accidentally brush the crest of his ear. “And you’re easy to please.”

He nearly growls at that. *She has no idea.*

She continues at a luxurious pace, time blurring under the gentle pressure of her touch. The heat threads along the flesh of his scalp, a warm ooze slithering through his skin beneath the water as he lets her do as she wishes.

The warmth spreads when she takes the cool water to him, and he can picture her slender fingers combing out the scented oil, cleansing him in more ways than one.

Then he feels it gathering—a traitorous reaction beneath the water, the fire of her touch overwhelming. He can feel himself succumbing to it, to the joining heat in his body, weaving together like a spider’s cruel web, waiting to snare him in its clutches.

He barely opens his eyes as his thoughts flee from him, all bright and threadbare edges, the only completed one among them the knowledge that Rey’s hands are on him, but not where they should be.

Swallowing, his hand moves on its own, reaching back to grasp her wrist. Yes… *yes,* his blood croons, swirling in his veins. *Let her see. Let her know.*

Convinced, he holds tighter, moving her wrist until he can feel the pads of her fingers along his collar, tracking fire in their wake as he guides her down. A sweet burning, this is, her presence and his—and she does not resist. Suddenly it becomes clear to him now, that words need not be spoken, that his shameful longing can be known with just a touch. *Just a touch.*

Rey goes still under his hand, watching dazed as he leads her down along his body. She swallows as her fingers approach his navel, the heat of his palms searing into her flesh. But as she observes, left without a thought, she sees it.

There is blood in the water.

“Ben,” she calls softly, tugging to halt him. “You’re bleeding—!”

He groans and she looks to his face, finding him panting, flushed and pale.

She rips her wrist from his loosened grip, bringing a dripping hand to his face, his forehead. His lashes flutter unsteadily against his cheek, lids screwed closed as her palm is met with fire and skin.

“Fever,” Rey whispers, eyes wide. She rises to her feet, knees screaming in protest as she gapes at the scarlet threads unraveling in the once-clear water. “Come on…” She stoops to take his arm, tugging, but he won’t budge. “...we have to get you out—Ben?”
His breath shortens, full lips pale in the afternoon sun as his head lolls to the side, chest heaving.

Terror grips Rey’s bones with its icy talons, freezing her every nerve. “Ben!”

He doesn’t reply; the water has bloomed, now.

Panic takes control, and in that panic rationale as she releases him, sprinting into the house. “Mitaka!” she screams, pushing harder. The courtyard spreads before her, the green tainted red. “Mitaka!”

He emerges from the culina, eyes wide and worrisome as she stops before him, snagging his arm. “Wh—”

“Come,” she pants, pulling him with her at a horse’s pace. “Come quickly. Please.”

To push down her frightened sobs takes all her remaining strength, she thinks, until she and Mitaka are beside their master’s basin, lifting him from the water. It rolls from his body, streaming down his leg in crimson. Mitaka retches to himself, but manages to help Rey pull him inside on dragging feet, laying him in the bed.

Without hesitation, Rey pulls the knife from her borrowed tunica and slices away the damp bandages. The bed beneath him grows cold and soggy, his head turning away from her. As she works, Mitaka pulls the sheet over Ben’s lap, expression grave and perturbed.

When the wound is bared, Rey gasps. An angry red spans from the healing edges, reaching out in cruel strokes.

She looks over her shoulder at Mitaka, eyes wild and pleading. “Get help.”

He blinks at her, lips parted cluelessly. “Who?”

Tears of frustration and anger gather in her eyes, but she manages to hold it steady as he backs away from her outraged cries. “Ahsoka! Get Ahsoka! Maz, Ematt—anyone!”

He replies in affirmative, turning and bolting out the door. She hears him leave for the stables as she hurriedly returns to Ben with damp cloths, pushing against the bleeding, rinsing it out, letting water spill along the floor. He pants under her hands, his forehead beading with sweat, mind lost as he groans in pain.

With a free hand, Rey smoothes it over his cheek, feeling an unbearable heat, and her lip trembles. “It’s alright,” she whispers, refusing to look at the angry plague spreading slowly through him, focusing instead on the soft of his jaw, the crease of his brow as she attempts to soothe it away, to return his eyes to her. “Look at me,” she calls softly.

He doesn’t.

Rey takes in a shallow, trembling breath, flushing him out, trying to stem the endless flow. “It’s alright,” she repeats. “It’s alright…”

But she barely convinces herself.

Chapter End Notes
[The Ancient Romans valued hygiene and cleanliness to an insane degree, for the time, enough to rival the Egyptians. This is one of the reasons why bathhouses were so popular. Also, men and women would purchase oils and perfumes that declared to make the opposite sex fall in love with them, which boosted sales and supported the Roman economy immensely]

[Men have shaved for thousands of years. Thanks to the iron age, the Romans used a "novacila"—a thin, iron razor sharpened by whetstone and water—to shave their faces. Most men would have a live-in shaving specialist (usually slaves) to shave for them, or would visit a local barber, called a "Tonsor"]

[The poem Ben shared with Rey is called "Stolen Kisses: to Juventius" (sometimes called "Juventius") by Catullus. Catullus was an Ancient Roman poet in the era of the Roman Republic who died in 54 B.C. He was famous for his personalized, more romantic poems, which would shock readers with blatant sexual imagery. His poetry has and continues to influence poets worldwide, reminding us that love and lust in their many forms have existed throughout the ages]

[Roman slaves were sold in the nude, and it was not unheard of to purchase Egyptian slaves in the same manner. Historically speaking, it's likely that Rey (being exposed to Plutt's slave trade) has seen many nude men and women, and was sold naked herself]

{The theme for this chapter is "Smells Like Teen Spirit" by Kina Grannis (a cover of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit"). Listen to the Glory's Fray Spotify Playlist here!}
Hi, guys! Just a head's up—classes have officially kicked back up, which is apparently FANTASTIC for productivity levels. Nothing like a good ol' procrastination habit to keep the creative juices flowing!

In other news... apparently it's against Ao3 guidelines to advertise my Ko-Fi account. The link has been deleted. Thank you to r for pointing that out and saving me a nasty suspension >///< But I started a Twitter now! You can find me there @avidlyhunting! It would be so amazing to have a dialogue with you <3

I'd also like to remind everyone that this story is indeed a veeeery slow burn, as well as a fic sprinkled with the occasional historical inaccuracy. It's in the tags (literally in all caps) and my opening note; I'm not good with history, I know, but I'm trying my best.

BUT NO MATTER WHAT, your support and encouragement always means so much to me, and I am so happy to share my trashy gladiator fic with you all. And as always —thank you so so so so sO SO MUCH FOR YOUR AMAZING SUPPORT!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Just as I thought. He’s been infected.”

Ahsoka crosses her arms, ruminating on Ben’s face—slick and restless in sleep—before turning her attention to the serious expression of Maz Kanata. “Is it serious?”

Maz shrugs helplessly, folding her withered lips. “All sickness is serious, but this, I fear,” she lifts the bandage, revealing the angry red thorns embedded in his white skin, “could be grave.”

Grunting with seething frustration, Ahsoka swears, pacing to the other end of his chambers, the lamplight low and flickering. Her bright eyes shift to Rey, seated uncomfortably in the master’s chair, face pale and gaze intent on him.

Ahsoka squares herself, resolute as she addresses the midwife. “I brought back fresh supplies from my own stores. What more do we need to see this through?”

Shaking her head, Maz peeks under the bandages again, squinting and hunched. “Time. And patience.” Her dark eyes flit between the women, tone severe upon Rey. “And no movement.”

Rey flinches, bowing her head, drawing her knees closer to her body beneath the woman's pointed reprimand.

“She didn’t know,” Ahsoka defends. When Rey glances hopefully at her, she is met with what she imagines to be the disappointment of a weary mother. “And think—if he hadn’t opened that wound, we may have been too late.”

“Hm,” Maz grunts, nodding to herself, but says nothing more as she reaches into her medicine box, retrieving a vial of clear liquid—the same as before. “I may know some, child, but I do not know everything. That being said…” she removes his bandages entirely, pressing lightly against the red.
He stirs, but does not awaken. “...there is dirt in his blood.”

Rey casts her worried glance to Maz, her voice tentative and strained. “What is that?”

“The poison of the earth. It will rot him, if it’s not given leave to escape. This, however,” she gestures, wetting her palm with the clear substance, “is sour wine. What was used to close his wounds may very well be the trick to emptying them.”

Anger rises hot within Rey, spilling from her mouth like steam. “So you don’t know what you’re doing?”

Ahsoka glares at Rey, the word “hush” curled on her lip, but Maz speaks sooner, her tone flat and aged. Warning. “I know more than some peddling curator off the Roman streets. If I were you, child, I wouldn’t let panic get the best of my good judgement.”

Rey closes her mouth, meeting Maz’s hard stare, unwavering. The heat within her has subsided, cooling like magma into hard, charred rock. Her heart hammers in her chest, denying the weak quiver of her voice as she murmurs, “…Will he heal?”

Maz blinks, considering her thoughtfully before humming to herself, pressing wrinkled knuckles along Ben’s forehead. “His skin is hot to the touch. What moves within him can take one of two paths. The first could cure him completely, if we wait. But the second path, I fear…” she pulls her hand away, expression grim. “…leads to death.”

Ahsoka curses again, covering her eyes. Rey, however, is silent, the midwife’s words washing over her, cold and final as dripping dew. It trickles within her like cool water, gathering somewhere deep inside, as if to become tears—or something far more bitter.

And when his ragged breathing sounds like a roaring flood in her ears, her spirit is washed away, replaced by something hollow yet full of light. She rises to her feet—only to fall to her knees before the woman, bowing until her face is against the frigid stone, arms braced and trembling.

She hears Ahsoka shift. “Rey—”

“Please,” Rey murmurs, throat closing. Shame wrings through her, twisting in her gut as she speaks. “Please. Forgive me my transgressions—lead him down the right path.”

Maz is silent for a moment, simply staring, until she waves her hand. “You are forgiven. Go now—you won’t be needed here any longer.”

Obediently, Rey shuffles to her feet, unable to look at anyone as she rushes out the door and into her chambers, shutting it tightly. She gasps, emotions swarming within her, threatening to overwhelm her control.

At length she strips in the dark, settling into her bed, helplessness thick and cold in her bones, turning her to stone. She curls into herself, shaking with unshed tears—the memory of him alive, of him beside her, struggling for victory over the thought of him gone.

When Ben awakens his lips are dry, mouth parched. He croaks out, blind with eyes sealed by sleep, but a cool hand lifts him by the neck. Something cold and merciful spills inside, and only when it passes through does he regain the strength to swallow, to reach and drink greedily.

It leaves to be replaced by another bowl, which he braces in his hand. As it drains, he gasps, wet and rattled, body on fire as he wipes his eyes open.
The blurry form of a familiar face drifts hazily into view. “Ahsoka,” he murmurs as she lies his head back down. He stays with her, swallowing thickly. “Where’s Rey?”

She shakes her head dismissively. “There are more important matters to discuss, Young Master.”

Though still in waking, Ben highly doubts it. His latest memory is of her hand on him, blood in the water, and all after was pain and fire. He lifts his head, thinking himself strong enough to sit up and find her on his own, but it would seem the inevitable pull to the earth—and Ahsoka’s firm hand—prove him wrong.

“Maz Kanata is here.”

He blinks up at her, head swimming. Suddenly, he notices the lack of chafing around his midsection, and turns to look. His breath catches at the sight—his wound rests open and slick, a foamy pus oozing from the angry red of his skin onto a catch of webbing.


Were his face not already burning, he may have flushed. Averting his eyes, he clears his throat. “I had everything under control.”

She scoffs dryly. “‘Control?’” she echoes, rife with disbelief. Her normally well-kempt hair is strewn from their twin braids, in slight, her eyes shining in the depths of hollowing sockets. “It seems every time I leave you alone with her, things go wrong.”

He snaps his head to glare at her, voice soft in quiet, outraged astonishment. “You suspect her?”

Ahsoka crosses her arms defensively, frowning back at him, unafraid of his rising anger. “I do. She is hiding something. And now here you lie, sick and halfway dead.”

Ben’s heart speeds, nostrils flaring with rage at Ahsoka’s insinuation. He quickly recalls his servant sneaking about Rey’s chambers as she slept, and lying to the girl about it when she awoke. Now the memory seeds indignation in his aching breast, spurring him to hiss, “She isn’t.”

“She is,” Ahsoka persists. “I hope to every god it’s not against you, but your injuries were healing well before this sudden change—”

“Enough—”

“—I trust you into her care and she has you roam about, ripping open your wounds with her ignoran—”

“ENOUGH!”

She goes very still, closing her parted lips, admonished. Staring into the dark gaze of her master, his creased brow, his trembling throat and twitching eye, she is reminded of a similar man—a similar face.

In her silence, Ben looses his fists from the sheets, voice ragged as he looks away. “I will not have you question her. These faults are my own.” He swallows the thick and dry air on his tongue, every muscle straining, screaming for solace.

For Rey.
He lays back, wincing, staring at the ceiling as the morning sun gleams along its white limestone finish, tone dipped with an even harder resolution. “I want her.” He glances at Ahsoka, daring her to defy him. “Bring her to me.”

After a moment she rises, brushing her hands along the skirt of her tunica, expression unreadable. But in her heart she mourns, the loss of many years returning to her, history repeating itself before her very eyes, leaving her helpless to stop it.

So she bows her head to him. To fate—praying it will be kind to her.

“Yes, Young Master.”

Her mind whirls in a sea of blurring color, the woodgrain of the countertop blending with the steel of the knife, cutting through crisp leaves in deafening monotony.

“Quickly, girl. The water is boiling.”

Snapping free from her thoughtlessness, Rey nods, chopping faster. When it’s ready, she scoops the mound of wet cabbage into her palms and carries it to Maz, who stands upon a stool, gazing into the pot with a scrutiny in her eyes. She waves her over, and drops them inside, rubbing every last one from her hands.

Rey glances at Maz, watching worriedly as she stirs the cabbage into a broth with the steady twist of her slim wrist. “What next?”


“Right.”

Rey returns from the storeroom in moments, splaying Maz’s ingredients about the countertop. The trembling in her fingers dissipates, replaced with a strong sense of urgency and resolve to do as she’s told.

Maz holds out her waiting palm. “Lentils.”

Obediently, Rey places their small store of legumes into the healer’s fingers, who plucks and sprinkles them about the rim of the brew, the bitter scent of cabbage wafting steam into the air and opening Rey’s nose. She gazes into the pot, moving to heat the salted pork as Maz works closeby. “...How will this help?”

“Your master suffers from a humor,” she remarks. When Rey quirks a brow, she elaborates, “an imbalance of the body. His blood has been tainted by this imbalance. It must be tamed before it consumes him.”

Rey nods seriously, letting the information sink into her skin. She moves to serrate the tender flesh of the fish, stripping scales with Ahsoka’s knife as she speaks. “I’ve read of those, I think… the blood and biles. You believe his have,” she thinks, searching for the word, “heated?”

Maz smiles to herself, laughing in her throat. “Oh, yes.” Her deep-set eyes shift to Rey’s tightly focused face. “Men’s often do.”

Not understanding her meaning, Rey remains silent, passing along the stripped fish for Maz to add at her discretion. They work quietly, the brew coming along well, the scent bitter and dry as it claws down her throat.
It’s in a moment of trained attention to flipping the pork that Maz remarks, “Keeping secrets is a bold move, for a slave in Rome.”

Rey stills, but quickly masks her face into one of confusion. Innocence. “I’m sure it would be…” she agrees soundly. “Why do you say this?”

“If you live long enough, you see the same eyes in different people,” she croons to the soup, almost lovingly, before meeting Rey’s stare. “When I looked into his, I saw a man who knows less than he would seem.”

Struggling to even her breathing, Rey tempers the stretch of her eyes, pushing away the fear. It made sense, at length, that Ahsoka could detect their deception. But this woman? This stranger?

Maz continues, shrugging. “But it is a secret he knows. The others you hide, well... I can't help but wonder how long they will last.”

The defense hits Rey like a shield, pushing the words from her before she can stop them as she gawks at this strange, small woman. “I hid them. The herbs. I intend to destroy them.”

“You think that wise?”

Rey folds her lips. She doesn’t know what wisdom is anymore, but, “I think it’s necessary… Ma’am.”

The woman’s hand stills its endless stir, her face turned to gaze deeply into Rey’s eyes. An unnerving gleam shines in them, their dark centers like coal in the deep tan of her withered cheeks. “You trust him that much?”

Taking a breath, Rey summons a small smile. The memory of her master’s promise still holds deep inside, ensnared and kept alive like an endless flame, stoked by the absence of any willful trespasses against her body. “I do.”

Her slim, fading brow furrows, her voice soft as she whispers in reply. “The places you keep your convictions are dangerous ones, child. At what cost will your faith in them come?”

Rey’s heart pounds once against her bones, solid and heavy as a drum. But before she can find the will to reply, Ahsoka enters, lingering in the doorway, expression haunted as she gazes inside. “He’s awake.”

As quickly as it came, Maz’s grave demeanor evaporates—like the steam of the soup—meeting Ahsoka’s with a clash of good-natured, practiced ease. “Good. Just in time for breakfast.” As she speaks, she hobbles down from the stool, retrieving the pork and cooling it with a breath before cleaving it in pieces, letting it fall into the brew.

She hands off a full bowl to Ahsoka, whose nose wrinkles. “A balance brew?”

“To the saliva, to the blood,” Maz instructs, waggling a crooked finger up to Ahsoka’s downturned lips. “Make him eat it, every last drop.”

“Of course,” she concedes, moving away to capture the girl’s eyes. “With me, Rey.”

Rey’s lips falter, breath catching on the edge of her ribs. She wipes the wetness from her hands on the rear of her stola—the crisp, clean fabric relaxing against her waist with its familiar, comfortable form—as she follows Ahsoka to the courtyard, closer to his room.
When they enter he lifts his head, hair limp and loyal to the pit of his damp pillow. Rey meets his eyes for only a moment, her veins seizing, before Ahsoka waves to the dresser against his wall. “Gather the pillows and sit him up.”

She obeys, quickly wrenching away the spare pillows. She reaches his bedside and meets his gaze with a smile, arms full of clean linen. “Good morning.”

Ahsoka moves to his other side. “Good morning,” he replies, voice strained in Rey’s ears, worrying her as Ahsoka carefully supports him to make room.

Rey catches sight of his flaming injury for only an instant, stacking pillows to brace his back. When he’s laid down, he sits almost upright, his visage pale and sickly, chest stuttering and uneven, the ache resounding in her own.

Sitting beside him on the mattress, Ahsoka dips a spoon into the bowl, gathering the steamy broth and offering it to him. “Eat this.”

Ben turns away from Rey, the pungent odor of the stew pulling down the firm edges of his full mouth. He meets her eyes with resistance, pouting like a petulant child. “I will not.”

Ahsoka scoffs. “This will balance you.”

“This is foul,” he contests, curling his lip.

Rey frowns at their exchange, unhappy that the two seem so at odds. “Master?” she calls, struggling to keep her tone soft and even.

He turns to her immediately. “Yes?”

“Please,” she starts, the emotions inside her teetering on the edge of her lashes, stinging as they whip through her tongue. She yearns to say his name, so she does. “Let it help you, Ben. Let us help you.”

For a long moment he merely gapes at her, as if lost, before the voice of Maz sounds from the entryway.

“Let the girl do it, Ahsoka. I must speak with you out here a moment,” she calls.

The three turn to look at her, Ahsoka rising reluctantly, passing the bowl to Rey without meeting her eyes. Rey watches as they go, terror pulsing cold through her veins to settle in her gut as they vanish from sight.

Then his voice comes softly. “Forgive me.”

Immediately pulled to him by the faint words, Rey returns to him, settling at his bedside as Ahsoka had. The heat of his mattress meets her instantly through the fabric of her clothes, only watering the blooming seed of fear within her breast.

She holds the bowl in her hands, shaking away the emotions lingering behind her eyes as they lift to meet his. “There is nothing to forgive. I shouldn’t—”

“No,” he interrupts, moving his hand to touch the arm at her lap. The chilly heat of their pads braces along her finer hairs, a deeper warmth rising to meet the gentle brace of his fingertips. “None of that. No more of that.”
She laughs brokenly, a mix of disgusting relief at his words and sadness at the sight of his face. While normally pale in health, there is a stark difference here—as though the blood has begun to abandon him, leaving his skin on the brink of discoloration along the hollowing soft of his cheeks.

“Alright,” she consents, shifting closer. His eyes warm to welcome her, his hold never leaving. The cold, clammy skin doesn’t bother her—not until it slips away as she lifts the spoon to his lips, leaving her without.

He opens his mouth, breathing out with closed eyes, accepting the offering with a surprising ease for all the resistance he gave Ahsoka mere moments ago. Rey pays it no heed but one of gratitude for his cooperation, continuing at an even pace, waiting until he’s swallowed before giving him more.

She loses all sense of time, only knowing that at some point his eyes opened, staying with her. And her own remains fettered to him, her heart at odds with her mind, every instinct priming her body for a cold hatred towards his ailment, yet the familiar gratitude that warms her. Selfishly.

There is eventually no more to gather by spoon, so she offers the bowl to him, moving to sit closer. The palpable throb of his body spreads through the air, inside of her. His arm lifts again to cup over her hand, guiding the rim to his lips as he finishes, lying back and breathing shortly when it’s done.

"There. Not so bad..." A faint smileghosts her lips as she sets the bowl upon the bedstand to keep his large hand in hers, struggling to warm them with both her smaller palms. “Thank you,” she whispers, the ridges of his knuckles fitting well inside the cusp of her fingers.

Ben nods briefly, staring at her hands, his lips parting. “You thank me…" his breath falters, brow creased, as though confused, “...for your kindness.”

“No,” she denies, squeezing gently. “For yours.”

He is silent, then, moving his fingers to welcome her warmth—and to her ignorance, savor it. “I am not a kind man.”

“Perhaps not,” she teases, earning a penitent glare. She smiles slightly in the face of it, enjoying the way he continues to change before her eyes in the oddest of ways, despite the pain he so obviously feels. “But I'm still grateful.”

Regret plummets through him at her words, a self-inflicted anger at the weakness of his body, bared so openly to her. Were he more capable, uninhibited by his lacks, perhaps he could find the strength to pursue this warmth she stirs within him—a depth in his soul, a passion unrivaled by anything before.

But this will be enough, for now.

“I see,” he rasps. “Then,” he moves to pull her hands with his own, the tip of his nose grazing the sensitive skin of her palm, pressing her knuckles to his cool cheek. “Your gratitude is a welcome one, Puella.”

Her stomach lurches into her mouth, catching words on the precipice of a forgotten tongue in the wake of a gleaming mischief in his dark eyes, the warmth of his breath along her tender wrist. She shivers. The longer she looks, as her hand lies trapped against his face, the more she sees the depths of their color, though dimming—a gentle mix of earthy soil and forest green, beckoning her closer, to enter and be lost.

But that word, Gratitude, rings in her ears, as condemning as temple bells to a wayward worshiper.
She slips her hand away, already missing the reassurance of his touch, and moves to stand. “You’re still warm. I will…” she stammers, averting her gaze from the sight of him, sleepy and disheveled, eyes urgent upon her. “...fetch more water.”

She feels his presence follow her even as he is left behind, her soles heavy with lead. A shaky sigh leaves her, rattling like his lungs, and she wonders if some unbalanced blood has spread to her, as well. Her limbs feel weaker, her skin flushed, her mind swimming in the wake of his touch.

As she wonders if Maz will force her to share the rather unappetizing stew, she hears the soft exchange of voices echo from the courtyard.

A sudden instinct seizes her, one of an ill-tempered curiosity, and Rey quiets her steps, moving to stand behind a pillar. They continue their conversation—and if it is in secret, then she has not been discovered. Yet. Carefully, she sneaks closer, continuing to hide behind the marble, swallowing down her rising pulse.

She admitted to Maz what the woman already knew—her possession of the Pennyroyal—and that it lies hidden. She hopes that, of the secrets Ahsoka doesn’t know, that truth will be the only one among them. Even the truth of Ben’s virtus would not be so horrible as what she keeps only to herself. But this Maz Kanata is a wise woman, and by her words has likely seen through her already.

To be found out now… it could kill them all.

She wills away the roaring blood in her ears, using them instead to listen to the trailing voices on the gentle Roman breeze.

“—fraid he will not heal in time...”

“But, to die so young?” Ahsoka murmurs, tinged with worry and grief. Rey’s heart aches at the sound, at their meaning.

“Gladiators seldom live to see the years of their grandchildren.” A pause. “You know that all too well, don’t you?”

“...Yes. I do.”

“His illness will only get worse. I’ve done all I can, but it is clear that death will come for him… very soon.” Silence. And then, “There is more than one poison in his blood. An ailment I’ve heard of, yet never seen.”

“And what is that?”

“It is too difficult to explain, but that girl… I believe she is the reason.”

Ahsoka’s voice laces with venom. “I see.”

“No, child. Not the poison one can see with their eyes...” her voice trails off, merely a whisper on the wind, but Rey’s heart sinks.

Of course. This was all her doing, wasn’t it? She knows he saw her before the blade struck him, remembers their eyes meeting in the heat of the Colosseum’s light. She has been a burden to him from the start—a thorn in his side, now corrupted. A poison, spreading through him, killing the man she...
She...

“You must tell him. Deliver the news, and have him send word for a scribe...” Maz’s voice sighs, defeat and weariness drenching each syllable.

And the words that follow strike within Rey, harder than a bell, than an executioner’s axe, leaving her lifeless and cold, the blurred edges of her vision collapsing into silent tears, that bitter flood within her finally crashing to the shores of her cheeks.

“...to forge his last will and testament.”

Chapter End Notes

[The majority of Ancient Roman medical studies believed that infected wounds occurred when dirt meets the blood. Though they did not perfect the idea of blood circulation, they knew that it moved through veins and spread sickness to other areas. They did not know to target one specific area, so they would instead focus on the body as a whole]

[Though Maz and Ahsoka admonish Rey for letting Ben move, Galen's approach to healing involved movement and regular cleaning to help maintain regular body function]

["Sour wine" is an Ancient Roman term for vinegar, which was used to both close wounds and draw out pus. The webbing is actually cobwebs, which catches the drainage in the absence of bandages, to let the wound breathe]

[Unfortunately, ancient medical practices, though advanced in Rome, were not beyond the trickery of craftsmen. Many "doctors" would create potions and brews that never worked, and pretended to know what they were doing to leech money from the unsuspecting. This phenomena was notorious in Ancient Greece. However—the discoveries of Hippocrates helped shape ancient medical practices, creating a solid basis for methods of actual healing. Today, doctor's swear to look after their patients under the "Hippocratic Oath." The sign of Hippocrates is the staff wound by a single snake (not to be confused with the staff of Hermes) called the Staff of Aesculapius—Greek god of healing and medicine, who would be called on in commonplace healing rituals]

[When the Ancient Romans regarded infections, they saw them as legitimate diseases caused by an "imbalance of the self" to be purified by either spiritual means or a change in dietary/ hygiene habits. Galen believed that when food met saliva and the stomach, it would go into the blood, thereby enhancing the power of food in maintaining health. This theory led to an "opposition" approach—meaning that if someone had a fever (also called "hot blood"), then they should be given things to eat that would cool their body down. Such foods included beef, pork, fish, snails, cabbage, peas, all sour fruits (like apples and prunes—for digestion), dairy products, and beans]

[Ben has been afflicted by what, today, is known as "Acute Sepsis" or "Septicaemia" ("Acute" meaning a rapidly developing form of Sepsis). Sepsis is an infection of the blood that spreads throughout the body, that if left improperly treated can lead to organ failure and death. Just some of the many symptoms are increased heart rate, confusion,
cold/ clammy hands and feet, pale or discolored skin, fever, loss of appetite, shortness of breath/ rapid breathing, and drowsiness/ vacant attention]

[The four combinations are Cold and Dry (Black Bile), Cold and Moist (Phlegm), Hot and Dry (Yellow Bile), and Hot and Moist (Blood). Ben's ailment is considered Hot and Moist, due to an infection in the bloodstream]

[BONUS: the Sanguine term of the four combinations of Galen's humors (black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood) gave rise to the phrase "hot blooded" to describe a man's sexual desires. In Shakespearean and Germanic literature, specifically the Deutsche Kalendar (1498), Blood is personified as a man embracing a woman with the intent to "woo" her]

{The theme for this chapter is "Nobody Praying for Me" by Seether. Listen to the Glory's Fray Spotify list here!}
Plea

Chapter Notes

Another 4am update! Woo-hoo!

Okay, everyone... obviously things are getting a bit intense for the characters in this story. Though short, I want to warn you that this chapter will deal heavily with grief and loss. Death is a scary thing for so many people, and a tragedy when it claims people in the prime of their lives. Of all of GF's heavier themes, this one strikes closer to home than a gladiator battle ever could, and I hope that theme serves to enhance the story as it's meant to do.

Thank you all so so much for your endless support. You are all amazing!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She returns to his chambers with the water, her every step heavy and slow. Laden with cold, the tiled floors like stones beneath her feet.

Having wiped her eyes, she hopes for no lingering trace of redness that will betray her, but her worries are for naught. He lies still, but unquiet, as the steady rasp of his breathing scrapes into her ears.

With great care she moves to sit in the stool at his bedside, gazing upon his sleeping face—so unaware of what awaits it in waking. Tenderness consumes her as she moves to wet a rag in the cool water, brushing away a stray lock of hair to tuck over his head, helping him recline and place the folded cloth along the heat of his brow.

When it is done, her touch lingers, drawing in the softness of his cheek. Her fingers trace its curve to the corner of his lip, her own threatening to tremble under the terrible truth—that soon this mouth, these closed eyes, will never open again.

Rey swallows, grief rising within her, thick as mud and mortar, sealing light away. But she scrambles for it still, clutching tightly to the feeling of his skin, still alive, and lets her feelings harden into resolve.

Decidedly, and with all the tenderness she knows, she rises to lean closer, holding to his cheek as she presses her lips to the crown of his hair. Its soft, silken heat shifts beneath their pressure, and for the smallest of moments, behind her closed eyes, she imagines him awake.

Shaking slightly, she pulls away, and finds him still asleep. Her hand falls to her side, the plucking lyre of despair crumpled into cold, shriveled fury by her fist. “This won’t be how it ends,” she whispers. To him. To herself. “I know it.”

His lashes flutter deep in unconsciousness, his breathing ragged, and her voice is spoken alone.

But does not go unheard.

He wakes late in the night, confused and pale in the lamplight before finding himself again.
It is then that Ahsoka sits beside him, sharing quiet words as Rey watches helplessly from the roaring hearth. His dark eyes widen, creased with emotion as his brow softens in grim realization. With downturned lips, he reaches a weak arm to cup the woman’s shoulder, and at length nods in quiet, solemn consent.

She rips from the room in hurried flight, a hand at her eyes to shield them from view as she disappears into the hall.

On her knees before the fireplace, Rey looks to her master, whose stare lingers down into the sheets, his gaze endlessly contemplative, brow taut and throat tight.

She knows what Ahsoka has told him. She needn’t guess, nor ask and break the silence of his concentration.

But as he seeks his acceptance, she cannot bear to watch or share in it. Her gaze retreats to the fire, burning enough to rival the flames as quiet wrath pulses low in her belly. She frowns, fighting the sting of tears, blaming it on the smoke—all the while unaware of his eyes on her.

The scribe arrives in two days, when all has gotten worse.

Ben lies low in his bed, lips chapped regardless of the water, fingers noticeably trembling. He does not reach to feed himself anymore, his usual stubbornness weighed down by the weary burden in his mind. Instead he closes his eyes, opening his mouth to eat, chew slowly, and swallow after he’s regained the strength and her insistent encouragement.

Rey scowls at his wound. The leakage has subsided, but the redness remains, a blistering hoard of skin stretching from it. Blackness rises around it as swollen as a plague of locusts, destroying all in its path. But still she treats it, running it in water, sour wine, honey—all she can, as much as she can—and will until their stores run out.

She doesn’t leave his side even as the scribe enters—a short, hunched man called Teedo. He wears an honored sash along the white of his toga, sitting in Ben’s chair as though he owns it. It fills Rey with anger that he would act so garishly, but she only glares for a moment before returning to her task, intent to ignore this man who so obviously holds respect for no one but himself.

Ahsoka stands before Teedo, her hair unbound for the first time since Rey has known her. It falls in glorious waves of silver and white down her back, her age and wisdom captivating in its beauty as sunlight streams through the open doors to illuminate its razor strands. “Master Teedo,” she greets solemnly, bowing her head.

Teedo grunts, withdrawing a folded wax tablet from his linen satchel. He wastes no time for pleasantries. “You are still head servant of this house, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Eh,” he grunts, picking his blunt teeth with his stylus before marking the wax tablet. “And the staff?”

“Dopheld Mitaka, an imperial messenger,” she reports, waiting for him to stop, “and Rey, female slave.”

“My ancilla,” Ben corrects, surprising them. His voice comes hoarse and tremulous, but manages to persist as he sets his simmering gaze on Teedo’s leathery face. “She is my personal attendant.”
“Same difference,” the scribe huffs, but marks it down anyway. He moves to sit on the edge of the seat, balancing the tablet in his lap as he meets Ben’s stare. “I found no records of your will from your service in the army. Have you any family, or heirs?”

Rey watches his face, catching only a flicker of hesitation before he replies, “No.”

“Mm, eh,” Teedo grimaces, as if to resist a pleased smile. No doubt Ben’s answer has made his job easier. “Then to whom will you leave your estate?” he asks noncommittally, stylus at the ready.

“Ahsoka Tano of Rome.”

“And your possessions?”

Rey pauses, feeling Ben’s focus on her. She looks up to see his face, the pain of his injuries undoubtedly the source of the sorrow in his eyes. In their shared silence, she knows that this question regards her—his possession—and that what he answers will decide her fate.

Meeting Teedo’s beady glare with one of his own, Ben asserts. “Ahsoka Tano. All of it—my wealth, my horse, my slave... and my records.”

Caught by his final sentiment, Rey stares into his hollowing face as it ignores her, challenging this Teedo to combat him. As Teedo writes, an overwhelming sadness floods within her, knowing in her heart that Ben said those words for her to hear. That even in death, he will leave the scrolls behind with them, the final traces of his voice, as soundless as it will be.

The last will and testament written, Teedo copies the script onto a packed sheet of papyrus, waxing it with the official seal, and hands it to Ahsoka before snatching down his payment from the mantelpiece, leaving without so much as a farewell.

Ahsoka sighs, holding the thin scroll in her hands as daintily as one might a newly-crafted flute. “It is done,” her voice trembles, her eyes red and large in their sockets, the blue too bright.

Rey ignores her, continuing her work. But as she begins to slather the honey over him, a large, cold hand wraps around her wrist, halting her progress.

“Rey…” Ben murmurs.

His voice is too soft. Too calm, when all she feels is anger, buzzing and mad, spiraling out of her control. She wrenches her wrist away, returning it to him, intent to see this through, but he grabs her again.

“Stop.”

The word breaks the damn in her heart, hot tears rising to the surface before she can think to stop them. “No.”

“Rey—”

“No!” she cries, sobbing once as she meets his eyes. He looks so tired, on the edge of death with his hollowing cheeks, the darkness looming over them. His limp hair and colorless skin. She denies it, defiant in the set of her jaw as her sticky hand clasps the chill of his tremering wrist. “I won’t stop,” she gasps, mouth wet, throat tight. “Not until it’s gone.”

“It will be,” he promises lowly. But his words are not in hope. He glances to Ahsoka, whose own tears remain subdued. He swallows thickly, gazing into the streaking sunlight along his sheets, lost
in the floating dust motes. “Our secrets will die with me. In time, Ahsoka will release you without suspicion.”

She shakes her head, as if it will keep him from speaking, but every word away. “No…”

His hand moves, and in one motion they both lie in his palm, his fingers holding loosely—with his remaining strength. He seeks her eyes, though she denies him. “Snoke will suspect us no longer. You will be free.”

Incredulously, she meets his eyes, finding them gentle and patient, full of a sadness she cannot understand beyond her own. Her voice comes as a choked whisper, syllables prisoners in chains. “But you will be dead.”

Something passes along his face like a fleeting shadow, as if he sees something written in her own. “…I’ve made my peace with that.”

The lie is a knife in her gut, hot and splintering into shards. In anger, in hurt and betrayal at his submission, she pulls away and lets her flying feet carry her into the courtyard, into the stables, crashing at the door as she pushes it open, the sunlight ignorant to the cold agony within her.

The sea of waving grass calls to her with its beckoning swells, and she steps into it, the ground fertile and soft, giving way as she falls to her knees. With clasped hands she covers her mouth, air hissing through her nose as she closes her eyes, and weeps.

Her shoulders rack with unsteady sobs, her heart and mind paralyzed by fear. Not of the unknown, no, but a fear of what she knows all too well—the loneliness of sand and stillness, of endless darkness despite the sun’s light, trapped in her skin with no one to see her as she is… as he sees her.

Tears spill over her fingers, hot like fire to join the sweat and stick of her palms, the seeping wallow of her nose as the idea she tried so long to resist tears away the curtain of her denial, leaving her naked and exposed...

...that the man she loves is going to die.

A shadow falls over her, a familiar presence falling to join her in the grass. Thin arms, the smell of linen and Summer flowers, of dyes and skin—all of it envelops her in a tight embrace, her head cradled into the warmth of her mentor’s hand.

Rey sobs, struggling to breathe out, only sucking in the cruel sting of air. “He’s dying, Ahsoka. He’s dying and there’s nothing I can do…” she whimpers.

The shuddering breath of Ahsoka’s own despair ripples along Rey’s hair like the smooth of her wrinkled hand over her scalp, soothing the girl as best as touch will allow. She closes her eyes, holding Rey close as a babe, and reprimands herself for her hasty suspicions.

It’s plain to her now that Rey could never poison him, nor plot against him, her loyalty and grief too profound to deny. The words of Maz Kanata sing clear in her memory—that what ails her master is not only a sickness of the body, but a sickness of the heart.

Feeling the soft of Rey’s unwashed hair, Ahsoka holds her tighter, shaking her head. “You’ve done more than enough, Rey. More than enough.”

Her hands reach to hold onto Ahsoka’s tunica, wrapping around the woman’s neck as they cling to each other, their tears falling to the soil as they share lamentations beneath the wide, Roman sky.
It would be a lie to say he did not imagine a life with her.

A life. What a concept, that is. Before her, there was nothing to life but mere existence. To kill and survive, to thrive under the thumb of a master so cruel as to strip away his name, to label him a rabid cur; a dog gnawing the bones of the dead.

In his life with her, he did not know what to expect, and in that had come such profound hopes that now, as he lies still, unable to move, his heart pounding in his chest so hard it could burst, those hopes only bring him pain. A streaming flow of anguish from his mind to the soles of his feet.

A life free from Snoke’s invisible chains—his and hers, both. A life by the sea, in the home he knew as a boy, of rolling hills and grass so green that she would hold nothing but pleasantness in her eyes, that with them she would look on him in love.

But it is a different life he sees for her now—where that love is for someone else. He sees it so clearly he mourns his own death; sees her free to live, to marry and bear children, to find happiness… and forget him.

He closes his eyes in the stillness, willing the darkness to take him quickly, for the God he forsook to leave him be, for his selfish heart to let her go.

All her life, Rey was capable of two things.

The first was to survive. To find her way around the struggles of her surroundings. And no matter where she was, or where she went, finding ways became the norm. To act, to do, even when things seemed impossible.

And the second, to hope.

As the dark of the night spawns monsters in the shadows, the whispers of fear do not touch her. Her body moves lightly, hollow from its tears, full of something new as she approaches his bedside, the fire’s light dancing atop the parchment of his face. Her hand falls to touch his, finding it cold, his breathing shallow, rapid pulse beginning to slow—and in her heart she knows that it will not persist until morning.

Unless.

Slowly, carefully, she goes to her knees beside him, her hand on his as he stirs, drowsing. The secret she’d held onto for so long rises within her, the dangers of it mattering not as she whispers, “Ben.” He frowns, as if he heard her, or lies caught in a nightmare worse than her own. But still she speaks, letting her heart fall from her lips with quiet tears. “Don’t go,” she chokes. “Please, don’t leave me here alone.”

As she speaks, her thumb traces over his knuckles, stirring from his darkness the faintest trace of light and thought as he lies still, too weak to give it voice. You’re not alone.

Her hold tightens as she brings his cold hand to her face, her every word quivering and soft against his palm. “I can’t do this without you,” she admits. “I don’t want to.”
Rey…

“And there is nothing I can do to stop this. I know that,” she sniffles, the warm drop of a tear cascading down his limp finger from her heated cheek.

Rey…

“But there is someone who still could.”

…I love you.

Resolute, Rey closes her eyes, opening the darkness in her heart, pulling it until it frays, uncovering the light that’s always been there, inside of her. Led by it, she clasps his hand, the warmth of her body wrapping around his cold flesh as she feels a familiar presence surround her, filling her with its glory. She sobs beneath its pressure, desperate to save him, to uncover herself as she is. “Abba…” she whispers, strained. Her voice comes again. Softer, not yet broken. “Abba…”

And as she speaks, as her pleas lace the air with earnestly and hope, Ben Solo’s mind is dragged down into nothingness.

Chapter End Notes

[Hiring a scribe became a more legal affair in the Imperial Era of Ancient Rome. They normally wrote their legal documents on papyrus with pen, as it was easier to craft letters and preserve legibility]

[A wax tablet (called a "Tabula") was the most common writing surface in Rome. It consisted of conjoined wooden slabs with wax inside and a stylus. One would press into the wax to write, and could warm the wax to start over or erase their "page." This is where the term "blank slate" originated, from the Latin phrase "tabula rasa"]

[In Rome, soldiers were expected to have a living will in the event that they died in battle. For citizens of the Imperial era, their wills and testaments were far more complex, focusing primarily on the inheritance of wealth, possessions, and land. Slaves would often be passed down generation to generation, since they were not categorized as people, but possessions]

[Sepsis today is nearly incurable if not treated immediately. Despite their remarkable advancements, the many poultices or medicines they had would not have cured Ben's illness. His suffering involves the second stage of Sepsis, where a rash and swelling breaks out around the affected area, sleepiness/ drowsiness is more effective, the body succumbs to violent tremors/ shivers, and the heart rate dangerously slows—ultimately leading to organ failure and death]

[According to Luke 11:1-13 and Matthew 6:9-13, Jesus Christ of Nazareth instructs his followers to address God as "Father" in prayer, as this will not make prayer some command, but a natural result of belief and faith in His existence. These versions are where we derive what is known today as "The Lord's Prayer"]

["Abba" is a word of Aramaic and Greek origin, meaning "Father"]
Recovery

Chapter Notes

It's 4am—AGAIN—but honestly, this is the only way I'm meant to write; a dark, dark denizen of the night.

Terrible pun/poem aside, I want to thank you all so so so SO much for all of your amazing support. It just blows my mind that you are all here with me, encouraging me to keep writing, no matter how insecure I feel. You blow me away—THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU!

And a special thanks to my beloved ladies at The Writing Den, especially Dalzo, Reylocaligraphy, RebelRebel, and bunilicious. The four of you have been my biggest cheerleaders this week, and no matter how stressed I get, you never fail to make me smile. I love you so so so so much (╥﹏╥)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In the day the sun is bright against the rippling fields, the nights cool and illuminated with silver on the ridged slopes of olive trees, the stalking shadows of lonely night watched over by silent, blinking stars.

He sits in the shade of the clay-stone wall, listening to the rustling crack and shift of leafy vines, their tendrils spiraling about the familiar banisters and beams. With squinting eyes he gazes into the expanse of the hilly slope. Beyond here, he knows, the sea awaits—just across the untamed plains, the steep cliff and ragged bluffs. A place his footprints in the sand have become little more than pits, dug deep by age and growing limbs.

“Ben.”

Her voice calls him from his imaginings, the fantasy of loafing upon the rocky shore, tossing stones—where he would much rather be, and be doing—disturbed like rippling waters.

“Yes, Mother,” he answers, rising to stand.

She comes to him—just his height, or he, hers—and takes his arm in her warm, soft hand. Her smile is simple yet proud as she speaks, squeezing gently as she tugs him to join her in walking beside the flowerbed. “Come. It is time to meet your teacher.”

Her hair, long and loose, sways along the small of her back in gentle curls, catching his eyes in the glinting sunlight and nostalgia of childhood, left behind further and further with every step.

He scoffs, letting her cling to him. “We’ve met before—you speak of him often.”

“Because he is a good man. And a great teacher.” She smiles again, this time ruefully, as she is prone to when warning him to behave. “It will do your restless mind some good.”

They pass through the courtyard garden, the trickling fountain dribbling along the stone. Shadows of slaves weave in and out through the vineyard beyond, collecting the harvest with their faithful hands. The scent of grapes dances along the air, carried by the salt of the not-so-distant shores.
He walks intent on it, rather then where they go, knowing in his heart that it will be too long until he smells it again.

As they come to the center of the house, a man in robes stands alone, admiring the ornate tapestries before turning to the sound of their steps. His eyes, bright and hopeful, cast widely upon Ben as his lips crack into a satisfied smile.

He opens his arms. “My nephew. Come closer; let me look at you…”

Ben’s mother releases him, and with a cautious obedience—but strange, lingering pride—he steps forward, accepting his uncle’s embrace with adolescent brevity. “Hello, Uncle.”

The Rabbi’s smile only widens as he opens his arms to his sister, exchanging kisses with her cheeks. “Is all prepared?”

“Yes,” she replies, voice thick. “My staff waits to load your wagon for the journey.”

“Then let’s not waste time,” he insists light-heartedly, motioning to Ben. “I will leave you to say your goodbyes.”

When he’s gone, she turns to find her son’s eyes downcast, his hands curled tightly at his sides. In her silence, he speaks. “He should be here.”

She considers him thoughtfully, but with no small sense of patience. “Your father is a busy man.”

“Too busy for his own son?”

“You know that’s not true—”

“It is,” he contests, facing her. His mouth slips into a frown, brow knitting as anger rises within him. “Isn’t that why you’re sending me away?”

She matches his frown with a sharp stare. “You are going with Luke to learn—and that is more than can be said for your father. You should be grateful.”

As she speaks, he returns his glare to the floor, the sound of the fountain carried within.

In a shift of cloth, a slip of warmth cups his cheek, turning him to meet her eyes. They are kind and soft—their slopes reflected in his own, he knows—dark with purpose. Her voice drips with it, staining him as she speaks. “We only want what’s best for you.”

His lip quivers at the words. What’s best for him. For sixteen years, she’s said those words, all at different times, but with one profound meaning. What’s best had been them together. What’s best had been their smiles. What’s best had been those footprints on the sand—three sets and one too small, too shallow to stay anywhere but in memory.

“My son,” she whispers, pulling down his head to lay a kiss upon his crown. “What waits for you is greater than we can give. Be guided by His light; your purpose will be made clear.”

Her blessing stirs him to move, taking her dainty wrists in his growing hands with all the tenderness he holds. He looks into her eyes again to find them welled with tears, their sting inspiring his own as he shifts, embracing her fully. He buries his nose in her shoulder, clinging on to the comforting scent of light and memory as he murmurs a low promise. “I’ll come home soon.”

She smooths her hand along his back, speaking beside his ear, into their shared blood. “I know you
In the darkness he feels the weight of his body pushing down against something firm, his back stiff and aching, his skull throbbing, forcing him out.

His eyes open slowly, one after the other, fixing blearily upon the hand—his hand—lying loose-fisted over the white of his linen sheet. As he wakes, his fingers twitch, feeling the fabric as though it’s the first time touching anything—raw and tender like fresh skin.

Turning his head, Ben winces at the crick in his neck, realizing he is sitting partially upright, laid back into a nest of pillows. Ah, yes, he recalls this, now—his fever and illness, the horrible pain of breathing, of being.

But the memory is short lived.

He notices a slight weight against his thigh, looking to see Rey hunched over the lip of his mattress, her arms crossed cushion to hide her face. Her spine rises and falls with the peaceful undulation of sleep, her lashes fluttering, peeking from their cover.

Ben sighs, finding immediate solace in seeing her there—a foreign pleasure in her unconscious touch. The image of her concern for him surges, and in realizing that he is still alive, Ben considers her with wonder, amazed that he has opened his eyes to find her here, beside him again.

With new strength, he lifts his arm, finding it blissfully free of tremors as he reaches out, unabashedly smoothing his hand over the fine arc of her head. Her hair is soft under his touch, strays catching like silk on his thumb, and before he is done she rouses, stirring.

He says nothing, watching as she lifts her head, rubbing her eyes. The simplest of gestures—yet it fills him like some grand movement. She doesn’t seem to realize his hand is still on her, and now nor does he, as she stares at him, sleepy and dazed. Her voice comes hoarse, from rest or disbelief, he isn’t sure which. “Ben?”

His name from her mouth pulls something inside of him, a power he didn’t believe he would have again. In the distant scape of his thoughts he knows he has confessed to her—though the words went unspoken, for he lacked the strength to try. But now he finds it anew, unbending, alive. “Rey…”

All at once, her eyes widen, brighter than stars as she comes fully awake. Something like joy, or sadness, washes over her face, her gaze shimmering as she sobs once and closes the distance, throwing her arms around his neck. “Ben!”

He grunts when they collide, her weight surprisingly jarring under the tight clasp of her arms, the heat of her body sinking through his skin, warming his bones. Hesitantly, his arms move to encircle her, his hands welcoming the dull pain of her stola before his own instinct takes hold—crushing her against him as she laughs wetly into his neck.

When she shifts he doesn’t want to let her go, his body craving the closeness of her own, the sweet nook of her collar, but she moves to hover over him, her cheeks raised by a smile he’s never seen before. She sobs again, sniffling. Beautiful.

She touches his face. His jaw, his hair, her hands almost careful. Ben swallows, reaching to do the same—to brush a stray wisp behind her ear, to feel the soft, tender flesh of her cheek. It warms under his languid caresses, dipping pliantly under his thumb—the two of them remaining still in the silence, yet drowned by the sound of hearts beating. Eyes meeting, never parting.
There are so many words to be said, but in this moment, with her face over him, none seem to matter as much as they once did. There is only now—and now, Ben knows, he is still alive. Weary and worn, but alive.

“I thought you were gone,” she whispers. “I thought I lost you…”

Her knuckles brush the hidden shell of his ear, the touch stoking the embers smoldering in his chest. Her words call to his memory, the sound of her tears returning like some distant dream.

Don’t go. Please… Don’t leave me alone.

He could almost scoff at the impossibility of it all—that he would ever leave her of his own will, the idea that she would never want him to. But he does nothing, only watch and feel the soft silk of her hair as it looms between his fingers, keeping her near. “You didn’t,” he murmurs, voice hoarse from disuse. His eyes return to her, hard with burning promise. “You won’t.”

She laughs at him, a small breath of relief as her small hand slides over his own, welcoming his palm against her face with trusting, closed eyes. The touch itself is a spark, the gesture and overwhelming presence of her, taking wing within him, threatening to ignite and consume all in its path.

When her gaze falls he is there to catch it, unblinking, heart pounding in his chest as he moves to cradle her head. At the shift there is a different sight to behold in her—her other hand taking root in his hair, the dark centers of her eyes swelling, wide and waiting.

His eyes pull to her lips, parted and pink, a feminity perched just within reach of what remains of his control. Swallowing the newfound gathering in his mouth, his body awakens to the stunning reality of her long, sensuous body draped over him, her hot hand trailing down his neck to the bare skin of his chest, the space between their sex held only by the strength in her soft, malleable legs…

He thinks he could kiss her now, that their shared relief and her long, drooping lashes are welcome enough to relieve something else, and in a light’s moment he wonders at the potential of her taste, the proper pressure to give—and all at once is cursed with cold-blooded fear. Still, his hand moves to pull her closer, to test and see, to let the mercy of fate guide them here, too.

“Oh—am I interrupting something?”

As if awoken—ah, such a familiar, damnable expression!—Rey winces, but does not draw away. Instead, she buries her head beside his neck, hiding her face in the pillows. He keeps his grip loose on her, content to sap the warmth of her waist with his long fingers as he looks to find Maz Kanata in the doorway, her expression as amused as her lilting tone.

Yes, he wants to answer, but refrains. Behind Maz the form of a taller woman appears, her taut, tired features melting away at the sight of him. He gapes, the visage of her lacking both braids and sleep unnerving. “Ahsoka.”

In an instant she brushes past the midwife, her teary gaze intent on him as she rushes to his side. On instinct, he opens his other arm to her, feeling her crash—much more gracefully—against him. “Oof,” he grunts, but lets the pain flow down, taking her into his embrace. Ahsoka sniffs quietly as Rey’s warmth meets his neck, and he closes his eyes, savoring the life that balances between them all, clutching tightly as they hold fast to one another, bathing in the quiet joy of relief.

“How is this possible?” Ahsoka asks, breathless and smiling into his hair, smoothing her hand along its shining crown.
The one to voice their shared thought is none other than Maz Kanata, who stands at the foot of his bed with a satisfied grin. “It’s not. If I hadn’t seen it with these old eyes, I may have never believed it.”

Ben considers her, in part grateful for her faithful service, but quite distracted by the shift of Rey’s face to watch her, their cheeks nearly touching as she clings.

Not that he’s complaining.

“How much do I owe?” he questions softly.

“Bah,” she waves at him with a wrinkled hand, her thin lips pursing with disdain. “Let Ematt handle the specifics. In any case, I’m sure he’ll be eager to see his prized fighter recovered.”

Rey flinches next to him, but Ben maintains his composure, tracing his finger along the fabric over her back in a blind effort to soothe. “‘Recovered?’” he echoes, brow piqued. He’s not recovered fully, he’s sure… he couldn’t be.

“Hm,” Maz chortles, hobbling over. She shoos Ahsoka away, and Rey as well, to Ben’s silent vexation. As she stands at his bedside, she moves to lift the sheet, admiring what lay beneath before tugging it away. “See for yourself.”

Ben looks to his injury, breath caught in his throat at the sight. What was once mottled black with illness, draining a malignant ooze, has become no more than white skin, forming itself into scar tissue around a pink, perfectly cleaned slab of torn flesh.

His lips part, incredulity numbing all logical thought. “This… this is—”

“—a miracle, Master Ren,” Maz finishes, her tone light and mirthful. She justs a decisive finger towards Rey. “That girl hasn’t slept in days, caring for this vile wound of yours. Working day and night, scarcely touching a crumb for herself, all to make you well.”

Under her grand declaration, Rey folds her hands in front of her, staring sheepishly at the floor. But Ben feels opposite, watching Maz Kanata inquisitively as she speaks, his mind drifting elsewhere, memories flooding in slowly from waking, as if recalling a long-forgotten psalm.

To heal from poisoned blood is unheard of. When Ahsoka told him so, he did not argue—merely came to terms with his impending death, as best he knew how. And yet here he sits, alive and well, his fever without trace, his contusion nearly healed. It shouldn’t be possible, but it is.

All because of her.

Ben turns his head to look upon Rey, the light of late morning sun flooding in from the open terrace doors, illuminating her—yet casting her in shadow. An unfathomable gratitude swells within him, his mind scouring for methods of repaying her in kind, until her eyes lift to his, her smile soft, expression mild and…

Abba… Abba…

...pleading.

His blood freezes in his veins, every muscle and sinew retching from the absence of movement, leaving him gaping at her in what anyone could think as awe, or unspoken recognition. But inside of him a war wages, one he knows from her dwindling smile must be surrendered, for now.
“I see,” he murmurs, breaking eyes with her. He looks to Ahsoka, tone only wavering in slight. “Has lunch been prepared?”

She blanches, gleefully off-put. “No, Young Master.”

He shifts, propping himself to sit straighter, his shoulders aching with the effort. “Then prepare it,” he urges, his stomach coiling with hunger. The sound of it comes to his aid like thundering horses. “Quickly.”

Unfalteringly, she nods, leaving in her long, even strides to see to his command. His gaze shifts to Maz, who has already retreated to her physician’s box upon his cushioned chair.

“Will you be joining us?” he asks, withholding a groan. Though the wound itself is nearly cured, the yellow bruising and ache in his ribs has yet to subside its ceaseless pounding.

She shakes her head, hoisting the box to hold at her side, smirking. “I think I’ve stayed long enough. Besides, your ancilla seems quite capable of handling you from here, hm?”

He chews his cheek in the wake of her shameless attitude, but on the grounds that she played a hefty role in saving his life, allows it. “Very well. Then I will see you out. Rey,” he calls, waving her closer. “Help me up.”

He can feel his name on the tip of her tongue as though he were the one about to speak, her hesitation to assist him palpable, but watches her conflicted face shift and think better of it. “Yes, Master.” Slowly, she offers her arm, then her shoulder, easing him out of his bed in no more than one of his finer skirts, now wrinkled.

His knees pop and toes ache, blood rushing down and threatening to make him fall with it. But she’s strong enough to brace him until the feeling in his legs returns, the strength to move more powerful with each step as they trail behind Maz Kanata into the atrium, then the front door.

They stand together on the stone porch, watching in silence as the little woman mounts her ass, riding at the pace of its slow, portly waddle.

Rey breathes out as the woman fades from view, taking in the swollen relief and aching soreness of her back with the delightful caress of sunlight on her skin. The air has grown murky as of late, a muggy humidity threatening to descend at any time. The heat of his body serves to gather sweat along her arm, though she cannot bring herself to mind in the slightest, overwhelmed with the satisfaction of—

“You’re a Christian.”

Rey goes very still next to him, keeping her eyes on the horizon, the sun illuminating the shining sea of grass as a numbing peace joins through her, catching her in its web—even as his words strike her like a spearhead, sharp and thick, gouging into her throat.

He must have heard her in his sleep. Known from his own past why she would forgo food, when she’d never given inclination to denying herself the plentiful in his household before.

Even so… no matter the anger she knows he will feel, it will have been worth it. She wouldn’t blame him for turning her over to his emperor now—her presence alone is too dangerous for him, even for the secret they share.

If she could bring herself to regret it, perhaps her eyes would sting with tears. If she could harvest even one grain of hopelessness, she would fall to her knees and beg to stay. Here, in the one place
She’s been seen as she is, despite all she’s kept locked away.

Her response comes strong, unwavering. He already knows her too deeply, leaving her nowhere to hide while her faith, her only hope, offers no room for denial. “Yes.”

Ben chews his cheek, sighing as he turns from her, limping into the house. “Of course you are.”

He leaves her standing there, looking in after him with doleful eyes as he distances them. “Are you going to have me killed?” she asks flatly.

He halts, the rippled divots of his back heaving as he braces his hand against the wall, turning to fix her a reproachful glare. Inside she sees a simmering anger, a crevice etched deep into the already fathomless wells of his eyes. “No,” he answers, tone dark. “But if you want to survive, I suggest you forsake it.”

Rey frowns, his assertion ressurecting a newfound choler of her own. “I won’t.”

Scowling, Ben continues to hold her eyes, finding in them the quality of mountains—impossibly arresting, immovably resolute. He scoffs, looking away, shaking his head at his own misery. Of course. Of course the woman he’s so inclined to love would have a secret of her own, one more deadly than the act of refusing her could ever be. He almost laughs at the absurdity of it all. “You should.”

“Haven’t you been listening?” she snaps. “Haven’t you seen it yourself?” Pointing to his exposed side, the bright rose of his scarring injury, she comes to stand beside him on squared feet, glaring into his eyes with the same defiance as the first moment he ever saw her—bright enough to rattle the stars. He’s caught helplessly within it, exposed as she continues. “I thought you were gone, Ben. You should have been! But you’re…” she looks him over, as if to find the words, or catch her breath. “You’re here.” Her eyes find him again. Adamant. Unwavering. “And if it’s my life that’s lost for it, then let it be done, because I will never doubt again.”

His eyes twitches as her words sink into him, each curve of her tenacious tongue a loosed arrow in his skin. Heavy, he looks to the floor before him, avoiding the burn of her gaze, the cold guilt unfurling in his heart knowing that now there is only so much more at risk for her—and his powerlessness to stop it from living on in her faith.

Rey softens at the sight of his glum expression, watching as hurt and anger battles over the soft features of his face. She comes to stand before him, then, bending her head in an effort to catch his gaze once more, her tone dripping with finality. “And neither should you.”

Closing his eyes, Ben breathes out slowly, memories of his youth beginning to resurge, to claw and tear against the nailed coffins buried deep within his soul. He speaks softly, the words breaking themselves over his teeth. “It’s too late.”

Her chest constricts at the sight of him, the bow of his once proud head, the slouch of his strong shoulders. A resounding solicitude expands beneath her skin, lifting free her inhibitions in exchange for fingers reaching towards him, the real him. “That’s not true,” she whispers.

When her fingertips tentatively brace the skin of his sternum, their warmth sinks inside, winding around his bones like ivy as the gentleness in her voice pries him open, breath leaving him in a gasp as shame and longing dance through his desperate, burning flesh.

He swallows it down, pushing it away, more unworthy to love this slave than he is to be alive at all. “It is.” Lenient to his desire, he covers her hand with his, pressing her palm against the
unsteady thump of his heart. Perhaps it is in this way, he realizes, she could finally see him. Know him as no one ever has.

And then, when she does, when she sees him, when she hates him anew, he can be certain that his love was never meant to be more than a dying man’s dream.

He looks up to see her there, the world around them blurring, past and future left in the dim, save for the light in her eyes and the blessing of a voice he’s never forgotten.

*Be guided by His light; your purpose will be made clear.*

His hold on her hand tightens, supple with urgency as he calls to her, seeking that which he does not know, but yearns to show her all the same. “Come with me,” he bids. "It’s time you learned who your master really is.”

Chapter End Notes
LOOK AT THIS STUNNING ARTWORK FOR THIS CHAPTER'S ALMOST-KISS BY THE LEGENDARY Selunchen!!!! HER LINEWORK IS FLAWLESS, THE COSTUMING IS SUPERB, AND I'M CRYING WITH JOY. PLEASE SEND HER YOUR LOVE AND SUPPORT! *happy dances into the sunset*

I'M GOING TO FAINT, I CAN'T TAKE ALL THIS LOVE. THANK YOU THANK YOU TO THE AMAZING sketchesbylaura FOR SURPRISING ME WITH THE SCENE THAT I'VE BEEN LOOKING FORWARD TO FOR MONTHS *gross sobbing*

No story notes today。*(T^T)*。
Hey ya'll! It's been a little bit. I'm sure you can guess why ^_^ This chapter is a LOT longer than the others, mainly because of content. I would like to take this time to remind everyone that Ancient Rome/ Greece was messed up, and this chapter will confront some darker themes—as well as religious ones.

Either way, this week has been super hectic for me on a lot of personal levels... but the relentless support from you all has inspired me to work whenever I can. This may not be a 4am update, but believe me I have stayed up wayyyy later than any respectable student should. Please consider it my way of thanking you for all of your wonderful, aMAZING encouragement. <3

AND!! GLORY'S FRAY IS NOW OVER 100,000 WORDS LONG!!! OFFICIALLY EPIC-NOVEL LENGTH!! *swoons*

(Also, to those who haven't seen, there are new fanarts! Please check chapters 1, 8, 19, and 30 and give the artists some love! ٩(̄ω̄)۶)

“Sit.”

Removing herself from his side, Rey skirts to the table in the middle of the tablinum, taking her seat with no small amount of reservation.

Ben breathes deeply, the drag slow and, for the first time in days, without the scratching rasp of death. The pinch in his brow is not one of pain as he sits upon his chaise, his bare back meeting the velvet plush—but something else, a deeper agony kept locked away.

Until now.

He covers his mouth with his hand, avoiding her gaze as his fingers shift over the growing wisps above his lip, upon his chin. But he does not hide the words from her. He knows he can’t. Not anymore.

He finds her eyes intent on him, tired and sunken, hair still unkempt from its bind, though altogether lovely—fruits of her devotion more worthy a reward than anything he could give.  “There is something you must know.”

She studies him silently, trying to understand how things came to this again—the distance he takes from her, the tepid tether between their bodies despite all separation, throbbing in her veins.

Gulping, Rey nods, her normal disposition to withstand the intensity of her master’s attention straining from lack of exercise. Already the sight of him regaining color, eyes focused on her, his healing body left on full display... has begun to distract her. Again.

But still her mind wavers, confusion abundant from his damnable tendency to speak vaguely. Patiently, she reasons with herself, asking not what, but, “Why?”
He rests a loose fist over his leg, a gesture of weary sublimation as he sighs. “We’ve kept our share of secrets, Rey. After all you’ve done… you should know the truth.”

“What truth?”

He considers his hand for a moment, mouth pursed, until his eyes return to her, shining with a thin sheen of unshed tears. “Me.”

Air forces itself through her lips, parting them to speak, to understand, when the red curtain is pulled open, spilling light across the lamplit floor.

Ahsoka stands with a steaming platter, moving dutifully inside. Immediately the heat within them is directed toward other matters, more or less primal than honesty.

The scent of pork winds through the air, seeping into Rey’s nose, dancing temptation on her tongue as it’s presented at the table, loaves of fresh, unleavened bread spread like coins along the rim.

With decisive movements in the newfound silence, Ahsoka plates a hefty portion, carrying it to Ben with slices of pear and apple-sauce. He takes them in hand, nodding his thanks, surveying his plate like a man suddenly in want of appetite.

Rey, however, feels no such sentiment, eying the plate with a yearning nausea, the desire to eat so consuming that the smell alone seizes in her gut.

Ahsoka murmurs to him in Latin, too quiet for Rey to hear, before Ben replies with a jut of his chin towards the curtain. “Leave us.”

Hesitantly, the woman obeys, her bright, knowing gaze flashing to meets Rey’s. Inside her mentor, for just one moment, there is a flicker of meaning. Reassurance and grief.

And then they are alone again.

Ben folds his lips, staring at her. “Eat.”

Rey glances at the spread, the juicy cuts of pork leaking onto the plate, and hesitates.

Worry and anger brawl in his chest, tainting his voice with strain. He will not let her go hungry; not in his house—no matter the stubbornness of her beliefs.

He speaks with little feeling, letting reason cloak the ever-present desire to care for her. “Your prayers were answered. You needn’t fast anymore.” His observation becomes an order, baring his teeth. “Eat.”

Rey ignores his building animosities, giving in to the hollow of her belly and the stretch of her arm to grasp the warm strip of meat, bringing piece after piece into her mouth, filling it without allowing time to swallow. He watches her as she does, silently partaking the sweet fruits and bread, leaving her to herself as he tries to formulate his thoughts.

To discover her faith was a surprise, to say the least. Though, perhaps, he should have recognized it before. The hatred she holds for the arena, for the nature of his profession, bespoke that. Loudly. And yet, when she told him she knew Hebrew, he’d only attributed that to her eclectic knowledge, and little else.

He studies her now, watching as she chews open-mouthed, inhaling every morsel as she never has before, and he thinks to her life in Egypt, what little he knows of it. Sighing, he considers asking
her, but lets it rest for another time.

For now, he decides, it would be best to let her see his own life, instead.

Finishing before her, he sets his plate aside and murmurs, “I was born in Spring.”

Rey pauses, mouth full, and looks up at him with her wide, searching eyes.

Taking that as silent ascent, he steels himself, sinking into the fields of his memory. A dull edge cuts along the rim of his psyche, stripping away the cool resolve to bare only truth for her, this woman who’s saved his life not once, but twice. This woman who sits before him, an abomination to his master. This woman who sits scattered and worn, but beautiful all the same.

This woman he loves.

---

*He is born in Spring.*

*On the cusp of sundown, the scarlet spires stretching their talons along the sky, a vicious predator looms over one hope, one sole heir, lying naked, red, and screaming in her arms.*

*She sighs, wanton with relief as she wraps him in swaddling cloth, his toothless mouth wide, eyes tightly shut, hair dark and plentiful as it rests plastered along his soft head. She coos, in love, and kisses him, tasting the yolk of life that links them still.*

*At her touch, the scent of her, he calms, snorting his derision for this new, cold, and foreign home. She laughs as she is cleaned by the slaves of her father’s house, their words of congratulations like fading sparks, leaving her in dark, exhausted, unparalleled felicity.*

*She touches his small hands as they escape their binding, curling over the soft of her breast, their mindless touch like dull, pricking needles. The smoothness of his skin is impossible to her—nothing short of a miracle.*

*And when, at length, his upturned face twitches, eyes slitting open to fixate blurrily over her own, she sees the soul of her child, and lets his name speak through her. “My son,” she whispers, squeezing his hand, feeling the hot pulse of life within his slight body. “My Ben.”*

*At that he shifts, mouth splitting in a yawn, small tongue wet and devoid of milk, which is soon rectified.*

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*When she regains her strength the next day, she dresses herself well, preparing to see her husband with braids in her hair. His journey across the sea was long, but the weeks passed for her in a loneliness she can withstand.*

*Sitting before her vanity, she chances a look to Ben, who lay swaddled and sleeping in his basket. Worry threads through her, and she frowns at his size, the glaring white of his skin.*

*The letter she received from her husband mere days ago expressed both happiness and relief, an eagerness to see their child born an heir to his name. For that fate, Leia knows, she has been blessed to deliver a son. But in her joy, she had not considered the stark reality of his smaller, meeker size. Looking at him now he is mostly cloth, born so early into the world... He breathes as any infant does, but since that day cries so little, as content and pale as the dead.*

*An early grief strikes her like a knife, making her weak as she braces against the vanity, trying to
slow her racing heart. She looks into the mirror, finding a woman staring back in quiet terror. In her mind, she reasons that this woman’s fear is irrational—that certainly the boy’s father will have mercy on them both, will give him the chance to grow. To live.

Settled by that, she carries him out and into the atrium of the house, the scent of growing grapes weaving through the calm night air rustling the tapestries. Firelight flickers over the busted heads of her ancestors, their glazed eyes tracing her every step with their stony judgement.

Holding her son tightly to her, she stands before the dias, where her husband turns to fix his dark eyes and roguish smile upon her. He strides forward, hair mussed as he reaches for her face, placing a quick kiss upon her lips. “It’s been too long, Puella,” he grins, gaze flitting down to the covered bundle in her arms. Excitement lights his eyes when they return to her. “How is he?”

Her mouth quirks at the edge, her worry dispelled in the light of his usual playfulness. “You think this child a ‘him,’ shepherd boy?”

He offers a laughing scoff, reminding her of when he was little more than an enamored sheep-herder, and she merely the daughter to a wealthy benefactor. “The slaves told me so. Come.”

Taking her by the arm, he lifts her onto the dias, bringing them before the shrine of her family now gone—yet born anew. His tunic shifts in the silence that drowns her ears as he turns her to face him, his hands on her shoulders, eyes between her cradled arms. “Let me see him.”

Taking a breath, she lifts the cloth from Ben’s face, exposing him to the night. His clean expression, aged only by a day, quivers at the disturbance, but remains unwoken. She smiles down on him, the sight alone enough to spread tendrils of warmth and love through her chest. “Han,” she murmurs, lost in reverence. “Meet your son.”

As is tradition, she moves away, allowing for slaves to place a small plush between her and her husband. Her toga shifts as she kneels, placing Ben upon the cushion before looking up to see how welcoming his father will be.

What awaits makes her blood run cold.

Han stares down at the child, his expression grave. “He’s… small.”

On her knees, Leia’s attention snaps into a wide glare, every small hair on her body making itself known to her racing heart. “All children are,” she contests, keeping her voice level. “He will grow —”

“Leia…”

“—he will,” she ensures, throat tight. “He…”

Han takes a step back, turning, running a hand over his mouth, as if to wipe away some foul substance. “I’m sorry, Puella—”

“No,” she denies, shaking her head. Her wide eyes tighten in barely-restrained fury, hope dwindling like a dying flame, gasping for air to stay alight. It lifts her to her feet, the slaves among them appalled by her actions, but she doesn’t care, staring Han down even as he refuses to meet her challenge. “Look at him,” she barks, pointing. “This child is your son—and you would deny him his life?!”

“He will only suffer,” Han retorts, wheeling around to meet her. He juts a finger down at the child as well, voice raising, bouncing off the walls. “I have looked, Leia, and I’ve seen enough to know the weak from the strong. This boy will just live to die—”
“Coward!” she cries, baring her teeth. The cold heat of rage rises within her from the stony ground, shooting fire into her palm as it swings to strike him across the cheek. The sound claps in her ears, reservations too far gone for a woman’s decency. “It’s not his size you fear—admit it! Is it not the loss of your freedom? Your fatherhood a lesser trade?!”

The male slaves move to restrain her, the murmur of Ben’s mews sprouting into a cry, but Han lifts his hand to motion them still, hair knocked loose over his face. He sighs deeply, stepping away, turning his back to her as he stares into the visage of her father—his benefactor from her dowry, the source of their great Athenian homestead that waits in silence save for a child’s cries.

“I would father a great son,” he admits at length, “were he strong enough to become a man. But you know what I say is true,” he falters, covering his eyes, bowing his head. “We can’t keep him.”

Leia moves to take Ben into her arms, holding him close as his waking cries pierce the air. “Han—!”

“Take him to the mountaintop,” he commands, voice trembling despite its harsh resonance. “Leave him to the gods. They are the only ones who can save him, now.”

Obediently, the men move closer, encircling Leia, but she clutches tightly to her wailing child, throwing herself from the dias as they reach for him. “No, don’t touch me! Don’t touch him!”

Han fixes her a reproachful frown, his expression one of mourning and great loss, eyes red-rimmed. “Leia… it has to be done.”

“Then,” she sobs, a single, cold tear scrambling over her cheek, “let me take him.”

His scowl only deepens, but he says nothing.

“Please,” she whispers between Ben’s fading newborn whines, meeting her husband’s doubtful eyes. Her lip trembles as she sucks in a steadying breath. “Let me say goodbye.”

Folding his lips, Han considers her for a moment before turning his back again, throwing up his hand as he trudges out. “Escort my wife into the city. See to it she arrives safely!”

When he’s gone, she holds her son possessively, glaring at any slave that dares meet her eye as she follows them out, climbing into the small carriage. It lurches forward when she’s seated, exhaustion suckling at the backs of her eyes.

Ben shifts in her grasp, wrestling in the tight swaddle, his eyes opening slightly. His face pinches, as if confused, and were Leia not consumed by her grief, she may have foraged the ability to smile. Instead she holds him up, pressing her nose to the impeccable softness of his raven hair, breathing in his skin, committing it to memory.

They arrive on the outskirts of the city in the span of a second, the door opening to the cruel silver of night. By a calloused hand she is escorted out, left standing in company but alone on the road into the city. She takes a lantern from them, cradling Ben in her arm as she looks up to see the mountain looming over the cityscape.

“I will go alone,” she asserts, not giving pause to second thoughts as she takes a moment to pull the white cloth of her mantle overhead, striding forth through the city gates.

Her feet carry her over the ragged stone, the uneven, craggy landscape a rough terrain beneath the flats of her sandalia as she approaches the base of Mount Lykavittos. The shadows of tall pines curve over the road, leading deep into the darkened path well-worn by mothers of similar plights.
She swallows stiffly, every nerve frayed as she moves on, following the path by the orange light of flame. She struggles to keep moving, to avert her eyes from the child held close to her heavy bosom. He remains quiet in the still of night, the song of creatures too dark to see weaving around them in the darkness.

Eventually she reaches the mountain’s plateau, as plain with rock and foliage as any moonlit field, and sets down the lantern, tugging down her mantle to better see the flickering firelight of the homes below—a river of light leading to the sea just beyond, where the waters shimmer in the deep blue reflection of endless stars, the heavens swept down in the night.

With slow steps she approaches the edge, the Spring winds stirring at her hair as she nears. She glances down the sheer cliff face, trees rustling on the waving breeze.

The smacking sound of little lips calls her attention to her arms, Ben’s mouth open in a wide, waking yawn. In the white of moonlight cast on him, his flesh glows a ghostly pale, his eyes black as they open, finding her face.

Her heart hammers against her bones, every breath upon the mountain one she doesn’t deserve to take. She doesn’t bother to whisper, nor hide her tears, letting them fall as she reaches a hand to caress the soft of his cheek with trembling fingers, watching as he moves toward it, as though leaning into her touch. “Forgive me,” she hiccups, nuzzling into his hair. He grunts, so innocent, so unaware, and she pictures the life they could have lived—her raising the child she’s dreamt of from her days as a girl, watching him grow into a man, to find his own happiness.

“Hello, there.”

She jolts, spinning around to find a man in white robes pulling down the hood of his cloak as he nears, an easy smile on his withering face. On instinct, she holds Ben tighter, thinking quickly on the best route of escape, should she need to flee.

The man holds up his hand, as though reading her thoughts. “Fear not, child. I mean you no harm.”

Though disinclined to agree, Leia finds herself in obedience, her fear dissipating almost completely as he speaks.

She watches as he sits himself upon a rock, gazing up into the sky. He claps his hands over his clothed knees, smiling appreciatively. “The full moon is a beautiful thing, wouldn’t you agree?”

“...I suppose,” she says at length, moving a little closer to him. As she nears, she can make out the wrinkles on his cheeks, the scragles of his short, white beard.

“Hm,” he nods, avoiding her gaze in favor of the sky, closing his eyes in the wake of a gentle gust. “Yes. Our Father is good. Could it not be said He wills the same goodness for His creation?”

Leia pauses, considering him. “Are you a Jew?”

The man chuckles, finding her eyes again before they drift to the bundle in her arms, knowing flickering like stars in his gaze. He smiles, patting the stone beside him. “Come. Sit with me.”

She glances out over the lip of the edge, thinking of her husband, before neglecting him in favor of resting her tired feet. She comes near as beckoned, sitting heavily beside the stranger, and looks down at her son’s drowsy face.

The man follows her gaze, his voice deep and wizened. “What do you call him?”
Leia frowns at him, surprised that he would ask such a question, would assume—or somehow know—her breach in tradition by bestowing a name to her child before his time, yet answers regardless. “Ben.”

He smiles, as if privy to some private joke. “A good name for a son. He will grow prosperously.”

Leia’s heart burns under the man’s words, searing within her like a branded calf. “He is too small to survive,” she combats half-heartedly, hating every syllable. “He won’t have the chance.”

“The hearts of men are too chained to the idea of strength and weakness,” the stranger murmurs, gazing distantly over the limestone and grass. His voice sounds clear in the night, even among the rustling leaves of nearby trees, curling wings around the flutter of her restless mind. “The body is nothing but ash, in the end—only a vessel for the soul. Now that is where true strength lies.”

She frowns away, shame hot in her blood. “Then I am weak. In body and in soul.”

“Perhaps,” he relents calmly, his tone polite as he continues. “But you have survived a most painful experience. And now, you are faced with another.”

A soft coo sounds from her lap and she looks down, finding that Ben’s arm has escaped from its bind, flailing uselessly against her stomach. She chuckles at him, sniffling, and returns his hand to its swaddle.

The man’s eyes remain on her. “Hear this now, young one.”

She looks to him, her lip trembling as the kindness of his face washes over her, bathing her in light despite the engulfing darkness beyond.

“The One who made that moon, those stars,” he points, moving his finger to hover over her son, “crafted this child within you. To discard such beauty would deny your own strength; your most precious gift.”

Leia looks to her son, finding his eyes on her once more, holding fast in the darkness. His mouth opens, quirking, as if to smile.

A sob bursts from her at the sight, pressing down upon her neck until she sits hunched over the stone, her eyes burning with molten tears.

The man continues, his voice fading, ethereal. “...Destiny will call this boy forth, one day,” he prophesizes. “And when it does, he will become the leader of nations—the strongest of us all...”

His voice shudders through her, gripping her like talons despite their gentility. It loosens only when he finishes, a fierce wind blowing out the fire of her lantern, leaving them cloaked in the iron moonlight.

And when she looks up, the man is gone.

Holding fast to Ben, Leia rises, cradling him to her shoulder as fear surrounds her, penetrates her in the stillness as she whips her head, scanning her surroundings as the presence of some great power descends upon her like rain.

Her heart hammers in her chest, breath hot as footsteps approach along the path, the familiar forms of her slaves appearing dutifully before her.

One steps forward, his gaze rife with worry. “My Lady? Are you alright?”
The answer is one she cannot grasp, though her body seizes in sudden determination, a will to remain in the stillness that shrouds her with its fiery wingspan—a will to hope.

She stands straight, the moon casting its halo over her crown as she lifts her chin, an energy flowing through her, granting her courage reborn.

“Return us to my house,” she commands, her voice a deep timbre to rival the trees. Her feet carry her swiftly past them, back towards the darkened path, every step imbued with power and control. “I wish to tell my husband the name of his son.”

Daylight streams its golden rivers along the stone, rippling with the shadows of passing clouds as the scent of blooming lilies wafts within.

She rounds the corner with purpose, ducking into the shade of the nearest doorway as the sound of small footsteps echoes behind her.

A small, bobbing head of black hair waddles with rapid steps, Ben’s pudgy feet slapping along the stone floors as he looks straight ahead, completely unaware of her stealth, and his nudity. “Mama, Mama,” he calls.

She smiles, her canines glinting as she lifts to her hackles, pouncing like a predator upon its prey as he passes, snatching him into the air. “Gotcha!”

He squeals, thrashing only slightly in his half-hearted resistance, small teeth bared and crooked in joy as she spins them, her hair flowing down her back in gentle waves. They laugh as one, his small lungs giving out as she nestles him to her hip, his long legs dangling against her toga as she walks them to the atrium, intent on breakfast.

When they enter, Han speaks with his compatriot—an old friend.

“Unca Wanwo!” Ben cries, wiggling for escape. With pride she sets him down, watching as he toddles over to the man crouching to receive him with a winning smile suitable to his trade.

“If it isn’t the Little Tiger!” Lando cheers, holding him up. “Look how big you’ve grown!”

With no small amount of happiness, Ben smacks a slobbering hand upon the man’s facial hair, coating it well in welcoming reply.

Lando groans good-naturedly, surrendering him back to his mother, who bows her head, letting her son play with her hair as she speaks. “It’s been a while, Master Calrissian. How do you fare?”

“Very well, My Lady,” he replies, winking deftly over a pearly grin. “I see your family continues to thrive.”

“Thanks to you,” Han interceds, clapping the man’s back. “The Road to Seres lies paved with good fortune—our business will thrive, as well.”

Leia affixes her husband a calm glare. “Oh?”

“Yes,” Lando nods, his cloak framing him in spangled adornment. “We have traded by sea for too long. The grapes and olives from your land are ripe, but true wealth lies in the trade of wool and silk along the Seres.”

“It will be good for us,” Han concedes, smiling hopefully at Leia. “And for Ben.”
She smiles back, intent to have him believe her in agreement, though in her heart there is only grief and knowledge that what he speaks is only half in truth.

At the age of seven, Ben is given schooling in the city.

He remains silent as his mother rights his small toga, her eyes shining with pride before she closes them, kissing his head, sending him off.

The years of his childhood pass in a blur of shape and color, the sunlight and green, the reflection of limestone walls and the scent of flowers imbuing within him the first flickers of memory.

He learns as all other boys in Athens learn, growing as they grow—in size and talents alike.

His skills in the arts shone most through memorization, his attention to language and detail striking to his teachers from his earliest days. All lyrical quality bowed before him like a young lord, though, despite his affinity for it, he refused to sing or practice his lyre.

As his legs began to elongate, his ears hidden more fitfully behind his hair in the mornings as he readied himself, the daily exercise of running came just as naturally to him. And with his awkward growth in adolescence came the arrival of an equally odd grace—his every movement precise in all activity, whether throwing javelins and discus or replicating symbols in ink on parchment, given his disdain for the less-dignified etchings of wax tablets.

Leia watches him from the shade, sitting amongst her chattering female staff as she observes her son, so soon grown, tighten his focus on a distant haystack. His grunt echoes across the grass, the spear in his hand flying powerfully through the air, hitting its mark with unearthly precision.

A shudder ripples through her, the memory of a forgotten prophecy ringing in her ears as she rises, entering the house. When she spots her messenger in the hall, she harnesses her strength, calling, “Send word to the North—Bring Luke Skywalker to me at once!”

Though Ben completes his schooling at the age of fourteen, it is at sixteen years he is sent to live with his uncle to learn his philosophy in Macedonia, his mother’s blessing ringing in his ears.

His uncle, Luke, is a teacher to many younger students, his words holding truth to the world around him, in flesh and spirit. And though in the beginning Ben remained skeptical, he remembers the quiet whispers of his mother before he slept, telling him tale of how she was visited by an angel in the night—a messenger from the God of the Hebrews to save his life.

A Rabbi in the synagogue of a small Macedonian settlement—a day’s journey from the sea, not midway between Athens and Rome—Luke raises Ben under his tutelage, feeding him the knowledge of the ancients, the history of their people’s suffering.

Ben, almost twenty—for now a growing youth with long, lithe, and gangly limbs—lays down the parchment to fix his gaze upon his uncle. “So, my mother… she is Jewish?”

“In blood, yes,” Luke grunts. “Our mother kept her faith hidden as she sought power in the Roman councils. Like Esther, she yearned for peace in a time of looming tragedy.”

Ben considers this in silence, lowering his gaze. Were he still in Athens, he would have received his military training by now. Perhaps he would have joined an army, served to protect, as his ancestors had yearned to do... and, in it’s way, the idea is not without its allure.
He glances at his uncle, challenge rising in his voice. “Is war not necessary for peace?”


Chewing his lip, Ben maintains his silence, uncertain whether his uncle means that peace is wisdom, or without. Still, he hardens his glare, resolution like a stone in his chest. “In a world full of evil, one should fight for what is good.”

Luke raises a brow at him, gaze flickering over his nephew’s scrawny physique.

“I would,” Ben asserts.


Ben frowns deeply, his tone only bordering on the civil. “It’s written, isn’t it? Do the scriptures not say that we will be called to destroy what is wicked?”

“Only when the Lord proclaims it.”

He scowls, laced with disappointment. “You sound complacent, Uncle.”

“And you too ambitious for death!” Luke growls, his patience at its end He scrambles his papers together, holding them to his breast. “Speak not that which you do not know,” he grunts warningly, rising and striding further into the house. His door slams closed behind him, and in his solitude Ben returns to the scrolls, scanning the words until his anger rises too hot in his blood, driving him out into the stables, where he takes his horse and rides through the countryside, letting these thoughts abandon him.

Though not his own trade, Luke insists that Ben’s study be accompanied by work for the inhabitants of the Macedonian settlement, Ahch-To, as the men so often leave the village to fish at sea, returning home once their catch bears enough to sustain their slim populace—leaving their flock unguarded.


Blinking, Ben reaches out, accepting the slim weight of a long crook from his uncle’s hand. He fixes him a quizzical glare. “A shepherd?”

“It’s a noble profession,” Luke shrugs, pointing at his nephew with an amused jab. “Even kings have humble beginnings amongst beasts.”

“Hm,” Ben muses, holding the staff beside him, feeling it’s sturdy weight and strength in his grip as it rests upon the ground. He supposes that his uncle is right, but doesn’t admit to it. Instead, he finds himself in the pastured fields not far from the synagogue, where the village biddies roam about to jabber and gossip, far from the wind in his ears.

Days blur into weeks of servitude, then longer, and for each one he sets off at dawn, the soft blue of morning like the deepest depths of the sea, looming overhead under threat of the inevitable sunrise. The sheep huddle in their flock, wool damp with dew, their plush, sturdy bodies shaking to rid the lingering chill of night.

And, though affluent in many things, Ben learns quickly that he is not fit to be a shepherd.

He growls frustratedly, poking at one of the wanderers. “Go on, then. Go.”
The sheep fixes him a wide eye, the slit of its center blank and unnerving to look at, before hobbling directly into its guardian’s side, nearly knocking him over.

Frustrated, Ben takes the crook, giving the sheep a hearty bop on the skull. It blinks, as if dismayed, and he finds himself smiling. “Just wait until shearing season,” he threatens lowly. Again, he nudges it, and the sheep obeys, skulking off to join the rest of the flock.

He sighs, plopping himself down onto the grass of the knoll, looking out over the open field. The sun lies lazily behind the ever-shifting clouds, whose wide expanse breaks into clusters of wooly rivals to the sheep below.

In these moments, Ben is oft to wonder at the mystery of reality, the marvel of that which his eye can perceive. His thoughts wander to God—to what end He has made it all, if more than only glorious creation. To what end he has been made, and has yet to know.

Wetting dry lips, he pulls his waterskin from his belt, squeezing some into his mouth. The cool stream slips free, cascading in thin rivulets down his neck, landing in the occasional splatter along the white linen of his toga.

Then, in the midst of the silence, a shadow falls over him that does not belong to a cloud—but a storm.

“You there, young man.”

Ben turns from his drink, glancing up to find three men clad in armor, their helmets shining under the sun, faces partially hidden beneath the masked guards.

He rises to his feet, just tall enough to stand above their majority. He recognizes them immediately—their attire too distinguishable.

Roman soldiers.

“Yes?” Ben replies, his voice low and careful, but unafraid.

The man at the head retains a serious expression, his tone leaving no room for argument. “Give us your sheep, one for me and these men, to bring back to our camp.”

Ben frowns, the man beside the leader snickering openly, and feels anger rise hot inside of him, as it is prone to do more frequently as of late. But he tempers it, keeping a civil tone. “I’m sorry, Sir, but these sheep are not mine to give.”

The snickering man halts, gaping openly at Ben as his leader takes a step forward, stern face dark, lips betraying the slightest lisp. “You think yourself brave, boy?”

Working his jaw, Ben swallows his resentment, warily scanning the men. At their hips swords lie undisturbed within their scabbards, but the twitching hands of their bearers bespeaks the opposite—if he’s not careful.

He meets the lisping man’s eye. “I don’t want any trouble.”

The man huffs, a sickening air swarming around him, darkness palpable. “Well, then, the solution is simple,” he smiles, the polite stretch tinged with simmering malice. “Hand them over.”

As he speaks the other soldiers move to surround Ben, their presence raising the hairs on the back of his neck. His hand instinctively tightens along the staff of his crook, knuckles whiter than the fire
rising in his chest. “I can’t do that.”

“Ah,” the man says. Wearily, he removes his helm, running a hand through his short, silvery hair as its metallic shine nestles in the crook of his arm. “I see. Allow us to help you.” He nods to the men. “Take them.”

Obediently, the soldiers move away, making for the flock. Ben turns, watching as the first lays hand on the nearest sheep, his every nerve alight as though he were the one scandalized.

The touch ignites inside of him, the instinct to protect cutting through his hesitation like a sword. He stomps after them, hand tight on his crook. “Hey!”

When the soldier turns Ben doesn’t pause, striking fast. With a decisive thrust, he knocks the hooked staff against the soldier's exposed nose, sending his helmet askew. As he stumbles back, Ben moves to stand between them and the sheep, crook raised in defense over his chest.

The stricken soldier shifts his hand to his face, drawing away blood. He looks to their leader, snarling. “Commander Krennic?”

The man glances away, as though the grass seeks disappointing counsel, before pursing his lips. His silence, it seems, is permission enough. The two soldiers move for Ben at once, the nearest suffering a swift punch to the lip—but not slowing. The other grasps Ben’s crook, wrenching it away, but Ben holds on. As he does, he is caught, his arm thrust behind his back, shoulder popping with the sudden twist, forcing a soft cry from his mouth.

In seconds his arms are suspended behind his back, the crook wrenched out of his hand as he struggles. Then the snickerer, blood leaking from his nose, moves before Ben, his lips quirked and pointed teeth bared in an eager smile. In a blink, his fist cuts through the air, striking hard and fast into Ben’s gut.

In all his life, Ben Solo had never been punched before. All memories of childhood roughhousing fades from his memory as thick, fathomless pain focuses in his body, doubling him over, sending spit from his mouth.

The weight of it collapses his legs, sending his knees down to the soft earth. He blinks at the stars in his eyes, dazed, before fingers wind through his hair, dragging harshly back. Air hisses from between his teeth at the pain, his neck and eyes exposed to the sun as it finally emerges, a silent spectator amongst the clouds.

Krennic sighs, stepping forward, clicking his tongue to his pursed lips—as though Ben were no more than a dog. “I must say I’m disappointed. With a fiery spirit like that, you would have made a fine Roman soldier...”

Ben remains silent, his heart pounding, throat lurching beneath the skin as the commander approaches, his gladius still sheathed.

Then, when he’s close enough, the man bends at the waist, his lips level to Ben’s ringing ear. “...but you lack the strength.”

The grip on Ben’s arms tightens as he struggles, his determination to prove the man wrong branding his will in molten iron. But Krennic moves out of sight, his visage replaced by the other, who lifts Ben’s crook—and swings.
When he awakens, the sunlight has fled once more behind the clouds, the salted rain drifting in from the sea, landing on him with deceptive gentleness.

He scrambles to his feet, finding the soldiers missing. And, when he turns around, he gapes, his heart pierced and buried in his aching gut.

The sheep lay motionless in the field, their throats slit, slick with blood.

His failure does not come without its sacrifices.

The villagers forsook him when he shared the news—the men cursed him, the women spat at his feet as he returned to his uncle’s house. Words swarmed like locusts around them, casting them in pestilence as they were forced to the edge of the village, made to live in a more ancient hut of stone and mud.

Ben’s anger only grows, the memory of that day, that man’s words, fresh and stinging in his soul.

“I’ll kill them,” he vows one day, breaking the silence of their cold dinner. His grip goes white over the bowl, fingers trembling. “I’ll kill them for this.”

Luke glances at him, exhaustion painted violet under his eyes. “No you won’t.”

“And why not?” Ben challenges, his voice hoarse, strained. “Am I not strong enough?”

He sighs in reply, looking into the fire, bright gaze pensive. Troubled. Yet his voice comes clear, soft amidst the sharp blades of his nephew’s fury. “The power to kill is not strength, Ben.”

Ben’s heart pounds in his chest, blood thick and indignant as his mind closes, his heart hardened. “What would you know?” he grunts, rising. With a flick of his wrist, he empties the contents of his bowl onto the fire, dousing the light as he turns his back, trudging out of the hut and into the frigid darkness.

Three years pass, and in them Ben has grown into a man.

He towers over his uncle, his visage in the Macedonian village a sight like a giant, striking fear into those who know him not as gentle, but rather by the intensity of his simmering resentment—and, in time, his language and foresight into politics and debate.

His interest in war grows, as well, his fascination fixated upon the history and intricacy of strategy. On the Sabbath days he sneaks away to join the men who spar on the edge of the neighboring village, finding the ease of childhood calisthenics returning to him with little effort, a comfort in the ache of his shoulders and back when he returns home to rest, alone.

In mere weeks he manages to best most of them in battle, the thrill and challenge riding high within him at every swing of the staff. His devotion to the practice takes form in his long arms, legs, and neck, muscles growing corded and strong as his mind continues to expand in the quiet corners of the synagogue.

Though there is still much to learn about his own faith, it is on a day he doesn’t remember that he acquires a text forbidden to him by the church, a passing scripture from one of the men in the other village—a passage written from a man once imprisoned in Rome, who writes his letters in a tongue strong and notwithstanding regarding an infamous name Ben recognizes at once.
As a man want for knowledge, Ben approached the letters with a critical eye, noting the contradictions to the values taught him all these years alongside his uncle’s tradition. In the nights, as Luke slept, he would write his letter to his mother by candlelight, remembering her with love and fondness, before retrieving the scriptures from their hiding place, reading over the intricate texts with a depthless curiosity, learning of a practice bespeaking kindness, forgiveness, and mercy.

The forbidden nature of the practice sends a thrill through Ben, and in time the knowledge becomes belief, as hidden as the passages in his room. He begins to work alongside his uncle, and on a night most unforgivably humid, bares himself to the ceremonial knife, forsaking the flesh of his body to teach the young men who enter the synagogue.

He meets them in the nights while his uncle remains unaware, sharing the passages with them in fervent declaration of their benefit. And when they ask him why they must tell no one, not even Luke, he is hesitant to answer that he knows, deep down, his uncle would never accept the words in these scriptures—never open himself to that which he doesn’t understand.

So he continues to teach them, their eyes wide and wondrous, pulling into the depths of his soul, reminding him of gentleness, even in the anger lying deep within.

Until one night, as he sleeps peacefully, the sound of a knife unsheathed strikes his ears in the dark.

He turns in his bed, finding the shadow of his uncle hovering over him, face pale and haunted by blue moonlight. Unthinkingly, he lurches, his instincts more honed after his training, lunging from the bed to take his uncle’s wrists. Luke struggles, but Ben is stronger, fear jolting its primal chill through his veins as he violently tosses the man away, the sound of his body hitting the stone wall heavy in his throbbing ears.

Anger, hurt, and betrayal swirls through him, sending him careening out into the night, the suspended thickness of cold dew surrounding him. Drowning him. He pushes through it, then the tears, as he finds his horse and rides.

Rides.

Rides…

He never wanted it to be like this.

What he craved, all along... what was it?

Was it peace he yearned for? The return of the simplest life, wherein his mother sang him songs, the lark in its cage flitting prettily amongst the vines—the gentle sway of his father’s boat as they sat in the rarest of silences, the kind where none need speak for fear of breaking?

But oh, the fear of breaking is such a powerful thing. It cripples a man, leaves him stumbling, wandering and alone along the endless countryside... A sheep without shepherd, a son without family, a martyr without reward.

And the anger. The anger—it doesn’t leave. Bitterness coils in him like a snake, fangs riddled with venom, striking the exposed pulse of his heart. It builds itself a fortress around his mind, sealing away the soft underbelly of his childish hopes and desires, forging in him the cold steel of a sword.

He realizes with a strange clarity, then, that the anger longs to become his ally. He listens to it,
obeys it, letting it fuel his hunger and rage. His uncle, his master, betrayed him. This man of God, this preacher of mercy and peace, saw fit to have him killed. Slaughtered in his sleep, sacrificed—a sheep in a field of green.

Very well, then. If that is what God has for him, then Ben wants nothing to do with it. For all it was worth, he will keep the knowledge, the wisdom, but as he dwells the devotion withers within him. Cracked, fading to dust on the winds of his newfound strength.

Strength. Yes, strength is what he requires. Where his heart has pointed him all along. No, it was not peace he yearned for, but the road to peace—War. Blood. Power in battle. Strategy, the makings of powerful men. From his youth he has craved it, in his studies worshipped the rush of clashing armies, yearned for the glory of the fight, but never gave it leave.

It is then that he recalls a memory he treasured to hate, its sight twisted within the lense of marvelous revelation:

With that fiery spirit, you would have made a fine Roman soldier…

Perhaps…. 

…but you lack the strength.

Perhaps he has the strength, after all.

The morning air hangs heavy with fog, yellow light caught in its slur, spread thick as insects bounce from stem to leafy stem, sucking at sweet, leaking nectar beyond the fortified bunker.

He files in line with the rest of them, still groggy from sleep, his stomach curdling in hunger. But they are summoned to stand before an incoming officer—a young man, fresh from his military schooling—who will take the place of Commander Tarkin.

His flaming hair makes itself known as the man stalks past the line, his fluid gait impeded by armor that rests too wide on his shoulders—obviously for show over function. His face is unimpressive, eyes bright and piercing beyond their dull expression as he frowns at each man in turn.

But when he nears the end, where Ben stands at attention, the commander quirks an amused brow. Whatever remark he holds, he keeps to himself. He points to Ben with a leveled finger, swung stiff as an executioner's axe. “Perhaps this one should lead the charge. He might serve to frighten them off.” As the man’s compatriots chuckle, he looks to Ben’s impassive eyes. “Have you fought on the battlefield before?”

Ben looks down to meet the man’s indolent gaze. “Twice.”

“And you think that makes for good experience?”

“I’m not dead yet,” Ben replies coolly, straightening. “Commander.”

The commander’s subordinates trade glances, marking their wax tablets while the commander appraises Ben as a bird might an escaped worm. Righting his posture, he drawls. “Very well, then. The front lines it is.”

In the time of civil dispute, where tension flows with blood, there must always be one to shed it.
Raising his gladius, Ben charges, meeting his opponent’s shield as the front line clashes against the Juthungi forces. His overbearing stature forces the man beneath him in one blow, the shield forced away to make room for the streak of steel through the chest.

The man grunts, wet and gurgled, as Ben withdraws his sword, turning to face the blurring shape of his next opponent. Arrows fly over his head and he ducks with lifted scutum, watching as one strikes into his attacker’s shoulder, dazing him long enough for Ben to deliver the final blow.

In time they gain land on the Juthungi, forcing their dwindling numbers closer to the river, the waters calm and undisturbed—ignorant to the toil around them—until men slip down the muddy slopes to drown. Sweat drips down the neck of Ben’s galea, trapped in his trimmed hair as he barrels towards a vulnerable foe, his shield too heavy with piercing arrows to hold any longer.

But the man is strong, holding up his gladius to block Ben’s advance, aiming a punch on his jaw. Ben takes it, tasting iron as he pushes back, forcing them down the slope. The man loses his footing, Ben’s weight carrying them over until they fall from the range of the battle, toppling into the river shallows.

Gasping, water burns in his nose, leaking from beneath his helmet, dripping from his eyes as he rips it off and turns, searching for the man. His shield lies too far into the water to chase after—even especially as his enemy appears in his peripheral.

Ben turns, managing to block just in time, but his grip on his gladius is too weak—his hand too wet. It slips free from his grasp, leaving him defenseless as the Juthungian slogs through the water, droplets flying at his armored knees as he lifts his arm to land the killing blow.

But ben thinks quickly, diving into the water at full speed, his form sloppy as it crashes through the trembling wake. He tackles the man from below, managing to avoid the slash, and topples him into the drowned reeds.

His blood hot and roaring in his ears, Ben scrambles over the struggling warrior, pinning his arm and wrapping a hand around his throat, pushing down until the thrashing subsides—and the bubbles stop.

He gasps, turning from the body to retrieve his gladius from the water. When he emerges from the slope, breathless and panting, sandals slick with mud, he looks out to see the men cry in victory as the Juthungi retreat toward the Po river, leaving them alone in revelry amongst the torn earth and scattered corpses.

Looking out to the mass of triumph, Ben realizes he’s never felt more at home.

Nor more at loss.

Three years in the Roman infantry pass, the road to war paved in the ground bones of their own people.

For many years, Rome has stood divided. But today, that will change.

General Hux, Ben’s once-commander, stands before the war council, pointing down upon his map. “Byzantium and Tyrana surrendered with little resistance, but the Germanic forces in the west still retain their stubborness. Emperor Snoke has demanded we attack at once.”

The men nod in agreement, save for one.
“That’s foolish.”

Hux lifts his head, his anger reflected in the low light of the votives. “Excuse me?” he challenges.

From the wall of the war room, a commander in a black tunic stands, leaning back with arms crossed, eyes narrowed in derision. “I said it’s foolish. You’ll only waste your legion’s resources.”

“You presume to command my army—”

“No, general,” Ben contests, pacing closer to the table, making himself known. The shadows play along the fullness of his body, his jaw tight with confidence as he continues. “Not your army. Just you.” He frowns. “Don’t march on Gaul.”

The air between the men grows thick, Ben’s fellow commanders looking upon him in silent awe and vexation. It does not impede him—and neither does the ever-reddening face of the general.

“I received these orders from the Supreme Commander himself,” Hux combats, voice strained, just short of rising. “His instructions were clear. Starting tomorrow, we will begin our siege of the Gallic Empire. The journey will take two days. That should be plenty of time to—”

“—ensure that your soldiers are tired, hungry, and distracted before they engage with a powerful enemy.” Ben frowns. “You think that wise?”

Hux’s teeth flash with a twitch of his lip, his small, lithe form moving around the table to stalk closer to Ben’s immovable frame. “I’ll trust your judgement when you’ve earned your rank among the soldiers, Solo.”

Ben meets his challenge with a withering glare, taking only one step forward, his shadow looming over the general’s wide, bulging eyes. “And I’ll trust yours,” his hands fist at his sides, “when you fight with them.”

At this, their eyes hold fast, Ben’s unwavering. Only after the few pounding beats of silence does Hux sniff, turning away, gesturing to their fellow strategists. “Very well, then. Tell us, Commander, what you suggest.”

Ben’s eye offers an indignant twitch, but he nonetheless returns to his impassive civility as he leans over the table, hovering a thick finger over the map, tracing westward. “The journey is long,” he begins. “The Gallic forces will follow their normal routes here,” he taps the shaded territory. “Their raids are growing more frequent—so they’re either confident,” he meets Hux’s eye, “or desperate.”

The men nod to themselves sparsely, Hux looking on with a cool mask of indifference.

“If we wait closer to the edge of their territory, just within their borders, they will send their most powerful legion to combat us…” he circles a plain landscape with his pointer, his voice thick with decision. “...There. In the Catalaunian Fields.”

After a quiet thought, Hux’s finger crooks over his thin, pale lips, gaze pensive and considerate. “And how can you be certain it will work?”

“Word among the soldiers spreads fast, General,” Ben demures, glancing away to withhold his contempt for this snake-oiled politician wearing warrior’s clothes. “There is already discontent in Britain and Gaul, after only thirteen years separated from Rome. They lack resources—not pride.” He shrugs slightly. “Tetricus will send his Rhine to meet their doom to preserve it, regardless the forces at their door.”
Sighing, Hux crosses his arms. “I see. Then…” defeat levels the man’s slim shoulders, but the ire and malice remains steadfast in the cracked sapphire of his eyes. “…I’ll send word to the emperor. But tell me once more,” he glares, “what exactly do you suggest?”

Ben fixes the men an appraising glance, finding all eyes on him. Like a spark catching flame, fiery pride rises in his chest, fixing his posture to one of complete control, the balls of his fists ones not of anger, but an impatience of reaching that which has so long avoided him, now lying within reach—the chance to prove his worth.

The slightest of smirks twinges at his lip. “Let them come to us.”

“In his years of service, Ben Solo rose from infantry to commander, and, in the wake of his strategic prowess, one of Rome’s most renowned military leaders.

The Battle of Châlons results in heavy losses—though not as many as there could have been, were their men devoid of food and rest. The so-called “Emperor” of the Gallic Empire was successfully captured, disappearing into the frock of Snoke, made to dance and sing in Roman politics—his shame known throughout the territories.

And it was this battle that ended the years of struggle between Rome and its traitorous territories, their wandering hearts tied back beneath the rod of discipline and suckled teat of diplomacy Emperor Snoke so diligently employs.

On a night in late autumn, among the barracks of soldiers at ease in the dying embers of war, Ben receives a letter from the Roman capitol.

Within days he journeys to Rome, witnessing for himself the grand wall—still under construction—that spans across the gleaming city. Upon his horse, a fine stallion bred by Persian warlords, he rides through the main road, following it to the palatium of Emperor Lucius Snoke.

He enters without pomp, the quiet regality blown like dirt struck from catapult fire by the stark redness of the atrium, whereupon an old man sits, his golden robs lying limp over his wrinkles and bones.

Lowering his head, Ben sinks to one knee in the presence of his emperor. “My Lord. You’ve summoned me?”

“Yes…” The man drawls, his knobby finger tapping along the arm of his chaise. “I’ve heard many things about you, Commander Solo. You’ve brought Rome great victory. And for that, you have my thanks. Now,” he intertwined his hands, smiling with small, yellowed teeth, “the Empire will thrive in peace for years to come.”

Ben’s throat constricts beneath the praise, the young man within him preening in delight. “’Tis an honor, my Lord.”

“Mm. Indeed.” For a moment he grows deathly silent, the dull edge of his words sharpening some untouchable weapon. Until, “To reward you for your valor, I have decided to relieve you of your duty.”

Ben lifts his head in shock, eyes wide.

“Allow me to indulge,” Snoke says, waving his hand, “that I find war has a time and place in a man’s life. That time for me has set long ago, and now for you.” His eyes meet Ben’s, shaking every nerve within him, the power of his master’s influence a palpable presence within his mind.
“You remind me of myself.”

Again, something in his speech sounds sharp, almost accusatory, but Ben does not challenge it. “What would you have me do?” he asks softly.

Snoke’s smile stretches along his face, bright eyes shining as his expression crumbles within itself—a horrid sight to behold. “I’m glad you asked.”

When purpose is lost within the fray
Where sight and self align
I stand in the sun, know nothing of day
To dwell in darkness ’ever mine

“Is it done?”

“Yes, Master Ren. Your helm has been crafted to your specifications.”

“And the gladius?”

“See for yourself.”

Kylo Ren takes the sword from the smith, balancing it in his hand with considerable appraisal. In one motion he turns, gathering strength in his arm to toss the blade across the shop. It flies on a long, silver wing, the red tinge of copper glinting in the sparse light, and lands wedged and wobbling in a wooden beam.

He stalks over to it, pulling it out. He gives the man his pay, wandering back to the inn he has made his home—for now.

In silence he stares at the blade in his hands, turning it over, pressing the tip against his finger. Blood wells and he sucks at it, lost in the hearth, until a knocking sounds at his door.

He redresses himself, answering to find a meek, younger man with a worried lip and mousy expression. “Master, uh… Ren?”

“Yes?”

As if struck from behind, the man jolts upright and bows deeply, arms at his sides. “My name is Dopheld Mitaka. Your personal attendant and messenger on behalf of our gracious leader, the Supreme Commander, Emperor Lucius Snoke.”

Kylo frowns, considering this boy. He couldn’t be more than twenty, by the looks of him. Scrawny and timid, no doubt loyal to his master. And likely a spy for Snoke.

Still, he sighs, deciding it best not to test these uncharted waters. He opens his door wider. “Come inside.”

He does, bowing again as he moves within the small chambers, drifting towards the fire to singe away the infiltrating chill of winter. He produces a letter from within his tunic, holding it out. “The emperor says your request for citizenship was approved. There is an official who will meet you tomorrow, at noon, in the forum.”
On the next day Mitaka accompanies Kylo to the Roman Forum, hot on his heels. In Kylo’s mind he dwells on the intriguing situation of being dressed by another man. It was quite jarring, to say the least, though not entirely without its more lackadaisical pleasures. After years of caring for himself, it only seems natural to allow for a bit of indulgence.

They enter the court silently, Mitaka waiting in the atrium as Kylo steps through the curtain, sitting down before an old man with kind, deep eyes. “Are you Commander Ben Solo?”

He nods. “I was, yes.”

“Ah,” he nods. “Right. Kylo Ren, now, isn’t it?” he asks, knowing yet weary, as if the very process of recognition has worn him through. He reshuffles his papers. “You’re gaining quite the popularity in our offices. But I suppose you should know who I am.” The man smiles. “I am Lor San Tekka, the record keeper of this forum and the greater Rome.”

Kylo nods his greeting, urging him to continue. “Are you giving me my citizenship?”

“That and more,” he smirks, withdrawing a sleeve of parchment. He lays it out before him, patting the dusty surface. “Given your ancestry—we have found a will in our archives, under your name.”

He blinks. “‘Mine?’ That can’t be. I have no family here.”

“On the contrary. It is not under the ‘Solo’ name of your father, nor this ‘Organa’ you mentioned…” he wets his lip, brows pinching, as though he debates whether to remain silent or speak. The latter, by law, wins out. “…It says here that you have been endowed with the fortune and estate of Master Anakin Skywalker.” He meets Kylo’s eye, tone low and serious. “Your grandfather.”

He follows the direction of the map to the west of Rome, chasing the sun hidden behind the endless grey clouds, gentle flakes of snow drifting lazily down, settling in beds of grass—catching in his raven hair.

Silencer chuffs, severing Kylo from his thoughts, drawing his attention upward as, at length, the villa comes into view from the mist.

He takes it in as Silencer eases them towards the hillside, more of the house laid bare. The pure limestone walls and red-clay roof lies still and silent in the pale daylight, a thin blanket dusted over the lifeless trees.

He hops down, leading Silencer to the stables, free hand resting along the hilt of his gladius. They enter slowly, the door coming open with ease, and Kylo peers through the dark. A sliver of grey appears in one of the stalls, but before he can think as to why, the thin edge of a blade meets the skin of his throat.

“Hands up. Don’t move.”

Swallowing, Kylo obeys, mind racing. The speaker is a woman, her voice as steady as her blade. She swallows again. Years of battle have taught him which ones he can win.

This one isn’t.

“Why are you here?” she growls. “Speak clearly—or you won’t speak at all.”

To prove her point, the blade presses further into the soft skin of his neck. It stings in slight, his
breath escaping in a puff of steam as he calms himself, doing as she says. “This is my home.”

“Bullshit. The master of this house is dead.”

“I know,” Kylo murmurs, chancing, “he left it to me.”

She pauses, her breath hitching as if to scoff at him. “And why should I believe that?”

He chews the words over between his cheeks, the cold climbing into his lungs, before giving voice to the truth he himself learned not one day ago. “Because I’m his grandson.”

There’s only a beat of silence before the blade is drawn away, letting him breath deeply again. From the corner of his view a woman emerges, coming to stand before him.

What he notices first is the obscene length of her hair, wound into two braids of white and silver behind her head. The tan of her skin bleeds into the darkness, age casting shadows over her ample cheeks, but her eyes shine brightly in the grey cast by the falling snow, roving over him in disbelief—then something else.

Kylo, at the sight of this woman, let’s the anticipation of his potential murder dissipate, meeting her eyes as she whispers. “Truly?”

He nods, slowly reaching behind him. She doesn’t lift her gladius again as he produces the folded parchment, offering it to her in silence.

She takes it from him, her gaze incredulous, fingers trembling as it unfolds. She scans the words of his grandfather’s will, her lip quivering only once before her hardness returns—now in resolution. Purpose.

“Come,” she urges, backing away to motion him within. “You must be tired from your journey. And there is much to discuss...” she smiles deftly, her full lips twitching with warmth as she meets his eyes, then bows her head low. “...Master.”

When Spring returns to Rome, the snow gone from the valleys, the Colosseum is dusted in fresh sand, the silt powdery and loose, waiting for warriors to bloody it again.

Kylo waits in the wings, his heart pounding in his chest, the gladiator blood in his veins awakening at the sight.

The woman, Ahsoka, told him the truth of his Roman ancestors—the ones Luke wrote off so garishly. His grandmother, a woman of the courts. And his grandfather, the mightiest of Roman gladiators.

Legacy thrums through him in numbing exhilaration, the eagerness in his hands to fight winning out as the gate opens, releasing them into the arena. He charges, the air rushing past his exposed legs, the thrill of battle crashing through him again with its sweet release.

The crowd roars like the battlefield itself, their cries of joy and pleasure feeding into him, feuling the anger that never left his heart.

The darkness buries itself further inside of him, reminding him of all he’s lost, all he’s gained, and as the arena stretches, the fight of a day spanning into weeks, to months, to years... it doesn’t fade.

The power is not enough. The killing is not enough.
To finish this, he must have his vengeance.

He rests in his chair, glaring into the fireplace, watching the flames dance as he lifts the chalice to his lips, draining another of its wine.

“Sir?”

Kylo doesn’t turn to look at Mitaka, his emotions as tumultuous as the drifting embers. “Have you found them?”

“Only one, Master Ren…” Mitaka discloses. “It seems that Commander Krennic died of illness two years ago.”

“And Skywalker?”

“Missing.”

Kylo’s mood only sours, the muck and mire of his anger pulling him down into its slurry bog, the word multiplying hopelessly in his mind. “...Go,” he murmurs.

When Mitaka leaves, Kylo goes for another sip, only to find it empty. Frustration mounts within him, sending the cup careening into the hearth, the glass shattering as he grunts. He rises, swaying unsteadily, stealing his gladius from the mantel and striking everything in sight.

He is summoned to a revelry in honor of his latest victory, the food gleaming amongst the firelight. The columns stand proudly, coiled around in garlands of ivy, the scent of grapes taunting him with long-distant memories.

Kylo Ren reclines amongst the other gladiators, listening to their idle chatter with only half-interest, until a man nudges his arm, pointing at a nearby noblewoman. He raises a suggestive brow, to which Kylo scoffs, and evades by pacing out into the garden, the night beginning its slow descent.

The heady aroma of marigolds drifts into his nose, the trickling of the fountain beckoning him closer—far from others, as his thoughts wander far from him.

For all the opportunity presented to him, Kylo Ren holds no interest in the women of Rome. Yes, they have their beauties, their own varieties of temptations, but the idea of having one—or in the case of his profession, many—never held its appeal. For what would they want of him? Surely not himself. No. Only his infamy. Curiosity, perhaps. But never that which he could long for. It was better to keep to himself, let the rising anger feed on his solitude. Let his body be his own—if not in the ring, then in his bed.

As time passed, Kylo became more and more aware of his position beneath the emperor—his thoughts, his rage, digging a deeper trench of which there was no escape. Only the space to hold his fire. But the mystery remains unclear to him, the ever-present suspicion lying in wait like a snake poised to strike, to fill him with its poison.

When he is so poisoned already.

“A new age is upon us, Kylo Ren.”

The voice of Snoke slithers along the smooth stone of the garden path, beckoning Kylo to turn and
look. His emperor stands alone before him, the fires of the festivities a distant light in the shadow of his presence.

Kylo considers him, bowing his head. “Indeed.”

“Mm,” Snoke hums, stalking closer. His towering height looms over Kylo, his sunken features brought close. “When I found you,” he murmurs, gazing into the garden with his gladiator, “I saw what all masters live to see. Raw… untamed power. And beyond that,” he straightens, “something truly special: the potential of your bloodline.”

Kylo meets his eyes, warily. “Master?”

At the sound, Snoke almost sneers, his voice curdled with contempt. “Lord Vader was a fool. Careless, now dead for it. But you… you can be so much more.”

He blinks, curious but uncertain. “What more can I be?”

The sneer becomes a smile, somehow more malformed and unnerving than the first. “One of my Praetorian Guards.”

When the words leave his lips, the snake within Kylo lifts, its fangs bared, venom dripping black and endless into his heart. And in that moment he knows—finally knows—what has been alluding him so long. The source of his anger, the hurt that never left, and now… the truth of his imprisonment.

Here in the rising darkness, the scent of grapes drifts far from him, home gone.

And captivity, his.

“Snoke took me from my place for a purpose,” Ben murmurs, tone distant, haunted. “He feared me. The open support of his people.”

Rey nods. “They wanted you. Didn’t they?”

“I don’t know. There were only rumors,” he confesses, morosely scratching his cheek. “He took me from the war to let the rumors die. Placed me under his wing, at first. I thought I’d found…” he scoffs, shaking his head, hunching over his knees. “…but I didn’t. I became his fighter. His servant. And now,” he frowns, glaring at the floor. “He wants me for a pet. A threat, neutralized completely, always at his beck and call.”

The room goes deathly silent, Rey watching, soaking in his words as he bows his head, intertwining his shaking fingers.

Shame floods through him, screwing his eyes shut to hold back the lashing sting of her gaze. He can’t afford to look at her now—to see the hatred returned to her face, just when they’d found their chance again. After all that’s happened, everything they’ve been through, to lose her completely would be more than he can bear.

“I didn’t…” he murmurs, voice cracking. “… I never wanted this. Not this.”

Rey looks on him in silence, her heart aching at the sight of his downturned face, the sorrow hidden so long within him laid bare at last.

So her revelation in the arena was true. Her master was enslaved. Betrayed by his father at birth,
then his uncle in youth—for mere curiosity. He wasn't always a fighter. He was a shepherd, a teacher, tricked by the masters he followed so blindly in his faith, then his anger, his ignorance—for all the knowledge he prized.

Fury rolls within her at the thought, the same instinct to rush to him pushing against the soles of her feet. So she rises slowly, her fear of him long burned away, letting his suffering pull her in ever closer.

Ben remains still, awaiting her reprimand, her ignominy on his behalf. He thinks she will renounce him now—come to her senses and flee from him. He folds his lips, the words escaping before he can think to stop them, to hide from her one last time. “You were right about what I am,” he whispers brokenly.

Standing before him now, Rey swallows her reservations, clinging to the solidity of his company. The heat spreading from his living, breathing body, and that is enough.

Slowly, carefully, she reaches out her hand, letting it come to rest atop the hair on his head, feeling its softness thread between her fingers. There and real. “No,” she urges gently, moving closer, wrapping her arm over his shoulders, pulling him to her. She caresses his hair as he remains still as marble, closing her eyes as she embraces this hidden affection lying dormant within her—the yearning to touch him, to comfort him.

To love him.

Ben’s heart jolts at her touch, letting her pull his head to her stomach, her arms holding him in quiet embrace. He sighs at the bliss of her fingers in his hair, her chin against his scalp, the simple touch like a hand around his wrist, dragging him from the drowning darkness, into the light at last.

Hesitantly, he lifts his hands, giving her chance to flee—but she doesn’t. His palms find her sides, her waist nearly encompassed as his arms wind around her, feeling her. Her grip tightens, and so does his. He buries his face into the cloth of her stola, the scent of her all-encompassing, the warmth of her soul finding his own in the dark as they cling to one another. Broken, but whole.

And, as the tears gather in his eyes, as he cleaves ever tighter, he knows. He knows that he could never escape her. Not really. No matter the anger prowling deep inside, the strength he sought for so long, he will never be strong enough to let this go—no matter the consequences.

If to love her is death, then let him die.
Unleavened bread, unlike leavened bread, is bread baked without rising agents (like yeast). Though unleavened bread is a flat bread, not all flat breads are considered unleavened.

Fasting was a common method of prayer, and still is, where a believer would abstain from eating food for a set amount of time in order to devote full worship and attention on God.

In Ancient Greece, newborns were not given names until one week after their birth, in the event that they were not strong enough to survive. This was to help mothers separate themselves from their attachments to their children if the time came to offer them as sacrifices.

Women in Greece had far less rights than the women in Rome. While women could sue men for rape and other atrocities, Greek women had no agency, even over their dowries.

Athens, Greece is a city close to the Mediterranean Sea, built over ragged terrain, and home to Mount Lykavittos (better known as "Mount Lycabettus"), a rock formation made almost entirely of limestone. It only takes fifteen minutes to reach the top, where the plateau is tall enough to see the ocean.
"The Road to Seres" is a reference to the Silk Road, which didn't earn its title until centuries later. "Seres" is the old name for the Asian provinces, and the Silk Road was a major highway for traders to buy and sell wares on an international scale.

Schooling in Athens was primarily centered around the arts, as well as some physical training. Young boys were taught to appreciate both battle and poetry, so that they could know "both war and peace." They would learn to play music, read literature, and write while also playing ball-sports and undergoing running exercises. In their later years, they would engage in wrestling, discus (basically Frisbee—heck yeah!), and throwing javelins. At the age of fourteen most boys would enter an apprenticeship, and the able-bodied would be sent to military training at eighteen.

The Book of Esther is one of two books in the Bible written about women. The heroine is Esther (formerly Hadassah), who was married to the King of Persia. She risked her life by confronting him with the truth about his adviser, who used the King's seal to condemn all Jews in Persia to death. With her cleverness and beauty, and divine assistance, she convinced the King to rescind his proclamation, effectively saving her people.

The scripture Ben is likely referencing is 1 Samuel 15:18, where God advocates for wars in times of defense against wickedness. Though many see the Commandment "Thou Shalt not Kill" as against war, the term "kill" is more about murder and crimes of passion than wartime (but that doesn't excuse war crimes, of course).

Shepherds were expected to take their jobs very seriously. They would even give their lives to defend the sheep. The "kings" Luke refers to is likely King David, who was a shepherd before he defeated Goliath.

The text Ben was given were the letters from Paul the Apostle, who was imprisoned in Rome on account of his Christianity. Before he became Paul, he was Saul—a man who killed and persecuted Christians until receiving a vision from God. After the encounter, Paul dedicated his life to Christ, and led thousands in their faith.

Snoke's character is based on Emperor Lucius Aurelian, who reunited the Roman Empire in 274 AD by defeating the Visigoths, Vandals, Persians, and the Gallic and Palmyrene Empires—which had split from the Roman Empire in a bloody civil war. He rose to power before their victory as an Imperator ("Supreme Military Commander"; similar to "Supreme Leader")—an Emperor chosen by the Senate and citizens for their leadership capabilities in times of war (also called "barracks emperors"). He is credited for defeating the Gallic Army in a secret plot with Tetricus in 274 at Battle of Châlons. Aurelian was then labeled “Restitutor Orbis ("Restorer of the World") for ending the civil dispute. He also organized Christian persecutions.

The battles Ben is shown fighting involved both enemies of the Roman Empire's civil dispute. The first was the Battle of Fano (fought in 271), where Rome fought the Germanic Juthungi on the Metaurus River. Many Juthunians drowned. The second was the Battle of Châlons (274) in modern-day France—one of the bloodiest battles in Roman history, whose victory sealed 200 years of peace in Rome.

[BONUS: Yes, Ben is circumcised. Also I ran out of space for all these darn notes]
Hello, all! Hooray for another 4am update! Please excuse any atrocious typos in this chapter (I promise to fix them later). I'm in a bit of a rush to wake up in a few hours for some quality relaxation time. And by that, I mean scraping out a five-page research paper. Yum.

Speaking of yum, this chapter is a bit spicy! I hope you enjoy. You all are so amazing, and deserve every bit of love and appreciation that I feel like I could never give. Thanks especially to everyone who leaves comments—I devour all of them all the time. They bring me such joy; you are all so inspiring!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She is on his lap again.

*His hands are two, in one moment, then later not—only touch, and blur, and the dullest of passing sensations.*

*It is a familiar place, where the bodies move beyond sight, their faces imperceptible, drifting like mist. But their presence means nothing as she bends beneath his will, as his lips return to ghost over her throat.*

*She makes a sound, one so foreign, so true, that is echoes deep within, resounding between the heated silk of untouchable flesh. His incorporeal body moves, his arms shifting to surround her, cage her. In the blink of unwoken eyes the sleeve of her tunica is pulled down, his mouth trailing to taste the flesh at her exposed shoulder.*

*Her body writhes atop him, the reaction severing the thin illusion of control, and he too makes a sound. A grunt, a moaning cry, low with desire and need. And she, nurturing soul that she is, does nothing to stop him exposing her breast to his dark gaze and wet, hungry mouth.*

*In life, they know not these sensations. In dreams, they dull and flatten, but as his tongue moves to encircle her, to drag from her throat a weak, helpless cry, the pleasure is somehow found.*

*He says her name. It comes so clearly from his mouth, full and ripe with readiness. She says his in reply, her lips moving, but without sound, without voice. Only the shape of him.*

*And when he moves to place his name inside, to aid her lips with his own, the vision fades, giving way to the timeless dark.*

Ben sighs, flicking the novacila once more through the water. Edge lubricated, it scrapes seamlessly over his face, ridding himself of the scratchy patches of hair grown in his bedridden phase.

Only one day has passed since confessing himself to Rey, and the experience seems to have left him more weak than his illness. The oddest sensations riddle him, and his dreams have begun to take on less… virtuous qualities.
He sighs again, toweling his face as he sits upon the foot of his bed, gazing down into the nothingness.

Rey may still be asleep. He doesn’t blame her. To share his burden while she’d already gone days without was an act of short-sightedness on his part. But she deserved to know the truth. After all, she did save his life.

Brushing down what that may imply in the light of recent events, Ben turns his thoughts from old religions to newer, more befuddling questions. He silently wonders at what left there is to do in terms of her, and these desires making themselves a home in the marrow of his bones.

The obvious solution would be to bed her—though, on further consideration, the act of bedding would not love make. After all, their agreement remains that he would keep to himself. It would be so much easier if she came to him, instead.

A light flickers behind his eyes at the idea, the sudden revelation making him almost dizzy. He leans over his knees, threading his fingers together—as he often does when deep in strategic thought—and nods to himself. It may prove difficult, yes, but to have Rey seek him of her own accord would bear far greater in terms of preserving her virtues… and his conscience.

He would never force himself on her. Could never—he loves her far too much for that. To rob her of her only possession, her body—regardless that it legally belongs to him—would be too wicked a crime. Even for him. And at that, it would be an act too distant from the place she holds in his heart.

But, should Rey come to him of her own will… then the contract would be rendered useless. It would be the best path, undoubtedly, where both of them standing to gain in their respective losses. Ben wets his lip, the old fantasy of her emerging from the water, her soft body laid bare, returning with great force. His cock shifts restlessly under his subligar, already searching for her.

He dashes the image quickly, not wanting to risk either woman barging in should he choose to humor the temptation. Besides, the one time he gave in to those thoughts of Rey, he was consumed with guilt shortly after. It would dishonor her to use her image so cruelly without her knowledge. Though the blood rioting in his body screams otherwise, he knows it to be true.

He will need to be patient, wait for her to give herself to him, and when she does he can make his love known beyond simple words.

Although… he hasn’t really spoken those yet, either.

Running a hand through his hair, freshly washed and dried, he traps his cheek between his teeth, puzzling frustratedly into the unlit hearth. In the strangest sense, the idea of confessing it to her feels almost more frightening than telling her of his despicable history. Already his heart has begun to pound against the bars of his ribs, an enraged prisoner demanding to be set free—though no one could know what havoc it may reap.

His gaze drifts to the unopened scroll on the mantelpiece, the beat of his heart pulsing cold, frothy blood through his veins.

Snoke. Surely he was as surprised at Rey’s intrusion on the field as much as Ben himself. He doubts the contents will be praiseworthy. But no soldiers have come to imprison her, and if they haven’t yet, then they likely never will.

Ben frowns. It could be an invitation to the palace. Perhaps to scold him for his slave’s disruption
of the festivities? It seems these summons often involve the emperor’s own brand of humiliation.

*Don’t fly too close to the sun.*

His memory shudders in recollection of his master’s warning. He is not in good standing with Snoke as of late—if ever he was—and the risk to Rey is clear. Lucius Snoke, as horrid as he is, can be perceptive, and should he assume Rey’s act was one of loyalty, then fine. It would be best to use it to their advantage.

She played her part well. So well, in fact, he wonders if anyone would question her loyalty to him. After all she’s done, in public and in secret, he knows it to be true. That his Rey, his brilliant ancilla, has earned his complete trust, something only one other has known.

“Young Master?”

As though summoned by his thoughts, she pushes the door open. Ben turns to see her, finally rested, come to stand in the doorway with a small note in her hand. “What is it, Ahsoka?”

“One of Caluan Ematt’s messengers brought this,” she reports, holding it out. As he takes and reads, she continues. “He’ll be here tonight. Apparently he wants to speak to you. Alone.”

“Mm,” he considers, turning the note over in his hand. His eyes flit to hers, finding them with the strangest gleam. “Very well. We will use the triclinium, then.”

She scoffs. “Actually… it’s in no condition to be used, Young Master.”

“Why not?” he asks, leveling her a confused stare.

“You left it in disarray,” she smirks, fisting her hip. “Remember?”

He does, looking down. “Oh.”

“I could clean it, but I could also use a hand. Should I wake Rey?”

His head snaps up. “No.” Setting the note aside, he moves to slip his tunic over his head. “No. Let her sleep. In fact,” he affixes his belt, “prepare something special for our company tonight, and leave some aside for her.”

She catches him with a raised brow.

“And yourself,” he adds quickly.

“Ah-huh,” she murmurs, turning. “Then we’d better get started.”

As she leaves, Ben begins to follow after her, when a twinge in his side strikes with a vengeance. He winces, pausing in the open hall. “You go on. I’ll be a moment.”

“Yes, Young Master,” she replies over her shoulder, leaving him alone.

He sighs, pressing a hand over the cloth of his tunic. The wound itself has closed considerably, only needing a simple bandage, but the pain lingers still. He leans against the wall, summoning his tolerance with steady breaths, and finds the door to Rey’s room left ajar.

An idea unfurls within his mind like a waking dove, and he glances down the hall, finding it empty and enabling. Swallowing, he eases to her door, remembering the stealth of his last attempt—foiled by Ahsoka’s presence within Rey’s room.
But Ahsoka isn’t here.

He pushes the door open slowly, peering inside, intent to see her, if only for a moment. She’s easily spotted, the white linen of her sheet bunched around her hips. As he comes closer, he appraises the gentle rise and fall of her stomach. On her back, her hair splayed, arms lifted by her head, her mouth lies parted and drooling in slight—and it would be amusing if not unbearably welcoming a sight.

Ben frowns, the onslaught of hot impulse assaulting him like a blow to the ribs. His thoughts drift to possibility, the placement of her wrists, so easily restrained. That and the crooked fabric of her stola, shifted to reveal the soft skin resting below her slim sleeve.

He gulps.

After only a moment of indulgent ogling, he sighs and reaches out, knowing his time is up. He takes her blanket tenderly between his fingers, lifting it to cover her unconscious temptations and restore her blanket to a comfortable place over her collar.

She shifts, her voice soft, brow drawing taut. “...en.”

He pauses, heart seizing. If he didn’t know better, he could almost think she’d just said his name in her sleep.

But that would be ridiculous. He knows his desires are his own. Though she had accepted him yesterday, held him fast to her, it was merely an act of gentleness. Compassion in the midst of ferocity—a strength of which only she is capable.

To see it as anything more would be a most foolish assumption.

He leaves her hesitantly, determined to keep quiet despite his lumbering gait. That, and convince himself such brief moments will be enough to quell the roaring fire within him.

In the triclinium, Ahsoka rights a chaise, clapping her hands free of the ache before soothing her back. He comes to join her, silent as they move about the room, gathering a few of the items he damaged beyond repair the night Rey first discovered the truth.

He frowns, pushing away the memory. His anger had done nothing to resolve the issue. It rarely does beyond temporary relief—though he doubts Rey would approve.

As they crouch to upturn the table, a thought emerges in Ben’s mind. He keeps his voice low in an effort to remain casual. “Ahsoka?”

“Yes?” she grunts, lifting.

“What do you know about pleasing women?”

A throb of silence fills his ears with wool, avoiding her open stare when the table is set. Then he jolts, shaken by the eruption of cackling laughter.

His ears burn, his eyes indignant when they look to her. “What?” he snips.

Her laughter peters out as she walks away, her shoulders shaking with the hearty traces of laughter. She hankers down into a chair, wiping away a stray tear, her lips stretched into a wide smile. “I,” she shakes her head, “I’m afraid I’m the wrong one to ask about that, Ben.”
Ben goes to stand in front of her, the anger he only just subdued wrangling back to the surface under his servant’s scrutiny. “Why is that? You’re a woman, aren’t you?”

Her smile persists as she gestures to herself. “Obviously. But I’m not really in the business of entertaining suitors.”

Frowning, Ben doesn’t understand, thinking it a reference to her age, until the chords of rationale unwind within his mind—only to reveal the idea that Ahsoka may have left the Vestals behind, but not their morals.

“Ah,” he murmurs, rubbing a hand over his mouth.

A knowing look casts over her face as she reclines, sighing away her short-lived bliss. “What do you want to know?”

Like kindling caught in flame, his eyes widen, alight with hope as he follows the weight in his knee to kneel beside her. He clings to her gaze like a child awaiting his mother’s blessing, searching for the knowledge written there. “How can I make her love me?”

When the words leave his mouth, the joy in Ahsoka’s expression goes dark, replaced by a grim seriousness standing the hairs on the back of his neck. Her eyes crystallize into cold stones, shining in rival of the afternoon sunlight. “Ben,” she murmurs warningly, “that’s—”

“Ben? Ahsoka?”

Ben jerks to his feet, looking to the door to follow a familiar, sleep-laced voice. “Rey.”

Rey pads in, rubbing the corner of her eye, the threat of a yawn on her twitching lip. “What’s going on?” She looks around at the half-cleaned triclinium, her face waking to moderate shock. “Oh.”

“Just a bit of straightening up,” Ahsoka grunts, rising to her feet. Her warm hand pats against Ben’s arm, resting, sinking in a warning singe. “Your master was just about to finish the rest.”

Ben looks to her askance, finding Ahsoka’s gentle gaze only a thin veil, concealing something else. But he doesn’t press it, deciding to trust her—despite his displeasure at being interrupted. He nods. “Right.” His attention returns to Rey, only leaving him a moment to appreciate her hair loosed from its usual tie. “We’ll have company tonight.”

Her worried look returns. “Is it the general?”

Ben frowns, finding her voice steeped in concealed terror. He too remembers Hux’s assault of her, and were he given the opportunity again would make sure the man no longer has the hands to bruise. In an instant he’s walking closer, as if the distance will take those thoughts from them both. “Don’t worry, Puella,” he reassures, voice low. “It’s only Ematt.”

“Oh,” she replies, a small smile blooming on her face. Her chin tilts up to follow him as he comes to stand before her. “Good. That’s good…”

He resists the urge to take her cheek in hand, swearing he can almost see the slightest flush spreading there, wanting to feel its heat. He’s left without words when her eyes join with his, her presence returning him to that addictive ease. So tempting. So strong.

Footsteps scrape over the stone, Ahsoka’s hand reaching for Rey’s elbow to turn her away. “Come on, then. We have dinner to prepare.”
At the sound of food Rey severs their connection, leaning fully into Ahsoka’s offer. “Yes, Ahsoka.”

As they leave, his eyes follow after her, stretching thin the tether of longing the more distance she takes. When she’s out of sight he’s left standing alone, surrounded by his mistakes, and can think of nothing else but the strangest look on Ahsoka’s face, wondering what he had done wrong.

Rey crouches as she checks the storage, counting quince. “Something special?” She calls back into the culina.

“Apparently,” comes Ahsoka’s reply.

Rey pouts a bit, going back to watch from the doorway, leaning against the frame. “What’s that supposed to mean? We don’t have many supplies left for anything special.”

“It doesn’t have to be remarkable,” Ahsoka shrugs, polishing her new knife. The old one has since found a comfortable home in Rey’s bedside table drawer. Rey has considered inscribing her name on it, but finds the Coptic letters in Ahsoka’s own hand more comforting than not.

“Then what do we do?”

Ahsoka pauses for a moment, as though her thoughts had tripped her tongue, before finding Rey with a smile. “Get creative.”

Rey grins at that, the implication lighting a fire in her belly. She recalls her earlier desires to experiment with her master’s food—though, Ahsoka was absent then. With her here, Rey’s fleeting fancy returns with bounding energy, her stomach already growling in anticipation. “Alright. When will he be here?”

“Sunset.”

Rey nods, returning to Ahsoka’s side as they discuss potential meals. Rey’s first inclination is to include beef, slow-cooked to allow for better flavor, as well as a potential salad of fruits and vegetables. In her time here, she has come to appreciate the finer tastes of Rome—even though she leaves herself little time to truly savor their qualities.

But Ahsoka is gracious with her critiques, suggesting different foods that will go well with wine. They settle on baking unleavened bread, to keep it soft and easily chewed, as well as their slim remaining selection of cheeses that have not sprouted hairs. The beef is cooked well, leaving no blood within, and readied with strips of baked fish and garum.

Ahsoka baptizes the lettuce in a pail of water, stripping it of its leaves as Rey plucks out the ripened olives from their dish. She glances out the window, and looks to Rey. “He’ll be here soon. You go on to greet him. I’ll handle the rest.”

“Yes, Ahsoka.” Rey bows her head in slight, wiping her hands free of the juices before moving out towards the courtyard, her steps laced with the strangest eagerness. She has not seen Ematt since the fight at the Colosseum, when her master was so gravely injured. The man had been kind to her—and to Ben. And he’d sent Maz, who’s straightforward methods helped heal Ben of his wounds.

It would be good to thank him again.

She passes by the triclinium on her way, glancing inside to find everything neat and tidy—save for a few old paintings that were destroyed. Caught between a frown for his recklessness and a smile
for his effort, she decides on the latter.

More than her palet has changed since she first came to this house. When her master was only Master Ren, his anger laid bare in his simmering animosity, she had often thought to fear him. How quickly things have altered from then—when she learned his name, and other truths.

Yes, the anger remains. But something else, too. Something she still can’t see, but yearns to nonetheless.

Rey reaches the front door, pushing it open to reveal the glade bathed in golden light. The terrible heat from the day has begun to disappear beneath the setting sun, the cool breath of evening fanning over her nose.

She inhales deeply, the outside air beckoning her to partake. Her nose twinges and she sneezes, only to open her eyes to the sight of a single rider rounding the bend of trees.

“Master Ematt,” she greets, watching as he swings his leg on dismount.

He turns to face her, his dark eyes gleaming with his yellowing teeth. “Why hello. Rey, was it?”

“Yes,” she nods, unafraid to meet his gaze. Remembering herself, she bows her head deeply.

“Welcome back.”

“How fares your master? I hear he’s recovering well.”

“He is,” she agrees, fervently deepening her bow. “Thanks to you. If there’s anything I could do to repay you—”

“Actually, there is,” he interrupts. She looks up to find his stare shining, his lip quirked beneath his bristled facial hair. He reaches a hand into the inner pocket of his leather tunic, pulling out something she can’t glimpse through his tanned fingers. “You see, a young woman dropped this, and I’ve been carrying it around for quite a few days.” He holds out his closed fist. “Here.”

Pleasantly confused, Rey holds out her hand, humoring him. But when the soft caress of wrinkled silk meets her palm, her thoughts are nothing but shattered stone.

Ematt laughs at her, a light, chuckling scoff, as he leans a bit closer, voice low with happy conspiracy. “Perhaps you could carry this burden for me?”

Rey’s lip trembles, joy billowing in her throat. It swells as she holds the silk to her heart, silently vowing to keep it safe there, where it belongs. “I can.”

“Good to hear. Ah, Master Ren!”

Rey turns, holding her hands behind her back as Ben lumbers down the hall, approaching them. His eyes flit from Rey to Ematt, his hard gaze softening. “Caluan.”

Opening his arms wide, Ematt walks past Rey, moving to clasp Ben’s hand and pump heartily. “Good to see you, lad. Maz tells me you’re doing well!”

At Rey’s ignorance and turned back as she moves to take Ematt’s horse to the stable, Ben’s gaze lingers. “I am.” He returns to Ematt at a blink. “Shall we?”

“Of course, but first,” Ematt grins, spinning to pull free two large jugs, heavy and sloshing with wine. “A gift.”
Ben takes one offered to him, nearly smiling at his manager’s profound eagerness. “Very generous of you. Please, come inside. My staff has prepared a meal for us.”

Ematt agrees, trailing into the house after her master with ambling steps and chatter. She leads the horse—a bit of a stubborn creature—to the last of the empty stalls. The other horses nicker, a bit roused by the newcomer, as Rey turns her attention to the silk in her hand.

It’s a bit dusty, no doubt from when she dropped it in the arena, but it still retains its softness. She hears Ashoka call to her from within, deciding to think more on it later as she stuffs the silk into her fascia and hurries back inside.

“There are less pillows than I last saw in this place.”

“Indeed,” Ben agrees, lying upon his chaise as Ahsoka pours their mulsum, both quiet as to the reason why. “Make note to order more,” he tells her.

She nods, leaving the jug on the table as Ematt swirls, taking a sip and staring openly at her. “Yes, Young Master,” she says, leaving them to fetch the first course.

“A beautiful woman, that one,” Ematt remarks, sighing at the sweet taste of his wine. “Firm.”

Ben glares at Ematt, though it goes without heat. “You fancy her?”

Ematt’s eyes gleam. “Are you offering?”

Now it comes. “No.”

A hearty chuckle sounds in reply as Ematt polishes off his first chalice, wiping away the strays with the back of his hand. “Calm down—I only tease. There will be no women for me after my Marian.”

Though wallowing in the shallow wake of Ben’s blatant discomfort at the idea of Ematt and his servant, Ben’s thoughts pull him from the waters and onto the shores of potential. He fixes Ematt a reading stare as the man pours himself another glass. “Ematt.”

“Mm?” he grunts, taking another drag.

“What do you know about pleasing women?”

Ematt chokes, wine spitting from his lip, spraying small flecks into the air. As he coughs, Rey enters, kneeling before the table to place two steaming dishes before them—beef, fish, bread and cheese, a bowl of grapes, a bowl of olives, and a saucer of garum.

The savory scent wafts into Ben’s nose, but it is a different hunger he feels when their eyes meet before she offers a small smile, turning and leaving the room with unhurried steps.

Ematt punches his chest, his coughing wet and persistent, sputtering, “Whatever for?”

Ben watches Rey as she disappears, his voice coming more quiet than he means it to be. “No reason.”

“I see,” Ematt murmurs at length, following Ben’s gaze. “Well, if there’s going to be talk of that, I’m going to need more drinks.”

Ben resists the urge to roll his eyes, leaning down to take some bread with his beef, chewing
heartily. It’s perfectly cooked—she’s done well yet again.

They eat and trade passing news from Rome. It seems that Ben’s predictions went better than he’d thought. Rather than uproar over Rey’s intrusion in the arena, the audience saw fit to spread word about a mysterious girl who saved the life of Kylo Ren, gossip of a more praiseworthy variety left in its wake.

“And now that you’ve healed,” Ematt says around a plump, shining olive. “You can start fighting again.”

Ben frowns, bringing his cup to his lips and drinking in silence.

Ematt doesn’t miss the throbbing silence. He watches him carefully, his voice low with warning as he swallows. “Master Ren, the emperor will be expecting you return to your duties.”

“I know that,” Ben rumbles, sulking into his wine.

“But…?”

He folds his cheek, avoiding Ematt’s gaze as he loses his sight in the rippling mulsum, the sweet aroma heady in his nose, reminding him of the night he shared it with her. It makes the words come easier. “I’m not going back.”

Ematt blinks, staring dumbfoundedly after him. “That’s a death sentence.”

“So would fighting with a handicap,” Ben grunts. “I’ve served my three years in full. Even if I were a slave, I would be free to retire.” He goes for another sip. “What difference does it make if I go now?”

His manager considers this for a moment, nodding his head, as though silently agreeing with him. “So…” he glances up. “…domesticity, then?”

Ben withers a scowl at him.

“I assume that’s why you asked your little question.”

There’s no use fighting it, but Ben tries regardless, grip tightening on his chalice as he averts his indignant gaze. “Perhaps.”

Ematt chuckles, leaning back in his chaise. “Oh really? It wasn’t long ago you were telling me about your virtus.” He lifts a salted brow. “Why the sudden interest?”

“…Things have changed,” Ben murmurs, leaning forward. He tips the wine between his hands, watching it rock like ocean waves—a babe’s cradle. “I’ve changed.” Their eyes meet, his own laced with fire and quiet fury, the intensity nearly knocking the old man down. “If I’m not going back, I won’t need my virtus.” He breathes in unsteadily, the words finally spoken leaving him trembling and exposed. “I just need her.”

In the silence, Ematt appraises this young man, seeing in him the warring maturity of a boy not yet grown—but large enough to withstand the fiercest battles, the fickle attention of Rome. His smile spreads slowly, pride blooming within him like a Spring lily. “I admire your flexibility,” he remarks. “You remind me of my son. Though, he never cared to learn the secrets of pleasing women.”

Ben’s lip quirks hopefully. The drink must be getting to him. “No?”
Pouting, Ematt shakes his head, sighing out, “Cornelius would have been not one year younger than yourself. As stubborn as you—with little interest in knowing women beyond the casual affair. A lot like his old man, when he was young,” he scoffs, taking another drink.

Frowning, Ben studies his manager, recalling how it took two years together for him to learn that Ematt stands husband and father to the dead. He drinks with Ematt in silent toast to them, unwilling to break the silence first, keeping his condolences to himself. The man is prideful in the face of compassion—words would not ressurect what he’s lost.

Luckily for him, Caluan Ematt is also quite the talker when dancing on the drunken line. He slaps his empty cup upon the table, rubbing his hands together—as he often does when preparing to place a bet. “Alright! So you want to know how to please a woman, do you?”

Ben nods once, fervently.

“In romance, or seduction?”

He frowns, the decision quite difficult. “What’s the difference?”

Shaking his head, Ematt chuckles again. “Ah, my boy, you humor me so.” He moves to pick at the remaining grapes, sorting through as if searching for something. “Tell me what you know about a woman’s heart.”

Ben considers this, drawing forth what he can and letting his tongue handle the rest. “It is…” he recalls Rey’s anger upon their first meeting, the gradual softening of it, only to leap back into bitterness—then tenderness again. He frowns pensively, suddenly fearing where his love may lead him. “…irrepressible.”

“Mm,” Ematt nods. “Yes, yes, a good word for it. Women are wild creatures, at heart. Beautiful, and sometimes demure—on the outside. Yet ferocious, untamable within. Surely you’ve seen this in your,” he smirks, “current interest.”

“Only interest, Ben wordlessly corrects. “I have. Are you saying I am to tame her?”

“On the contrary,” Ematt grins, wide and yellow-toothed. “You are to run with her, if you can.” Ben only nods as he continues, barely understanding. “Women are complex beings,” he praises. “Angelic, divine. Beyond the understanding of mere, mortal men.”

The words remind Ben of the sight of Rey above him, on the battlefield and in his bed, both alight with heaven’s wonders. “I see.”

“Not many do,” Ematt affirms, waving his free hand dismissively. “I was one, in my youth. I used women for temporary pleasures—and felt empty all the while. It wasn’t until Marian that I sought the knowledge you do from me. But sentiment aside—to understand that women work beyond us is the key to appeasing them, in their hearts and,” he plucks a small, round grape from the bowl, gesturing to Ben with it, “in their beds.”

Ben swallows, shifting in his seat to watch as Ematt reaches for other pieces of untouched food. “What are you doing?” he asks impatiently.

Ematt shushes him, continuing his work. He snags the last strip of fish, lying it down and flanking it with two thin pieces of cheese, resting the small grape at its crest. When it’s finished, he lies back, appraising his creation. “There we are. Surely you recognize this?”

Ben doesn’t. By all accounts, he shouldn’t—until old memories of passing illustrations among the
boys at the synagogue, which had been burned within both hearth and memory, come flooding back. His throat closes looking at the crude representation, leaving him to a shallow nod and a desperate need for more wine.

“In pleasing a woman’s heart, I’m afraid I can only offer so much advice. They are all too different to give any hard solutions. But if you’re looking to woo her, then the least we could do now is work backwards,” he winks. "Don't you think?"

Gulping down his fourth—fifth? Who’s counting?—glass, Ben merely grunts, scooting over to watch Ematt as he points about the display, his heart pounding at the sight of it.

“This is her entrance,” Ematt claims, finger hovering over the fish. “I’m sure you know what to do with that,” he chuckles, poking it.

Ben almost smacks his hand away, offended on Rey’s behalf, until he recalls that this is for his betterment. Still, comparing this slab of meat to his Puella’s most secret place should not be affecting him as it so threatens to do right this very moment, stirring wakefully in his lap.

However will he last should he see the real thing?

“It’s quite sensitive to touch, namely around here,” Ematt continues, tracing the inner walls of the cheese. “These are her wings—so called because they are meant to be spread. When they have swollen with blood, she will be more welcoming to insertion.”

Ben suddenly feels quite light-headed, but manages another sip to dispel it before asking, “How will I know when she is… she is… most welcoming?”

As demonstration, Ematt spoons out a sample of garum, letting it trickle down upon the fish. "She will be wet.”

Wet. Ben nods, swallowing the gathering in his mouth at the heady smell, at the thoughts it evokes. “Ah.”

“Indeed. Your fingers will do just fine for this, but I’ve found that the tongue works best for wetting a woman.”

“My tongue?” Ben echoes, more to himself than his companion. Of course—it’s not that he hasn’t thought about tasting her, but merely underestimated its usefulness. He finds himself pleasantly surprised.

“Yes,” Ematt concedes, glancing to find Ben’s cheeks flushed. With drink or embarrassment, he isn’t sure, but is endeared nonetheless. “I believe you have the mouth for it.”

Ben snaps his head, staring in open disbelief. “I do?”

“Yes, yes,” he insists. “Women enjoy a long tongue. And your lips are large enough. I’d say your woman would be quite receptive to them.”

For the briefest instant Ben envisions her spread before him, her eyes closed, lips parted, cries resonate as he tastes her. He blinks the vision away, returning his attention to the less-appetizing replica. “What else?”

“Ah, yes, perhaps the most important,” Ematt drones, as though a wise prophet delivering sacred news. He rests his finger upon the grape. “The landica.”
Ben nearly goes pale at the obscenity pouring from his manager’s lips, but focuses more intently on its position, fearing he may forget where it lies. “I’ve heard of this.”

“It is a blinding pleasure to a woman,” Ematt reports, almost grave. “To touch her crest is to proclaim silent love, and strip her of every defense.”

His lips part in awe as he stares at the small grape rolling slowly under Ematt’s thumb. He memorizes the movements as best he can, mind lost to the thought of using his body for such intimate contact.

He is not made for women. He knows that much. His stature is too large by the Roman standard, and his manhood… defies the more reasonable qualities. Were he smaller, in all places, perhaps he would have more confidence in the thought of pursuing her.

“But,” Ben murmurs, “how do I please her?”

Ematt smiles a gentle smile, his voice patient, fatherly. “Listen to her body, her voice. She will tell you what to do. Though, you may need to ask. Women can lose themselves, just like men.”

Ben frowns, nodding, and feels a hand rest upon his shoulder.

“You’ll do fine,” he reassures. “There is so much more to learn about your woman, my boy. I’d hate to spoil all the secrets for you.” He pats once, heartily, against Ben’s back. “If all else fails—be attentive to her breasts; stroke upwards within her furrow. That will have her finishing in no time.”

Pausing, Ben soaks in the man’s words, the new information almost startling as he searches the man’s shining eyes, as if to detect some cruel joke, but finding only earnestly. “‘Finishing?’ So a woman can—?”

“Master?”

Ben jolts to his feet, nearly leaping out of his sandals as she walks in, her expression wide and ignorant to what she’s caught him in. “Rey,” he grunts, faltering. His knees knock against the table, toppling the near-empty jug of mulsum, sending the wine shining along its surface.

He swears under his breath, feeling muzzy and hot as Rey steps in, a rag already in her hands. “Sorry,” she apologizes humbly, as though trying to withhold her embarrassment. Or laughter. Either way she looks up from her knees, her eyes large and flickering in the firelight. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Looking down is a dizzying feat, even moreso at the proximity between her pretty, pink mouth and his rousing member. “No,” he stammers, backing away, only to fall back onto the chaise. “It’s… It’s alright…” he mumbles, face burning.

If there is a God, He will slay him now.

Ematt offers a bellowing laugh, slapping his hand against his knee as he rises to stand. “Good thing the last of the mulsum is gone—I think your master has had quite enough! Perhaps you should take him to bed, hm?”

Ben stifles a groaning concurrence, covering his face as Rey finishes her work at the table. She looks up to meet Ematt’s eyes, her smile persistent, fed by his good cheer. “Shall I prepare a room for you as well?”
“Naw,” he chuckles, sniffling the last of his laughter. “I can see myself out just fine.” As he moves towards the hall, he stumbles, leaning against the wall.

Ahsoka comes into view, standing in the doorway, effectively blocking him with her drawn shoulders and stern expression. “What’s this?”

“Master Ematt is leaving,” Rey explains.

Ematt grins. “Good evening, Madam.”

As his breath wafts to her face, Ahsoka wrinkles her nose. “‘Leaving,’ huh? I don’t think so. You’ll fall from your horse.”

He waves her off. “I’ve fallen off the horse many times, Madam. But I always get back on.”

Ben scoffs.

Ahsoka offers her master a seething glare before she sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Master Ematt, I insist on my master’s behalf that you stay with us tonight.”

“Well,” Ematt smiles, a burst of air breaking from his throat. “If you insist…”

“I do. Rey?”

She rises. “Yes, Ahsoka?”

“Escort the young master to his chambers and put him to bed while I prepare this man’s accommodations.” She points within the triclinium, moving it about the messy table. “And clean this up?”

“Yes, Ahsoka.”

The woman smiles softly at Rey before taking Ematt by the arm, dragging him off. “Come on then, old man.”

He chuckles again, winking after Rey as they vanish from sight. “Yes, Ahsoka.”

Rey sighs, running a hand over her hair. Though only having been awake for several hours, she already feels exhausted. She turns to find Ben staring at the ceiling, his hair mussed to expose some of his ears, tinged pink.

“It does you no good to get drunk. You’re still healing,” she chides.

Ben groans softly, covering his eyes with his hand. “A side-effect of bad company, I’m afraid.”

“Mm,” she smirks, rounding the chaise to tip at the waist, looking at his face from an overturned angle. “Will you need my help?”

He peeks out from under his fingers and jerks, catching her by surprise as he gently swipes her nose. “It seems I often do.”

She sputters, laughing at him as she offers her hand. He takes it, the warmth of his skin enveloping her instantly. She marvels at the soft calluses along his palm, scratching so mellowly against her own, and heaves him to his feet.

They make it to his room without incident, his coordination better with a guide, and soon he stands
in his room, watching as she lights the hearth to fight away the darkness.

“Will there be anything else?” she asks, wiping the dust on her stola.

Ben merely stares at her, the firelight lapping gently against her skin, illuminating the fine hairs on her arms, on her neck. His drunken mind says to put Ematt’s lessons to good use—after all, he has always been studious in honing new skills—but remembers his earlier decision.

*Woo her. I must woo her first. Then whatever comes after.*

“Ben?”

He snaps free of his musings, the cloth of his tunic too chafing. “Undress me.”

Her amused look becomes a wary glare, but she doesn’t protest, closing the space between them with slow, careful steps. Her hands move to unfasten his belt, fingers trembling as they cup the base of his tunic, tugging upwards. He stoops to aid her as she pulls it from his head, freeing his chest to the stifled cool of night.

Rey only looks at him for a moment, the gentle glow of the fire igniting every facet of his muscular frame, and feels her face growing warm. She blames it on the heat from the day—but knows it’s a lie.

While he was incapacitated, looking felt more like study. Nurture. But now as he stands before her, healthy and still, *waiting*, it’s become too hard to focus on more innocent motivations.

“There,” she murmurs, pressing his crumpled tunic against his chest, barely serving to cover the wide swath of skin. She doesn’t dare look into his eyes, knowing that if she does, she may not be able to escape. “You’re undressed.”

And with that, she hurries out, shutting the door and unwittingly leaving a man in love behind.

She finishes cleaning the triclinium. It was odd, finding food strewn about, but she didn’t question it. She’d eaten the small grape as she went, figuring she might as well, given that the men didn’t see fit to try.

When she closes herself in her room the house is silent, leaving her alone with nothing but her thoughts and moonlight.

She strips down to her undergarments, dreading the heat that will come in the morning. According to Ahsoka, it will only grow worse until the rains come—to which Rey is more than excited to see for herself.

As she pulls off her stola, the silk falls to kiss her feet. She stoops, taking it in hand, thumbing over the soft fabric and remembering when Ben had given it to her.

*Keep it safe for me.*

He’d wanted her to protect it, and she’d failed. But now, as she sits alone in the dark, she wanders blindly through the mystery of what it could mean.

She sighs, lying down and staring at the flooded moonlight over the ceiling, dreading falling asleep.

Last night, she’d had the strangest dream, one unlike any she’s ever had before. She was back in
Snoke’s palace with Ben, on his lap as he ravished her, and things became…

Her heart hammers against her bones, forcing the vision from her mind. She closes her eyes, screws them shut tightly, willing the image away.

She can’t think of her master that way. She can’t. Regardless of her feelings for him, she must push them down. From the beginning he made it clear that he had no desire for her. And though the small moments they shared built within her the foundations of gratitude and… love… she must remind herself that if could never be. Not really, and never in the way she wants.

Rey huffs, pulling the cover over her shoulder as she turns heavily to her side, but sleep eludes her, a constant reminder of something else, something small, needling the back of her mind.

The Pennyroyal. She’d almost forgotten about it, had been determined to forget, but now can’t stop herself from reconsidering her stance.

The night Ben had… lifted, she convinced herself that her desires were untrustworthy. And though she cannot trust them now, with this burning behind her eyes at the mere sight of him unclothed, she knows she also cannot keep the Pennyroyal any longer.

The temptation to use it may prove too great—an easy out, a way to take what she wants. To be selfish with her body. And his.

Decided, she slips from her sheet, reaching under the mattress. Her hand hunts for it like a huntsman’s hound, but when there is nothing to be found, her heart jolts. She rises to her feet, upturning the mattress, using the moonlight and her scouring hands to scavenge at every last corner before she is left breathless, panting, and consumed with paralyzing condescension and truth:

The Pennyroyal is gone.

Chapter End Notes

[Men in Ancient Rome, as evidenced by the existing texts today, cared very little about a woman’s pleasure in the act of sex. Rather, sex in Ancient Rome was seen as an act of dominance, which is why many men (and women, still) were raped by men in an effort to exert "power." To them, "power" in sex was the ability to, quite literally, force their genitals inside of someone (be it orally, anally, or vaginally). (Orally was an act called "irrumatio," which modern fanfic readers know today as "non-con/ dub-con/ or even consensual face-fucking")]

[Because Romans saw sex as a power-move, they also thought the opposite end of the spectrum to have even greater strength. The man’s "vir" or "Virtue," would be a determinant of his high social status, making him respected for his ability to control his body. Roman generals and nobleman would often undergo virtuous lifestyles, refusing to be alone with women or hire young, handsome men to their house staff. (So when Snoke took that choice from Ben, or tried, this was his attempt to bring him down even further)]

[The word "landica" means "clitoris," and in Ancient Rome was considered one of the most atrocious things anyone could say, especially in public, and was often written in
graffiti. The term translated is "crest"]

[The Latin language didn't have a word for a woman's labia, so they were often called "orae" (meaning "edges" or "shores"), and "pinnacula" ("small wings")]

[A woman's vagina had many different terms, most usually referring to fruits or gardens (as seen in Song of Solomon from the Old Testament). Though not really a subject of praise in Roman texts (as Roman men frequently were disgusted by lady-parts, the cowards), common terms included "furrow" (used with the masculine term, "plough"), "door," "hearth," "altar," "vessel," "oven," and "bag" (which is likely where the "old bag" insult gets its sting)]

[Unlike the Greeks, Romans did not condone public nudity, especially in males, until later in the Empire's reign. When they did, it was only to erect (haha) statues of gods, wherein the male's penis was considerably small. This was seen as a sexual preference, echoed by the desire for women with wide hips and small ("unobtrusive") breasts. They also saw circumcision as a horrendous act of genital mutilation, and it was outlawed to perform it on anyone, even slaves (who had no personage). (Therefore, Ben, who is large, and circumcised, will have a lot of societal pressure on his more... intimate appearance)]

[BONUS: I personally headcanon Ahsoka as asexual. So yes, Ematt is spending the night in a house full of virgins]
She awakens from a restless sleep to a familiar heaviness—a thick spread of heat along her arms and neck, strangling with warmth she thought long abandoned.

Sighing, Rey sits up, wincing at a twinge in her shoulder. She must have slept oddly on her mattress, which, to her credit, was difficult to arrange in the dark of the night. Much more so with her rattled mind.

Wrestling out of her sheet to stand, she treads across the room, scanning with the aid of sunlight, the bag of Pennyroyal nowhere in sight. Even on her knees, she finds nothing.

Someone must have taken it, Rey muses, thoughts racing. It couldn’t be Ben, she reasons quickly. After all, he was on his deathbed only days ago—and she doubts he would ever have a reason to enter her chambers.

Steeling herself, Rey rises to her feet, sweat cooled by the chill in her blood. There’s no doubt in her mind that someone must have found the herbs, and knows she’d kept them hidden.

Rey closes her eyes, resigned. She has a idea who it might have been, and the thought serves both to reassure and terrify her. But she holds fast to the truth that the Pennyroyal is no longer her secret, and resolves to tell the truth if confronted, and leave it at that.

Yes, she had panicked when Maz gave the leaves to her, but in the end it was best to take them—to promote the act of her lost virtues. For that, Rey only feels somewhat guilty.

But…

Ben promised her that he would keep to himself. And no matter her own feelings, the strength of these new temptations, she believes him. He’s taken such care with her, given her greater liberty than a sister. In his way, or in her own, he has been a… friend, to her. Guided her, trusted her.

And she should trust him, too.
Sitting at her small vanity, Rey sorts through the drawer, avoiding the knife for a comb. She ties her hair back, relieved by the air finding her neck—for what little draft it brings—and looks into her eyes.

Though the heat surrounding her feels the same as her past, she looks different. Her cheeks have rounded ever so slightly, the color and vibrancy of her skin shifting from the harsh Egyptian sun to the softer, pinker hues of the northerners in her blood.

There is something else she sees, too, when she looks at herself. A firmness in her lips, faded at the edges. The arch of her brows sleek and... respectable.

She straightens her posture, hands in her lap, and gazes at her stola, a smile flickering under her feminine nose. In this reflection, she is no girl, no slave—but a woman.

Considering herself in this light leads to so many thoughts, all blooming, blossoming within her mind like flowers on creeping vines, twining across new, untrodden ground. Thoughts she shouldn’t entertain.

Rey sucks her lip between her teeth, biting hard. “Stop it,” she whispers, chiding the woman in the mirror with narrowed eyes. “Remember your place.”

She doesn’t reply beyond a beat of silence and shaking head, a soft sigh spilling from her lips. Rey abandons her there, turning from the vanity to open her door and stride down the hall.

For now she’ll focus on breakfast. The sooner things return to normalcy, the sooner she can leave these intrusive thoughts behind. Yes, her master is kind—when he wants to be. Yes, he is both strong and knowledgeable, with the occasional wit that never ceases to surprise. And, yes, he is handsome—a fact that continues to plague her with his tall frame and striking features, the soft length of his dark hair, the hard set of his shoulders and carefully sculpted build, the endless, consuming depth of his eyes...

Her heart jumps in her chest when the thought trespasses further. Of all she has come to love in him, it’s his eyes that threaten her most, shaking the unsteady foundations of her building resolve. In his eyes she’d borne witness to more emotion, more sorrow and pain than she can remember anyone baring to her before. And yet, for all his walls and hidden places, he welcomed her there, inside—and she never wanted to leave, knowing that once she did, he would go with them.

But he hadn’t. When all was spoken, he remained. Shattered and true, waiting to be forged again.

She turns her thoughts to holier things as she crosses the courtyard, the late-morning dew foggy with entrenching heat as it hangs over the grass. Though Ben has faced terrible injustice in his past, for the briefest moment she saw in him an openness, a light shining in the darkness of his soul. Perhaps, she hopes, that light will grow, if given proper reflection. All that’s left to do is pray, and wait, and trust—and then, maybe one day, they will meet again. Maybe as something more.

As she nears the culina, her thoughts pull away, lead by the nose and scent of a familiar sweetness. She follows it, thinking Ahsoka awake, but halts in the doorway, blood gasping in her veins.

Inside stands Ben, hair kempt and skirt donned, with little else but a skillet and spatula in his grasp.

She watches dumbfoundedly as, with an expert flick of the wrist, he manages to toss a golden cake amidst the skillet bed, the sound hissing throughout the culina and into her ears. Her stomach twists.

At the smell or the sight, she’s not sure which.
“Good morning.”

The rumble of his voice makes Rey jump. He hadn’t given any acknowledgment that he saw her there, and she wonders flusteredly just how long she’s been watching him—and how long he’s known.

Seemingly unaware of her struggle, he turns, granting her full view of him shining like polished marble from the heat of the day creeping steadily throughout the house. He appraises her slowly, his eyes trailing over the length of her body. Rey swallows, rooted still, every slide of his gaze feeling almost like a touch until it meets her own with wide, burning intensity. “Hungry?”

God help me. She manages a nod. “Y-Yes. Always.”

The slightest quirk pulls at his lip, his eyes creasing at their corners into fine wrinkles as he wordlessly gestures to the stool at the table.

She obeys, tearing her eyes away from what may be the strangest of spectacles: her master, cooking breakfast? Ben. Cooking breakfast. It’s enough to make her scoff, when she seats herself, at the madness of him.

With his back turned, she sneaks a furtive glance upon him, watching the ripple and shift of his skin over the wide bones of his shoulders. Stop it, she berates, holding up her hand to the side of her face, averting her eyes. She swallows, breaking her thoughts in lieu of silence. “Where’s Ahsoka?”

“Out,” Ben answers simply. If she peeked, she would see him shrug. “I sent her into the city for fresh supplies.”

“Oh,” Rey murmurs. "And Ematt?"

"Sent home," he replies. He glances over his shoulder, finding her with a hand concealing him from view. He withholds his smile until he turns back to his work, pride rearing its head within the confines of his own.

Last night, when she’d left him, Ben found sleep unattainable. The earlier conversation with Ematt had illuminated far more than he expected, yet much less than he needed. As unfortunate as his manhood may think it—were it to have a mind of its own, contrary to his own theories—to pleasure Rey would require a much longer, more patient process.

Patience, however, has never been Ben’s strong-suit, unless in the realm of war and strategy. In which, as he lied awake in his bed, pondering all different methods to more effectively romance her, his obsessive thoughts stumbled upon a revolutionary idea. And, many hours of contemplation and penmanship later, Ben Solo found himself a commander once again, prepared to do battle against his newest foe.

The first wave of his onslaught being, of course, food.

He stalks casually towards the table, placing the stack of fresh-made cakes before her, and sets aside the rest of their honey for her to use. He lets her avoid looking at him—his curiosities beginning to divide his ranks, leaving him to wonder if she averts her eyes for lack of beauty, or otherwise. Regardless, she seems resolved to ignore him.

It seems courtship is proving difficult already.

At least, until her hands rip into the wheat slabs, dunking torn pieces into the small bowl of honey
as though it were no different from a saucer of garum. He watches her as he takes the seat across the table, making use of his hands to feed himself at a more leisurely pace. When Ahsoka returns and Rey sees what he’d ordered brought for her, surely her heart will continue to soften in his favor.

They eat in silence, the air charged with heat as the sunlight bleeds through the windows, leaving its trace along the nape of her neck. Though struggling to maintain composure, she feels she does quite well—despite her inability to avoid the wide expanse of his bare skin.

She frowns into her next bite. Of course her master has every right to dress as he wishes in his own home, much less during such a wave of heat. But at the very least he could stop taunting her with it.

When she feels his gaze leave her, for only a moment, she glances at his side. “No bandages?”

He shakes his head, mouth full. “No.”

Finished, and curious, Rey rises, walking over to gaze at his wound.

She blinks, bewildered yet grateful beyond measure. The spot that had once been a horrible gash, mottled with angry skin and slippery pus, has now closed completely, the scabbing giving way to the thick whites and rosy tinge of healing. “How does it feel?” she whispers.

He turns his head to look at her, then himself. “It aches, sometimes, but it will fade.”

Unthinkingly, she reaches out, tracing the perimeter of his injury. His arm twitches where it rests on the table, but he doesn’t move away, only sucking in a breath that reminds her of her own fragile decorum.

She pulls back to meet his eyes in quiet apology, finding them wide and dark. Endless. Beautiful. Pushing herself from her intrusive thoughts, she risks a smile, going to her plate. “I’m glad.”

Ben watches her as she moves to the water basin, skin humming from where she’d touched. When she sets the plate down, he spots her wince, reaching back to squeeze at the joint of her neck and shoulder briefly before setting to washing.

Swallowing, Ben rises as well, taking the rest of the dishes with him. He stands beside Rey as he places them in the water, eyes on the slim sleeve of her stola—the creamy, lightly freckled knob of her shoulder—before stepping behind her.

Rey scrubs, content to feign ignorance of his proximity, every nerve alight and receptive to the heat trapped between their untouching bodies.

Until that distance is closed.

Long, thick fingers close around her knotted shoulder, the broad pad of his thumb shifting over the tender muscle, pressing lightly. She shivers, both at the touch and the rousing pain throbbing beneath the skin.

Ben pauses, frowning at the back of her head, searching for any sign of discomfort. “Does it hurt?”

The soft ghost of his breath on the back of her neck clouds her reason—it must, because she whispers, “Not there.”
His heart lurches at her words, opportunity a light in his eyes. He smirks, victorious as he advances to the next stage. Ben touches her deftly at first, watching his hand carefully as it smooths along the hot skin at the height of her shoulder blade, savoring the feel of her before squeezing, probing for her tangled muscle. He finds it almost instantly—she jerks. “Here?”

Keeping her head down, Rey nods, blood rioting in her face as she leans into the water, unmoving. At her silent ascent, Ben moves to stand closer, positioning himself where her shoulder fits well into his hand. He shifts his thumb in slow, steady circles, pressing upwards to untangle her.

Suddenly, he hits a spot just right, Rey’s mind bursting into bright colors of pain and relief. She groans, closing her eyes to savor his touch. Perhaps just one moment of indulgence couldn’t be so harmful—not when his fingers work such miracles into her flesh.

Ben swallows, his confidence rattled when she leans into him, her backside brushing between his hips. He presses a little harder, the scent of her hair dulling his senses, sending his blood elsewhere. For the briefest moment he contemplates pushing her against the counter, letting his hands wander wherever she allows, but restrains himself. It would do no good to rush into a more physical form of combat. For now, he must remember his tactics. “Have you ever been touched like this, Rey?” he prods lowly.

Rey sighs, the pain gone, replaced only by sweet allay as his fingers remain hooked over her shoulder, his thumb grazing, then pressing, circling in diligent rounds. “No,” she murmurs. “No one’s ever done this for me…”

Shifting his weight, Ben sets his other hand to her free shoulder, mirroring his own movements. His heart hammers in his chest, so loud he can swear she’ll hear as he leans closer, lips tickled by the loose hair at her temple. “How does it feel, now?”

Her blood stirs, feet restless as her fingers begin to shrivel in the water, the warmth between their bodies growing thicker by the moment, spreading like silk under his hands. “Good,” she breathes, the new sensations rippling through her, the comfort of his touch rooting her still. “It feels good.”

At her words, the blood in his veins ignites in a furious fire, and he remembers the desire he felt that day in Snoke’s palace, where he yearned to feel her. It fills him once more, his voice dropping dangerously. “Good.” Cautiously, he moves his hands down along her back, large fingers spanning the width of her to press thick pads into the cloth of her stola, working his way to her hips.

Rey nearly jumps out of her sandals, the hedonistic swirl of his touch pulsing shockwaves between her legs. His fingers stray higher along her sides, a bolt of warmth so heated it nearly immobilizes her with its foreign chill striking through her body, ‘rousing her nipples beneath their cover. It’s too good—too far! “Stop,” she panics, lifting her hands from the water, resting them over his to halt his progress. The tender flesh astride her breasts screams a silent protest. “It’s…” She wills her heart to slow, searching for some excuse—one that’s not a lie. “... the heat. I can’t…”

Ben pauses, water slithering down his knuckles from her grip. He looks at them, her hold on him tight, as if in fear.

“It’s not your fault,” she presses, returning to the dishes after smiling at him over her shoulder. It’s mine. “It’s just so warm in here,” she chuckles nervously. “These Roman clothes are like a second skin.”

“I see,” he murmurs, slipping out from under her hands, giving her space. He curses himself in
silence—he’s crossed too far, taken heavy casualties. But she no longer seems in pain, and that will have to do. Never one for human interaction, he shuffles to lean against the counter, tapping his fingers on the stone, folding his lips and avoiding her gaze as he searches for something to say. “Perhaps you would feel better if you took them off.”

Rey pauses, catching his eyes as they both lift to the other’s.

“Just the outer layer, of course,” he rectifies, clearing his throat. Heat rises in his neck, forcing him to look away. **Damn. Damn damn damn!**

For a moment, Rey thinks he’s being serious. But a laugh bubbles from her throat, her lips peeling back despite herself at her master’s surprising sense of humor. Who knew he drifted for the more improper side of comedy?

Ben chances a look at her face as she giggles, the sound serving to both relieve and chastise his lapse of judgement. He scoffs at himself for even trying, though he must admit, this result also has its benefits.

Rey shakes her head, setting the last of the dishes up to dry. He takes and towels them, setting them up as she wipes her hands, surveying him with the lighthearted comfort they know. “You’re funny.”

He quirks a brow at her in feign offense. “I’m aware of my appearance.”

She frowns, whipping her towel at him and missing. “Not that. I mean—your humor.”

“Ah,” he murmurs, chewing his cheek. He looks at her as he mounts the spatula on the wall, a slight quirk in his lip, the crinkles returning to the corners of his eyes. “What about it?”

“I’m not sure,” she replies honestly. He’s hardly suave at it perhaps that is what endears her so. She scoffs, waving her hand. “You would laugh at me if I did as you say.”

His head snaps to her attention, eyes hard. “I can assure you that’s not true.”

“No?” she smirks, but he stands resolute in the face of her shyness, gaze unwavering as she squirms, toying with her fingers. “I don’t think that would be appropriate…” she mutters.

He takes a step closer, his voice low, soft and prodding. “This weather doesn’t care what’s appropriate. Why should we?”

Rey stills, lifting her eyes to meet his, so high above her. “You’re serious?”

He nods.

His chest shines in her peripheral, sharing the muggy suffrage of the risen sun. She feels her own sweat chafe under her arms, the wetness between her legs more noticeable than the usual hot day. Chewing her lip, she considers her options. Even in the shade of the house, the elements seem persistent to discomfit her. To remove her outer layers would certainly provide more in terms of comfort...

She imagines the relief of the air on her belly, on her legs, and sighs, remembering herself. While she promised to maintain her own control, she also knows that she can trust Ben to keep his word. And just now, his words were that he wouldn’t belittle her. In fact, he could very well order her to—but has left the choice to her.
She closes her eyes, resigned to put her comfort over her pride. “Alright.”

Ben stares at her, dumbfounded, before moving past her. “Come. This way.”

Rey follows after him to the atrium, watching as he stands before the shallow pool. Her eyes linger on the water, rippling sunlight, casting their fiery dance over his body. “Here?”

He doesn’t respond, stooping to release himself of his sandals and toss them aside, stepping down into the water. It comes only so far as his middle shin, but he grunts appreciatively nonetheless, shifting his weight to sit on the tile floor to let his feet soak in the lingering cool. He looks up at her, expectant as he rumbles, “Join me.”

There’s nothing she would like more, Rey realizes, bending to unravel her sandalia, setting them away. She glances at him, her heart pounding as she realizes what comes next. She glances at the drawn curtain of the tablinum, and makes for its cover. “One moment,” she whispers, feeling his eyes on her as she slips behind the satin drapes.

Ben leans back on his elbows, lingering in the shade under the atrium roof beyond the pool’s reach, gazing up in awe of the circumstances. He can feel his throat pulsing with every beat of his unsteady heart, the anticipation of her defying any enemy he’s ever faced.

When the curtain rustles he’s immediately thrust from his reveries, watching, claspingle onto this one moment in time where her long, slender leg first emerges from the tablinum.

He swallows when she steps out fully, the exposed skin of her thighs and stomach wrapping small, soft hands around his throat and squeezing mercilessly. Her small, pert breasts lie nestled close by her fascia, her sex hidden well by the large cloth of her subligaculum—every part of her leaving him breathless and gaping.

She steps into the water to sit opposite him, her eyes wide and shy as she holds her arms to cover herself, though there is little to be seen where she lifts them. His mouth waters at the rolls of her stomach as she makes herself comfortable, her hips wider than when they first met. Soft, inviting.

The sight is enough to excite him, but he covers himself quickly, shifting his weight to lean hunched over his knees, his eyes taking her in hungrily.

Rey looks up, catching his gaze with her own. The water feels nice and cold as it closes in around her ankles, relieving most of the heat from her body. Unhappy with the silence—or perhaps afraid where it will lead—she opens her mouth to speak. “So, after this, what am I to do?”

Her words tug at him to focus. He should probably pay attention. “Mm?”

“My chores?”

He blinks at her, almost scoffing at her devotion to the most mundane tasks. “There will be no chores today,” he says simply. “So, after this, you may do as you please.”

“‘As I please?’” she echoes, tasting the words on her tongue. They are so foreign there, but so gratifying. She returns her elation to him, a wide smile on her face. “Could I ride Silencer again?”

Her joy is contagious—his unwitting assault marching on to begin a new battle, to ply her with things she enjoys. Silencer, of course, is one of them. The thought of such a simple thing, of potentially watching her again, worms between his cheeks, having her like this, so comfortable with him, enough to make him grin. “If you like.”
Rey blanches, her every sinew and muscle seizing at the sight of him—his eyes squinted so narrow, the folds in their creases so pronounced, the pure and crooked whites of his teeth bared to her view. It floods her with a new warmth, everything else fading but the sudden, striking happiness on his face. One unlike any she’s seen before.

Oh, what a torment to love him now—this man so close, and yet so distanced! She flushes, forgetting herself as she watches the water dance over her feet. “I would.”

For now, with Ben’s erection beginning to subside—though not as entirely as he would prefer in a skirt like this—he simply studies her features, recalling when she’d sat and silently listened to the testimony of his life.

He’d yearned to know of her own in return. Maybe she could enlighten him now.

“Tell me about Egypt,” he says, leaning a palm upon the floor, draping his arm over his knees.

Rey’s eyes flicker to his, her mouth twitching out of its small smile. “What about it?”

Ben shrugs. “You decide.”

You decide. Such funny words for a master to say, she muses, altogether grateful for their privacy. “Well,” she starts, “there isn’t much to tell. You know I was sold young.”

“For drinking money.”

His words, on the surface, seem cold and callused, but a small part of her wonders if it’s in a quiet anger on her behalf. Still she continues, “I grew up with Plutt and his slave traders in a place called Niima Outpost—east of the Jaukku Village. It was a trading ground for traveler’s to buy and sell wares before their journeys.”

“So you’ve met many people, then?”

Now Rey shrugs. “I suppose you could say that it was a moderate amount. Plutt tended to keep me busy in his shop.”

The hand hanging over Ben’s knee tightens to a fist, anger surging. “Did he touch you?”

Shaking her head, Rey wiggles her toes under the water, savoring the cold in memoriam of the desert heat. “Never like that. Sometimes there were lashings, but never enough to scar. He was…” she frowns, “… saving me. For the highest bidder.”

“Snoke,” Ben hisses. “Me.”

Rey nods, rubbing at her wrists. “I saw many people come and go as slaves, meant to be sold. Deep down, I always knew I would go, too.”

Spotting her sadness, Ben immediately seeks to rectify it, changing the subject. “Were they the ones who taught you?”

“Yes,” she replies, voice low and reverent. “Some things. I learned Coptic first, from shelving records. Then the slaves taught me Greek letters. The rest came naturally, over time.”

“And Hebrew?”

“The Jews,” Rey supplies, her voice wavering, unsteady. “And the Christians, too.”
“Mm,” he grunts, the subject sinking within him like lead.

Rey studies his face, silently imploring he listen. “They taught me more than languages. I heard stories, myths that I clung to in the night. Even as I despaired, I had hope,” she murmurs, insistent. “And the years I spent lying to myself, certain my father would come back for me…” her eyes well with tears, “…they vanished, because my real Father was with me. He wanted me.” She smiles, a serene thing—a spear through his heart. “And that was enough.”

Ben watches her silently as she finishes, sorrow and hate dancing through him like poison and blood. He thinks it would be satisfying to have Plutt executed, but not so much as it would be to have met her from the start. Perhaps she would have been one of his students, would the villagers have allowed her cleverness to flourish.

The thought makes him curious, and he realizes he has no idea Rey’s age. “How old are you?”

She laughs softly at that, matching his changing tempo with ease. “Twenty, when Autumn comes. At least, that’s what my record said.”

Ten years, he marvels, searching her eyes. He should have figured—what with her youthful beauty and blossoming intellect, she was bound to be somewhere in that range. He’d never given it much thought, but the difference is not so unusual. Actually, he finds it quite preferable that she is so well into adulthood.

He allows himself the smallest of tentative smirks. “Are you sure you aren’t older?”

“Oh,” she chuckles, kicking her foot. A few droplets land on his face. “I won’t have you aging me.”

A scoffing laugh crawls from his throat, shaking his shoulders as he wipes his cheek. “Oh really?” he asks, rising to his feet. He holds Rey’s eyes as he nears, watching as his shadow falls over her, leaving her in silent provocation. His voice lowers to a deep rumble, the cadence enough to ripple the water in which he stands. “You would challenge your master?”

Catching on to his game, Rey smiles coyly, her heart shuddering with a newfound excitement. “I would,” she replies playfully, voice low to mock his.

“Mm,” he grunts, turning from her, tone steeped with promise. “Then perhaps I should punish you.”

She watches him wade away, momentarily struck by the sight of his behind in the well-fitted white skirt as he aims for the bucket lying underneath the atrium table, just within arm’s reach. He returns to her, stooping and filling it with the water along the way, and she goes rigid. “You wouldn’t—”

“I would,” he smiles, quoting her words as he dumps the water onto her head.

Rey yipes, the cold racing down her back as shocking as it is relieving. He chuckles at her, his throat pulsing forth a deep, sweetened laughter.

As charming as she finds it, her temper wins out—she’s never lost a scrap, and doesn’t intend to now. As he turns to make his way back to his own seat, she rises, lunging for the bucket in his hand.

But he’s faster, pivoting to hold it out of her reach. She slips on the watery stone, losing her balance. On instinct she pushes against the nearest surface.
His chest.

It’s enough to send him off-balance, his knee giving out and sending him crashing into the water. Droplets splash against Rey’s knees, her horror at the accident mounting amidst her nervous laughter. “Ben! Are you alright?”

He sits up, gaze roving slowly from her ankles to her eyes, dark hair wet against his neck. “Yes,“ he answers. Drops of water cling to his arms, dripping like gathered dew from morning leaves as he lifts his hand. “Help me out, would you?”

“Oh, uh, of course,” she stammers, face hot as she takes his hand, the touch solid and affirming. What had she been thinking? Hopefully his anger won’t be too severe. Though bracing, it was actually quite—

He pulls.

—enjoyable.

His expert tug sends her splashing harmlessly into the water, her face submerged for only an instant. She gasps, lashes heavy with cool drops that she blinks away amidst his preening grin.

“You,” she pants accusingly, moving to sit heavily on her rear in the water, “are a child.”

He chuckles again, lighter this time. More for her than himself. “And you are gullible.”

She fixes him a meaningless frown, flicking her fingers in his smug face before setting her hair to rights.

Ben scoffs, wiping his face with his arm, already dried by the sun. He glances over at her, and stills.

Her arms are up as she affixes her wet hair behind her head, water clinging to the sunlit skin at her collar. His mouth waters as his stare drifts lower, the white cloth of her fascia soaked through to tease what lies underneath—her peaks awakened by the cold.

His cock twitches, ideas of exposing them twinging the bones of his fingers. But he must control himself. He cannot— will not—jeopardize his strategy. Despite its momentary hiccups, he feels that today has already laid the foundations for a swift victory.

He averts his eyes, staring into the shallow pool. Perhaps now would be a good time to move onward, to pull forth the third wave of his onslaught.

“Rey.”

“Hm? What is it?”

He pulls his knee up, resting an arm over it, losing himself in thought. “There’s something that’s weighed on my mind for some time now—something you should know.”

Her tone grows amused now, but is sounds suspiciously like a front. “Oh?”

Gathering his courage, he swallows, meeting her eyes. “It’s about your freedom.”

Rey pauses, studying him before lowering her arms, then her gaze. “Oh.”

Ben looks at her, taking in the sight of her so close to him, so trusting. The beauties and
temptations of her body pale in the light of all he knows to be true of her—her strength, her wisdom, and now, her faith. It’s more than he deserves. His voice rumbles low, steeped in certainty, a quiet vow to her and her alone. “I’ve decided to set you free.”

She blinks, staring at him in silent question.

“Our plans have changed,” he continues. “You changed… everything.”

Scoffing, Rey shakes her head, incredulous whilst a small droplet falls from her chin. “I don’t understand.”

He turns to face her more fully, his words careful and precise, urging her to listen. “When you stepped out into the arena, everything changed. Rome speaks of you and I,” he rocks his jaw, “in a light the Emperor won’t contest. And this,” he says, gesturing to his injury, “will give me the freedom to retire at last.”

Rey’s eyes light when they meet his own again, an open smile emerging from her tempting mouth. “Does this mean you’re not going to fight anymore?”

“It does. Rey,” he starts, riding the high of her excitement, dipping his head to level with her wide, striking gaze. “You have released me from my contract. Snoke won’t want an injured man in his guards. With me no longer under his eye, I can finally give you your freedom.”

In a blink her eyes well with tears, and in another they streak down her cheeks. Water sloshes as she opens her arms, throwing them around his neck in a crushing embrace that nearly sends him falling back into the water.

Unlike the last time she did this, he doesn’t hesitate, wrapping his arms around her, pulling her tight as she sobs happily into his hair, the skin of her back soft under his palms. Her proximity is beginning to affect him again, but he ignores it, savoring her happiness by burying his nose in her hair, finding traces of honey and pollen, sweat and skin.

“Thank you,” she murmurs wetly.

He squeezes once, letting his eyes close to savor the bliss of her body and his. “You’re welcome.”

They remain like that for only a few moments more before she pulls away, her tears gone. Replaced by something else. “But…”

He cocks his head. “What is it?” He frowns, disappointment mounting. “Aren’t you happy?”

“No, I am! I am. It’s just…” she folds her hands in her lap, searching his eyes “What about you?”

Ben scoffs softly. “What about me?”

She shakes her head, folding her lips before muttering, “I… I wouldn’t want to leave you alone.” When she speaks, she reaches into the band of her breasts—making Ben’s struggles far too noticeable for his liking—and pulls out a small slip of silk cloth.

Ben stares at it, breath leaving his lungs in a rush. “You kept it.”

“I lost it,” she admits. “Ematt returned it to me last night.” Her eyes meet his. “When you were dying, I felt so much guilt. I wish now that I had this to hold onto, this one piece of you.”

“Rey…” he murmurs, reaching out to take her hand, holding it over the cloth in his fist.
She smiles weakly. “I’d like to keep more than this, if I can,” she says. Deep inside, her voice screams to confess. If he were to release her now, then perhaps she would become more than a possession in his eyes.

And maybe, in time, a woman he could love.

“You and Ahsoka have been so kind to me,” she begins, voice trembling, her heart bursting to tell him everything, to share the truth locked away inside, “and I… I…”

“I understand,” Ben interjects.

Hope scatters in her chest, falling stars through her veins. “You do?”

“Yes,” he answers, his hand tightening over her fist. “You’ve been so lonely. So afraid to leave—even when everything you know brings you nothing but pain. I know…” he pulls her hand to his lips, kissing the droplets between her fingers with closed eyes. “Whenever you need me, I’ll be here to guide you. You will always be welcome here.”

Her face falls, her confession dashed as her heart races, her cuticles tingling from the deft brush of his lips. Tears sting at her again, filling her with a joy and love she’s never known—the urge to embrace him, to taste those lips on her own, pulling at her relentlessly.

His eyes meet hers and she’s lost, relief a gaping chasm in her chest. Their depth urges her to sink inside, to let go, to drown, and he doesn’t look away, holding fast to her hand, their touch more real and alive than anything could ever be.

“Rey!”

They jump, turning to find Ahsoka, parasol in hand as sharp as a blade.

She points the tip at Rey, her eyes blazing with fury as she curls her dark lip. “In your chambers,” she growls.

“Ahso—”

“Now!”

Rey rises, covering her chest, preparing to flee, when Ben’s hand snags her wrist. He stands beside her, his skirt dripping into the atrium pool as he glares openly at his head servant. “You don’t make demands in this household, Ahsoka. Rey stays.”

Ahsoka fixes him a chilling stare, chasing away all sense of heat and privacy. “Anakin,” she says.

Confused, Rey looks to Ben, whose face has gone a ghostly pale. “What did you say?” he murmurs.

“Anakin.”

At this, Ben swallows, lowering his head. His grip on Rey’s wrist goes slack, voice dark. “Go to your chambers, Rey.”

Shame floods her as he avoids his gaze, and she forces back her fear as she exits the pool, leaving her belongings behind.

When her door shuts, Ahsoka sneers down at him. “Get dressed and meet me in the tablinum. It’s time we had a little chat.”
He enters to find her seated at the table, but does not join her, hovering by the concealed shrine. The light is darker here, with the curtain drawn, the oil lamps basking them in sunset hues.

Since the day he contracted Ahsoka Tano, they forged a series of secret messages to tell the other. But, out of all the ones they’ve spoken, Anakin has never been used—their code of impending doom.

Ahsoka steeples her fingers, lost in thought as she stares down upon the wooden table. She sighs, her voice low and tired. “What are you doing, Ben?”

He frowns. “What concern is it of yours?”

“I don’t have the patience for your childish remarks, Ben Solo. So tell me now,” she growls, “just what do you intend to do with Rey?”

Working his jaw, Ben averts his eyes. “I’m letting her go.”

“Oh? Is that so? Because that’s not what it looked like to me!” she storms, rising from her seat. Ben blanches, never having seen her so angry before. “Tell me the truth. I can’t take any more lies from you.”

He meets her gaze, but remains silent.

She scoffs at him, rolling her eyes. “Typical Skywalker—you really are so much like your grandfather. Stubborn. Short-sighted. Selfish.”

At this Ben takes a step closer. “You hold your tongue!”

“I won’t!” she barks, meeting his challenge. “Never again! Do you think my age, or my inexperience, makes me blind? I can see the way you look at her, how you dote on her, and to ask such a question last night—” she throws her hand away.

“She has done nothing wrong,” he defends, rounding to the opposite side of the table, eyes wide and scorching. “You leave her out of this.”

“There is no leaving her out of this,” Ahsoka warns, her voice falling, low and quiet. Broken. “Can’t you see the danger you’re putting her in?”

Ben pauses at that, fury rising into his fists. “She is safe from Snoke. When I retire he will have nothing to do with her anymore.”

“Not Snoke,” she murmurs. “You.”

He gawks, mouth hung open and dry. “...What?”

“You, Ben. This danger you’ve put her in—all of it is yours.”

“That’s,” he mutters, stepping away, “that’s not true. I’ve never harmed her.”

“On the surface, no,” she agrees. “But I found this...” Gingerly, she reaches into the pocket of her tunica, producing a small parchment bag and placing it on the table. “...in her room.”

Ben stares down at the small bag, not moving to touch it. He shifts her an accusatory frown. “So this is what you were hunting for that day?” he points. “Was this what you were so suspicious of her for?”
“It was and it wasn’t. I knew she was hiding something, I just didn’t know what. Until now.”

Ben shifts his weight, uncertain. “What is it?” he asks, bringing it to his nose. On a whiff, he says, “Mint?”

“Pennyroyal.”

He raises a brow.

She sighs, shaking her head. “It’s an herbal tea made to soothe,” she meets his eyes askance, as though suddenly dreading his reaction. “And to aid the unwilling mother.”

Understanding dawns on him with gnarled claws, nesting on his shoulders, making them stiff. He bites his cheek, fingers balling over the sack in his palm. “Where did she get this?”

“Maz, I think,” she answers dutifully, brushing the subject of the midwife aside. “It’s the same bag as those poppy seeds. Rey knew what it was, and she hid it.”

Ben’s lip trembles, his foundations suddenly so unsteady. “But why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Ahsoka murmurs, her eyes laced with pity.

Swallowing, Ben turns away, the truth burrowing deep in his mind. Cornering him, leaving nowhere left to run. “I won’t hear any more of this.”

“Then history will be doomed to repeat itself. Think of your grandmother,” she urges. “It was Anakin’s love that killed her, Ben. Nothing else. Would you do the same to Rey?”

He remains silent until his voice comes cracked, broken. “I won’t.”

“How can you know?”

“Because she will be free,” he asserts, turning to meet her gaze. “And when she is, I will provide for her—I will give her the life she desires. She will be free to choose me of her own will.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

Ben’s scowl withers, dying like fallen tree, gnarled and ugly. “Careful.”

“You need to learn to face reality, Ben,” she says, pointing to the Pennyroyal in his hand. “That Rey has kept this bag is evidence enough. She is vulnerable to you.”

“No,” he denies. “She trusts me.”

“Exactly,” Ahsoka says, her voice soft and patient. “And what will you do if you have to break that trust?”

He considers her warily, watching as she comes closer. “What?”

“Ben,” she sighs, her gaze drifting down into the small, burning hearth. The heat washes over them both, suffocating. Inescapable. “Plans don’t always go the way you want them to. What happens if, one day, you lose control of yourself?”

“I would never force myself on her,” he grunts.

“And if she came to you by choice?”
He pauses.

Looking deep into his eyes, Ahsoka continues, her stern features leaving no room for argument. “You seek an honorable path now. But I am no fool. I know what Ematt told you last night. You may be strong of mind and body, but your heart is soft, weak and untrained. And your love, as well-meaning as it may be, will not stop Rey from suffering because of it.”

Meeting her eye, his own twitches.

“If she bore your child,” Ahsoka warns, “it would come into the world a slave. And if you are not free when that happens—what then?”

Ben looks away, covering his mouth. The thought of Rey with his child is a tantalizing vision, but to think it would be so soon… “I would take care of them both,” he answers.

“You’re missing the point!” Ahsoka snarls, smacking his arm. He winces, but does not retaliate, looking on as she rages. “She trusts that you will not take advantage of her, that you will keep your promise. But what if you can’t, Ben? Then what becomes of her?” She narrows her eyes, threatening. “What if Snoke found out?”

His blood runs cold at the thought, but he diffuses it quickly. “He won’t. He thinks I’ve already bed her—I gave him evidence,” he says, going on to explain the scrap of silk he’d kept.

Ahsoka shakes her head, looking down at the floor. “Rey told me you gave something like that to her. I hadn’t thought much of it at the time…” she remains silent for a moment, until, “…she spoke with Poe Dameron.”

His fists tighten at his sides, the memory of the pompous racer’s eyes lingering on Rey returning with sudden force. “I’m aware.”

“That he pulled her aside at the revelry?”

Ben halts. “What?”

“He captured her,” Ahsoka reports. “He offered to buy her from you, but she refused.”

Struck, Ben’s heart swells, both in anger at Poe Dameron for intruding and in love for Rey, who, even in her fear of him, remained ever faithful. “So what?” he challenges.

“What I’m about to say, you are not going to like,” she sighs, leaning against the table. “Tell me anyway.”

“I…” she wets her lip, steadily meeting his eye. “…I think you should let him.”

Ben goes rigid. “Purchase Rey?” he scoffs. “No. There isn’t enough gold in Rome to make me turn her over to a man like him.”

“You let your personal grudges cloud your judgement, Ben,” Ahsoka murmurs, her gaze knowing and bright. “You know he is a good man. He would never harm an unwilling woman.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“It does,” she grunts, taking a seat, out of breath. “Snoke’s focus is on you. And because of that, Rey is in danger. After the arena, Snoke will find out the truth of your feelings. He will use her against you—and you will drag her down in flames.”
“...You speak like a prophet,” he grunts.

“I was once called to be one, once,” she nods. “But now, I’m called to be something else.” Slowly, she reaches out, taking his fist in her small, slender, wrinkling hand. “I couldn’t save them, Ben. First Padme, then Anakin,” she shakes her head, tears in her eyes. “I’m growing old without them. I couldn’t bear to lose any more.”

He backs out of her grasp, moving towards the shrine. He looks inside, the mask of his grandfather—horribly misshapen—closing his eyes. “I know that time is running out,” he admits. “For me. This agony I feel, it doesn’t fade. It only grows stronger.” He turns to face her, and looks down at the Pennyroyal in his hand, his every vein igniting, gritting stones between his teeth. “I love her. And I know what I have to do, but I don’t know if I have the strength to do it.”

“I can’t help you,” Ahsoka murmurs. “You have to choose, Ben. Before it’s too late.”

Anger swirls within him, a storm raging, too consuming to escape. A shout rips from his throat, his arm shoving away the standing lamp closest to him, the light dousing on the stone floor. Unsatisfied, he moves to the chair astride Ahsoka, shoving it across the room, watching it lose a leg to the wall.

She waits with closed eyes until he finishes, panting in the heat, his every thought charged and full of hatred towards the truth.

He snarls down at the Pennyroyal, then to the the fire, letting instinct guide him. Rey trusts him. She does—and he would never do anything to soil it. The bag itself is a silent mockery of his love, taunting him in a voice like Dameron’s, words like Ahsoka’s telling him his vow will never be enough.

But he’ll be damned to believe it.

Without another thought, he hurls the bag into the blaze, watching with heaving shoulders as the herbs burn. He rights his posture, closing his eyes in vengeful bliss as he speaks. “Tomorrow.”

Ahsoka frowns up at him, the fire dancing in her eyes. “‘Tomorrow?’”

He nods, clenching his hands into tight fists, riding the surge of power in his body, in his heart. “Tomorrow, I tell her how I feel.” He turns to face her fully, frightening her in the dark authority of his countenance, filling the room to their corners with shadow. “Tomorrow—I tell Rey that I love her.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Ahsoka sighs, rising to her feet, meeting her master’s gaze as the bag shrivels within the hearth and disappears into smoke.

Chapter End Notes

[Soldiers in Ancient Rome were required to cook their own meals, so, in the words of Adam Driver himself: "he [Ben] is a good cook"]

[Romans took a multitude of battle tactics from the Greeks and expanded upon them for more effective victories. The most common form was in three separate waves of attacks called "the triple line." The first wave would consist of "hastati" (who would
throw spears) and "principes" in the second rank, and "triarii" in the third, who would act as the fallback system for maintaining defense. This is where the strongest, most capable warriors were kept stationed during battle until all forces had to resort to physical combat.

[A "death mask" was a common burial ceremony in Rome. Much like how we keep the ashes of family members today, Ancient Romans would cast their dead relative's face in wax and keep it on display at their homes. (Usually in the atrium, but for the sake of this narrative, the tablinum)]

{The theme for this chapter is "Achilles Come Down" by Gang of Youths. Listen to the Glory's Fray Spotify playlist here!}
Tomb

Chapter Notes

Hello, everybody! I'm really excited to bring you this new chapter. After the last one, I know some folks were left in a bit of confusion. Hopefully this makes everything a little more clear. If you have questions, you can always find me on Twitter @avidlyhunting or Tumblr @avidvampirehunter <3

Either way, I think we all know that things are going to escalate. I would like to encourage everyone to be mindful of the tags as we press onward. I'll be sure to warn you in the opening notes (like I'm doing right now) if there is anything you may need to know.

And as always, THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU from the BOTTOM OF MY BLACK HEART for all of your AMAZING, RELENTLESS SUPPORT!!! *hugs*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As the sun falls, so too does its heat—but only in the relief of light.

The air remains thick and stifling as the flames flicker in the hearth, his curtains limp without breeze as he stares deep into the blaze, contemplative.

He wonders at Ahsoka’s warning, anger hot in his fisted palm. Though deep in his heart he knows her right to be worried over him, and Rey, his thoughts circle as vultures in his mind, one after the other, starving for an answer.

Frowning, he clenches Snoke’s message in his hand. There are two choices for him, now. For Rey. The first—he could hold an audience with Snoke. The letter merely says to come, should he survive his injury. It would not be suspect. He could even go tomorrow, claim his retirement and return home to Rey. Confess his intentions; his love.

The second—he could heed Ahsoka’s warnings. It’s possible that the emperor will not allow for any escape, not until he’s joined the Pratoreans. Given away his personage completely. Once a dog of war, Snoke knows nothing of failure. To keep Rey close as time wears on only puts them at greater risk of being discovered. And with her Christianity—even more so.

She would die.

But she would also lose the freedom he promised her. At least, the immediate freedom. Poe Dameron is a worldly man—Ben could pay him enough to release Rey when the time comes… though, she would require a husband. But if that happened, he would still not be free to take her hand without endangering her again.

Ben frowns, blood boiling at the thought of another man seeking to claim her. They could never offer her what he can—could never please her as he so longs to do. He knows her better. He has seen her fire and fury, has tasted the honey of her neck, basked in the light of her strength, her unwavering faith and kindness. If anyone is to love her, it should be him.
Poe Dameron could never give her what she needs. Not really. She would only be safe with him if Ahsoka’s words can be trusted.

He captured her. He offered to buy her, but she refused.

The rage building in his arms begins to dissipate. Whatever Ahsoka knows, the truth is clear—Rey chose to stay with him, not Dameron. She made her choice already; and she chose to trust in him.

He will be damned to forsake it and lose her now, when they are so close to being free.

Ben rises, tossing the message into the fire as he leaves his chambers. He passes Rey’s door, finding it closed.

She must not have left since he and Ahsoka told her to go. Guilt coils in his chest like an adder at the memory of her fear and hesitance, her ignorance of the turmoil within him.

Folding his lip, he stalks to the culina, finding Ahsoka lying asleep and sweating at the table. He moves around her quietly, ducking into the storeroom. She did well in taking what he asked for. In the near-darkness he scrounges, plating figs and quince, a saucer of honey. He takes a wooden cup, fills it with smooth milk, and makes for her chambers.

His heart pounds at her door, the sweat on his brow matching the damp beads emerging from the small chalice in his hand. Clearing his throat, he straightens and raps the back of his finger against the wood.

Inside, Rey jolts over her sheets, shifting to sit on the edge of her bed. Fear and trepidation makes a nest in her chest—scratching her every breath as she stares at her closed door. “Who is it?”

“It’s me. I… I brought you something.”

Relief is too safe a word for the warmth inside her, but is soon overwhelmed by mortification at her state of dress. Though he’s seen her in her undergarments already, she’s not inclined to repeat her last mistake. “Oh. Uh, just a second!”

Curses! She'd left her stola in the tablinum! Thinking quickly, she pulls the blanket from her bed, throwing it over her hair and holding it closed to cover her.

Ben swallows, hearing her shuffle about. Had she been naked? his thoughts intrude. Before he has the opportunity to entertain them, the door opens.

His eyes widen, lip quirking at the sight of Rey almost completely covered by one of her linen sheets. Her face peers out from inside, large as they settle on the food in his hand. “May I come in?”

Her gaze finds his again before she nods, standing aside to let him through. He looks about for a place to set them. Her vanity is too small, so he sets the plate gingerly on her bed, resolved to improve her accommodations. Perhaps, if things go well, by making his chambers hers to share.

Rey watches him come inside. He’s put on his tunic again. She nearly sighs in relief, though having a man, this man, in her room seems to have the same effect regardless the clothes he wears. Or doesn’t wear.

He passes her the milk when she steps closer, watching as she takes a tentative sip, her gaze cast down. He looks over her face, noticing the slight redness in her eyes with no small amount of
regret. Biting his cheek, he sits on the end of her bed, careful to avoid the plate, and pats a hand on the matress. “Come. Sit with me.”

She nods again, seemingly lost as she moves to join him on the bed. She maintains her distance—for which he is grateful. The idea to pull that sheet away has begun to tempt his restless fingers.

Taking his knees in his hands to still them, he watches her cling loyally to her cup. She’s sipping, savoring something for the first time since he’s met her. The sight melts behind his eyes, flowing longingly down his throat and into his twisted gut.

Rey chances a glance at him, finding only his ever-present stare. Though, for now, it isn’t so reassuring. “Am I to be punished?”

Her tone isn’t playful, and it sends Ben’s head shaking. “No. You have nothing to be ashamed of, Puella.”

Hearing his name for her inspires her to smile, shying away from him to conceal her flustered expression. She turns her gaze to the milk—such a rare commodity—and peers dismally into the white froth. “Then why are you here?” she asks softly.

“To give you this,” he replies, matching her tone as he motions to the plate between them. “I… thought you would like them.”

The thoughtfulness of his gesture flows through her, and now she doesn’t hide her gratefulness, plucking a fig from the dish and bringing it to her lips. “I do. Thank you.”

As she eats, he sits with her in the quiet, the light from the hall flickering on the floor, combating her lone oil lamp resting on the dresser. In this light, her soft face seems all the more inviting, her lips dark in the shadow as they move over her fingers, catching juice gone astray.

He averts his eyes, closing them to keep his thoughts untainted. “There’s something else.”

She looks at him, mouth full, and waits.

Ben swallows, hunching to lean over his legs and thread his fingers together. “I talked to Ahsoka. She says you spoke with Poe Dameron.”

Rey stills, frozen as he moves his head to meet her eyes, his face wide and imploring.

“Did you?” he murmurs.

Her heart beats soundly against the cage of her ribs, as though a prisoner facing execution, desperate for escape. She remembers when she told Ahsoka everything that happened while she’d been away—Poe’s offer among them. Rey had completely forgotten about it. But even so, she cannot hide the truth from him any longer. He deserves more than that. “I did.”

“And he offered to purchase you.”

She nods.

“Why didn’t you let him?” he asks, gaze earnest on her own. He sits up, leaning closer, not wanting to miss a word. “You knew what I was, and yet you stayed. Why?”

She searches his eyes, fear melting, morphing into something else. “I don’t know,” she murmurs honestly. “I just…” she smiles. That small, quirking smile, gleaming in the firelight. “I didn’t want
to leave. I still don’t.”

His blood surges with heat, hope igniting the depths of his eyes as he scours her own for any sign of deception, finding none. His resolve sharpens. “Then you won’t.”

Rey scoffs at her own joy, tearing her gaze from his, not ready to be lost in its hold just yet. She sets the cup on the ground. As she does, his hand brushes the plate further inward, making room for him to come closer. His presence is suffocating when she rights herself again, robbing her lungs of their purpose, every nerve on fire as he ducks his head, urging her to meet his eyes.

“Rey.”

Against her better judgement, the relief and frustration gathering like a storm behind her eyes, she does as he silently requests.

The way he looks at her—with those eyes deeper than the midnight horizon—she can see the stars again.

His voice comes soft, deep and full of promise. “Not until you’re ready. And when you are…” he lifts his hand, hesitantly cupping her cheek, tilting her to face to him, letting her see his sincerity for herself. “…I’ll still be here.”

He will, won’t he? Even when she leaves this place, seeks her own freedoms, he will remain here, and her heart will stay with him. Tears gather in her eyes at the thought—that anyone could ever stay. Could ever want her to.

A small sob breaks from her lips, years of loneliness falling away under his touch. His thumb moves to wipe away a traitorous tear, his hand so large and warm upon her cheek, a comfort she’s never known. She closes her eyes and leans into his chest, hiding her face in the cloth of his tunic. The smell of him breaks through—of parchment and sweat. Of home.

Ben sighs at her slight weight, welcoming her into his arms. The sheet slips from her head and he cradles it, lying his chin over the cloth as her hands creep out from underneath, resting on the wings of his back.

A wave of possession crashes over him, his gaze resolute and burning into the wall. No. He could never let this go. He won’t. “I’ll take care of you, Rey,” he vows lowly, his hand caressing down her covered hair, smoothing at her shaking shoulders. “I’ll keep you safe.”

When she nods he presses his lips to her hair, breathing her in, holding fast as the night lingers in looming shadows over their heads—knowing in his heart that everything, everything, is going to change. Every touch of his hand over the cloth is like a whisper, a hissing wave on the evening shore, sealing him to her forever.

“I promise.”

When the morning comes the heat remains steadfast, and Ben has never felt more rested, nor restless, in his life.

In the privacy of his room, he rolls the parchment over his thigh, reading through again and again, worrying teeth at his cheek. Every word rests in careful script under his roving fingers, waiting to be read by her—when the time is right.

Soon, he decides with a resigned sigh, rolling it up again. Today he is to share his feelings, but for
these words she will need more time to… adjust. To reveal his deepest desires so soon may only serve to pressure Rey. Or worse, frighten her. He would never forgive himself for such recklessness—should she choose to accept him at all.

So he places it back in the chest, lying it down carefully—the most prized of his treasures—resolved. Today will be a day for innocence. For honor and virtue, a more fond farewell to his life committed to celibacy, and the beginning of a new life at her side. He wonders if she will let him kiss her. It would be his first time kissing a woman not his mother, and already his mouth has begun to water, hungry to discover the taste.

A knock sounds softly at his door, prompting him to rise. “Enter.”

His heart leaps when she comes inside, her hair kissing her collar so sweetly, eyes so wide and hopeful that he may just fall and beg her now. But he remains upright, watching her approach with a steaming tray of fresh quince and oatmeal. “Good morning.”

“Morning.” He smiles, accepting the bowl as she sets the tray on his mantle. He stares down into the mash, the sweet aroma of honey filling his nose. “Not much time has passed since you first woke me to this,” he reminisces, sitting down on the edge of his bed. “And yet, it feels like a lifetime ago.”

She understands his meaning. It’s become difficult to remember a point in her life where he wasn’t in it. Rey watches him as he stares into the bowl, confused, yet happy nonetheless. “Was it a good life?”

He meets her eyes from where he sits, but he may as well be inside of her for how piercing his gaze becomes. How gentle it remains. Softly, he replies, “Yes.”

Her throat begins to close, her excitement mounting. She leans against the fireplace, her fingers wringing anxiously behind her back as he continues to stare. “Are you going to see the emperor today?”

Blinking down at his breakfast, he moves his spoon about, bringing some to his lips. “Yes. He sent after me—before the fever.” He chews thoughtfully, “And,” he swallows, “now that I’m healed, he will be expecting me.”

Rey frowns, crossing her arms over her chest.

Ben catches her, a quirk in his lip as he sets to finishing his meal. “Your loyalty is commendable. But this is something I must do alone.”

She studies him, a flicker of hope in her gaze. “So you’re really doing it?” she whispers.

Ben purses his lips in a shallow nod, taking down the plate of quince. He tilts it to her, letting her take one as he goes on. “Yes. It’s time I left that life behind me.”

Rey smiles around her slice. “What will you do after?”

Anything you ask. He offers a small smile in return. “What I promised. You, Rey of Jakku, will be a free woman,” he rumbles, popping a few into his mouth.
She breathes in shakily, her eyes drifting out the window towards the morning horizon, mottled grey. “It’s all happening so fast. Like a dream,” she murmurs. *Any moment it could end, but it doesn’t.*

Ben appraises her quietly before setting the plate back with its tray, following her gaze out the terrace doors. He frowns at the gathered clouds, stalking closer to the windows and glancing out. The sky has grown thick with cover, the humidity stronger than before, set to collapse under its own weight.

“A storm,” he murmurs. “It won’t be long now before the rains come.”

“She’s going to be different now.” She turns to find Ben’s eyes. “Aren’t they?”

Yes. He knows they will be, can feel in the very marrow of his bones that when he returns to her, it will not be as when he left.

All his life, there was only the promise of strength. To grow, to learn, to guide, to fight. All of it required a power he adapted to. Copied, applied to himself until there was so little of him left. And yet, even when Snoke deprived him of his strengths, he still could not take his pride. That small piece of himself he clung to, kept close and hidden.

And then there was Rey—and suddenly, none of that mattered anymore. What was a weapon became his forge, her sordid purpose transformed into a beauty beyond compare. With her, there was no sense to himself, to the pieces he kept locked away. His own personage pales in the light of
her, now.

Now, he doesn’t want the solitude, doesn’t want these remnants. Not when they can merge with hers to create something new.

“Perhaps,” he replies, moving closer to her. She lets him, her face upturned, and he remembers the sunlight on her cheek when he first spotted it. He takes it in hand now, savoring its sweet, silken softness under the pad of his thumb. She looks at him like a frightened doe; he approaches the tentative hunter, stopping short of her nose, holding her eyes even as they blur—not daring let go. “Wait for me...?” he whispers.

Too nervous to smile, too shaken to do anything else, Rey’s heart hammers in her throat, drinking in the lingering trace of honey and fruit on his breath, the warmth of his hand, the yearning such proximity evokes.

When she was first told to wait, the ones she loved never came back. But Ben… oh, her heart trusts him, more than anyone else, and with full confidence and a trembling hand, she holds onto his wrist, clinging to her faith as she’s done all her life.

She nods. “Always.”

His breathing rocks under the soft caress of her words, their warmth brushing his lips, and he can stand this no more. His hand moves to her hair, his neck weak as it dips to close the distance between his mouth and her damp, supple cheek.

Rey stills, surprise and thrill running down her sensitive flanks, but the feeling is all-too short when he pulls his lips away, his voice low and silken against her ear. “I’ll come back soon, Puella,” he murmurs. “I promise.”

When he lets her go his face is reproachful, his hands reaching back to pull his hood over his head. He mounts Silencer as she steps away, looking up at him. Her voice wavers, heart pounding at its foundations. “When?”

Gathering the reins in hand, Ben lets his eyes linger on her flushing cheek—right where he’d kissed—and lets pride guide his lips in a small smile. “Before the storm hits,” he assures. “Not long.”

Despite his confidence, Rey’s worry persists. The thought of him going alone holds no reassurance to his healing side, nor her given history of being left behind.

But she nods anyway, returning his smile with one of her own. “I’ll be here.”

The thought is enough to inspire him forth, like a soldier sent into battle. A hero, blessed by a goddess. He forces his gaze from hers, reminding himself that the sooner he confronts Snoke, the sooner he will return to her a man free, worthy of her love.

With a kick to the side, Silencer trots out, breaking into a steady gallop. Rey goes to the door to watch them race down the glen, her very body numb to everything but the warmth in her face.

She places her hand against her cheek—and imagines that he’d taken her lips, instead.

He rides to Rome at a decent speed, not wanting to overwork Silencer, or his side. With every bounce his ribs continue to ache.

But he will not be stopped in his quest to finish this once and for all, to fulfill his promise to grant
The streets of Rome are less busy than normal, all to his advantage. With his hood drawn, Ben dismounts Silencer to walk on the road, blending as well as he can into the shadows of the brewing storm.

He follows the familiar path to Snoke’s palace, dropping Silencer at the stable. Just as he begins his progress towards the grand atrium, a familiar form scuttles closer.

“Master Ren! You’re alive!”

“Mitaka,” Ben greets. For the first time he can admit to himself that it’s somewhat a relief, to see the young man. He glances over Mitaka’s shoulder. “Where is Emperor Snoke? I seek an audience with him.”

“Oh, well,” Mitaka stammers. “He is, uh, convening with the Mistress Netal. He says he will not take any visitors.”

“I see,” Ben grunts, disgust roiling in his gut at the implication. “And how long will this ‘convening’ last?”

Mitaka shrugs helplessly. “I’m afraid it could be hours, Master.”

Ben groans, glancing out onto the roads. “I don’t have time for this.” I promised her, I promised her. Suddenly, he shifts his glare to Mitaka, purpose burning deep in his belly. Perhaps he doesn’t need to speak with Snoke directly. Not when there will no longer be a need for his services. “Can you relay a message?”

“It’s uh,” Mitaka stammers, “my job, Sir.”

Right. “Then this will be the last,” Ben affirms. “Tell Snoke that my injuries have impaired my ability to battle. I am hereby resigning my rank as his imperial gladiator—as is owed to me by law.”

“Master Ren, you can’t be serious!” Mitaka blanches, a look of sheer awe on his face.

Ben meets the young man’s eyes with a strange, nostalgic glee. With the slightest of smiles, he lays his hand on Mitaka’s shoulder, rocking him with ease. “As the grave. You’ve served me well, Dopheld. It won’t soon be forgotten.”

The man bows his head, his terror palpable amidst the nervous grin on his face. “Th-Thank you, Master Ren. I will alert the Emperor at once.”

Ben nods his approval, thanking Mitaka before retrieving Silencer and roaming back out into the city.

As he walks, his feet feel lighter, every step bringing him closer to her. The sky remains silent for now; he is running ahead of schedule.

Passing through the forum, he glances over to a nearby cluster of wares and curios. A heady aroma baits him by the nose and he follows it, finding at its end a cart brimming with flowers. He pursues them in silence, bending at the waist, eyes casting over each of them in turn.

In his mind’s eye he sees her in the courtyard, tending to the green, breathing in the scent of life, and knows he cannot leave this place without one.
Ben glances up at the vendor. “How much?”

“Three denarii,” the man grunts.

Expensive for a flower, but he is certain the look on her face will have been worth all the money in his purse—that and more. He hands over the funds, letting his hand move over the flowerbed to find the perfect—oh.

*This one*, he resolves, tenderly freeing a white lily. The flower is small in his hand, the perfect size for hers. The petals, soft as her cheek, white as her spirit, call to his chest in an unspoken song. He smells it, closing his eyes to the sweetness, imagining it in her hair, each petal falling loose as he kisses her wildly.

He opens his eyes, nodding thanks to the vendor before moving on. As he nears the edge of the city, Silencer faithfully in tow, his eyes roam over the hillside, and halt.

Ben pauses, staring out into the cemetery, his feet urging him to move forward. He follows it, wandering into the grounds a lone visitor, his sandals leading his heavy gait along a familiar path.

He finds them easily.

Their stones lie still and silent in the ground, reaching his chest with proud stature and ragged, rocky slopes. The grey of afternoon storm casts over them all—he and his ancestors.

“Hello, Grandfather,” he murmurs, tugging down his hood. “Grandmother.”

They do not reply.

Swallowing, Ben bows his head, paying quiet respects, his heart roaring in his ears. When he looks up, the name *Anakin Skywalker* looks back, etched into the stone like scars. “It’s been some time,” Ben smiles, remembering his words. “A lifetime.”

Silence.

He sighs, frowning at the ground as he continues to speak into the void of his thoughts. “I have continued your legacy in the arena long enough. So today,” he murmurs, looking at the flower in his hand, “I will finish what you started.”

In his heart he knows that his grandfather is not there to hear him, but within Ben’s mind there is a relief to be found in it. He understands the truth of Ahsoka’s fears for those who were once Anakin Skywalker and Padme Amidala—knows that it was his grandfather’s love that laid them here in the dirt. But with Rey, he’s certain, things will be different.

He can make it right.

“I’ve fallen in love, Grandfather,” he murmurs, heart swelling. “With a slave, as you once were. But that will change soon. And when she is free, if she chooses me…” he closes his eyes, savoring the bliss of a hope he’s thought long lost. “...I will take her for my wife.”

Thunder rolls above his head, the clatter of something not quite lightning shaking the ground at his feet. As raindrops fall in scattered specks—no different from bugs to be swatted—Ben looks up to see a small group of Roman soldiers, marching towards him along the path.

He stands at attention, frowning as their group leader—that companion of Hux’s, the boy, Thanisson.
“Kylo Ren?”

“Yes? What is it?”

Thanisson rights his slender frame, turning to the side with an ushering hand. “You are to come with us, by order of Emperor Snoke.”

Ben doesn’t move from his spot, glaring down at the boy.

He seems a patient one, simmering just underneath. Not unlike the man he calls his mentor. “Master, I’m afraid if you don’t comply we will resort to force.”

Two soldiers draw their gladius from their scabbards, making Ben hesitate. He sighs. It would do him no good to fight them all—he’s severely outnumbered, has no weapon, and is in no hurry to have an ordnance put out for his capture.

“Very well,” he murmurs, the rain beginning to gain speed. As the soldiers watch, he looks to the grave of his grandmother, the flower in his hand heavier than her stone, and can almost hear her voice warning him that where he goes now is a path none can follow.

So he sets the lily upon her grave, caressing its face, and surrenders himself into their custody.

When they lead him into the atrium, Snoke stands pacing on his stage, his expression twisted in ugly, simmering rage.

Ben’s throat tightens, his blood running cold at the sight. Mitaka stands before the stage, trembling and leaf-like, avoiding all eyes but the irises of the colored tile.

The soldiers stop, parting to reveal Ben to the Emperor’s heated gaze. He sneers, waving off the soldiers to make space for him. Isolating him within the ring of danger.

“...After all I’ve given you,” Snoke menaces. “After all I’ve done—you defy me in my own home, without the courtesy of speaking to me in the flesh?”

He lowers his gaze, knowing it the right thing to do. “Master—"

“Silence!” The room goes deathly quiet, Ben’s pulse hot and loud in his ears. Snoke stands on the cusp of his dias, looming over Ben like a shadow, pointing a knobbed finger as he grounds, “Not another word. Your emperor speaks."

Ben does as he’s told.

“For three years I gave you nothing but the glory and riches of Rome. I welcomed you into my house. I bought you your freedom from the ranks. I unearthed the truth of your lineage—showed you the path you were destined to take. The gladiator in your blood.”

Wincing, Ben casts his gaze across the floor, every word a dripping poison.

“And how do you repay me?” Snoke continues, his voice smooth and deep—only to cover the jagged surface lying underneath. “By forsaking my generosity?” he snarls. “I will have none of it. If you seek to ‘retire,’ then you will do so with dignity—right here, before me.”

Warily, he lifts his eyes, finding his emperor cold and scrutinous, as unbending as stone.
“Kneel.”

He does, easing down to his knee on the hard ground, his cloak shrouding him as he bows his head in subjugation. Calming his heart, he keeps his voice tepid and smooth. “My emperor,” he begins. “Your generosity has made me gracious beyond compare.” What he says is not a complete lie—Snoke did give him Rey. “My injuries have healed—but my body remains scarred and stiff. I will no longer be able to fight and bring you victory.” He clenches his fist, bowing his head lower. “I hereby request my severance from the Colosseum.”

For a moment there is only silence, until a throaty chuckle erupts from the stage, pulling Ben’s gaze upwards.

Snoke sits upon his chaise, leaning back, his small teeth spread wide as his laughter echoes through the room. It bounces from every column, landing like arrows in Ben’s patience—but he remains still, combating the dread within.

“How excellent,” Snoke coos, clasping his hands together in delight. “Kylo Ren, your severance has been granted.”

Ben’s heart constricts, victory lacing cool tendrils through his skin. Eyes alight, he rises to his feet, bowing again in a gratitude more earnest than any of the ones that came before. “Thank you, Master.”

“And, of course, your service in my Praetorian Guard can begin.”

Ben pales.

Snoke’s smile falters. “You have made your decision, have you not?”

“I have,” Ben swallows. “My Lord… I could not protect you as you seek. My body—”

“—belongs to me. Or have you forgotten?”

“No—”

“I think you have,” Snoke frowns, his misshapen features twisting with an ugly curl. His eyes darken beneath his withered brow. “…It’s that girl, isn’t it?”

Horror grasps Ben in its icy claws, leaving him paralyzed.

Snoke’s tone leaves no room for dissent, no space for hope. “I saw the way you looked at her, how she rushed to your aid. Loyalty, one would think. But from a woman?” His frown twists, cruelty seeping venom from the corners of his lips. “No. A servula known by the force of her master would never be so inclined to preserve his life.”

Anger swirls in Ben, trembling in his clenched fists. “You think I lied?”

“It remains to be proven,” Snoke growls, rising to his feet. As he speaks, he walks down the steps of his stage, looming ever closer, his voice powerful in the drowning quiet. “I question your gratitude—your pride remains ever standing, Young Solo,” he hisses, coming to stand before him, his robe swaying around his thin frame. “And that,” he utters, “I will not allow.”

A twitch in his eye, Ben scours his master’s face, his worry for Rey mounting as his instincts scream to run, to flee to her. Yet he remains still. To do anything now would risk death, the loss too great.
But as he opens his mouth to speak, to submit on her behalf, the world goes dark in the shadow of his master's will.

“Send word to my physician,” Snoke demands, sweeping his arm to Mitaka. “Have him sent to the Skywalker Estate. I want it proven to me that Master Ren has shown gratitude for his gift…”

Thunder rolls above them, sinking into Ben's bones, burying him alive. Alone. Snoke's sickening smile returns, stretched wide for his progeny’s distress, leaving nothing but ashes in his heart.

“...Immediately.”

Chapter End Notes

[Milk in Ancient Rome was much rarer to obtain than water or wine. It mostly came from goats, which was an amazing source of protein and potassium—and was very similar to cow milk. It's believed that the proximity of a male goat in rut (mating mode) can give the female's milk a more musky flavor]

[Burial in Ancient Rome was often done in two ways—either bodily burial (called "inhumation") or cremation ("burning"). Cremation eventually became the most popular form of burial, but the tradition of inhumation persisted in some families. So, while most of the body was burned, they would bury a small piece (like a finger) in respect for the dead]

[Roman cemeteries were either built in underground catacombs (for storing ashes) or above ground on the edge of cities called "The Tombs." However, though some bodies were buried there, the space was more for remembrance than burial purpose—which allowed more retail space for the dying populace]

[Named "leiron" by the Ancient Greeks (meaning the Milk of Hera), lilies are a symbol for the souls of the departed that have been restored to innocence after death. The white lily, specifically, is a symbol for chastity and virtue]

[From ancient times to only decades ago, the myth that a woman's virginity remained as intact as her hymen was commonly perpetuated and accepted in medical practices. They would not know that it could be broken by impact or touch—only penetration via intercourse]
Virtue

Chapter Summary

WARNING: THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS POTENTIALLY TRIGGERING SEXUAL CONTENT. PLEASE SKIP TO THE END CHAPTER NOTES FOR DETAILS. THANK YOU!

Chapter Notes

It's almost 6am, and my heart is pounding. The reason why, I'm sure, will be made clear—but first, a warning:

Glory's Fray is not a happy story. At least, not all the way through. It's content covers serious issues dealing with religion, sexuality, and grief. In my tags and notes I've given allusions to what is going to happen, but please trust me when I say that this is only the beginning of a much brighter end for all of us.

Thank you so so much to everyone who has supported me this far! Whether it be in the comments, on Tumblr, Twitter, or even on my Ko-Fi, you have never failed to shower me with all this love and praise I can't begin to fathom. You are amazing. I couldn't do it without you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She’s always been waiting.

In the nights below the cold Egyptian sky, she gazed up at the stars embedded so deeply within the heavens, never knowing that she would find their warmth in his eyes. How many years has she been ignorant of these emotions? This love that waited for her?

Rey breathes out, her heart pounding nervously against her bones as she gazes out from the stable, her eyes locked on the distant bend where tall trees shroud the path.

She knows he does not love her—to think so much would be more than hope allows. And yet, that hope remains a small seedling in her chest, aching to grow in forbidden light. It screams to her, in the quiet rumble of the approaching storm, that everything can change. That when the rain comes, the seed will be watered—drunk on its fall. That when he returns, she will be free to seek her independence, free to become his equal.

Free to love him.

Even now his kiss lingers on the flesh of her cheek, feeding that hope she’s tried so hard to subdue. But she can fight it no longer—not when he gave her such promises, held her so tenderly as she succumbed to its power.

She smiles, feeling the first stir of static heat ripple through her scalp. For now, her desires have
only begun to bloom. So soon after they’ve met, and yet, as he’d said, a lifetime since—and her heart yearns for something more. The chance to stand at his side not as his slave, but as his—

“Rey?”

She looks up from the ground, leaning her head against the stable door. Ahsoka enters, ragged and worn as she paces over, bright eyes flitting from her to the storm brewing beyond. “How long have you been out here?”

It feels like an eternity, but she answers, “Not long, I think... Ben told me to wait for him.”

“Oh? He did, did he?” Ahsoka hums, moving to sit at the doorframe opposite Rey. She groans onto her bottom, leaning her head back, stretching her legs and smoothing her aging hands over her thighs. “Did he,” she glances furtively, “say anything else?”

“That he’s going to see Snoke,” Rey reports, looking worriedly into the darkness forming on the horizon. It approaches them as a slow, mighty wave. Rising from the depths of the earth, coming to break the promise of God. “And that he’ll be back before the storm.”

As she speaks, as though called, thunder rolls in the distance.

Ahsoka readjusts herself in her seat, looking out into the pasture as a quiet, warning wind shifts over the long grass. “When the storm comes, the heat subsides,” she murmurs, as if to herself. But Rey listens anyway. “Darkness swallows the sky, raining down upon us, submerging us, and yet that is the balance of things.”

Rey’s ears perk, a not-so-distant memory blooming in her mind. “A fulcrum?”

The woman looks to Rey with surprise, as if she hadn’t realized she’d been speaking aloud.

She takes Ahsoka’s silence as assent. “That’s what Ben called you. On that day. ‘Fulceire.’” She smiles. “Fulcrum?”

Ahsoka frowns, but it’s light. Full of sadness. “He is the only one who still calls me by that name.”

Intrigued, Rey crosses her legs, sitting up to listen. “Why?”

Sighing, Ahsoka looks down into the dirt beyond the stable, losing sight in the green shards of stubborn grass. Her eyes glaze with a familiar shroud, forcing Rey’s heart to stutter as she whispers, “His grandfather gave it to me.”

Rey’s smile falls. His grandfather… the gladiator.

“But that was a long time ago,” Ahsoka continues, shaking her head. “He’s long dead.”

“What happened to him?”

Ahsoka looks up to Rey, hurt in her sinking eyes. She knows Ben told Rey about his past. Surely he must have—though, Ahsoka doubts he would be willing to recount the more gruesome details of his family history. She flattens her lips, voice cold. “He killed himself.”

Rey blinks. “That’s... that’s awful.”

Wincing, Ahsoka averts her eyes, unable to look at Rey—sweet Rey, with her youth and naivety, her passion and strength. She sees herself in Rey; Sees a lifetime of pain spread before her, grand and crushing. The injustice of it weighs on her throat, her voice choked as she speaks. “It was. He
drove himself mad with lust. For power. For purpose.” Her hand tightens into a fist. “Even for love.”

Thunder growls once more, the storm prowling closer.

Rey’s chest grows thick under the heated charge, her eyes trained on Ahsoka’s hand. Tepidly, she tries, “I saw his mask in the tablinum, on my first day here. It frightened me.”

“He wasn’t always frightening,” Ahsoka recounts. She loosens her fist, finding the strength to meet Rey’s patient, probing gaze. “When he was my master, I trusted him completely. He took care of me. Like a brother—a father.”

Understanding washes over Rey then, watching as this woman, normally so strong and serene, begins to unravel. Could it be that Ahsoka held a deeper trust with her old master—as Rey does with Ben?

Slowly, Rey scoots across the stable floor, shifting over loose hay and dirt, coming to sit beside Ahsoka. She leans into the woman’s stiff posture, the lingering scent of dye wafting from her tunica. “Is that why you take such good care of Ben?” she whispers.

Ahsoka’s shoulders fall to the sway of Rey’s cheek, loosened from their tenacity. “It’s why I try.”

“‘Try?’” Rey echoes, moving to catch Ahsoka’s evasive gaze. “You don’t ‘try,’ Ahsoka. You do. There is no ‘try’ for us. We…” she searches for the words, hoping, praying they are real as they come hushed and secretive from her lips. “We’re a family.” She searches her face. “Aren’t we?”

Ahsoka looks at Rey, then. Truly looks, seeing in her the pain of starving years, in company but alone amidst the cruel, rainless desert. In Rey she sees so clearly the youth she envies, but the fire that burns to rival Vesta’s flame. A hope kindled into a fearsome, unstoppable blaze.

And realizes her mistake.

Ahsoka smiles, tears brimming in her eyes as pride sweeps over her. She lifts a hand to Rey’s face, seeing beneath her palm the daughter she never birthed—yet sits before her now.

For three years she has cared for Ben. Watched helplessly as he followed in the steps of his grandfather, in the arena and now, in his heart. And yet, when love was her master’s undoing, she sees now that Ben may stand a chance to rectify the past, to break the chains of his ancestors.

Now she sees it clearly, sees in Rey all of her young master’s love—feels it for herself, as she should have from the beginning.

Settling her caress over Rey’s hair, Ahsoka murmurs, “We are.”

Rey lets a small smile bloom between her cheeks, covering Ahsoka’s soft, warm hand with her own. A change in them shifts like the clouds beyond, the gathering grey beginning to swarm. Shadows begin to choke the landscape, dark streaks of rain cast over the eastern skyline.

A loud clap of thunder sends Rey jolting to her feet, her heat hammering.

Ahsoka chuckles at her from the ground. “Not many storms down in Egypt. Here, help me up…”

Nerves soothing, Rey takes her mentor’s hand, guiding her to her feet. As the woman dusts off her tunica, Rey leaves her to gaze outward, a warm wind stirring a ghostly chill over her arms. It feels wet, pricking her skin until the flesh rises. Unnerving.
Not one to miss much, Ahsoka notices Rey’s eyes lingering on the bended path—spots the downward pull to her lips. She comes close, looking out, feeling the heavy wind on her neck. “Hm,” she grunts, folding her arms. “What’s the matter, Rey? You don’t strike me as a girl afraid of storms.”

“I’m worried about him,” Rey confesses. “He should be here by now.”

“I’m sure he’s on his way,” Ahsoka reassures, trying to catch Rey’s gaze with a smile. But Rey ignores her, letting her features grow dark and taut.

Ahsoka sighs. Ben would have her head for letting Rey stay out here like this. No matter how flattered he may be by Rey’s loyalty—the girl already seems keen to run off and drag him back to the villa by the ear.

An amusing image, but one she’d rather not humor. “You’re that concerned for him?”

Rey turns away from the hillside for only a moment, meeting Ahsoka’s eyes with firm resolution, and yet, wavering uncertainty. “I am.”

The amusement becomes something else within Ahsoka, then. Something warmer, yearning to rectify her mistakes.

Her master is out there earning Rey’s freedom—fighting for the right to love her with honor. And, as any good servant should, she will provide her aid.

“Very well then,” she grunts, making for Lux’s stall.

Rey gawks as Ahsoka tugs the mare free from the pen, her white-dappled coat like the overcast sky. “What are you doing?”

“Ben said he would be home before the storm comes. Well, the storm is here,” she huffs, laying the saddle over Lux’s back. Rey goes to help her, fingers oddly numb. When Ahsoka mounts, she continues, “You worry for him. I say it’s about time I entrusted his care to another woman’s judgement. Don’t you?”

Her wink doesn’t placate Rey’s nervous excitement, nor her rising trepidation as realization drenches her. “But—the storm! Isn’t it dangerous to travel alone?”

“It wouldn’t be my first time. Besides,” she smirks, leaning down to take Rey’s cheek, “when he returns, it will be to you. You must wait here for him.”

Blood runs thick through Rey’s wrists, behind her ears, as she meets Ahsoka’s eyes. Her words resonate within her, calling her to a familiar purpose that she knows too well, and cannot defy. “I will,” she nods.

“Fear not,” Ahsoka assures, pinching the skin of Rey’s cheek before taking the reins. Lux stamps impatiently. “I’ll be back before nightfall.”

A sudden boom shakes the ground from the distance, tearing their gaze to the black wave on the horizon—as though night comes already, riding with a thousand thunderous hooves. Lux’s ear flicks, her knicker soft as Ahsoka leads her out onto the grass, ushering Rey to bring her palla.

Once it’s pulled over her head, Ahsoka smiles, small droplets flecking the dark linen of her cloak. “This is a new day,” she assures, their minds unknowingly merging to the idea of her freedom. “A
new beginning. For what little a servant’s word is worth, Rey… I’m glad you’re here to share in it.”

With that, she kicks Lux’s hide, ushering the mare to trot out to the east—into the approaching storm.

Rey’s heart swells, flooding in the woman’s absence as she rounds the bend, disappearing from sight. “Me too,” she whispers.

But the thunder drowns her out.

“Send word to my physician! Have him sent to the Skywalker Estate. I want it proven to me that Master Ren has shown gratitude for his gift… Immediately.”

No.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Mitaka nods, scurrying from the room.

No!

“The storm is fast approaching,” Snoke hums disdainfully, listening as the thunder rolls above them. With a wave of his hand, the guards surround Ben once more. “Come, boy. Take shelter in the walls of my palace as we await my physician’s return.”

Their movements are slow in Ben’s peripheral, his sight blurred by anger and disbelief. The thought of Snoke’s men in his land, invading his house, his Rey. Rey, his heart cries, agony ripping through his clenched hands, numbing each trembling finger. Once they discover he has not lain her, she will be captured. Tortured. Taken from her home, from him.

This is not how it was meant to be—not how it was supposed to end!

When the first hand lays on his arm, Ben wrenches it away, terror pulsing hot within him. He cannot stay here—he must go to her!

He…

“Master,” Ben urges, his voice faltering as the soldiers close him in, their hands spreading poison along his skin. His words come clipped, rushed. “My staff will not allow strangers without my word. Send me to my home, and I will prepare for his arrival.”

Snoke turns from the inspection of his crooked nails, eyeing Ben darkly. “I’m sure my own will manage,” he sneers, fluttering fingers towards the door. “Take him away.”

Their hold on Ben tightens to a deadly snare, rage rising from the bottom of his feet. Their swords shine at the ready, their legs primed for battle, for excuse.

Ben struggles at their hold, his every urge a command that he flee this place and rush to her side—but they are strong, just as their master’s reach is strong, holding him down. Defenseless. Desperate. Weak.
“Please!”

Snoke pauses, lifting his hand. The guards obey, leaving Ben’s eyes on his master’s until they fall, his head bowed and heavy in submission. Defeat.

“Please…” he whimpers. “I beg you. Let me go. Let me go…”

At first there is only silence, until the shift of Snoke’s robes ghosts along the floor, his master’s feet peeking out from their cover before Ben’s lowered eyes. He closes them when the man tilts up his chin, the cold of the emperor’s skin spreading through his body.

“Look at me, boy.”

Willing himself, Ben opens his eyes to find his master’s alight—their color an unforgiving ocean swell. Crushing and cruel.

Snoke frowns, folding withered lips in contempt as his thumb moves to Ben’s eye, wiping away lone evidence of wetness—from rain or from despair, Ben cannot bear decide as the voice of his master speaks lowly, only to him. “I have seen these eyes before. Once. They darkened with grief, then—a proclaimed selflessness, but all a selfish lie. For whom, I wonder…” he murmurs, “...do you weep?”

Trembling, Ben swallows, the answer unclear, his master’s taunt all-encompassing, drowning him in sorrow at the thought of riding home to find her lying dead on the atrium floor.

You really are so much like your grandfather. Stubborn. Short-sighted.

He closes his eyes once more, remembering Ahsoka’s words.

Selfish.

“Let me go,” Ben murmurs, the only words he can say as all others fly far from him, leaving only darkness.

Again Snoke is silent, until he withdraws his hand, voice an echo along the cold limestone walls. “Very well. Release him.”

The guards obey, unhanding Ben. He nearly falls to his knees, the weight of his body too much. Still he manages to ground his hollow gratitude, lifting his eyes to Snoke’s—

To find them gleaming above a victorious smile.

It caresses him, then, on the rear of his thoughts, the only warning before a crushing blow to all he’d set out to hope. All he’d dared to dream. A realization, an epiphany, and a curse.

Snoke knew.

All along, he must have known. That, or came to recently. As Ben lies trapped between the blunt teeth of his master, his seniority in strategy severs the final threads of Ben’s resolve. All this time, Snoke had longed for the fall of Kylo Ren—sought the path to rob him of his honor. Completely. Utterly. Not to kill him in some arena, nor on the battlefield. But to own him entirely—a living man.

But broken.

Ben’s heart falls to his feet, sinking into the stone, abandoned as failure sinks cold claws into his
flesh. His thoughts scramble for purchase on the rocky face of his strategy, finding nothing to grasp.

And in that heart so far from him, as it crawls where she is, the voice cries out that Snoke has won.

No, Ben’s heart pounds, returning to him in cruel reality. Not yet.

He turns on his heel, fleeing the grand atrium with rapid steps, his pallium loose around his shoulders. Once out of the emperor’s sight, he runs to the stables as fast as his feet will carry him.

Rey...

He enters the stables with rasping breath, his arms ablaze as they shove away a servant that stands between him and Silencer. He mounts inside the stall, snapping the binds and calling for the stallion to gallop at full pace. They lunge through the doors and onto the road, Silencer’s hooves pounding against the stone.

I will keep my promise...

Lightning strikes the darkness overhead, illuminating the pale clutch of his fists over the reins. The wind at his face gusts strong, the rain stinging his bare cheeks as he makes for the countryside—his cape caught by the gale and fluttering abandoned behind him.

...I will keep you safe.

Ahsoka swears, tugging down her hood as Lux steadies her pace to a trot. She had abandoned her parasol in her chambers—thinking not to grab it—a neglect she regrets as she moves headfirst into the downpour. She ducks her head to avoid being blinded by stinging drops, never-minding the occasional traveler racing past her to avoid the storm.

She enters the city on lone horseback, the streets emptied save for natural debris. The path to the palace is easiest—where she knows Ben will be.

She dismounts Lux, looking up to the oil lamps flickering in the stable. The soldiers halt her until she lifts her hand in peace. “I come in search of my master,” she calls.

“Ahsoka?”

“Mitaka,” Ahsoka greets, relieved to see a familiar face—pale and ghostly as it is. Moreo than usual, she ponders as she pulls down her hood. “I’ve come to take him home. Where is the young master?”

The soldiers disperse, leaving them alone as Mitaka swallows, taking her arm. The gentle touch spurns fear within her, instinct warning her of something unknown.

“Come with me,” Mitaka urges. “There is much to discuss.”

Rey stands beneath the stable roof, looking out into the falling rain. The sound of it beating above her head, tapping at her feet, brushing against the gentle wind, wraps its arms around her—filling her with splendor.

She steps forward tentatively, reaching out her hand to feel its cold, endless kiss. It tickles at her
palm, coating it in a thin sheen. She smiles at it, the smell like earth and sky as she brings it to her lips, kissing it back.

A life in Egypt, surrounded by tale of such wonders, could never have prepared her for its truth. The rain, she knows, is beautiful. As Ashoka said, despite the darkness it brings, there is balance here. Life. Family. Love —things that once felt as impossible as the rain.

As the darkness sweeps over the countryside, thunder rolling between her and the horizon, Rey moves to light the hanging lamp beneath the stable onging, sheltered from the downpour as it flutters in the wind. A torch to light their way.

A beacon to bring him home.

Rey’s heart pounds furiously against her breast, the emptiness of his presence already beginning to hollow her through.

*Stop that,* she reassures. *He will keep his promise. He’ll be back. He will.*

Still her body continues to confound her—every hair, every mark, every where —yearning for him. His tender words live inside, his promise to return with her freedom hot and stinging joy behind her eyes as they cling to the horizon.

Never before had she found the strength to love anyone. Those she cared for always left, taken in chains, almost as quickly as they’d come. Nor had they loved her in return—their care as fleeting as the shifting sands. Friendships lost to the endless, invisible tide.

But *Ben.*

*Ben* changed everything. From the beginning, he treated her with kindness. Gentility. Even when she feared him, renounced him, he was ever faithful. Though his reasons were his own—efforts to protect his virtue, nothing more—it was still she who scavenged his benefits. By his wishes, by their secret, he let her keep her body. And even after, so much more.

He stayed true to his word—never did he touch her when it was unwelcome. Never did he force himself on her, when he could have if he’d wished. Perhaps he’d never wished at all.

But she did. She *does.* In her dreams he haunts her still, the proximity of his body a shelter more trustworthy than the walls of this very house. When in his arms, she’d never felt more safe. To leave him would ruin this heart that clings to him—yet it cries out for battle, the chance to win him in freedom. To lay bare her hidden desires that he will court her, lay hand on her, the thoughts of emperors and secrets far behind them.

To begin something new.

And then he is there. A shadow on horseback rounds the bend at the base of the hill, lightning illuminating the dark frame of a lone man racing towards the villa.

And Rey doesn’t think—only runs.

The rain curtains about the curves of her face, dripping from her lashes as she runs down the hillside. Memories of a clear day, of silt beneath her sandaled steps, assault her as she goes. Always waiting, always running.

But no longer. For the first time her waiting, her *longing,* has at last been rewarded.
“Ben!”

Her cry breaks through the din of storming rain, thunder carrying it to his ears. He squints through the tempest—finding her alone.

Safe.

Mud splashes against Rey’s feet as she runs to him, spotting as he leaps down from his horse in time to pace forward in long, purposeful strides. She doesn’t stop. The relief is too much—the joy in her heart soaring as they open their arms to the other, colliding.

Ben clutches tightly to her, bending to wrap his arms around her smaller body, the softness against his hard chest leaving him dizzier than his fall. He sighs into her neck, trying to catch his breath, to keep.

Rey smiles into the dark, rainy sky, the arms around his neck reaching out, daring to feel his hair, his ear, his warmth—alive and real beneath her hands. No longer a dream. “You came back.”

His massive palm moves to cradle her head, holding her fast to him before he pulls away, unable to meet her eyes. His touch drifts down her arms, ending at her hands. Water trickles between them in their silence, the pounding heat in his body leaving his knees trembling against the cold rain.

“Come,” he whispers, guiding her towards the villa.

She stays close to him as they trudge, glancing back as his horse stands alone and miserable in the glen. “But, Silencer—”

“Leave him,” Ben grunts, ushering her inside.

Once in the safety under the roof, in the still, stiff air, Rey shivers, holding her arms.

Ben notices. “Wait here,” he mumbles, stepping away to fetch a laundered saddle-blanket. He wraps it squarely around her shoulders, cloaking her in warmth as he cradles her arms, guiding her further into the atrium.

The pool’s surface flickers with rainfall as it lies beneath the open roof. The shallow shores flood in slight, water lapping against the tile and stone. Light flickers softly from the sparse oil lamps, casting them in near-darkness.

He pulls out an atrium chair—the only one left unbroken—bidding her sit. His hands linger on her over the blanket as she obeys, the warmth of his palm combating the cold tips of his long fingers as they leave her.

Their eyes meet, Rey’s hopeful gaze twinging with concern at his glum expression, his dark eyes distant and saddened. He swallows, the rain dripping off the swell in his throat, his gaze sweeping down to her toes, eliciting from her a shiver not born from cold.

“Your feet,” he murmurs.

Rey follows his eyes, looking down to find them smattered in mud and loose grass. She notices a trail of prints leading from the entryway to her seat, flushing. “Oh. Sorry—”

“No. No, don’t be,” he grunts, his voice softening. He wipes his mouth with his hand, glancing pensively to his hands. Biting his cheek, he moves to the table, his back to her.

When he turns back there is something in his grasp she cannot see. Silently, he lumbers to the
atrium pool, stooping to dunk the object in the water, and finally she spots it.

A bowl.

Ben comes close, meeting her eyes as he balances the bowl in his palm. Slowly, achingly, he kneels before her, tenderly taking her by the ankle.

Rey watches, every thought of speech, every word capable of speaking, fleeing her—leaving her empty save for his touch.

He cradles her foot, mud smearing over his thumb as he looks down, dipping her into the water. She gasps at its chill, at the thrill that runs through her in their silence as he shifts, ladling droplets in his palm to spread along the smooth skin.

Rey swallows, a familiar burning spreading from her chest, trailing down her spine. Heat pools between her legs, every nerve on fire as he wipes away the filth with his large, warm hands.

Ben moves slowly, unable to look at her as he cleanses her. He is not worthy to, knowing what must come next.

She watches his broad shoulders unlevel as he moves, lost in the impossible sight. Her lungs stretch tight, ushering forth little more than a whisper. “A master would wash the feet of a slave?”

Ben pauses at the word, closing his eyes.

He could take her now—take her and run far from this place. But he knows that, wherever he goes, these burdens will only follow. Snoke will pursue him relentlessly, hunt them down until there is nowhere left to run. They would be caught. They would be tortured.

And she would be killed.

His hold tightens slightly on the small of her foot, her skin so warm in his palm as he strokes the soft, tender flesh. When she shudders it ripples through him, the small sound of her gasp driving him mad with helpless, shameful lust.

Tears gather behind his eyes, waiting for them to open, to flood his cheeks with their cold, ruthless swell. Pain knifes through him as the sand streams thin, this dream drowned in the hourglass of wasted time.

He cannot tell her he loves her, now. Cannot deliver the life he promised—can keep no promise at all.

Except one.

“I would do more than that,” he rumbles, meeting her wide eyes. His grasp on her shifts, cupping from the bottom as he brings her arch to his lips, pressing them to her wrinkled flesh, clinging to her face. Searching.

Rey sucks in a breath, the rain falling hard behind her, roaring like the blood in her ears. She clutches to her shawl, to the seat of her chair, defenseless and open as his onslaught continues.

Hesitantly, his eyes leave her, focusing on his task as he lays a tender kiss on the knob of her ankle, the delicate slope of her joint. His hand moves to support her calf, the broad tips of his fingers holding her leg in place as his mouth treks carefully upward.
The sound of his lips and soft breaths against her skin builds within Rey, urging her to make her own. But she resists, trembling as the warmth of his body consumes her from each slow, lingering press. His free hand moves to the soiled skirt of her stola, shifting it up in a shuffle of cloth to bare her knee to his hungry mouth, the wet slide of scarlet flesh entrancing beneath her hooded eyes.

When his hands drift up he exhales harshly against her skin, hot fingers brushing to the soft, sensitive bend of her leg, the pleasure twitches her limbs to stillness—rousing her from this listless dream. “What are you doing…?” she murmurs, confused. Set aflame.

Ben winces, pulling away, crouching before her. He bows his head against her knee, his thumb stroking against her plush, impossible skin, and says nothing.

His silence unnerves her, the fluttering in her body settling into one of unease. Why won’t he look at me? she wonders, mind lost. Bravery roots within her arms, bidding them reach to cup the damp softness of his cheek. “Ben… What’s wrong?”

Her touch sears him like a brand—burning his skin with a traitor’s mark. He lets her turn his head, meeting her eyes. In them he sees what he’s always seen. Wheated fields, swaying so gently. Endless and beautiful. So full of ferocious hope.

A hope he can never give.

“Ben?”

He takes her wrist with as much gentleness as he can muster, her bones so small in his hand. Suddenly so breakable. He pulls it away from his face, already missing her touch as it folds them into a shared fist.

His voice comes small, eyes entreating, every word a curse on his lips. “We’ve run out of time.”

Rey’s brows pinch, disbelief swarming her rationale like flies. Surely she misheard him. “What?”

“Snoke. He,” Ben gulps, holding fast to her hand, the other falling to her skin, savoring what little she will give him as he kneels weak and trembling before her. “He knows.”

Her heart falls from her chest, beating powerfully against her bones, unable to escape. Realization numbs her, resigns her, and yet she fights. “But that doesn’t matter now,” she urges, struggling for the smallest smile. “My freedom…”

Ben remains silent, but his eyes cannot betray. Rey knows them too well, now, watching them wince, narrowed in pain. Sorrow.

Seeing that shoots anger through her veins, her earlier disbelief ignited into flame, the truth meeting within her mind like the frayed ends of a tether, united at last...

That she will never be free.

“No,” whispers, shaking her head. “No. You promised.”

His lip trembles, his hold on her loosening. “I cannot give that to you, Rey,” he murmurs. “Not while I belong to Snoke.”

Ben’s words strike fear through her heart, his voice poisoned with grief and resignation, the mask of his former self emerging from the darkening edges of her vision. “Unhand me,” she murmurs, anger threading through every sinew in her body, the need for distance warring over her rationale.
But when she tugs, he does not let go. His hold over her grows tight as he rises to his feet, an unholy vision of darkness in the soft light of the lamps. “He knows our secret, Rey,” he repeats, voice strained. “He has sent his physician to…” he frowns, unable to find the words. “There’s no time.”

Breath flees from her, her temples pounding, everything beating. “What are you saying?” she probes shakily, trembling beneath his hand.

Ben glances down at her hand in his, their skin molding in the dark, creating wet, shivering shadows in the firelight. Agony washes over him anew, the sight of her reminding him of his failure. To save her. To save himself.

Of all the pieces he so willingly gave, what could be said of all that remains of him now? To give his mind to his teachers, his soul to false prophets, his body to his master in all ways but one—how shattered and broken he has become. How sharp the edges he allowed her to touch, to be cut by and bleed.

They had taken him. Blindly, to them, he gave, yet clung to his heart all the same. He looks into her eyes now, in the darkness, her face so beautiful even as it twists in grief. A sorrow he forced upon her with his promises, his declarations in the night.

_I will keep you safe._

His hold on her does not relent, his voice low with authority, a cold distance from those dreams his foolish heart gave home. “I know what I have to do.”

Raw dread slithers down her spine, his every word an unspoken vow. It numbs her to her toes, filling her with distress. She tugs again, harder this time. “Let me go—”

He shifts in a swift movement, snagging her wrist as she begins to struggle, his voice strained as he pulls her closer. “Don’t you understand? Snoke’s physician is on his way. He will come with soldiers. He will know the truth—at a single word, everything will end. Unless you lay with me.”

Rey pauses, her heart hammering against the rain. She meets his fervent eyes—finding only despair in their depths. “What?”

His hold on her gentles, the world spinning beneath them as he cups her cheek in silent entreaty. “Lay with me, Rey,” he whispers, stroking her skin, his heart quivering with each wavering breath. “Come into my bed. Let me know you tonight.”

Air escapes her body in exodus, the vision of him shifting into a haze—a blur of motion too fast for her heart to follow. Against the current of her mind, her feet carrying her away, her arm left throbbing by the absence of his touch as she steps back, shaking her head. “I…”

While his mind understands, his heart roils in anguish at her distance, his trembling, empty hand left waiting for hers. “Join me,” he implores, urges once more.

Cold fingers crawl along the surface of her skin, the traitorous warmth returning somewhere deep within her body, a place once so hidden. She holds her arms to trap it inside, tears gathering in her eyes as her world begins to collapse, voices spilling all at once into her mind.

_He will never set you free—Your body is not your own—You trusted him—His promises were lies—He’s a murderer—He cannot keep you safe—Liar!—He will take you to save himself—He killed your people—why not you?—Murderer!—He claimed your heart, you foolish girl!—Thief!—Your love was blind—And now will never be returned!_
Rey looks down at his offered hand, swallowing what she can of her bitter tears, unable to find the strength to move beneath the onslaught, the crushing sound of thunder and rain in her chest. Slowly, she folds into herself, her arms wrapping around her waist—if only to hold together the shredded remains of her.

Ben watches as she recoils from him, his lips parting, a silent gush of agony rising from his heart. “You…” he murmurs, “...You would truly rather die?”

*I’m not giving you anything!*

*Don’t thank me for having no desire for you.*

*I’ll keep you safe.*

*I know what I have to do.*

She meets his eyes, hesitant, everything happening too soon, too much for her to take. She parts her lips, but does not answer, afraid to speak the truth aloud.

In her silence, Ben’s soul darkens, his lips set into a firm line, his brow furrowed in rage as his hand forms a trembling fist.

He cannot let them take her—cannot let this be. Of all the promises he’s broken, her safety outweighs the other, her life more important than the one piece of him left. “Well I won’t,” he grounds. On a wave of anguish and rage, he lunges forward, snagging her arm, dragging her close. “I won’t let you.”

Rey gasps, his hand enveloping her in heated pressure, tighter than before. The last thing she sees are the blaze of his eyes before her turns from her, making towards his chambers, dragging her beside him.

“Stop!” she sputters, managing to speak. She jostles, the blanket falling from her shoulders as she claws at his hand, finding it immovable. The enter the hall, the light from his room flickering against the floor like a waiting, fiery furnace. “Don’t do this, Ben—please don’t go this way!”

“I don’t have a choice,” he hisses, hatred blooming in his chest knowing that his beloved would rather die than know him in his bed—that all he can give, she will never accept.

Rey pants with the fear bursting through her veins as they come closer, entering his room. The bed lies before her like a grave—of hopelessness, of temptation, the coiled heat in her belly unraveling beneath his hold like a venomous snake, eager to fill her with the pleasure of its poison.

Thinking fast, she grasps the wet ends of her hair in her dry hand, returning it to her arm and burrow beneath his fingers. It works—allowing her the freedom to slip free from his hold before he can move to subdue her fully. She flees from the room with rapid steps, knowing not where she goes—or where she can.

She bursts through the curtain of the tablinum, intent to use the heart of the house as the quickest route to the stables, when she hears his steps begin to close in behind her. Iron arms lock around her body and she cries out, his breath heavy upon her neck as he turns her, hands bruising against her skin.

He’s too strong, his will binding as he shifts them closer to the red, velvet length of his chaise, his chest blocking her in as the dim lights of lamps and votives bear witness. Rey gasps as he pushes her down, kneeling to hover over her, his hands pinning the resistance in her wrists.
Breathing hard, Ben trembles above her, his muscles weak and near collapse under the weight of his betrayal. But still he persists, fitting himself between her legs.

Rey jolts, the same feeling as his unwitting gesture on the eve of his injury coursing through her as the wide span of his hips settles between her thighs. She quivers as it persists, leaving her no option to flee from it, only submit to the flames. To burn beneath him with closed eyes and a choking sob.

Ben’s gaze flits to her face, his eyes dark with grief and longing. He remembers then, how simple their lives had been, when there was only trust. He wishes now that he had kissed her then—knowing that to kiss her now, to offer her pleasure, to take, would be a cruelty he cannot bear.

Time runs past them swiftly, now, his heart hammering, his will faltering as she lies helpless beneath him, the heat of her core spreading to meet the treasonous swell of his member. Shame and disgust fill him as he looks at his hands, his eyes pricking with unshed tears.

And he knows he cannot do it.

Is this what he has become? Too weak to save her, too selfish to let her die? He sobs once, the weight of him falling into her neck, burying himself there, seeking a comfort he will never find again. “Take me,” he whimpers. “Please.”

Rey opens her eyes, staring into the ceiling’s shadows as his hold on her goes slack, the warmth of his body sinking into her, the wet fabric of their clothes chafing and thin. She feels what could only be him stir against her thigh, hitching her breath in the silence as he begs.

Her heart hammers against her breast, her body screaming in a language she hasn’t learned. And yet the truth of her soul, the name in her pulse—is his.

Resigned, Rey closes her eyes once more, letting acceptance wash over her. What he said was the truth. If their secret is discovered, then he will die. How easy it would be for him to strip her now, take whatever he wants, and leave her defenseless.

And yet he pleads all the same.

So she shifts her hand from his empty grasp, moving to thread her fingers through the drying waves of his hair, summoning the scattered shards of her love. “A master should beg his slave for nothing.”

Her touch shudders through him, her whispered words forcing the breath from his lungs. He turns his face and places his lips to her neck, shaking as he descends to the joint at her throat, offering her all of him. She flinches when he reaches the collar of her stola—returning him to unsteady sanity.

Ben swallows, moving his hands down her thighs, pausing at the risen hem of her skirts. The warmth of her skin seeds through his fingers, spurring him on. “I’ll be gentle,” he promises. “I’ll be good...”

Rey’s breath stutters as he lifts her skirts higher, her face burning. She turns away as shame floods between her thighs, paints her cheeks in crimson blood. “Ben—”

“Only what I need,” he whispers into her hair, his heart twisting at the sight of her so unwilling, so fearful of him. Were things different—oh, how he would ravish her! Take the time to learn her pleasures, exploit them in full—hear the sweetest moans from her parted lips, taste the fruits of a shared and secret garden.
But as he moves his hands to graze her hips, her pants gaining speed, he cannot bear to think of that now. Cannot bear to dream of all they’ve lost—all they’ve never had.

His hands find the hem of her subligaculum, tipping over their binds to inch them down her legs. Rey shudders as air slithers against her womanhood, the impending contact torturous and heavy in her bones. Ben’s breath steams against her neck, every shaky exhale clinging like dew to the strands at her nape.

Ben does not look down at her as he untangles the folds of her subligaculum, slipping them free from her legs. He lets the fabric fall to the side, swallowing the thickness in his throat as he reaches beneath his tunic to follow suit.

Rey’s hand flees from his neck to his shoulder, her gaze daring look between them for only an instant. A blur of flesh—red and angry—lies unveiled as he removes himself from his subligar, burned in her eyes as he shifts higher, his arms moving behind her back, clasping her body as he presses flush against her.

They gasp as one, Ben’s mind blank save for the maddening heat of her body. The head of his cock brushes against the downy hair of her mound, twitching, searching for her. Rey pants into the cloth of his shoulder, sucking in the scent of parchment and rain.

Grasping his bearings, Ben adjusts, shifting his hips, forcing her legs to spread wider. Waves of warmth call to him from her entrance, bidding him enter. When he brushes against her folds, he shivers, moaning as her silken shores caress the length of his throbbing cock.

Rey’s body clenches at the sound, her legs falling wider as if by silent command, bringing him closer. Her mind muddles, all thought of flight gone, replaced by curiosity and terror of the desires awakening inside of her—of all she’d dared dream they could do.

His breath escaping in rapid pants, Ben holds fast to her, cradling her head to him as he closes his eyes, lining himself with her. He breathes her in, feels the pulse of her body lying so close, touching his sensitive tip beneath the cover of their clothes.

She’s wet, he realizes, pushing forward, not quite entering her. He can hear it in his pounding ears, the slightest of sounds—the sign of her accommodating womanhood. He wonders if her body is as traitorous as his own, if her shame and his are the same.

“Forgive me,” he whimpers into her flesh. Slowly, carefully, he moves his hips forward, letting the stiff jut of his member aim true.

He dips inside of her body, wedging within her wings, and stifles a groan. Rey jars, the stretch shocking her core, leaving her resistant. She whines as he pushes through, the swell of his manhood shoving against her walls, expanding them from their foundations.

Ben sighs, long and slow as he seats within her, the warmth of her hearth an insurmountable, consuming fire. “Rey,” he moans softly, a mere whisper into the cushions as his shoulders quake with the effort to restrain himself from moving within her.

The sting of his entry ripples through her muscles, her thighs trembling from their position at his hips. Her nails dig into the fabric of his tunic, her eyes squeezed tightly closed as her body struggles to contain the impossible width of him.

Every other breath spills from his lips in a dizzying moan, disbelief, awe claiming him as he slowly pulls away, never leaving her.
It should be finished now. He has known her.

And yet.

He presses his lips to her ear. “Rey,” he moans, feeling her wetness shroud his length as he returns it to her, giving himself completely. Her gasp encourages him, his sack already beginning to tighten between his legs. His thoughts spiral beyond reach, the urge to touch her, feel her, hold her, overtaking him. “Rey…”

He rocks into her body, aided by the nectar of her garden, her most secret place, the pleasure once unknown to him made clear.

He would kill for this. He would die for this—for her, if only to keep her in his arms beyond this place. In a dream where she is his, and his alone. A wave of possession crashes over him as her hands brace his arms, her tentative touch, the unsteady huff of her every breath, driving him mad with desire held so long at bay. He thrusts once, hard, so close, and—

She cries out.

Ben pauses, his heart halting in his chest. He looks up, eyes glazed as they sweep over her face, only to find hers closed tightly shut, tears streaming down her cheeks. Horror descends on him, then, when he looks down to their joined bodies, finding her trembling, racking with silent sobs.

He hurt her.

In losing his mind, he’d hurt her. She’d taken him, allowed him this—and he wounded her in return.

Shame floods through him as he returns to her neck, his hands trapped beneath her. He moves his fingers to her neck, but stops. No. He is not worthy to touch her. Unworthy of her love—a love he will never possess.

Tears gather in his eyes as he begins to move again, all thoughts of passion, of her smile, leaving him one by one. With each thrust he remembers her touch, her smile, her voice, her eyes, each memory shifting him closer and closer to the end.

Rey.

He has broken her.

Rey.

She will never look at him again.

I…

“I’m sorry,” he whispers brokenly. He crushes her to him fiercely, then, savoring the last of them—all he can bring with him—a silent goodbye to all his dreams with her. “I can’t.”

He rips from her then, stumbling to his feet as he backs away, shielding himself from her view. He flees from the tablinum with a swipe of his arm, the sound of his steps disappearing amidst the timeless rain.

Rey lies motionless on her back, gazing up at the ceiling, tears cold on her jaw, over her ears. Her womanhood aches with emptiness, the burn left unsoothed, her every heartbeat a pulse crying out
for what she did not know.

As exhaustion pulls at her mind, her head drifts down, her eyes pulled to the scrap of cloth lying damp and unraveled on the tablinum floor.

Ben crashes into his chambers, slamming the door behind him as heaving sobs claw from his throat. He leans against it, the earth pulling him down until he sits.

He looks at his hands as they shake, down at the scarlet traces of her along his erection, eyes welling with grief, spilling over his cheeks. He covers his face with those hands as he weeps, agony tearing through his chest knowing what they have done to her. What he has done to her. Selflessly. Selfishly, he knows. He knows.

That she will never love him now.

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Chapter End Notes

{If you've skipped to read this, here is a summary of the content: At a high point of turmoil, wherein Ben is desperate to save Rey's life, Rey is resistant to his advances. He pins her down, but cannot make himself take her by force, even to save her life. He begs her to accept him, and she consents, knowing that it's the only choice they have left if they want to survive. *Please rest assured that they love each other deeply, and yearn to be intimate, but they both wanted to wait for the right time and had that freedom taken from them. To learn more, click here to read a brief essay about consent in Glory's Fray. Thank you!*}

[This SENSATIONAL art for the foot washing scene is by the amazing and generous reylos_stole_sw, who has been such a shining light of support for the story. Please leave her the love she deserves!]

[Washing someone's feet was an act of subservience to the other. In ancient times, when people traveled by foot, it was customary for a slave or a host to wash a guests feet. It is a symbol of submission, respect, and devotion]
The theme for this chapter is "The End of All Things" by Panic! at the Disco. Listen to the Glory's Fray Spotify playlist here!}
Inspection

Chapter Summary

WARNING: THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS POTENTIALLY TRIGGERING THEMES OF MURDER/ SUICIDE AND ANCIENT ROMAN GYNECOLOGY. PLEASE READ THE END NOTES FOR DETAILS. THANK YOU.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your patience! Midterms came around right after the last chapter was posted, which I understand may have left some of you disappointed.

And speaking of disappointment, after the previous update, it's come to my attention that not all readers agree with my labeling of Glory's Fray as Mildly Dubious/ Dubious Consent. For those who remain unclear or wary of the narrative, please follow this link to read a brief essay about Glory's Fray's plot and straightforward explanation of themes that may have been lost over time/ translation.

That being said, I would like to remind everyone that I have no say over what you can or cannot read. In no way will I try to pressure you to continue if you feel uncomfortable, but I will also refrain from saying any more on the subject. The tags have been altered for that purpose. Though these chapters in particular have been very difficult to write, I am certain that this one will provide more illumination to the complexities of GF Ben and Rey's relationship. Thank you for understanding! *hugs*

One more thing! WE HAVE NEW FANARTS! Please take a moment to look at the end of Chapter 22 (the infamous revelry scene) and Chapter 35 (the foot-washing scene) to check them out and leave their creator's some love, if you haven't already~ (ﾉ◕ヮ◕)ﾉ*:・゚✧

And as always, thank you so, SOOOOO much for your endless, unrelenting support! (•・ω・)萌

(Chapter beta-ed in part by the amazing RebelRebel, a fellow Reylo fanfiction writer. Please feel free to check out her works when you finish the chapter—you won't regret it!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A merciful breeze dances through the window, the torn cloth of pale drapes fluttering in the quiet. Daylight surges along the floor at her feet as she works, lonely yet content with silence’s company.

The sound of the door creaks open, the heavy steps of her master pounding against the stone floor. Jolting, she turns away from her station, wares left half-polished. She bows her head. “Master Plutt.”
The man grunts, more or less a sneer, as he waddles closer. Rey folds her lips to keep away her grimace, the rank odor of his presence more pungent than most. He stands before her, towering, his belly stretched against the hem of his linen kilt. Without warning, he tilts up her chin, turning her head, disdainfully inspecting what must certainly be the soiled state of her cheek.

Then he releases her, his expression riddled with displeasure—moreso than usual. “Wipe your face and come to the yard,” he grumbles. “Don’t come out until you’ve made yourself presentable.”

Rey nods and he leaves. Frowning, she takes a dirty towel from her station, wiping her cheek with the clean backside, and walks along the narrow halls out into the yard.

The sun shines blindingly along the sand, the breeze dying out, leaving each grain hot and hard beneath her bare feet as she looks out to see Plutt standing with two well-dressed men, donned in armor and red cloaks.

Roman soldiers.

Rey’s heard enough about them to know when she’s looking at one. Her head spins as she approaches with a bowed head, wondering what their purpose could be.

“The finest of my slave women, gentlemen. You’ll find that she is indeed untouched.”

One of them speaks back, his voice coated in a thick, rapid tongue Rey can’t decipher beyond the pounding of her heart.

Plutt speaks back to them with it, slow and choppy, before falling into Coptic once more. “I paid handsomely for her. Preserved her for myself, of course,” he claims proudly. “Too thin, I’m afraid, but she may surprise you yet. Girl,” he gestures, waving his hand at her. “Remove your clothing for these gentlemen.”

Rey looks up at Plutt, finding his eyes pinched with amusement—the same look he gleans whenever about to make a notable sale. She swallows, her heart hammering, the thought of baring herself before these strangers too daunting a task. “I—” she starts to say, but Plutt raises his hand, threatening a blow.

So, silently, avoiding their eyes, Rey nods, mortification grasping her throat as she peels away her skirt from her breast, shucking it down the length of her body to the sand, leaving her bare in the daylight.

One of the soldiers steps forward, his eyes snaking over her. With a gloved hand, he reaches out, prodding the thin bone of her collar, the shallow dip of her empty stomach. She flinches under the unwelcome touch—but knows better than to move. With closed eyes she pushes away the dread, praying against purchase into a different type of servitude.

Tears prick behind her lashes when they circle her, scanning her, as faceless and peering as the eagles etched into their armor. They do not touch her again, yet their eyes roving over her don’t lessen the violation now soldered to her bones.

When they’ve finished they speak with Plutt once more, nodding and deftly passing him a bulging sack. Her master waves his hand, dipping greedily into the bag with pudgy fingers as the soldiers close in on her, pulling free a band to bind over her eyes, casting her in darkness, leaving him her master no longer.

She struggles as they pull her away, the sand shifting like burning fire through her dragging toes, nightmares playing before her blinded eyes. She cries out into the stillness, the crunching of their
sandaled feet drawing near to the sound of waiting horses. They do not understand her as she pleads, as she is forced into the stifled space of a wooden caravan.

On the hard floor, she closes her legs tightly shut, trembling as they bind her in chains, the cold rattle splashing in her ears like the shores of the Nile. Breath shudders from her crushing lungs as she realizes the futility of her prayers, her fate sealed as she is left imprisoned and alone.

The ceiling blurs before her eyes, swimming in the empty, flickering darkness. Heat coils within her palms, fingers tight, drawing in to cover them as she lies bare upon the chaise. For an eternity there she remains, a hollowed tomb without peace nor rest as the storm quells against her ears.

Until she sits up slowly, wincing as her body cries out against it, everything raw and cold as clinging dew. Glancing down into her lap she sees her groin unchanged, the hair tufted and still, as though nothing were there at all.

But within, she knows it not to be true. Her body throbs with pulsing heat, the tears in her eyes subsided alongside the quiet din of rain beyond the walls. Swallowing, she finds her throat dry and, empty of thought, devoid of all other purpose, she rises shakily to her feet and shuffles through the curtain, into the courtyard.

Rain drips scantly in the near-darkness, the sky neither day nor night—a liminal space shrouded by rising mist. The overgrown grass hisses at her exposed ankles as she approaches the well at its center, a wandering ghost.

The rainfall must have replenished the water within—its surface dwelling high along the stone slabs of the well’s shapely body. She crouches before it, reaching in, her hand trembling as she brings a sliver of water to her mouth, her mind beginning to resurface from the pit of her parched throat.

The earth sinks, soft beneath her knees, as she gasps against the drowning. So full, yet so empty, warring back the temptations and memories within her.

Alone in the muted grey of timelessness, she parts her lips to pray.

“Abba... Abba... I’m so confused.” She shakes her head, her heart swollen in broken pieces, unfit to live within her breast. “Was everything I knew a lie?”

She waits in silence for a reply, finding nothing but anger and fear arise in her chest from the soles of her feet, her patience wearing thin.

Her lip trembles, peeling to reveal her teeth in guard against sobs built anew deep in her flexing throat. “I trusted him,” she hisses, smacking the stone. “I trusted You! I trusted You…”

In the quiet roar of her rationale, where her shattered hopes collide with the cruel reality sinking damp against her knees, Rey places her head to the well—as though it were an altar—waiting, always waiting.

Then, a small voice calls within her mind, a burning deep within her soul, a realization unraveling without words. A call once more to the truth lied buried deep inside her, unearthed at last from her traitorous heart.

Who was she to dream of him—to live at his side, in his bed? So long her visions have plagued her—these endless days of gathered longings and regrets. A plague she welcomed in the dead of night, in the bare light of day... in his arms.
The cold of the stone burns like a brand into the hard slope of her head, throbbing throughout her body, the pain of her desires cast through her soul.

He had come to her so plainly, so ardently in the storm. His words of truth too painful to endure as he tore her dreams of freedom asunder, his very face that of another man. But what he’d asked of her was clear—and in that alone, she knows, the fear was not of his words, nor his mask.

But of herself.

All this time she’s hidden away her longing, her secret desires. For the sake of her spirit, of her master’s honor, she’d dared to hide such traitorous dreams of standing equal to his hand. In marriage, in pleasure, in love...

...but he does not love her. She knows that more than anything else—its sting burning within her heart, between her thighs.

When she accepted him, she knew for herself the choice was her own—even in her grief for lost dreams of freedom, still her desires remained, ever potent and strong. To look upon his bed granted her the terror of her own will to submit to these urges—her damnable will.

Her soul screams in agony at her betrayal as she leans further into the stone, a beg for forgiveness on the peak of her tongue… but it does not come.

She is unworthy to beg for that which she so easily forsook long before this night. In her mind, she knew her master—knew his body in dreams and lingering glances. And oh, the way he would touch her, the way she could lie to herself when he did...

Rey hisses as she pulses below, the emptiness gaping and wide, parched. Heat flushes beneath the damp skin of her face, the fright returning vengefully, these desires that must be snuffed. Quickly, she dives her hands into the water, splashing the cold to her face to alleviate it, closing her eyes against its crashing wave.

_Lay with me._

His words spoken so gently, as though he cared, the way his voice shook her very bones. His eyes pleading, awakening the fire that lay simmering within her...

The air grows colder against the heat of her womanhood, left exposed beneath the soft brush of her skirts. Dabbing the water to her neck, her touch slows, each press only a reminder of where he’d lain his lips so tenderly. The memory a clear vision behind closed eyes.

_Rey… Rey…_

Her name strikes through her like a javelin, his words burrowed deeply into her heating ears. Her body cries openly now, weeps from between her tender folds, aching for him still.

Rey’s thoughts wander far from grace, descending into curiosity’s madness as her hand moves on its own, reaching down to cup herself over the cloth of her stola. Her lips part as a foreign thrill runs through her—the pressure of her hand soothing, but not enough!

She braces against the well’s edge, holding to the hard stone as her fingers inch the hem of her skirt ever upward, the journey slow and torturous, their destination forsaken boon. Carefully she slides their pads along the hair of her mound, the sensitive flesh beneath welcoming her familiar touch, bidding her continue to realms unknown.
In all her years of loneliness, never has she known this cusp of waiting bliss—this trembling sense of rightness as she probes at her sodden shores, sending shivers up her body. They grip her shoulders like his hands—from behind, so large, so warm, offering her the chance to relieve the ache, to take away her pain.

_Have you ever been touched like this, Rey?_

No. No, she hasn’t, she could say, but words escape her as she traces along her opening, focusing on the sensations ripping apart her resolve. And when her fingers wander upwards, she jolts, a muffled moan against her lips as delicious heat numbs the pain to her toes.

Silently, she moves around this hidden place, each shift bringing a new wave of pleasure through her, the emptiness in her body soothed by the touch of her own hand. She trembles as the feeling mounts—a crashing wave coming ever closer, crushing her under its foamy swell. Behind closed eyes and building pants, the helpless, mindless speed gathering at her wrist, she feels herself succumb to the blinding ecstasy in her veins. Closer, closer, _closer still_, to that place he began to take her.

_Tears stream down her face, the agony of her lust a burden heavy on her soul as she bids him take what he needs—at the wrongful rightness of his body and hers, the way he fills her so utterly with each careful thrust. And when his slow movements break beneath the power of his own body, for only a moment, there is pain—the pain of desire within her, finally unleashed._

She cannot think about how he left when she’d cried out—not now, as her mind clings to the final remnants of her lost dream. Instead, she bids herself imagine that he’d remained, that he’d continued and finished within her, that she could keep that piece of him inside.

Panting, her heart hammers against her bones, bending them, bidding them pliant as she moves her fingers in tactful circles. “_Hoh... hah..._” her lungs exalt, grateful for the sin of her traitorous body. Her thoughts continue, racing alongside her pulse as she moves faster, the heat summoned, gathering and obedient.

_He continues, his hands large, holding fast to her as though she were his altar—his sacrifice her silent desire, a rapid pound within her body, against her quaking thighs. He calls her to freedom, returns with glad tidings of their future, his movements made in rapture, in promise..._

Rey gasps, the vision bending at her spine.

..._in love._

“Ah—!” she whimpers, breath steaming against her cheek, eyes tightly shut to the blinding smatter of stars. Her legs twitch as her body succumbs to her fantasy, mind blank as the blood in her body gasps for air stolen by desperate lungs. She trembles as all muscle beneath her waist goes numb, her bones collapsing her down into the grass, the weight of this sensation too heavy to bear.

She pulls into herself as it pulses, holding her arms as the dew descends upon her, molding her. Burying her.

She remembers then what Ahsoka once said, that those who betrayed their own bodies, their beliefs, all they swore to uphold—would be lowered into a tomb of their own making. Left in the darkness to wither and starve.

Rey has starved all her life. Until she came here. And now, she hungers still. Empty.

And alone.
Ahsoka bursts through the door as the grey morning light washes in behind her, the threat of the storm’s second wave crashing over the distant ocean—against the wall of her master’s house.

Her heart pounds in her breast, her every step leading her further as she holds her skirt in her hand. Muddy tracks trail into the atrium, disappearing at evidence of a startling idea. She follows it like a hound, her blood boiling as Mitaka’s words guide her feet towards her master’s chambers.

“Snoke believes Master Ren lies about Rey,” Dopheld stammers, glancing about as soldiers file past in their usual rounds. “He’s sending his best physician to—”

Ahsoka halts before the entrance, finding the door tightly shut.

She swallows. Should she look inside, she knows what she may find. Her heart aches to think of it—of such an act committed before its time—but she cannot stand idly by as danger approaches in the lull of the storm.

Gingerly, she rests her hand on the handle, pushing tentatively. It’s unlocked. Pushing forward, her eyes shift to his bed, prepared for the worst.

But the bed lies empty.

Pursing her lips, Ahsoka opens further, glancing about the room. She’d spotted Silencer grazing, so they must still be here. Unless the soldiers had beaten her—

“No, Ben,” she replies softly. “I’m not going anywhere.”

His arms flex as his grip on the marble tightens, his knuckles whiter than the stone. Looking at his hands, Ahsoka realizes, that her fears have been realized at last. Before her now stands not Ben Solo, but Anakin Skywalker, trapped in a prison of his own making.

Pity washes over her in a heated wave, a sudden desire to cast a thousand curses thrumming through her veins. But she lets it go, if only to hold onto him. Reaching out, she rests her withered hand over his, her touch tender and calmer than she feels.

The silence beats through them both like answering drums, an old call of war they’ve never abandoned.

“You were right,” he chokes at last. “You were right about me. But I didn’t listen. I didn’t…” his grasp tightens further, as though willing the marble to bend beneath the building fury of his arms. He rocks to and fro on his feet, almost retching, holding on to keep himself aloft. “I couldn’t...”

Her fingers move to clasp his massive knuckles, her mind distantly wondering what all these hands have done. “Ben. Tell me what happened.”
He stops his movements, the air still. “She was so beautiful,” he murmurs, voice choked with tears. “So beautiful. She ran to me. I held her in my arms. In my hands…” he trembles, pulling from her grasp to cover his face. “...and I took her.” He sobs once. A deep, broken thing. “I took her.”

Ahsoka stands to face him, watching her master. Never before has she seen him like this, so twisted. Consumed. But in his panic persists her calm—and her terror. “Against her will?”

He shakes his head, sniffling, turning his back to her. “I couldn’t.”

Hope and confusion war in her chest as she keeps a level ground. “So she accepted your proclamation, then?”

He pauses, pulling his hand away, revealing himself beyond her sight. His voice murmurs a low rumble, thunder under skin. “What did you say...?”

“You told her you loved her,” she elaborates slowly, probing. Her eyes search his back, the way it begins to shudder under her gaze, and the silence uproots those seedlings in her chest. “Didn’t you?”

“You think me so cruel!?! ” he spits, wheeling on her, revealing himself at last.

Breath hitches in her throat as she steps back, leaving him room to stand enraged, teeth bared in a loathsome snarl. The sight of him seeps through her—his eyes wide and dark, rimmed with red, stained black in their beds for want of his own. His hair hangs in tatters about his cheeks, damp with fallen dew—or something else.

He scoffs, a mad thing. “Perhaps I am,” he rasps, eyes finding hers. Vehemently, he huffs, “’Selfish,’ you called me. And yet I tried—I tried…” he looks down at his hands, holding them for his perusal, scanning over the deceptive cleanliness of his palms before they lie covered by fingers, morphing into clenched fists. He closes his eyes, voice a rattling timbre as they tremble, clutching to some invisible thing. “I wanted to tell her. Ahsoka. Tell her. Hold her. Touch her. But I held the words in my mouth—I could not bear to harm her further.” He finds her eyes again, pleadingly, as he had the night he frightened her so. “Is that selfishness?”

Ahsoka searches his wanting gaze, finding only anguish in the darkness of its depths. But to answer him would lead them nowhere—would only push him further into this madness. “You did what you had to do. So did she. It is not my place to tell you what you must feel,” she winces with meaning, her eyes narrowed as a silent plea, “when we have already lost so much.”

Ben frowns, turning slowly from her to brace against the banister. Ahsoka watches. He must have stood here all night, she realizes.

He breaks the silence again, tone retreating to a dark rumble—low, ominous thunder. “What I’ve lost was freely given; for her life, it’s a small price. It is the how that plagues me.”

“So... Snoke, you mean?” Ahsoka tries.

Ben nods to the banister, eyes low in thought, hard with resolution. Despair. “He knew, Ahsoka. He knew all along. And now, knows to use her.” His lips tighten in a frown as he speaks, each word laced with venom. “He knows what I would give. So… it will be given.”

Ahsoka watches dumbfounded as he straightens, glaring in challenge to the rising sun, veiled as the eye of a bride behind the clouds. “What are you saying?”

Anger glosses over his features, concealing all tenderness from sight, replaced with hideous fury
and will. “Snoke will have what he wants. I will submit myself to his guard. I will let him think me beaten.” His hands fist further at his sides, shoulders squared and proud against the distance. “Then I will kill him. I’ll kill him for this.”

She blanches, his promise severe. And yet, not beyond her belief. “And when it’s done?” she challenges softly. “What then?”

He meets her eyes, saying nothing. But his answer rings clear.

Dread descends on her with all its weighted terror, her heart pulsing cold. “No. No, Ben—”

“What I’ve done can never be forgiven,” he mourns. “She ran from me, Ahsoka. Before I…” he looks away, cast down in shame, struck by soiled memory. “I begged her. I begged, and she… she does not want me. Not really. And now… now she never will.”

Anger rises in Ahsoka now, her rage building on helpless foundation. “You underestimate her,” she growls. “After all this time, all she’s done, you doubt her ability to love? Thrice she has saved your life now—all when she could have refused! And you think her so incapable?!”

“You offer this only to preserve my life,” he replies softly. “But my mind is made up. Your devotion has met its end, Ahsoka Tano. The master you serve no longer exists.” He relaxes his posture as the words leave him, his sunken eyes dark and distant, as if all light has fled his body, leaving him a hollow shell. “The last of him belongs to her, now.”

Ahsoka parts her lips to speak, to fight for reason amidst this insanity, but a clatter of hooves and armor pulls their attention out to the trees, partially obscured as shadows flit through their trunks, approaching the villa.

Her heart pounds in her breast, fear pulling from all sides as a hoard of Roman soldiers comes closer.

Ben shifts to stand beside her, tense and tepid as their eyes fix on the same damnable sight. “Go,” he murmurs. “Find her. Give her what comfort you can.”

Ahsoka longs to disobey, to plead the case for his life, but knows that time has run out. For now. She glances at him, finding him distant, before turning on her heel, lifting her skirts, and racing back into the house.

Ben follows shortly after, the world spinning, blurred beneath his feet. Steps heavy-laden, he moves through the house, each wall a looming ghost, destined to haunt him with their memories—all they have seen.

Hatred swarms in his chest, buzzing flies scavenging the baking carcass of his heart. Hatred for Rome. For Snoke. For himself.

All he sees when he closes his eyes is the fear on her face, that look in her eyes when he led her into his chambers. She looked at his bed as though it were the gates of Hell—as if... as if he would take her there.

And then her cry, her tears, the horror of his love behind it all.

He does not deserve to live—does not deserve her forgiveness. He knows that now. Through the night the rain fell on him, until it subsided, the cold winds stirring as dew took its place. The weight of his crime never slaked beneath the swell. Never quenched the parch of his throat amidst the flames. Only drowned him, slithered into his lungs like a snake in a once pure and lush garden.
And as he sunk through the darkness of its crashing waves, he knew not which way he faced, only the way to the end.

Ahsoka was right—Rey has saved him. Time and time again, when all was lost, she never stopped saving him. And what has he given her in return? These broken shards of his soul, sharp and burning—run through her body like a blade. Promises soiled by his failure, his ignorance, his weakness.

No. He does not deserve to live. Not when she will never be free.

He comes to stand in the atrium as soldiers file through the open door, their armor clanking off the stone as grey clouds shine from behind, casting them in shadow. Ben remains steadfast as the five of them form a defensive line with no more than sheathed gladii at their hips.

The air is still when a tall shade drifts through the passageway, long, smooth strides presiding in the steady clack of his sandals as he nears. The soldiers part to bid him entry—revealing to Ben an older man with an unshaven face and sharp eyes.

“Master Ren, I presume.”

His accent sounds Gallic—a northern form of Britannian by the way it lisps. Ben nods.

“My name is Galen,” the man introduces, not leaving room for pleasantries. He does not offer a hand to shake. “I assume you know why I’ve come.”

Thunder rolls in the distance, a gust breezing across their feet. Ben surveys the man, notes his near-matched height with his own, before he nods again.

At his silent ascent, Galen purses his lips in what could be called a polite frown as he offers Ben the same quiet gesture of surveillance. “Then I will be brief. Where is the girl?”

“All eyes sweep to look, Ben turning fully to watch as she emerges from the courtyard hall, her dress soiled and hair matted—but her posture upright, her chin held high.

Ben’s heart rends anew at the sight.

Galen hums once, a low, dull thing, and snaps his fingers. One of the rear soldiers produces a hefty satchel, but Galen does not take it at once—instead motioning for Rey to come near.

She does. Ahsoka lags behind, standing apart as Rey drifts past Ben, neither daring meet the other’s eye. Yet he watches her as she stands before Galen, her face a cold mask of impassivity despite the dark, roiling terror in her eyes.

Galen looks down at her with a different gaze—one softer in scrutiny, almost in intimacy. “May I?” he asks, gesturing for the hand at her side.

When Rey nods he reaches down, but is stopped by a hand much larger.

He looks up into Ben’s warning glare, notes the burgeoning snarl on his lip, and yet remains eerily calm, his voice lilting in the grim. “It would do no good to mistake intentions here, Master Ren.” He lifts his brow. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Young Master,” Ahsoka calls warily.
Ben glances to the bulging pouch held aloft by the faceless soldier, dread sinking through him at
the thought of what lies inside—what instruments will be used on her. His gaze snaps back to
Galén’s, voice low with the man’s native tongue. “You hurt her,” his grip tightens. “You die.”

If Galén is surprised by Ben’s slim knowledge of his mother language, he doesn’t show it. He
bows his head in gracious submission, and Ben hesitantly releases him, stepping back to allow
them room.

The man takes her hand and presses his lips soundlessly to it. Rey meets Galén’s gaze steadily, the
serenity returning to their faces as her fear leaks along the tile. His voice comes softly. “Have you a
table of considerable height?”

She shakes her head. “There is a counter in the kitchen,” she offers flatly.

“She has a bed,” Ahsoka interjects, drawing Galén’s attention, as if for the first time. “It’s larger
than the counter. And higher.”

He grants her an appreciative nod. “That will do,” he replies, reaching for the bag. It hangs at his
side as he motions for Rey to lead him forward, spurring in her slow steps—as though she were
marching off to an honorable execution.

Ben does not think, only begins to follow, but Galén lifts an arm. Its slender length seems a trap,
corded muscle tight and hidden underneath, flexing to halt him by the slightest block.

“I’m afraid the emperor’s instructions were clear, Master Ren. I am to conduct this examination
alone.”

Rage builds in Ben’s body, a ram battering against the cracking dam of his control. He withers a
scowl at Galén, his tone sharp, teeth bared over his lower lip like soldiers waiting in their trenches.
“It’s my right,” he contests, stepping forward despite hand barring him. The image of this man in
her room as she lies helpless, stripped to this physician and his tools, is too much to let her bear
alone. “You will not lay hand on her without her master’s per mit.”

“Permittance is granted to me by the Empire, Master Ren,” Galén replies stonily, unfazed. The
sharpness of his gaze dulls, but only for a moment, his voice soft again as he speaks. Beseeching.
“Consider her privacy before your pride.”

“I will go,” Ahsoka sounds, stepping forward. They look to her as she frowns, avoiding all but the
physician’s eyes. “Allow me to stand in my master’s stead as a witness to your verdict,” her eyes
flit to the ground. “She may require a Coptic translator, as well.”

Galén considers her for a moment before retracting his hand. “That, I will allow. Come, madam.
Lead on.”

Ben watches as Ahsoka takes Rey’s arm, the two of them leading Galén down the hall. Once
they’ve gone two soldiers stand guard before the entryway, the others gathering behind him,
leaving him helpless and waiting, his eyes trailing after her until she vanishes from sight.

Rey’s heart throbs in her throat when they enter her chambers, the bed laid out and still before her,
ignorant of what’s to come.

Gently, Ahsoka squeezes her arm, leaving her to move freely as she stands in the corner by the
may remove your clothes, if you wish. But only your genitals need baring.”
Swallowing, Rey nods, sitting on the edge of the bed. Her thoughts echo empty along the cavern of her mind, willing her only to do as she’s told. She pulls up her skirt and lies back, the cold of the air pressing fully on her bare skin as she closes her eyes, folding her lips to hold back the tears long-since drained.

Ahsoka crosses the room to stand beside Rey, pity winding through her at the sight of her beloved girl lying exposed and trembling on the mattress. She offers her hand, slipping it around Rey’s, letting her clasp tightly to her thinning bones.

They remain silent as Galen sets his instruments upon her small vanity one by one, his expression unmistakable for disinterest. “My duties for the emperor are various in nature,” he explains simply, a hint of sadness in his voice. “Today will be a painless observation. It’s unlikely I will need all of these items.”

Rey dares sit up her neck, watching as he removes the last of four objects—a large, plying tool, one made for prying something open. Her eyes widen, her hold on Ahsoka firm. “What is that?”

“A speculum,” Galen says, coming closer. His steps fall without malice or cruelty. Far from it, as he moves to show her every angle of the tool, letting her see it in full. “For the sake of diligence, it will be placed shallowly inside and allow a clear view of your extremities.”

All of it is purely scientific, Ahsoka notices, his bedside manner serving to relax Rey’s grip in slight. As she nods her understanding, he pulls her stool before the bed and takes his seat.

“Will it hurt?” Rey asks shakily.

“No,” he reassures, something almost like a smile in his eyes as they hold her own. “Just relax your legs—and breathe deeply. Madam,” he addresses Ahsoka, face patient, “water for my hands, if you will. I shan’t start without it.”

Ahsoka looks to her for a moment, but Rey releases her slowly,nodding her approval. “I’ll return shortly,” she promises, stepping out the door.

Galen sighs, shaking his head. He looks down to the floor, leaning over his knees, revealing a kink in his rigid posture. Suddenly he speaks—in fluent Coptic. “My sincerest apologies. I understand that this must be very unpleasant for you.”

Rey swallows, knowing not whether she should thank him for his consideration, or say nothing at all. “…It is,” she whispers, copying his speech. “You know Egyptian?”

He nods, pouting at the ground. “I should hope so. I studied medicine there for twelve years.”

His humor is enough to lift her spirits by the slightest margin, reminding her of someone else. And to this man, as the other, she asks, “Why are you being so kind to me?”

“…I have a wife. And a daughter,” he mentions at length in that calm, lisping voice of his. “You remind me of her—your eyes.” As he says the words he meets them with his own. Not once do they linger on her body. Instead he looks within her more deeply than she knows, her soul met with understanding. “I am here because of them. Were my daughter in your place, I would pray to any god to have a man be kind to her.”

Rey blinks at him in marvel, left for want of speech as Ahsoka returns, holding the bowl for Galen as he rinses his hands.

When it is done he retrieves the tool with a surgical steadiness. “Breathe,” he says calmly, finally
setting his attention to her body. Rey closes her eyes and inhales, clutching onto Ahsoka’s hand as the cold tips of the iron speculum press against her skin.

Galen returns alone, his steps slow and purposeful, the clack of his sandals drawing Ben’s restless gaze. The soldiers part to let the physician through. He stops before him, looking up, his eyes searching and tired. A beat of silence passes through them, Ben’s rage at last surrendered to grief as the man turns his face away.

“She has been known,” Galen murmurs.

And with that, leads the soldiers from the villa.

In the lone silence, Ben collapses against the nearest column, covering his eyes.

Upon the bed Ahsoka remains with Rey, both sitting as the woman’s arms envelop her, holding her close while she cries.

Ahsoka strains to hear the tears as they fall, but Rey merely buries her head to her aging bosom, clinging as a child to their mother. Tenderly, Ahsoka strokes her hair, soothing her as best as she knows how. “There was no other way,” she whispers.

“I know,” Rey nods, sniffing. “I know.”

Within her Ahsoka yearns to share that which she knows—that their master has now begun to walk a terrible path. But to do so would betray his love for her, and in that, betray him. So instead she holds Rey tightly, moving to look in the young woman’s eyes. “Did he hurt you, Rey?” she asks softly, stroking her face.

Rey folds her lips, tears spilling anew. Throat choked, she looks down at her folded hands resting limp in her lap, shaking her head.

Yet Ahsoka feels no relief, heat rising to prick behind her eyes. “Tell me why you weep. Please, Rey. Let me know what I can do.”

So many reasons, Rey could say, and still so many she cannot. When through the night tears of all temperatures fell, hot with self-pity, cold with regret, and yet all from the same source—this plague within her she could never outrun. Not when he was kind. Not when he laid himself bare. Not when he called her by a woman’s name.

Not when she loved him.

Not when she still does.

“I ran, Ahsoka…” Rey sobs. “All this time… I ran…”

Ahsoka nods in understanding, remembering their master’s words to her, the sadness in his voice. “Because you didn’t want him to know you.”

Fire rises from deep within Rey, scorching the walls of her soul, smoke and steam twining, their whites and shadows merging into grey. It seeps from the corners of her lips, from between her legs. Dancing, pulsing with every beat of her heart. “No,” she whimpers. “No, I… I ran because… I wanted him to,” she sobs, burying her face in her hands, keening where she lay. “I wanted him to...”
Ahsoka returns her hand to Rey’s hair, warring for comprehension. “Oh, Rey,” she sighs, and all at once, a world once concealed now lies unveiled and torn, the silence spinning out underneath them like shattered stars—leaving them stranded in the wake of endless night. The truth revealed at last from Rey’s lips, a broken proclamation of that which Ahsoka never cared to speak—the awakening of a woman’s heart.

And as Rey lay crying in her arms, it is then that Ahsoka knows, knows more deeply than any other, that perhaps there is still a chance, after all.

Chapter End Notes

{If you’ve skipped to these notes for details, this chapter contains dark themes of suicide. Ben is in a very, very dark place after what's happened, and blames himself for causing Rey's “suffering.” He no longer finds himself worthy to live, especially without the chance that she could love him, and resolves to commit himself to a suicide mission to exact his vengeance on Snoke. Regarding the gynecology—the physician reveals a tool to Rey, explaining what it does as she lies ready for examination. The scene cuts away when the tool touches her}

[Homes in Ancient Egypt has a different layout from Roman homes. While the Romans had open roofs and wide doors/windows, the Egyptians had small windows, closed rooms, and dim lighting. This is because they needed protection from the harsh daylight, and the shadows helped keep houses cool]

[Egyptian men wore white-linen "kilts" (which we mistake as skirts in modern media due to their similarities with the modern women's pencil skirt). Egyptian slave women wore "skirts," which were long and began high over the breasts, ending around the knees. These simple dressing styles helped regulate body temperature and remove any sense of individuality]

[Ancient Rome was a time where women were first beginning to explore their sexuality—as shown by Lesbos, the famous poet (and lover of Catullus). However, early Christianity rejected the idea of exploration submitted by the violent, cruel culture of Rome, and therefore their tendencies for sexual impurity. Rey, as a Christian struggling with her lustful emotions, would have felt condemned for giving into her desires]

[As you may recall, Galen was a Turkish (Greek) physician famous for his work with the four humors and Roman gladiators. Though the real Galen died in 210 AD, this Galen can either be read as THE Galen or a decedent of the same name and occupation (since Glory’s Fray takes place in 278 AD), though the original Galen never traveled to Egypt or practiced gynecology (that we know of)]

[A "speculum" was an ancient tool used to look inside of a woman's body. The prongs would be inserted and pried apart to expose the vaginal canal]

[BONUS: Hymens do not "break" so much as "stretch" after penetration. Though some women can break theirs during exercise, the hymen of a "deflowered" woman looks less like it was pulled, and more like it was repeatedly run through by, well, a penis]
[BONUS BONUS: Mads Mikkelsen, who plays Galen Erso, is originally from Denmark—where the ancient Germans lived. (Ben knows Gallic from Chapter 20, when he fought them in the war)]
Heiress

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so so much for reading! Receiving your comments really brightens my day—especially for those of you who offer such profound insights. I love knowing what you enjoy and what you've learned, you have all taught me so much!

This chapter is for my lovely ladies at Cunning Linguistics. Thank you for feeding into my deranged obsession! *hugs*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Who was he to dream of her?

He who was, who is, her master—he who controls. He who takes. Or was he her teacher—he who gives, who provides? Both were he who provided—yes. Pain. Knowledge. Agony. False hope. When he lay in his bed and thought his dreams prophecies, how easy it was to entertain their fancies, impart his will on the vision of his own hands. Around her waist. Wrapped around her heart.

But he was no prophet, knew nothing for all the knowledge he claimed to own. Once-dreams become nightmares here, in the darkness behind his fingers, as their shards cut him through—the blood staining them disguised as tears.

The call of death sounds beyond the din, ringing silence in his ears, the rapid beat of his pulse too distant to hear—and yet he feels it, shudders beneath its icy drip into the hollowed cavern of his chest. He runs from it, his legs useless and slow, crashing him along the walls, battering him into the place where he was teacher and master both—where he gave. Where he took.

The red of the curtain streams down in horror, its color wide and screaming at the sight of him, the noise too much. With a strangled grunt, his eyes burning and wild, he reaches up with pleading hands—only to tear it down.

The sound of it ripping relieves its cries, silencing its ceaseless wail, and from there the familiarity of what he was streams into him with vengeful fury. He crashes through the tablinum in throbbing rage, his hands meant only to destroy. Yes, to ruin and render, to tear all asunder—as he’s done to her, will do to his master.

Will do to Rome.

The table goes first, flipped on its head like dead weight cast off—a carcass, a casket. Parchment flies, ink stains the stone like blood. Perhaps he cries out with the effort, but cannot hear it. Hears nothing at all as he topples everything with legs, bidding them fall while he still stands.

When his eyes lay on the chaise she is still there, her body stretched before him, bared and welcoming—and yet her eyes remain closed, her face turned away, wound tightly in betrayal. Agony tears through him at this phantom sight, and with one, strong movement, he thrusts the chaise to the ground, banishing that which will never be his.
But the tablinum is not enough. He stumbles across the tile, top-heavy and dizzy, through the hall towards his chambers. In doing so he passes hers, and through the ringing call hears the sound of her voice—a song of redemption, no… the sound of her tears, oh God—the gasps of her anguish!

He cannot breathe, cannot see, racing blindly for the mercy of his chamber door, bidding it quickly closed. His chest heaves with the effort to draw breath, his eyes burning for lack of sight beyond the endless black.

His arm thrusts out to grasp the post of his bed before he can fall—the post where she once lay chained—and sobs break free at last.

Who was he to ask for her, to dream of mercy, to love and be loved? A monster’s hands cling to the post now, seeking that which has long past. What he would give to go back, to have her here, now, once more! To ask for nothing and steal love from their fate, to love and woo her from the start!

Could he but wish it—if he could change anything, oh, the things he would change. To make love to her slowly, to kiss her passionately, to taste her clever tongue. Disrobe her with his hands, explore her with his mouth, hear his name from her lips as bliss entwines them forever.

But your love has killed her. She lives, yet listen—she dies!

The darkness calls to him again, closer now, death waiting in the sunrise beyond the veranda doors. He looks to its blinding light, feeling it numb him with cold acceptance, the vision of his beloved fading into ash, replaced by the armor of the royal guard.

But his body rages against the darkness, knowing now there is nothing left of him to keep. He topples his dresser to the ground, the effort sending him to his knees before the chest. He roots through it viciously, hurling the perfumed jar against the wall. It shatters, the scent heady sulfur in his nose as the chorus grows louder. Drowning him out.

And when he takes the parchment, so carefully rolled, into his hands, he thinks to tear it apart. That the words within will never be seen by her. His body, his heart, never accepted.

He was foolish to dream of love. A runt on the mountaintop, who thought himself a king. A shepherd boy without sheep, a warrior without war, a vengeful soul without the strength to finish what had been started.

Yet as he lays there, prostrate before the lifeless hearth, his energy sapped and draining still, he thinks perhaps vengeance may still be his. This one thread of life worth holding onto in the wake of her ashes. One last thing these hands can destroy.

Though she will never love him, he swears this into the stone—his vengeance will be hers.

Two days pass without word from Rome.

Rey emerges from her chambers, the morning chasing after what remains of lost, lingering dreams. Tentatively, she moves to pass his door, looking down to find his plate left untouched.

She frowns at it, angry that he could let it go to waste—that there’s nothing she can do to force him. He passed like a fleeting shadow when the physician left, taking all trace of him with, leaving her and Ahsoka with nothing but the occasional crash sounding from his chambers. Like the sharp edge of the sun on its dial, something would break behind this door. As if he were assuring them, in his own way, that he was still alive.
Rey sighs, bending down to take the plate into the culina. The fruit and meat are still good—though the quince has caved in under the soggy slump of time. Alone in the quiet, she drifts from the kitchen with the quince in hand, slipping into the stables.

Pulling the knife from the roll of her stola, Rey begins to cut into the rind, severing it in two. Lux rears her head first, offering her bright, silky mane in exchange for Rey’s attention.

Managing a smile, small as it may be, she holds a segment aloft, feeling as Lux’s plump lips fold over her palm to catch every trace. A jealous knicker, deep and impatient, sounds close by. She indulges Silencer, smoothing her hand up along the curve of his muzzle, and imagines a different hand in her place.

“At least you appreciate it,” she murmurs, wiping the stallion’s spit from her hand. She returns the knife to her freshly-washed gown as she makes for the door, shoving it open to let the light spill through. Her lungs greedily drag the soft wind into her body, the relief of the storm’s passing a clear and happy flavor. Fresh air in this home is a common commodity, but none so much as here. As now. As it had been when she first arrived—when she laid eyes on the green for the first time.

*His eyes have green in them, if you look close enough.*

Groaning, she presses her wrist to her head, fighting back these pounding thoughts of him. “...What am I going to do, Silencer?”

He doesn’t reply beyond the flick of his ear to bat at a pesky fly, blinking and somber in his stall.

“I mean,” she turns back to him, looking into his round, black eyes, her hands beginning to fly on their own as she starts to pace. “He’s my master. *Your* master. I can’t expect him to just *accept* me,” she dismisses, slicing her fingers through the air in decisive execution.

Lux knickers.

Rey halts, glaring back at Lux’s impassive expression. “Because I’m still,” she gestures to her stola, “*this!* I’m not some Roman patrician, or the daughter of some general, or—!” She sighs. “Besides… we know what he’s like.” Glumly, she casts her gaze down at the ground, the words leaving her quietly. Resigned. “If he wanted me, then he would have said so.”

*Don’t thank me for having no desire for you.*

That’s what he’d said when she thanked him for sparing her that night, the night they first met. After weeks of travel, naked and blind, being poked and prodded by the emperor’s men, the man she was bought for had refused her. Back then it was a blessing—her new master a gift from God that she only dare give thanks for in private. But now it feels more like a curse, falling for a man who loathes the very thought of bedding her.

*I’m sorry. I can’t.*

Rey leans against the beam between Silencer and Lux’s stalls, gazing up at the ceiling after briefly considering the pile of fresh hay in the corner of the stable. “‘Sorry,’” she whispers. *What did he have to be sorry for?* At the time, his words had fled from all reality, the crushing weight of his body distracting. *Too* distracting, the thickness of him inside of her, stretching her body in ways she’d never imagined.

If he was sorry for the pain, then that would have been trivial. Unlike him. It only lasted for a moment—but then something new, something once so distant from her, suddenly revealed itself like the burning sun on that green and endless horizon.
Rey closes her eyes, trying to fight back the image of him, thinking instead of how scandalized he would be to have a slave woman dwell on his... proportions. It’s enough to light a fire beneath her cheeks, around her ears, over her breasts.

She is no stranger to lust—no matter how far she ran from it. Since her time in his estate, now she knows, it has been building within her. Rising. Boiling. Beginning to spill over. From the morning she gave him his first meal—no, even before that, first seeing him in the light of day, it was always there. Like a Greek god, she had thought, and now covers her mouth to stifle a muted groan at the memory.

Silencer stamps his hoof, waking her from her intrusive musings, all of which will do her no better than they have in these two days without any more sight of him. Ahsoka reassures her that he will come out when the time is right. That he is a man, and men need time to collect their thoughts. But all Rey can think is how those thoughts must be quite powerful for him to stay in such arduous battles with them—that his time spent avoiding her bodes too similar a trait to disgust.

Rey sighs. “You’re right,” she concedes, to herself, or Silencer, she doesn’t know. “I can’t keep thinking about this...” She glances up into the stallion’s expectant face, and perks up, an idea taking root in her mind.

With rapid steps she flies to Ahsoka’s chambers, squatting at her bedside and taking the woman’s warm shoulder in hand. “Ahsoka,” she whispers, shaking lightly. “Ahsoka?”

“Mm, what is it, Ani?” she mumbles sleepily, yawning into her pillow. “You promised I could sleep in...”

Rey screws her lip in something not quite a smile at the sight of her mentor so lost in her dreams, calling a bit louder. “Ahsoka.”

Blue eyes crack open, startlingly bright. “Rey,” she croaks, sitting up. Her sleeping gown tangles as she moves, jerking in quiet panic. “Are you alright?”


Wind races through her hair, faster than her breaths can catch, leaving her choked and dizzy—enthralled with every moment.

Silencer’s body shifts powerfully forward, his legs flailing out in full gallop. His heart throbs between her legs, the bump and crash of her body on his back too harsh to be pleasurable, yet gives her pleasure all the same. An innocence, a cleanse of her spirit in the lashing gust.

Ahsoka leads her out along the countryside, further than Rey has ever been. The hills roll out before them as they gallop through the green, the sky wide and blue and beautiful. Ahsoka motions with her hand as a large and lonely tree comes into view, nestled comfortably within the glen, and Rey pulls Silencer’s reins to slow him to a steady trot.

Ahsoka hops down from Lux’s back, making quick work of the satchel attached to the saddle as Rey follows suit. The horses go off to graze as Rey takes the opposite end of Ahsoka’s woven blanket, spreading it under the shade of the tree.

“The heavens will be clear tonight,” Ahsoka muses, glancing up at the cloudless sky. “The storm
has polished every star—and now they lie in wait for our mortal view.”

Rey settles herself, watching as Ashoka sits before her.

“I haven’t come this far since I was a girl,” she continues, leaning against the trunk as Rey divvies up their lunch. “Of course, my last master and his wife made better use of these fields than I ever aspired.”

Rey smarts at that, passing Ahsoka her share of fresh grapes. “Do you think Ben’s mother was sired here?”

“A strange question,” Ahsoka chuckles. “I’m afraid I have no answer… but it’s very possible.”

Rey snickers with her, setting fast to her unleavened bread, shoving soft pieces into her cheeks and sighing at the tender taste.

Ahsoka watches Rey, plucking at her cluster. “History has a way of repeating itself,” she murmurs.

Rey looks to her. “What do you mean?”

Smiling softly, Ahsoka re-positions herself, popping a grape into her mouth. “Anakin, Ben’s grandfather, had an eye for strength. He even surrounded himself with strong women—present company included.” Rey scoffs good-naturedly at that, but Ahsoka continues anyway. “You are a strong woman, too.”

Lowering her bread, Rey frowns at Ahsoka, doubt coiling in her heart. “But… I’m not.”

Ahsoka tilts her head, looking worriedly over Rey. Since that night, the young woman’s countenance has shifted. Her jaw seems firmer, her skin softer, her eyes sharp and focused—when not lost in some swelling thought. “Oh? And why is that?”

Rey considers her mentor, searching her eyes for judgement, finding none. Her kindness as of late has nearly brought Rey to tears, the relief of her company soothing years of barren loneliness. Perhaps she can trust her with this now. Taking a breath, she looks down at the blanket, searching for the words. “Something…” she whispers, “inside me has always been there. And now it’s awake… and I’m afraid.”

Ahsoka blinks, listening intently as Rey goes on.

“I don’t know what it is—or what to do with it,” she confesses, meeting Ashoka’s eyes at last. “I need help.”

A gentle smile blooms on Ahsoka’s face, nestled deep in her face as her piercing gaze softens. “It sounds like you need something else.”

Heat creeps up Rey’s neck, embedding itself behind her cheeks as she looks away, unable to meet Ahsoka’s eyes as the shame of her awakened desires begins to pool beneath her, threatening to pull her under again.

Ahsoka leans forward, taking Rey’s hand and holding tightly, her voice imploring and earnest. “Search your feelings, Rey—you know it to be true. That inside you are indeed strong, forged in iron, wielded by your will.”

Tears prick behind Rey’s eyes, her mentor’s encouragement stark against the darkness of her past. “But how can I be strong when I feel so weak…?” she whispers.
Clasping both of Rey’s hands, Ahsoka meets her gaze deeply, looking inside. “Because, Rey,” she smiles, “that’s what love is.”

Rey’s jaw goes slack.

“You love him,” Ahsoka smirks, a knowing glimmer passing through her eyes, “don’t you?”

Her tone leaves no room for argument, though Rey knows she could never contest it if she tried. Breath flushes from her lungs with cool relief, yet replenishes with the hot, heavy weight of new, intangible burdens. “I do.”

“Then,” Ahsoka says, taking Rey’s face in her hands, the wrinkles in the corner of her eye emerging in the shade. “You have nothing to fear. Rey—for too long I’ve lived in bitterness. I blamed love for the wrongs in my life. I saw it as a curse—and never, never thought differently after it took the lives of those I cared for most. But Rey,” she laughs, soft and brief as she pets the young woman’s hair, “look how strong it has made you. You sit upright before this world now, after all we’ve lost—and say that you are weak? What foolishness,” she chuckles.

Rey sniffs, a tear streaking down her cheek, these emotions too strong to hold at bay. Stiffly, she swallows, that damned doubter’s-side rising again. “But... he doesn’t love me. He didn’t even stay...”

Ahsoka frowns, knowing that the opposite is true—but that to say so would take away what belongs between her and Ben. This must be their choice to make, and she cannot intrude. So she chooses her words carefully. “Men are fickle creatures, Rey. Boys who’ve grown out of their clothes, but not into their age. There may be pieces of him that have yet to grow.”

“But what can I do?” Rey asks helplessly.

“Talk to him,” Ahsoka urges. “Use your strength where he is weakest. Speak with him and let him tell you the truth for himself.”

Rey nods, and Ahsoka releases her, allowing her the space to wipe her cheeks. “I don’t know what I could say...” she murmurs, hope and terror waging in her heart.

Humming, Ahsoka looks to the sky, breathing in the slight rustle of wind. “You’ve learned a language together,” she glances down, offering a flickering wink. “Perhaps you could learn one more?”

Rey pauses at that, her mind turning time to when they were alone, when he taught her and praised her, when she first felt those spreading tendrils of affection for her master.

As forbidden as it had been, he was kind all the same. He gave her everything. A roof, a bed, food in her belly. Knowledge, a new type of voice, belonging.

Home.

Rey rises shakily to her feet, gathering the courage Ahsoka spoke so highly of, clutching it close. All this time she has run, forward and back, to him then away... but no more.

It has to be today. Today, she will tell him the truth of her feelings. Will confess at long last this love she should have laid bare long ago. And if he denies her, so be it. She will have let this torment run its course—will have heard from his own soft, tempting lips that her longing was in vain.

Yes… even if these desires, these hidden feelings, were in vain, love could never be. Whatever comes next will finally set these things to rest, and for one moment she dares, dares to dream of one last chance to make things right.

“I’ll do it,” Rey affirms, voice clear and strong, eyes burning in foreign fire. “It’s time to finish this.”

From the ground, Ahsoka looks on, pride brimming in her chest, a feeling perished so long ago finally embraced once more. “I’m glad to see you so passionate,” she replies, dripping with amusement. “But perhaps we should finish lunch, first.”

They return to the house beneath the bright afternoon sun, the weather finally tempered—for now—into a sweet, cool swell.

Trotting back to the stables, Rey is down in the span of a breath, rapid steps carrying her inside the villa. Every beat of her heart pounds like an executioner’s drum. What waits for her beyond this living death feels so unknown—the ideas of happiness and Hell shifting side by side in a forbidden dance.

She halts before crossing the courtyard, thinking on how best to begin. Mind racing, she can think of nothing better to do than break for the storeroom, filling a bowl with ripe figs.

Fussily, she frowns and pats at her hair, blindly taming its windswept strays. She looks down to see her stola wrinkled from riding, and wonders briefly whether she smells like the less favorable end of that which she’d ridden.

But there is no time for that now. She takes a breath, hoping it will steady her nerves, casting up a silent prayer. In the days since her… she has refrained from similar touches—as much as she could control—never again finding that shattering bliss. But this distance between her master and her Master, for perhaps the first time since, finally feels like it can be closed. That, maybe, just maybe, these feelings inside of her aren’t wrong at all.

“Just tell him,” she whispers as a mantra, crossing the bench in the courtyard, passing the triclinium. The Coptic from her lips is a reassurance, an old trace of what she’s left behind as she goes to embrace something else, something new. “Just tell him,” and maybe things can go back to the way they were before. Maybe they can be better.

It’s too much to dream of a life with him anymore. To picture her freedom, to become a citizen of Rome. But she cannot run from this any longer—it’s not fair to him. To herself. Even if he hates her, he deserves to know the truth.

I love you.

Rey pauses outside his door, lifting her knuckles, hesitant. She’s never said those words before—hasn’t tasted how they will sound, no matter how many visions spread before her now where she manages some way to ruin everything. She’s not like him, with his poems and philosophies. Yes, she knows many languages, but to speak them with any amount of clarity evades her even on the best days.

And yet, in the midst of these fears, she thinks of him waiting there, just beyond this door. Of how
many doors have stood between them, opened one by one. At first strangers bound by law, by threat of death. But from that something more—dare she think a kinship. A… friend.

Shakily, she breathes out, trembling and weak-kneed. Ben, her friend. Dare she think her first—the first person in her long, lonely life who has ever seen her for more than she is. Nothing. Something. Anything.

He trusted her with his secrets, with his life. Gave more of himself than he ever meant. She sees that now—knows beyond these walls, that all of their doors have been opened but one.

So she swallows her fear, grasping the threads of her strength, letting hope spill through her again, and goes to knock—

But the door opens.

Rey pauses, surprised. “Mitaka,” she stammers. “What are you doing here?”

With eyes wide and flightful, he clears his throat, stepping out and shutting the door behind him. “A message for Master Ren. He,” he swallows, “he let me in.”

Relief loosens the tight muscles of her shoulders, knowing that Ben is, at least, breathing inside. She must have missed seeing Mitaka's horse in her rush to confess these feelings. “Is he alright?” she probes, searching the man’s eyes.

But Mitaka doesn’t answer, haunted gaze cast to the floor. “…He wants to speak with Ahsoka Tano. Do you know where she is?”

Rey blinks. “Just Ahsoka…?”

Mitaka nods.

Rey frowns. So he will answer for them—of course she can’t expect he’d want to see her now. Tempering her feverish hopes, she gestures to the back of the house. “Oh. The stables, I think.”

“Thank you,” he murmurs. He opens his mouth, as if to say more, but decides against it, scurrying towards the courtyard, disappearing from sight.

Sighing through her nose, Rey looks morosely at the door. Perhaps this one will remain closed to her. For now.

So she leaves the bowl of figs on the floor, setting it against the wall, and takes her throbbing heart with her.

Ahsoka frowns as Rey passes by, refusing to look into her eyes. But there’s no way things would have resolved themselves so quickly. It seems that time has moved against them once more.

She doesn’t bother knocking, pushing the handle and finding it unlocked for the first time in days. She wrinkles her nose at the rank, the room dark despite the daylight beyond the closed veranda doors. She leaves it open, letting the stench escape and relieve her of the confounding sting in her eyes.

Unsurprisingly, his chambers lie in shambles, everything from his dressers to his mattress strewn about and splintered. The only thing remaining upright is the chair, where from this angle she spots two, long legs stretched out and still.
“Are you shitting in here?” Ahsoka huffs, covering her nose and coming to stand before him. She lays eyes on his rugged form, seeing him motionless and scowling at the unlit hearth. Despondent. “You look terrible.”

“And you look like you’ve been riding,” he drones, glancing up at her. Stubble darkens the soft of his jaw, over his lip, his hair greasy and flat, lacking its wavy luster. His eyes remain standing in their graves, deep, earnest, and harder than stone. For the barest moment, they seem to flicker. “How is she?”

“Better than you give her credit for,” Ahsoka replies, crossing her arms. “You have to stop hiding from her like this, Ben.”

He winces at his name, looking genuinely hurt before averting his gaze once more. “I’ve been strategizing.”

“So that’s what that smell is.”

“Your ire won’t stop me, Ahsoka. I summoned you here to carry out a request.” He rises, the wrinkles of his tunic bunching around him. He turns to face her again. “My last request.”

In the hall, a young woman shifts carefully, soundlessly, straining to hear. His voice sounds, deep and cadenced, rasping. Tired.

“And what would that be?” Ahsoka asks, her voice hushed by distance.

Rey turns, peering inside, spotting his tall shadow and hers, her heart hammering.

“I have sent Mitaka with a message for Poe Dameron. Tomorrow at dusk, you will take Rey into Rome in secret, and leave her with his staff.”

She blanches, stepping back, blue eyes aghast. “Ben—!”

“It’s for the best.”

“You don’t know that—!”

“Face it, Ahsoka,” he snarls, rounding on her with a sweep of his arm, slicing through the air like a blade, as though to cut her resistance in two. “She has no future here. Not in this house, not with me. She belongs elsewhere—far, far from here!”

His booming voice shakes Rey through her core, his words searing behind her eyes like a brand. Gutted, her bones shatter, her blood flowing into the empty beds where her heart, her soul, once lived—draining her mind devoid of all thought but how foolish she had been to even hope he could ever want to keep her.

She covers her mouth, turning away to stifle her sobs, tripping over the bowl at her feet, figs spilling and chasing after her—only to give up on her, too.

Ben’s body goes numb as the words leave his mouth, resounding and final in the emptiness.

Ahsoka glares at him, anger rising in the tan of her tight cheeks, on her dark lips. “You know that’s not true.”

“It’s the only way to keep her safe. No matter how much I loved her, this place will never be her home.” Then he turns, withdrawing a sack of aurei from the mantelpiece, and offers it to her. “Take
Ahsoka takes the bag from him, scowling. “You speak like you’re already dead.”

Hand deceptively still, Ahsoka takes the bag from him, scowling. “You speak like you’re already dead.”

A knowing look passes over his face, cold and distant like a fading star in the cruel light of dawn. “I received an order from Rome. It will be carried out tonight. And when it’s done, I will join Snoke’s guard—then it will be finished.”

“You’ve been waiting for this,” Ahsoka realizes, terror washing over her. “Sealing yourself away in here like a dog.” She turns away from him, covering her trembling lips, unable to look at him standing so pitifully before her—this boy, heir of her master’s house… this man she has grown to love.

She glances up to the mantel, spotting a scroll rolled carefully, crumpled, as if it was crushed then smoothed out by regretful hands.

Ben steps closer, the scattered remnants of his heart hating how they hurt her so. He moves to stand before her, taking her neck to press his lips against the crown of her head. She sniffs beneath him as he holds her, drawing her into his arms.

A tear spills over her cheek as she burrows into his chest, winding her arms around his massive torso. “You smell terrible,” she sounds, muffled.

An empty chuckle sounds above her, sullen and devoid of all but these thin tethers of fondness between them. Frayed, but never gone.

“Thank you, Ahsoka,” he murmurs. “For everything.”

Blindly, Rey stumbles through the hall, aiming for nowhere, knowing only where she cannot go. As the sunlight streams into the courtyard she is blinded for only a moment, then collides with Dopheld Mitaka.

“Pardons!” he cowers, holding her upright before removing his hands, wiping them on his tunic.

Rey wipes her cheeks free from their cold tears, anger and desire pounding deep within her, forming words of their own as they blurt from her lips. “What was in that letter?” she demands.

Mitaka blinks. “Wh-what?”

“What was in that letter?!” Rey presses, taking a step forward.

It’s enough to threaten him. He backs away, his eyes wide. He looks around and sighs, tapping fingers to his mouth. “I… I normally would never say, but… given your circumstances,” he flounders, meeting her gaze. “Master Ren has… has been invited to the house of Mistress Bazine Netal.”

Dread hollows Rey’s throat, ridges thick, her rationale teetering on their soaking edges. She has never heard of this woman! “For a revelry?” she chances.

Regret swarms in Mitaka’s dark eyes, as if to offer her comfort, when there is none to be found. “For the night.”

The executioner’s drums cave into the silence, the ax swung on a breath, the world lost beneath her
Mitaka calls her name. She’s sure, but she has no ears to hear it, no eyes to look where she’s going, no pulse to keep her warm—and yet all she can feel is her heart, pounding in rebellion against the blade, fighting when the battle has already been lost.

In a blur she finds the door to her room, falling inside and locking it behind her. Sobs lurch from deep within, the only words in her mind quiet whispers of *it’s over, it’s over.*

*It’s over.*

He leaves his chambers with heavy steps as night descends, the orange glow of daylight burning his sleepless eyes. They claw to her door, finding it closed. He takes a step—and his foot crushes a stiff fig.

Looking down, he sees a bowl lying spilt, and sighs. She must have left them here for him.

Frowning, he allows himself one moment to look upon her chamber door, longing threading through him as he closes the distance, knowing that now may be his last chance to say goodbye—to tell her what awaits them now.

“Rey—”

“*Go away. Just leave me alone...*”

His lip trembles and he obediently backs away, her bark shaking the foundations under his feet. Then suddenly it fastens, like the belt of a saddle, that she must have heard him when he spoke with Ahoska.

Tears threaten him that this too has been stolen from them, but he blinks it away, straightening. He must be strong now. Strong enough to let her go.

So he silently places his hand against the wood, fingers splayed, reaching—always reaching.

Yearning to touch her, to come back home.

But he knows now that home has never belonged to him. Not in Greece, or Macedonia. Not in barracks or war rooms. Not in this villa, not in the arena, not in Rome.

And now, not in her.

The red dusk descends over the House of Netal, its station within the trees sitting in all its calm, imposing regality.

Silencer trots forward somberly, his ears flicking judgmentally at the shaded property. Ben keeps his eyes forward until the dirt becomes stone, hooves clopping noisily from the trunks.

A home this large hidden deep in the countryside was surprisingly easy to find, with its shady grove standing out amidst the ridge of the plains. Deep within the forest it waits for them, the glowing sky curving each branch into wicked claws.

As he approaches the doors split open, servants flooding out to greet him with flat, sightless faces. He dismounts from the saddle, but none remark on his stink or unshaven state, scurrying about like
rats. They obviously fear him—a wise choice, when faced with a man who has nothing more to lose.

He is led within as they take his horse away, the lighting of dim candles guiding them along a narrow, carpeted hall. Busts of Persian faces watch him as he passes, their names going unknown.

“This way,” a servant murmurs. “The mistress has prepared a bath for you.”

Ben glances down at the man, knowing better than to challenge it. Snoke is watching him now—to refuse would only bring harm to Rey.

*Just a little longer. Then it will all be over. She will be safe.*

He has to protect her, cannot let anything more happen to her. And if this night destroys him utterly, then let it be done. Nothing else matters, if only she can live.

He will deliver the freedom he promised her.

The servant leads him through a door to a grand bathhouse, empty save for a hoard of shirtless men. Ben towers over them as he is led further within, letting them take his clothes until he stands nude. Slipping into the hot water, he sighs—not in pleasure, but the pain of the heat—the feeling of dirt rotting away stripping him of every defense until his skin is left clear and pink.

The men offer him the oil to wash his own hair, and he lathers it himself. Closing his eyes, he can almost imagine they are *her* hands, so gently threading through each strand.

They dry him. They lather his hands with softening balms. They shave his face with practiced flicks. They trim his long hair as it dries—the curls at his nape taking form. They present him with fresh subligar and a white skirt embroidered with shimmering gold thread. They put perfumes in his hair. They offer him a mirror to see all they’ve done. They escort him to a grand dining hall.

And then they leave him alone.

Ben glances around the tapestries in the striking space, the table unlike those in Roman villas—long and low, with many cushions placed strategically on either side.

He skulks along the walls as he waits for further instruction, the carpet plush against his bare feet. He studies the metal sculptures of various beasts, mounted like a hunter’s menagerie.

Suddenly, a small rumble sounds nearby. He glances down at the table to see a cat, its face flat and expectant. It pushes its wet nose against his knuckles, and for a moment he indulges the creature, stroking it behind the ears.

“You have large hands.”

Ben looks up, finding the slim figure of a woman standing in the doorway. Rich robes adorn her with brilliant scarlet, her legs carrying her closer in long, calculated strides.

As she comes closer, she flashes her white teeth in a smug curl of her painted lips. “I hear you know how to use them.”

Ben cannot muster even the energy to frown, staring blankly into her leering eyes. Suddenly, he recalls from the recesses of his mind, a name to go with this face—the cruelty of the emperor sinking like a spear into his chest. “I know you.”
Bazine chuckles, coming closer. “Not yet,” she croons. Her long, dark nails reach out like mounted
spears, settling against his chest. “But that won’t last long…”

The touch is cold and sharp, her hand harsh as she drags it over his breast, moving to circle behind
him. He remains still and motionless, her proximity revolting him, churning in his gut.

“Mm,” she moans appreciatively, running her hands brazenly along his back, around the wings of
his shoulders. He suppresses a sickened shudder when her arms move to his front, hisses when her
palms scrape over their peaks. She laughs at him, low and purring and pleased. “So this is what the
mighty Kylo Ren has been hiding. Well, I say we change that tonight, don’t you?”

He doesn’t respond, unmoving as her hands venture lower, passing over his heart—like it means
nothing. They move down, the traction gaining hellfire, her fingers spreading to take his thick torso
in her grip.

Ben lowers his head, closing his eyes against the pain in his chest, the wrongness of this touch. Not Rey, not Rey, not Rey, his flesh cries out, anguish tearing through him knowing what he must do.
For her.

“Oh, yes, Master Ren…” she whispers.

For her.

“...you’re all mine.”

Chapter End Notes

[Ahoska likens Ben's separation to a dog because, as a dog nears the end of its life, it
will tend to separate itself from the pack in order to diminish the bond and make its
death easier for the pack to move on from]

[Persian art consisted of various forms, including pottery, metalwork, architecture, and
calligraphy. They are well-known for their metallic statues of griffins and other beasts,
a decoration called "Achaemenids"]

[Persian cats may have been recorded in the 17th century, but its believed that their
ancestry pre-dates even the earliest records—just like their history of domestication]

[Oftentimes in Ancient Rome a gladiator could be sold off for a certain amount of time
to wealthy patrons or paying customers. Most of these visits were from women—who
were forbidden to watch gladiator fights—in order to "quench their curiosities"]

{The theme for this chapter is "Ashes" by Céline Dion. Listen to the Glory's Fray
Spotify playlist here!}
If you are reading this—WE HAVE MADE IT HALFWAY THROUGH GLORY'S FRAY. *gross sobbing* NO SLEEP. SLEEP IS FOR THE WEAK. SLEEPING FOR A WEEK. THANK YOU SO SO MUCH!!

I couldn't have done it without all of your unending support. You are all so so amazing. Thank you for all of your kudos, comments, and bookmarks. I can't tell you how much they mean to me. ♥

I'm so happy. I never would have dreamt this would ever come so far. And we are only halfway there! So much is left to be done, and just having you here helps take away all the stress and pressures in my life. I love you so much.

*hugs*

avidvampirehunter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She ventures out when she’s sure he’s gone. Him, and all she thought him to be. Tears faded away long ago from the stinging corners of her eyes, hollowness icing them over.

Rey has never known ice. But she has known cold and thinks that, yes, this must be what ice is like—colder than the cold, so cold that it’s numb, that nothing, nothing, will make it warm again. Because isn’t that what ice is? And if not ice, then what remains? Its form rotted by heat, melted away? Nothing?

No one?

She leaves this room—not her chambers, not hers, not anymore, and shards of glass dreams trail behind her feet, shimmering like false stars as the real ones emerge and spread out before her. She walks over them and under them, those so in reach leaving her heels lashed in burning cuts, a curse in every step.

The courtyard stretches out before her as the reds and blacks blend together overhead. The stars awaken, opening slowly, blinking like eyes. They look at her like God. All-seeing and silent. They cast their judgement down on her... as though she were a breathing person. A human being. A woman pulsing with blood, heat, and desire. Not ice. Not cold.

Yet no one all the same.

Tonight, yes, she will be no one—no one but a slave, yet queen to these lonely stars. As ice she will breathe the last dregs of this house, this air, her home no longer. And when the sun rises it will conceal her kingdom again, melt her away, and that will be the end.

She strips herself of her sandalia, flinging them away to feel the grass underfoot, waiting for the cold blanket of dew to cover them sweetly, numb them and bid her awaken to this new soul within her. Flush out the heat, the warmth and yearning, with hatred.
Cold.

And hers to keep.

The woman’s claws travel lower over his body, the touch passing dismissively over his heart as it beats in protest against her, every moment her hands lingering on him flooding like a deadly poison in his veins.

“Oh yes, Master Ren. You’re all mine…”

Her hands cup at his sides, the brush of her palm stinging the sensitive skin of his scar. It strikes through him as a spear; the memory of Rey’s tender care, oh, the way she’d looked at him as they awoke together. The first time she’d ever embraced him—the sweet warmth of her body. The feeling, however fleeting, of her heart in his hands.

Ben hisses, taking the woman’s wrists, pushing free from her grip. “No.”

Bazine watches as he backs away from her, scours his hard expression with a strange, unexpected calculation. “Hmm.” Her eyes fall to the old wound at his side and she straightens her stiff posture, stalking forward—only to walk past him.

She maneuvers to the far end of the table, and pulls from the seat a long slip of black fabric. His pallium cloak.

“You left this on the palace grounds. I’d thought it fitting that I’d found it,” she muses. “Don’t Romans speak of destinies and good fortunes?”

Ben considers her as he might a lame horse. “...If they do, I am not one of them.”

“Then what words do you speak?” she asks, coming closer. The saunter has fled from her steps, now hesitant and stalky, as if each one clings to the last of its youthful energy.

Frowning at her hand, he takes the cloak when offered to him. It’s cold. As he gazes at it, he remembers that same cold in her eyes as she’d fastened it around his shoulders—when he was first so certain she would never look on him in tenderness again. “None worth speaking,” he murmurs.

“What a foolish way to live.”

He glares up at her, each word stinging. He resents her for it—for somehow knowing this hurt within him—and snips, “Why have you summoned me here?”

Bazine sighs, seating herself on one of her plush lounges before the low table, offering her legs to a view that refuses to accept them. She avoids looking at him, her fingers resting empty on the table, as though longing for drink. “The evidence is not simple enough for you?”

Ben blinks, unamused, unwilling to play along. “You say to speak flippantly is foolish. So speak plainly.”

Her lips fold in a smile of someone caught, tight and taut over hidden teeth. “Hmph. Very well.” She dares a look up at him, her eyes dark and hollowed like a snake, glittering with something hidden there. Something false. “From the moment I saw you that night at the revelry, I was curious about you. And then your little,” she bares her teeth, "display during Vestalia, well… I knew I had to have you.”
He catches that tinge of falsehood flicker and die in her eye, but lets it go in exchange for a new curiosity of his own. “What display?”

“That girl. I watched the way you ravished her.” She sneers, all sharp teeth. “You became quite the animal when she succumbed to your arms. What woman could refuse the opportunity to make such bliss hers, instead?”

Ben winces at that, pain threading through him, warring with an anger still unrealized. “You mistake bliss for responsibility,” he mourns honestly before her, this woman in red. How simple it is to speak bluntly. Well, so be it. If he is to die, then why not let his sins be known? “It was all a lie.”

“Ha!” she barks, rising to her feet, as though the humor of his grief has propelled her up once more. “Foolish man—you think someone like her could falsify such pleasure? She is obviously unnatuned to her own womanhood,” she sneers derisively. “I'm surprised she even knew how to walk with all that childish ignorance on her face.”

The wisps of lingering anger join together in his mind like tender threads, coiling, strengthening as he glares. “Watch your tongue.”

“You defend her,” Bazine notes, her smile limping on the border of sanity and hysterical glee, and yet her voice remains sultry as she braves a step forward. “Even as you stand here in another woman’s house, beheld to her every whim, yet disobedient like a rabid cur. What, has that hairy little cunt taken more than your pride?”

Something in Ben snaps, the coiled threads wound too tight. His hand lifts on its own before he manages to force it still, his eyes wide and wild in fury.

Never has he hit a woman, nor had he ever intended to, and so to his lifted hand he stares openly in wonder. His body a traitor to him completely, now. A stranger.

“She has,” Bazine affirms, looking at his hand, now devoted to her stern expression. She gazes at him as though he were a specimen, examining him slowly. She screws her lips into a frown at the sight of his injury, the pink scar at his side. “Hmph. I’d heard tell of a young woman racing onto the battlefield to spare the life of Kylo Ren. ‘She had the speed and strength of a Roman goddess. And when she was to die in his stead, lo, he rose again.’ That is what they said.”

Ben ponders this as she speaks, finds himself in agreement with the mass’s gossiping sentiment—that his love walks as a goddess, rather than slave, to Rome. His hand lowers back to his side, unwilling to fight when she can no longer. “They were right.”

Her scowl withers away into bitterness as she meets his eyes, and, in a sudden act of neither cruelty nor mercy, waves her hand and turns away. “Then I have no use for you. Go.”

Her change in countenance disturbs him, though relief floods cold and clear through his veins. “Just like that?” he asks, left staring after her in awe.

She tsks at him. “Men in love are no good for warming beds. At least,” something like sadness passes over her eyes, but she masks it quickly with stiff indifference, the fire roaring behind her, “not mine.”

At that, Ben wastes no time. Her dismissal rings through the room in clear finality, offering him escape. He holds fast to his pallium and strides from the room, feeling as the cold of her gaze abandons him, letting him breathe again. He treks quickly down the hall, snatching his sandals
from the entryway, donning them with impatient hands before bursting into the night.

The stars wait for him there, gathered in bright clusters, swirling above in their endless whites and greys. Their blue streams and bursting colors watch as he mounts his horse, spurring Silencer quickly in the direction of home. They flicker and shift like sand through an hourglass, measuring the time it takes, every beat of his heart and whip of night air against his exposed chest, counting the dwindling seconds between him and her.

And when time runs out, he vows to himself, as starlight guides him there, he will finally have said something worth saying.

He walks through the darkness towards her room, finding the door left open. He pushes it slightly, only to see that her bed has been left empty.

Frowning, he traces whatever trail she may have forged, daring a step into the tablinum. It remains complacent in its wreckage, alone and still in the black. He looks upon it with a disdainful type of pride—as would a spirit walking the earth, worn of the sins it too once so eagerly partook. He treads through it, each step measured and blind, before he parts the curtain on the other side, baring the courtyard to his gaze.

Beneath the silver of the moon and stars he sees her. She sits on the stone bench, her hands folded in her lap, her chin turned up to watch the night slide past in silence. Her face illuminated.

Ben’s heart pounds at the sight of her there, alone in the dark, yet so incandescent all the same. The white of her stola shines like a beacon and, mindlessly, he heeds it, stepping out from the shadows at last.

She notices him, her eyes wide as they fall. In shock, perhaps. In fear or anger, or some mixture of the three, he cannot tell, but when she stands that look bids him halt. Together they stand apart, the distance wide enough to feel the torturous pull of his flesh—to seek and meld with hers again.

“Rey,” he calls, voice deep with shame, choked with regret as his eyes bow before her. “I—”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

He winces, grounding himself, lowering his head, hands tight fists at his sides. “I know.”

Rey scoffs at him, at his state of dress—or lack thereof. Hates how he looks as he stands before her, awash in the pale moonlight. Dangerous. Beautiful. But bitterness outweighs his beauty, her heart hardened at the sight of him now, even when he bows his head so penotently—as though she were his equal. “You promised, Ben,” she scolds, the tears already beginning to rise. “You promised.”

“I know—”

“You told me I would always be welcome here,” Rey spits, her anger finally beginning to rise. “But you don’t look at me, don’t speak to me for days! And now you give me over to some,” she swallows her tears, her voice trembling, ”some man I don’t even know? After all we’ve been through...?”

Pain knifes through him, and he takes a step forward, his hand reaching for her. “Rey, please—”

“No,” she barks, taking a step away, closer to the well. Her eyes fall on him in an icy glare, their edges melting from the hot tears in her eyes, the quiver in her lip. “You’re just like them. Giving me away, like none of this ever mattered to you. Like I never mattered to you.”
“That’s not true,” Ben contests, shaking his head. “Rey... all I’ve done, I only did to protect you.” He steps forward, the distance still far too wide, holding out his hand again. His voice comes softly. “Just you.”

Rey glances down at his offered hand, cold fear racing through her as the enemy's heat threatens to make her pliant. She shakes her head stubbornly. “No. All you’ve done is lie. You’re cruel,” she whispers. “And I won’t believe anything else again.” She meets his eyes, her own spilling over at last at the sight of his face twisted and open in agony. Deep in her heart she yearns so desperately to believe him, to beg him to protect her in the shelter of his arms—not to send her away. To be the one person on this cursed earth who will keep her. Who wants her to stay.

But now the choice to leave has become her own. The pain of this place has become too much to bear—the sight of his face too stark a reminder of all the dreams that slipped away.

Sniffling, she wipes her eyes, and reaches into the collar of her stola. With weighted steps begins to close the distance between them, pulling from her fascia a small sliver of cloth.

What little remains of Ben’s heart falls to the grass as she presses the silk into his palm. A sob strangles itself somewhere deep in his throat, trapped and silent—the warm brush of her fingers the last traces of hope abandoning him at last. His own close around the lifeless cloth, feeling nothing but the lingering evidence of her life as she backs away, closing her eyes and turning from him fully.

He can’t think for lack of strength. Can’t move as she moves. Can’t speak in this throbbing din, drowning and alone as she walks away, leaves him standing cold and empty, devoid of her. Again. And yet inside he knows, he knows, that he should let her go. That he has to let her go.

But as he lifts the silk to his gaze, the memories of sweet love, so fragile, so new, so real in the reflection of her eyes, shudders through him with traitorous tears. Laying him bare.

“You’re right.”

Rey pauses as he calls out, not turning back, but curious all the same. The warmth lingering inside her yearns to hear more, to clutch tightly to his voice. So she will allow it—one last time.

“I am cruel,” Ben exhales shakily, staring at the silk in his palm. “I’ve murdered. I’ve killed. I’ve lied and betrayed,” he murmurs, stroking the softness with his thumb. “I abandoned my faith and my home. I bathe in blood. I pride in possession—and wallow in lust. Life after life I’ve destroyed with these hands, and yet,” he gasps, his heart pounding, “the cruelest thing I could ever do...” his eyes close, hot tears spilling down his cheeks, his voice no more than a whisper lost beneath quiet stars, “...is love you.”

Rey turns back to face him then, her ears ringing as she looks on him, unable to speak.

“I love you,” he confesses into the silk, his lips peeling back in a silent cry as he presses it there. “I want,” he sobs, “I want to touch you. I want to hold you. I want to kiss you, I want to take you. I want to feel you—all around me—but I can’t. I can’t...” And now I never will.

Rey gapes at him, his words ringing clear and true through the night, bouncing off the stars.

From his lips it sounds so genuine, so shaken by grief, and all at once her heart thaws out from the ice, leaving her the queen of nothing as she clings fast to the last of her anger—this bitterness, this last slip of sanity to keep her from running into his arms to give him everything he wants.
But seeing him so broken only fuels her hatred, these last fractals of cold held only for herself, and her own disbelief, remaining under the shattered altar of her trust.

“How dare you...?”

He opens his eyes to look at her, marveling and full, as if he wasn’t expecting her to stay, or speak at all.

Her own tears resurface now, cold with anger and frustration as she looks on him—unable to fathom that his words, so contrary to his actions, could ever be true—even as her dreams reach back for him. “How dare you?!” she cries. “How could you be so... so... augh!” She turns and fists her hands in her hair. “You say you love me, but you don’t even look at me—you didn’t even stay when you... when we...” heat flushes under her cheeks, and she drops her arms to her sides, defeated by her own heart, lost to the speechless numb of gaspig hope.

Ben, bewildered, chances a step closer, understanding dawning on him so suddenly, yet so tentatively. A sun rising in his soul. “Did you want me to stay?” he asks, searching her eyes.

Rey looks to Ben, sensing a sudden shift in the air, in him. Her own feelings for him claw to the surface, rearing their heads as beasts, the melted ice in her veins beginning to merge into her blood. She sets her jaw and turns her face away, letting the fat droplets fall from her chin unabashed, dripping onto her bare feet as proud perfume. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Tell me,” he insists lowly, taking another step. The light flows from his skin, burning against the darkness, the intensity of his gaze.

Rey roots beneath it, unable to move. Her hand goes back to support herself against the well as he stands just an arm’s length from her, allowing her to see him more clearly; feel the heat of his body, see the slight heave of his breast, the throb of his throat, the part of his lips—unable to contain the power inside.

*I love you.*

She closes her eyes, burrowing herself into the darkness, finding the will to speak, the strength to push him away. It speaks to her, tells her he only lies again, that once she gives in, there will be no turning back.

Nowhere left to run.

“I...” she sobs, “I did. I wasn’t supposed to. I know that. But still I,” she shakes her head, letting the words spill loose from her hands, the ice lost forever, leaving only her heart. Beating and vulnerable. “I trusted you. I wanted you, I... I loved you. I loved you...” She covers her face with her hand, shielding herself from him in weak defense. “You were the only home I’ve ever had. And now I’m losing that, too. Losing you.” *When I never had you at all,* she weeps. “And I can’t take it.”

Ben’s eyes spread wide, taking her in, her shuddering words. They sink into him—their pain, their agony, their wasted time mirroring his own. And yet in them there is a new release, the crippled bones in his body healing, his chains falling away as the truth stands broken before him, bright and glorious.

And his.

“Then stay...” he murmurs, reaching for her face. His fingers brush the warmth of her wrist, the rightness of her flesh sinking into his bones, devotion and terror warring within every mending
space between them as he holds onto her, “...and take me instead.”

His touch ripples through her in a wave of heat and shame—shame for the love she still feels, the betrayal of her heart and her mind, this crushing need weighing on her soul, in her body. The need to see him, to touch him, to know him again.

She lets him take her hand from her face, awakening her raw and new to the night, the stars shining endlessly overhead.

In his eyes.

He shifts closer, eclipsing the moon, his hand enveloping her own so tenderly, leaving her weak. The scent of his body sneaks past her defenses, his proximity a war of its own. Breath shudders from her lungs as her doubts wade on the draining surface of her rationale, emerging new and timid from the waves.

Her gaze flits across his eyes, falling down to his lips, the desire to obey him, obey herself, strong.

Yet she resists. “I can’t,” she whispers wetly—reality, reason, fighting against the armies of this new and foreign enemy. “I’m still a slave. How can I take what isn’t mine when I’m worth less than nothing?”

“Is that what you think…?” Ben replies softly, his hand trembling as he finds the courage to take her cheek in hand, brush away the trail of her tears. He remembers when she said similar words to him, almost a lifetime ago. Regret falls through him that he hadn’t corrected her, then. Had kept his feelings locked away. But no longer. “Rey,” he murmurs, her name a holy sacrament on his lips. “Puella, look at me.”

She obeys, hesitantly meeting his eyes as he calls her by that name, rending her heart in two.

“Everything I am is only a piece,” he says, his blood pulsing under the warmth of her eyes, her love hidden so deep inside, lying just within reach. “My hands, my feet... my body, my soul—all of it. They were stolen from me, Rey. Taken until there was nothing left to give. Nothing but my heart.” In a swift movement, he drops the silk to the ground, taking her face gently in his hands, his hooded eyes welling with emotion as he touches his head to hers, savoring her warmth. Her. “Slave, ancilla, Puella, nothing, Rey —whatever you are, even if you will never be mine,” he closes his eyes, lowering his mouth, hovering a mere breath away from her own, “my heart belongs to you.”

Rey gasps softly, the heat of his breath entwining with her own as the cool of night descends, her chest constricting, bursting beneath the onslaught of her traitorous soul. It cries out for him as he waits for her, this one moment stretching infinitely outward. An endless sky, the storm on the horizon. And yet, she is not afraid. Her hands hold fast to his wrists, feeling him as they tremble together, and her fingers venture between them to touch his face—his true face.

And finds in that truth, belief. A love. A name.

“Ben,” she sighs.

His name from her mouth shatters him, the soft of its lilt, her tender touch, more than he can bear. Slowly, deftly, he tilts her face towards him, gazing so greedily as the silver starlight bathes her cheeks in its light, her lashes closed and fluttering over them. And all at once, love fills him where emptiness once was—chasing away the darkness and despair, leaving only this moment, only Rey, as he touches his lips to hers.
Unable to restrain it, Rey whimpers, the brush of his skin setting her heart aflame. From her lips she feels only the bright shatter of stars, the simplest of touches so complex as their shards claw down her body, awakening her at last to these forbidden desires lying dormant within her.

Ben, his eyes closed, feels himself begin to lose his hold on any thought but to clasp her tightly to him, to merge their bodies as one, the sensation of her mouth already too much. Within his chest he feels his soul cry out, his hands caressing her hair before he pulls away, not ready yet willing to leave his heart with her—

But Rey is faster.

She holds his face in her hands, bidding him still as she follows after him, her movements quick, uncalculated. Her lips press firmly against his, testing him, unraveling him.

Ben shudders with pleasure at her ardent gesture, turning his face and returning her kiss without hesitation. The sweet sensations spiral out from the sensitive edges of his flesh, his blood possessed with phantom fire as he moves his lips over hers, bidding his hands to move. He winds them in her hair, feeling their silk shift between his fingers, taking a breath only to breathe her in—and kiss her again.

His touch consumes her, her arms moving of their own will to explore his neck, to bury her fingers in his soft raven hair. He moans against her mouth, its cadence thrumming through her, settling in heat behind her skin, between her legs. The shock of it is enough to make her gasp, her lips parting, giving way to his own, the taste of his flesh like musk and wine.

The wet brush of her tongue on his lip unchains him, the final thread of his restraint abandoned as he slips his own into her mouth, the heat of her spreading throughout his body. She accepts him, her small whimpers goading him on as he trembles, exploring her deeply as time holds no worth, no consequence.

Rey has never kissed a man before, had never felt inclined to try. And by the way they tangle together so, noses bumping clumsily, teeth clacking and sharp, she feels in her heart with no small amount of elation that he is just the same.

His palms rove over her back, caressing up and down, nearly encompassing all of her in his large, strong hands. It’s gentle yet ferocious, claiming her with every swipe of fingers and tongue, and beneath its crushing swell Rey slips through the waves, follows the current down into this listless pressure. Her hands fall from his hair down his working neck, feeling it pulse so rapidly under her fingers as they drift to his chest, resting over his heart.

He shivers at the contact, of the precious warmth and sanctity of her touch, and deepens the kiss. His hands clutch to her waist, squeezing at her hips. The fabric of her stola bunches in his hands and he tugs at it, pulling her closer until she collides with the taut, eager skin of his bare chest. She gasps and he fuses his mouth to hers again, sucking away her breath with a possessive urgency and tact she’s never felt before—as if she were his battlefield, his war.

Craning her neck, she feels him venture deeper inside, her mind spinning beyond any thought but to have him closer. She winds her arms over his shoulders, standing on her toes and relishing the cool grass between them, feeling his skin gather under her nails as she claws into his hair, holding him fast to her desperate mouth.

With a grunt, Ben bends to loom over her, only for a moment, letting instinct guide him as he lifts her off the ground. She squeaks appreciatively into his mouth, setting him ablaze. The urge to take her now stars to gather, swelling between his hips, prodding against her thighs as she stands
suspended in his arms. Wetness gathers at the corners of their mouths, an obscene, beautiful chorus of parting flesh singing as they make to remember their lungs.

“Rey,” he pants, fighting himself, these urges to take more than he should. He touches his nose to hers, savoring the soft give of her cheek, yearning to kiss her again. “Rey.”

Her name from his lips feels almost better than his kiss, and Rey’s eyes flutter, drifting along her aching need to have him closer as she weakly lifts her legs to straddle him. “Please… Ben, please…” she whispers, tasting the plump skin of his lip once more.

The soft shift of her thighs over his hips stokes a low whimper in his throat, the impossibility of her wanting him dissipating under the sweet sound of her voice. He moves quickly, lifting her legs to wrap them soundly around him, feeling her core come flush against his member through their clothes.

Rey shivers as the thick spread of his hips split her legs wider, craning his head with her hands to plant another messy kiss on his red, swollen lips. He welcomes her, coaxes her inside as he carries her away from the well, his steps slow yet purposeful until her back meets the hard stone of a nearby pillar.

His hands hold her legs and squeeze tightly, one traveling up, ghosting over her rear to slide past the sensitive skin of her side, only to wind in her hair. His tongue rolls over hers, powerful and choking for only a moment before he pulls back, his eyes wide and dark on hers. “Tell me you want me,” he murmurs.

Rey, seeing his vulnerability, relinquishing her own, pants, “Yes. I…” heat floods through her in a quivering wave. "I want you, Ben.”

He sighs out, low and drunk with relief, bowing his head to suck the skin of her neck into his mouth. She cries out as pleasure spears through her, short-lived as he leaves it to lave kiss after kiss on her exposed collarbone, drifting to her shoulder. “Tell me you need me…”

“Yes!” she sobs, the truth spilling from her lips, her spine curling to press her further against him. She feels it then—him—between her legs, the hard jut of his body controlling her thoughts, spurring on her demanding, listless desires. “I need you, Ben.”

Power shudders through him as she writhes in his arms, her milky skin like honey under his tongue as he traces cleverly around her throat. When she moves against him he hisses, bucking into her, trapping her against the stone column.

He looks up to meet her eyes, wide as his own, caught together in wonder as his voice comes quietly, their pulse merging in the cradle of her thighs, in the throbbing silence. “…Tell me you love me,” he pleads, knowing he will not live if she refuses him again. “Tell me you love me as much as I love you.”

At his words, at the caress of his hand over her cheek, Rey feels the thick swell of time wade away beneath his palm, years of loneliness brushed aside to reveal something hidden from her for far too long. “I do,” she sobs, taking his face—his precious face!—in her hands. She kisses him once, tenderly, softly, just because she can, and looks into his starlit eyes, knowing she will never love any eyes as much as these again. “I love you, Ben.”

Ben chokes as he attempts to swallow his joy, pulling her face to give her his lips. She melds against him with a new, practiced ease—and oh, is his love so adept for new tongues and methods of the mouth! He sighs with pleasure as she passes over him, her hands drifting through his hair,
brushing his ears as heat floods down his neck, gathering in red and rose at the crest of his chest.

Rey’s body cries out in protest of the stillness, her legs tightening around his middle, bringing him closer against her throbbing core. He breathes shakily when her hips roll over him, her flesh blindly seeking him out.

Gently, at first, he thrusts forward to meet her there, pinning her repeatedly against the column. Her heat envelops him, strangling his control, pinning him down as they surrender to this frenzy of desire, sliding languidly, gaining speed and tuneless rhythm.

Eventually Rey, her bones beginning to ache, tugs harshly at his hair, gasping as she goes to claim his mouth, as he lunges to meet her lips.

The momentum is enough for him to understand, and he pulls her away from the column. His hands brace under her ass, squeezing the tender flesh, eliciting such sweet, agonized groans into his throat. His legs stumble them to the bench and he sits, pulling her onto his lap. Quickly, his fingers situate her over his aching member, grasping the succulent flesh of her thighs to aid in her quest to slide over his concealed length.

The new angle sends delicious waves of pleasure with every rocking jut of her hips, every move an instinct she never knew. Rey holds tightly, tighter than she’s ever held onto anything, afraid that once she lets go, he will be gone. With each caress their bodies they slot into a new, wicked dance—his hardness striking that sensitive place within her just right, building, hurtling her towards the edge. A moan stumbles out of her throat, sprawling past her parted lips to pass through his own.

Ben can’t take it anymore—the anguish of not touching her rioting his every vein. He slides his hands up through her stola, passing over her sublicaculum to take the warm skin of her back. He feels each pore pucker beneath his fingertips, and moves his fingers to tug at her fascia, determined to remove it.

Then her kiss flicks over the tip of his tongue, a new love blooming within him, and he shudders, his body taking over as a familiar sensation gathers—coils low in his belly. Before he can stop it he grunts, parting from her lips as he quivers and moans helplessly into the joint of her neck, his hands going still as white heat pushes him down.

Rey pauses, her budding ecstasy interrupted by a heady pulse between her thighs, its throbbing wantonly against her aching womanhood. Ben’s throat ushers forth a small, pathetic whimper, his nose and lips plush against her collar as he halts, holding her tightly.

She looks down between them, confused, until she sees it—a dark spot in the white linen of his skirt.

He breathes heavily onto the disorderly reveal of her decolletage, nuzzling, and Rey’s face floods with heat. *He finished,* she realizes, looking at his face, tight and contorted with bliss. *I made him finish.*

As her blood begins to cool, fear suddenly spikes through her. Not in doubt of his love—never that, not any longer—but her own.

She blinks, horrified at what she’s done—that she has used him so soon after everything he’s lost. That she allowed her lust to take control. Guilt burns profoundly within her, stinging tears into her eyes as she knows that this one moment between them is all they can ever have.
If all he did was to keep her safe, she knows that leaving now is the only choice she has left—to do as her master commands. She has to remember her place in this story, for both of their sakes—for the sake of this man she loves—Rey realizes at last that she must sacrifice this for him now.

She has to let him go.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, taking his face, placing one last kiss on his lips. He tries to follow her, his eyes lidded, every thought disoriented and slow. But she moves away, the wetness between her legs screaming in protest, his hands left warm and open for her as she slips from his grasp, turning and fleeing into the shadows.

Alone beneath the stars, Ben rises shakily to his feet, his body pulsing with relief, yet his arms empty and longing for her. He makes to move after her, his knees weak, but finds her door locked. He bangs against it, over and over, yearning to return to her side, but she does not answer him.

Had he scared her? Had his love pushed her away? He wonders, wandering and lost. Too tired for an answer, his manhood limp with exhaustion, his ears ring with her words of love as he wanders back into the wreckage of his chambers and lies upon the torn mattress—feathers fleeing from his slumping weight.

Slowly, he brushes fingers against his lips, drifting along the lingering pleasure of Rey's kiss as his eyes flutter closed, days without sleep returning for him at last in black, consuming vengeance.

Chapter End Notes

[Bazine has seen Rey before—both when Rey went to the bathhouse with Ahsoka and when they went to Snoke's revelry. Bazine, having seen Rey naked, knows that Rey's genitals are unshaven. Classical Roman beauty standards deemed that "attractive" and "sensual" women shaved their pubic hair. So, by calling Rey "hairy," Bazine has actually called Rey "ugly"]

[Back in the days before light pollution blocked our heavenly view, on clear nights you would be able to see almost every star in the sky. Biblically, this was the way that human beings could see in the night—meant to display how, even in absence of the sun, God never left his people in darkness]

{The theme for this chapter is "Stay" by Samantha Barks. Listen to the Glory's Fray Spotify playlist here!}
Rapture

Chapter Notes

So here we are!

It's almost 6am—please forgive the hackjob editing, I'll get to it as soon as I can! For now college and work are being their usual selves around this time of year, but I am so, SO blessed to have the support of my amazing family and friends to get me through. You guys are all so amazing! I can't thank you enough for being here with me through it all. I love you so much ♥

Now, if you will excuse me, I'm going to go take a nap. (⌒▽⌒)

*hugs*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There are two ways for a man to fall.

The first, in body. To land a successful blow, to strike him down with sword in a grand show of blood.

But the second is in his soul. A crush, a collapse of the self, to send a man reeling, crumbling into ash without hope of ever rising again—and even then, never wanting to. To fall to the earth and further beneath, to drown under the weight of the body he’s abandoned. That is how a man can fall —how a man can fall in love.

And, oh, how he has fallen.

Ben Solo lies beneath the looming morning light as it wades over the ceiling, watching in intangible fascination as his mind unearths itself from the darkness of forgotten dreams—only to bury itself beneath new, waking ones.

He touches his lips and doesn’t realize that a smile has begun to bloom there, only reclaims the lingering bliss of light to his sensitive flesh, remembers the way she had so wantonly claimed him there.

I love you.

Ben sighs, a wistful, boyish thing, and reclines further into the ruins of his bed. Downy feathers shift and make nests over the bare plains of his stomach—the dark spot on his skirt long dried and faded—as he folds his hands behind his head, replaying the events over and over in his mind.

Rey. His beautiful, powerful Puella—oh, how she’d commanded him so furiously beneath the moonlight, ignited him, reawakened the sleeping monsters of his desire. Her touch singed like fire, her kiss enough to send him falling. Body and soul alike.

He chews his cheek ruefully at that small detail, damning his ineptitude for endurance.

Perhaps that was why she ran.
He sits up at last, groaning with the effort, his bones crying out for rest. But he has rested long enough—and now must come the time to think. To strategize—to pursue.

*Not without her,* his rationale calls, and he knows it’s best to concede. Rey loves him—as he loves her—and can deny it no longer. What’s to come cannot be done separately anymore, not when they have become so entwined.

And so he rises, fallen, and determines to finish this.

Once and for all.

Rey watches hollowly out the culina window as Ahsoka stirs their breakfast, the silence between them like the beating rays of rising sunlight on the horizon. A light breeze ghosts at the sheer curtains, the golden light illuminating every small imperfection of the iron grates.

Since last night, every one of Rey's senses has seemed to heighten. The smell of porridge and quince sinks into her with its warmth and fullness, the sound of the crackling fire and morning birds at war with the other in their popping rhythms and staccato chirps. Even touch has begun to unnerve her—a sudden awareness of her own lips, of her nipples beneath her fascia, and that small bud between her legs. They touch one another with every beat of her heart, reminding her of their existence, taunting her with what could have been.

And what was.

“Mitaka should return today,” Ahsoka murmurs, her focus deep in the pot—unaware of Rey’s torment.

Rey looks away from the window towards her, her thoughts drawn away from memories of last night. For the moment. She says nothing in reply, and in the lapse of neither seconds nor hours Ahsoka sets a bowl before Rey—its contents shimmering with glazed honey and slices of ripe fruit over a bed of plush, boiled oats.

Ahsoka goes to sit across from her, both eating in silent company as Rey’s firm melancholy continues its ferment.

Last night had been a mistake. Or, no… not a mistake, but definitely something that should have been controlled. Rey could groan at it all over again, where Ahsoka not here. With the woman’s perception, Rey would only be found out and chastised—even more than she has begun to do for herself.

Rey made her decision before Ben returned from the House of Netal. And now, as she sits, forgetting to blow on her hot porridge before taking a spoonful into her mouth, she burns for more than one reason.

But—she had decided to leave her master’s house when he’d left her behind, so sure that he would rather pursue a woman of wealth than, well, *herself.* Even now her jealousy reminds her of that demon between her thighs, the relentless pulse of her own, traitorous womanhood.

Rey has no claim to him, no right to want to—and yet he gave himself to her anyway.

*My heart belongs to you.*

So many words he’s spoken to her, so many times she has believed him, or doubted him. But then, when he held so fast to her, his eyes so near and open and *true,* there was no room to doubt him at
all. Only the room to doubt herself.

And oh, was she right to! As she takes a bite of quince it brushes firmly past her lips, reminding her of his tongue, and how much sweeter it had tasted than this. If eating this alone can remind her of the sinful pleasure of his mouth, what more sins await her if she dare recall the way he held her against his strong, burning body?

*These passions,* she thinks scornfully, as though waving off a troublesome band of youths. But is it not her own fault? Could God forgive her should she fail to dash them away? Rey sighs, too worn to think much on it, the guilt already weighing more than she can shoulder. Surely—

“What’s the matter?” Ahsoka asks.

Her voice calls Rey back to the present, but not far enough to escape the lingering pressure of his arms around her—the phantom trace of his fingers along her spine. She doesn’t bother feigning a smile, too consumed by these unfamiliar emotions. Unable to find an answer, unwilling to admit the truth, Rey shakes her head in reply.

Ahsoka considers her with no small amount of pity, her dark lips set firm, as though holding back tears. “The Young Master only wants what’s best for you.”

“I know that.”

“After what happened,” Ahsoka continues, drawing Rey’s eyes, “he and I both feared for your safety. Please don’t hold him accountable—”

“I don’t,” Rey cuts, her voice steeped low. “I don’t blame him—for any of it. Or you. But you’re right, Ahsoka,” she mutters, frowning down at her food, left in disarray. “Staying with him is dangerous.”

Something, a light, flickers in Ahsoka’s eyes. Something almost like hope. “But you want to.”

Rey opens her mouth for a sharp reply, when a tall shadow materializes in the doorway.

Ben emerges from the hall in easy, long strides, fully dressed in a clean black tunic that clings to the firm set of his shoulders. His hair, however, is unkempt, small white feathers clinging and calling for attention from the ebony waves like shipwrecked seafarers.

His eyes find Rey’s immediately, snapping her mouth shut as their ethereal *smugness* leaves her in angry awe. In a blink he looks away again—Rey swears she can see the faintest of smirks, there!—making for the pot to serve himself.

“Ahsoka,” he drones, ladling the porridge into a bowl.

Having not noticed the look on his face, but obviously questioning the state of his hair, Ahsoka quirks a brow. “Yes, Young Master?”

“I’ve made a list of materials I’ll need you to acquire. Go into the tablinum and read it,” he turns, fixing his dark gaze on her, “thoroughly.”

Flabbergasted, Rey and Ahsoka gawk at this man—his essence completely shifted from the lingering brood of days prior. Against her will Rey blushes, because deep inside, in that ever-trodden den where her pride sleeps so soundly, she has an idea why.

“Of…” Ahsoka murmurs. “Of course, Young Master.” Silently, she offers a gaze to Rey, both
knowing and questioning, and Rey folds her lips, nodding. At her ascent, Ahsoka rises, taking her breakfast with her, casting one final look over her shoulder before she disappears into the hall.

Alone, Rey’s heightened senses fall into chaos, feeling his gaze bore into her from behind. It’s quiet for only a moment before the sound of his footfalls lumbers closer. She watches from the safety of her lashes as he snatches Ahsoka’s seat, carrying it and setting it—then himself—right beside her.

He sits as she stares, contentedly avoiding her as he focuses on his breakfast. As he does Rey tries in vain to temper her heart, taking her unfinished food in her hands.

But before she can make to stand and flee, his hand shoots out, grasping the leg of her stool, and pulls. Rey jolts, balancing on the table to keep from falling as the legs scream across the stone, taking her with them.

“Stay,” he grunts around his food, not glancing once from his bowl. “Let’s talk.”

There is a hint of danger in his voice that shivers awake those places on her body that she’d prefer to keep hidden. For now. His warmth bleeds into her as she frowns at him, determined not to let his newfound… whatever this is get the best of her decision. “Then talk.”

“Why did you run last night?” he asks outright, finally looking at her.

Rey blanches underneath the wide set of his eyes, unprepared for the vulnerability lurking in their depths. When she opens her mouth the hot rage slithers from the corners of her lips, leaving only a tepid, “I don’t know.”

His eye twitches in that way it does when he doesn’t understand, when he’s angry, but his voice remains calm and level. Gentle. “Was it me?”

Horror bleeds into Rey’s chest. “No,” she sputters, “no, I mean yes, but not…” she winces.

“Well what, then?” he persists, his sleuthing reaching a miserable, impatient end.

“It…” Rey sighs, shaking her head, unable to think with him so close, demanding answers from her. But inside she knows he deserves to hear them—no matter how humiliating it feels to speak in the presence of a man she’s spent countless hours pining for, only to flee from him the moment that wish is granted. “It was perfect,” she whispers.

Ben nearly falls out of his stool, but manages to keep himself in balanced enough to lean closer to her, breathe in the scent of her peachy skin. “It was,” he murmurs, considering kissing her again—wondering if her taste has changed from the night before, “so why did you run?”

“Because it was too perfect,” Rey groans, looking down at her lap, out the window—anywhere but at him. “Besides, I’m going to Poe Dameron’s house tonight. What point would there have been to stay?”

Ben frowns, his hold on her stool turning his knuckles white at the sound of another man’s name, but he quells his jealousy in exchange for looking at her as the sunlight fights its way through the windowsill, scrambling into the fine strays of her hair, catching in her lashes and watery eyes.
At the sight of her gathering tears, Ben’s heart constricts. “That’s not the only reason. Is it,” he goads softly, silently begging her to turn those eyes on him.

They don’t, but she answers anyway, her shoulders falling in defeat. “When we kissed,” she whispers, the word hushed and secret, meant only for him, “I never wanted to stop.”

Ben’s heart soars at these words, once so forbidden to his ears after decades of solitude. His body cries out to give her what she wants, all that she wants, right here on the culina floor. Or, perhaps, the table.

Yet she continues, folding her arms over her middle, awakening him to the reality of her lingering despair. “But when you,” she gestures to his lap, her cheeks dusted rose, “I knew I had… had lost control.”

The realization dawns on Ben, then—dripping into his psyche like wax from a candle. Burning, sudden, and resolute.

*Her faith.* Of course—he once believed in the sacred nature of the body, upheld himself in religion’s light rather than his own pride. He’d almost forgotten what it meant to be upheld to another, much less to a perfect being beyond understanding. What pain and guilt must she feel now at her wayward thoughts, having betrayed the master of her soul—just for a kiss?

“I can’t trust myself,” she whispers brokenly. “I’m weak. And… I know I should go. It’s the only way to erase all the destruction I’ve caused.”

Ben scoffs, watching in awe as she tells these half-truths so plainly, as if he is meant to believe them. But still, he will not question her—no more than he can get away with while his gentility remains intact. “Rey.”

She looks up at him from the corner of her eye, the color of her framed in the window all too tempting a sight.

He holds fast to them, dread rekindling that ever-present fear that this may be the last time he has the privilege. “I’ve made too many choices for you,” he murmurs, carefully tucking a stray wisp behind her ear. Greedily, he grazes the soft of her cheek with his thumb, drinking in her warmth. “More than a man in love should make.”

Rey sucks in a breath, the world spinning at its edges. “You say that word so easily.”

“I think our desires have been made clear,” he replies smoothly. “Why should I hide what I am?”

In his eyes Rey sees words printed clearly, the phantom wind of his voice challenging, *Why should you?* But she has no answer for him, only the pound of her heart and the ceaseless flush trapped beneath his caress.

“I understand,” Ben sighs, his eyes falling to her mouth before tearing his gaze, and his fingers, away. She instantly misses his touch, listening as he goes on. “I won’t try to influence you one way or the other.”

A part of Rey, a large part, is exhilarated that—for once—Ben isn’t trying to impart himself on her actions. It’s a strange flavor to taste, but none so much as the sourness of that lesser part of her that secretly wishes he would.

She studies him as he goes begrudgingly back to his food, heaping spoonfuls past his large, luxurious lips…
Rey blinks. “Then what will you do?”

Ben swallows, offering a slight shake of his head. One of the downy tufts falling to the floor. “What I promised. When you are safe from Snoke, you will have your freedom.”

Rey watches his eyes while they avoid her, wondering how much of the truth he’s telling her. She’s no fool—the only danger she is in is because of Ben’s insidious ties with the emperor. It’s clear to her that Snoke will harm Ben not with violence or defamation, but…

…the people he loves.

“You’re thinking too loudly, Puella,” Ben says, returning them to the other. There is sadness in his eyes—Rey can see it. Could never avoid it. “Don’t worry about me.”

“What happened to ‘not influencing’ me?” she probes, the smallest of smirks threatening the precipice of her lip. A vain hope, perhaps, to lift his spirit as high as it had been when he sauntered into this very room.

It seems to work; his eyes begin that familiar crinkle in their corners. “Ah, of course. I’d merely assumed you would feel guilty to leave your master’s heart in shambles.”

“I would forgive you,” she murmurs, her pulse beating a bit too erratically, “but if I remember correctly, that heart belongs to me.” What are you doing Rey?

“True,” he concedes. When had their faces begun to move closer to the other? She can smell him better now, breathe in the scent of his skin, the lingering traces of honey and perfumes. His voice drops low, like a whisper, like a growl. “You can do with it as you please…”

His words flow into her as a promise and, suddenly, there are a great many things Rey would very much like to do—an overwhelming amount, which should be avoided. She tears her eyes away from his mouth, the pain of withholding the urge to taste it again migrating and transforming into a dull ache between her legs.

But still she manages a smile, watching his expression trail after her as she rises, taking both of their bowls to the basin. “There is one thing,” she mentions, looking to him carefully—not daring turn her back on him. “One last thing.”

He doesn’t hesitate. “Name it.”

Silencer bounds across the fields, his long legs jutting proudly as he and Rey race alone beyond the sight of the house.

She gulps down wind and urges the stallion on faster, relishing the way her body sways as he gallops. This loss of control—this freedom, pushes her along like the waves of an ocean she will never touch. It swells in her like a tide and she closes her eyes against the sting of rushing air, this need to savor everything. One last time.

She stays out until the daylight begins to wane, waking from a peaceful doze beneath the shade of the tree. She’d fallen asleep listening to its swaying leaves, basking in the fluttering shimmer of afternoon light. What she’d dreamt of she could never remember now. Not so clearly as the dreams she once had of him.

When she returns it is Ahsoka who greets her, waiting until Silencer is returned to his stall to speak. “Mitaka arrived while you were out. He’d thought you’d stolen the Young Master’s horse—he’d
wanted to wish you well.”

Rey can’t help but smile at that, as foreboding at the subject may be. “Oh? Really?” She strokes upwards along Silencer’s arcing snout, savoring the short, silky pelt under her fingertips. “Maybe I should have.”

Ahsoka shakes her head, but even she cannot hide her amusement. “It is going to be very different without you around,” she mentions at length, her eyes shimmering with emotion. “I’m going to miss you.”

“Ahsoka,” Rey sighs softly, pacing towards the woman to offer her arms.

Ahsoka accepts them, embracing her for only a moment before she separates again, wiping under her eyes. “Come. There is something here for you.”

She follows Ahsoka into her little chambers, letting her eyes sweep over the room, committing everything to memory one last time. A sliver of cloth emerges from the corner of her eye as Ahsoka produces a folded garment—a basic tunica.

Rey frowns when she takes it. The cloth is crisp and unused, a sterile feeling under her thumbs. “What is it for?”

Ahsoka sits on the edge of Rey’s bed, her voice tired. “Your new master’s uniform. All masters decide how their servants will dress.”

“So he did accept,” Rey muses darkly.

Ahsoka nods.

Folding her lips, Rey considers the cloth again. Though basic in nature, it’s still very fine. And yet she feels hollow as she strips off her stola within the privacy of Ahsoka’s company—like a stranger to herself when she slips the cloth over her head.

Ahsoka comes forward to help fasten the sleeves. Like her stola, the gown cascades down to Rey’s ankles, rasping against the exposed skin. The collar is loose, as if made haphazardly, or for a woman with more robust decolletage. But Rey knows she will have to make do—that nothing will ever fit so right anymore.

The stola is still warm when she offers it back to Ahsoka, remembering how, in this very room, she had first worn it. Became something new. But that must be abandoned, now, as they walk out to the hall.

Rey, so lost in her own musings, doesn’t notice how Ahsoka lingers behind.

Until they enter the courtyard. It is then that Ahsoka pauses, and takes Rey’s arm in her hand, urging her to meet her eyes. “Are you sure about this?”

Rey opens her mouth, but every word feels like a lie. “Yes, I am.”

“Tell me what happened between you last night,” Ahsoka presses gently, searching Rey’s face as it widens in shock. “Oh come, now. Don’t be surprised. There is only one thing that could have made him sleep so soundly.”

Rey flushes, pulling her arm free. “It doesn’t matter.”
“Doesn’t it?” Ahsoka challenges, but needs not answer. She can see it now, written clearly over Rey’s face—that she is buried deeply within her denial, still so blind to the truth.

A truth easily illuminated.

“I suppose not,” she acquiesces quietly, glancing back where they came. She furrows her brow at Rey, scanning her. “Have you got your knife?”

Rey blanches, surprised by this sudden change in Ahsoka. It’s almost as if the raging fire within her mentor has gone out, tempered quickly. Suspiciously. “Is that allowed?”

“I’m sure Master Dameron cares about the safety of his staff as much as he would himself,” Ahsoka says, a knowing look in her eye. “I believe you left it in your room. Go and fetch it—I will prepare a meal for the journey.”

At the sound of food, Rey’s countenance lights. She nods and turns back, feeling about her tunica for a place to hide her knife as she walks through the door.

Upon entry she forgets what she came for, finding a wrinkled roll of parchment lying on the sheets. 

That wasn’t there before, Rey ponders, reaching out to take it in hand. She recalls the knife, then, like opened floodgates, and takes it with, holding one in each hand as she moves slowly through the hall, peering at the scroll. It’s sealed with wax—thinly so, and, carefully, she uses the knife to pry the seal away, her curiosity as unleashed as its contents. She slides it open enough to read the topmost line, and halts.

Puella

Rey’s heart pounds at the familiar sight of Ben’s handwriting, his elegant script blaring the dark ink of the name he’d given her. Her curiosity flares in her chest, raging beyond her control, and she feels she cannot go another step without seeing what’s inside.

No. Not here, Rey decides, looking ahead of her. The sun’s light has begun to rust along the tile floor, casting her in bars of shadow as she moves forward, slinking into the stable. She passes the pile of fresh hay without a second thought, Silencer’s knicker dull and unheard in her roaring ears.

She stands in the wide, open door of the stable—seating herself as she had when she waited for him what feels like an eternity ago. Her hands shake as they take the scroll fully, peeling it open, her heart crying out to hold this piece of him.

One last piece.

Puella

How sweet are the fruits of my Love

Whom I know, but is not mine?

She grazes the pastures of my home

Wanders so peacefully.

I yearn for her

And all she is—
Loathe the fine-hilled slopes of her cheeks

The honey of her smile.

Her lips are finer than lilies,

Her eyes rarer than stones.

Through their wheated fields I wander

Lost but unafraid.

And where has my Love gone?

My arms ache empty,

Yearning for her.

The bitterness of my body moans with grief.

The frailty of my heart cries out:

“Come, my Love, know me,

“And call me by my name!”

Oh, to know the splendor of her wish

Could I but lay kiss and claim!

Take Love by hand and lead her

To know what no one does—

And share in her the hidden pleasure

Of gardens left untended.

Within them, I bid us—grow!

Grow fruits of fig and pomegranate!

Turn, my lips, to drink the wine of her neck—

The nectar of Love betwixt her stalks!

What in return, could I but give

My body as a stronghold?

My legs as pillars? My arms as towers?

To shelter her in Love—

Stand guardian to her fruits

No longer wandering gale,
To plant myself within her soil

And forever their remain!

I will oversee her garden

And tend to it with Love.

Within these walls I will guard her,

On the wind shall I say:

“Come, my Love, know me,“

And she will call me by my name.

Rey covers her mouth, her hand trembling as she reads the words over and over, their contents flooding through her with molten heat.

Never before has she read such suggestive material, and yet, scandal falls far from her hands, replaced instead with overwhelming loss. Tears gather in her eyes as she reads that one word again and again, and a—

“Where did you get that?”

Rey nearly jumps out of her sandalia at the sound of his voice, scrambling to her feet as Ben walks into the light, closing the door behind him. The sunlight bleeds over his face, wide in neither humor nor anger, illuminating the careful comb of his hair.

Her heart seizes in her throat, forcing her to choke it down as she thrusts the scroll behind her. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to say goodbye,” he laments, his face now a careful mask of impassivity as he comes to stand before her. He clasps his hands behind his back, mirroring her, the cloth of his pallium sliding over his shoulder. “You have decided to go, haven’t you?”

“I…” Rey murmurs, her insides twisting at that sadness in his eyes. The words on the page ring behind her own, in her ears, in her body—every inch of her skin lost to the thrumming din of uncertainty and desire.

Ben’s gaze darkens, and he dares a step closer, his voice low and cautious. “Rey?”

She can’t take this anymore—cannot bear looking into his eyes, knowing that she will only leave them behind. Closing away her sight, she turns, the tears still burning behind her lids. Prowling like lions in the darkness, waiting for her to falter. The scroll burns in her hands as she holds it to her chest—the cloth over her heart too cold, too wrong.

Remembering what she’s fighting for has become so hard, so tiring—she’s forgotten what it means to fight at all. Ahsoka was right, he was right. All this time, still, she has run. Run from the world, from her home, from him.

From herself.

She sobs once, covering her mouth, but it does nothing to stifle the choking gasp as it escapes into the Summer air—the hum of life so unaware of their hearts’ blazing tempest. “I don’t know,” she admits at length, holding the proof of his love ever tighter. This inescapable bond they have
forged. She snivels, shivering with the cold, looming loneliness on the night’s horizon. “I don’t know anything.”

Warmth, heat, breaks through the cold, holding her at swordpoint—the feeling of his body coming near. He doesn’t touch her, and yet he hovers, ever present, all encompassing. Even when she cannot see. “Tell me what you want me to do,” he whispers, as broken as she.

In her mind she scrambles for the torn shards of her soul, mourning the loss of her innocence as she realizes she can flee from her heart no longer. That what was lost may never be reclaimed.

All this suffering, all this pain, all they have been through gathers behind her eyes like a storm, a rain of images cascading in blurred shape and color—their warm afternoons in his study, the span of his hands around her waist when first she’d flown, the press of silk cloth against her palm, the strength of his embrace in the merciful morning light, the caress of his lips against her leg, the consuming passion of his kiss as moonlight faded away.

All of it, all of him, returns to her at once. And in this moment she knows. Knows. That she has the strength to fight, after all.

“Say you’ll keep me,” she chances, the words crushing her with their terrible freedom. All her life she has begged to be kept, to be wanted. Could God be so cruel to give her this now—and yet so good to show her His mercy? This love she could never escape? She sobs again, trembling, his warmth just beyond her reach. “Tell me you want me to stay.”

Slowly, gently, his arms wind around her, pulling her back to him. Warmth touches her at last—spilling into the cold depths of her yearning soul. He holds her tightly, his lips at her ear, the soft stir of his breath in her hair as he murmurs, dark and sincere, “Of course I do.”

Rey shudders in his arms, breathing in deeply, feeling as her body begins to shift and change—transform within his very grasp. “Say it again.”

Ben’s heart pounds against the cage of his ribs, again and again, tearing itself free to find its way to her. He sighs with closed eyes, relief in this chance trembling the tips of his fingers as he moves to take her waist, to press his lips to her temple. “I want you to stay with me.” He trails lower, over her ear, savoring the delicious way she shivers. He kisses her there. “Stay with me,” he rasps, sweeping away her hair to caress her neck with his mouth. “Stay with me.”

Pleasure spears through her as his deft touch brushes away her resistance, her jaw slack, her joints too weak to support her swimming head. She leans back against his shoulder, leaving him room to kiss and sip at her tender flesh, her body speaking to itself. Screaming.

His hands begin to roam, their width spreading like newborn tendrils, creeping along the fabric over her stomach. His fingers swirl and dance, weaving their spell into the unguarded nerves sleeping in her sides. A small whimper escapes her throat and he growls, clutching them and turning her to face him, his chest heaving, his eyes smoldering cinders. “Stay with me. Rey,” he exhales, holding her cheek so tenderly, only reverence and promise in his touch. “Let me show you the things we can keep.”

A tear slips down her cheek as she gazes up at him—all of her hate, all of her hesitation, set free at last. Here, in the capture of his arms. “Yes,” she whispers, her eyes falling to his waiting lips. She releases the scroll and it flutters forgotten between them, her arms thrusting forward to wrap around his neck.
Their lips collide in a symphony of life, the sound of their meeting flesh and persistent tongues regaining their rhythm between their ears, blocking out all but the other. Rey sighs beneath the release of his touch, basking greedily in the endless warmth of her master, of her love, of Ben.

Ben kisses her victoriously, his hands seeking to claim his prize as they rove up and down the length of her back, following the delicate curve of her spine, relishing every sensation. He breaks away with the barest of smiles, kneeling to encircle her hips and hoist her up, leaning her soundly against his body.

Rey moans, appreciative of the new angle as she tastes the lingering trace of honey on his lip, her hands moving to brace against the solid wall of his chest. He grunts into her mouth, teasing the corner of her lips with his tongue and making her tremble. Curiously, he allows his hand to wander to her backside, enjoying the way she stiffens and squeaks when he squeezes the mound of covered flesh. He continues until she breaks from his mouth, pressing her lips against his neck, breathing hard.

The heat trickles straight into his cock, rousing faithfully to the call of her desire. Without thought beyond having her closer, he gathers her legs in his hands and splays them open, bidding her wind them around his hips and feel how she makes him fall.

“Mh,” Rey shudders, burying her hands in the softness of his hair, embracing the scent of him. She tightens her legs on instinct, cleaving to him as she peppers small kisses over his working throat.

Ben hisses beneath the divinity of her touches, the sweet press of her lips leaving him in awe. Heat flushes his face when she finds his ear, her tongue offering a curious lick that triggers a sudden rut against her heated core.

Rey gasps and his hands tighten at her thighs, his lips a blur as they move to nip and suck at her neck. His tongue laves against her taut skin, her body still so unused to such strange and foreign pleasures. She pulls his lobe into her mouth in passionate retaliation, almost smiling when he moans pathetically into the cloth of her collar.

When she persists Ben goes still, the sensation of her sweet lips, the sound of her tongue lolling against the sensitive skin of his ear, trembling at his knees. His fingers toy at the hem of this paltry excuse of a gown, inching their way to the bare skin of her sumptuous thighs, and squeeze.

So soft, his body growls, spurring him forward. With a decisive snap of his neck he claims her mouth again, walking them back into the shadows of the stable.

Silencer and Lux turn their heads with flickering ears, distracted by the building chorus of soft moans and panting breaths.

Ben kneels at the corner of the stable, his hands careful to cradle her as they lay into the fresh hay. They pause for breath, their limbs a mad scramble to remove his pallium cloak and shove it haphazardly beneath her body. Her hands roam brazenly over his tunic as he dives down to take her lips in a desperate kiss, his addiction to her taste and touch stronger than opium. She tugs at it as he begins to properly traverse the silken flesh of her thighs and he wordlessly accommodates, helping her free his chest to her wandering hands.

Rey splays her hands over the heated expanse of his breast, her palms brushing over his dark, taut peaks. He jolts, withholding a whimper as a surprising bolt of pleasure stems from her sweeping caress. He feels her legs tremble, bare against bare as his torso lays subject before her, and before he can think to control himself, his hands set to the cloth at her chest—gathering the tunica in his fingers and ripping it apart.
Rey gasps as it splits open, the loose collar at her neck even looser as the air washes over her exposed sternum. With a ravenous growl Ben tears it even further, casting the cloth and fascia from her shoulders and baring her breasts to his hungry gaze.

Her breath stutters as she looks in his eyes, finding them black as pitch. His lips lie parted and wet, motionless, until he descends upon her with a wistful moan, taking her nipple into his mouth.

Rey cries out, her body lost on the gust of his storming embrace. His hand holds her leg fast while the other rises, almost timidly, to trace the soft skin of her other breast. Rey sighs, restless in her content as she arches into him, all thoughts lost save for the impossible heat of his hands and mouth—as though she has become only them, no longer a body at all.

Ben suckles unabashed, reveling in the soft skin he feels under the flesh of his lips, the tip of his nose. Her taste is Summer sweet—the lightest traces of salt and honeysuckle embedding her essence deep within him. Curious and impatient, he moves on to its twin, licking and kissing past the modest valley of her breasts without deviance.

Nonsense begins to build under Rey’s tongue, a language she doesn’t know spilling out in coded whimpers and wanton sighs. She digs her nails into his shoulders and hair and he grunts, as though amused to think pain could deter him from overwhelming her with this listless, relentless desire.

He presses loud, sloppy kisses against her peaks, as though in fond farewell, before he lifts his face to study hers, his eyes searching for a competence he will not find. He slides his tongue into her mouth and groans, the sound echoing through her. “Amica mea, mea Puella,” he whispers, his hands drifting under the hem of her soiled tunica, taking hold of her sublicaculum, tugging the cloth down her quivering thighs. “Amor tantum mihi… I want to touch you, tonight.”

Unable to speak, Rey can only manage a fervent nod, watching raptly as pushes her tunica up to join its tatters around her navel. His eyes fall studiously to her last defense, his long fingers a shaky kind of still as they move to unravel her. Slowly, carefully, he opens the folds and lays them aside, seeing her at last.

“Hah,” he exhales, left breathless at the sight. Unaware of the tears in his eyes, he beholds her under his hand, laying the pads of his fingers over the downy hair of her mound. Rey stirs, watching him as he stares, her body losing all sense of discretion as he strokes the dark thatch of hair. “Pulchra. Beautiful.”

Rey flushes under his scrutiny, unable to tear her gaze away from his face, the unruly state of his hair as he kneels between her legs, his thick fingers voyaging down between her swollen folds.

Ben swallows, dizzy yet determined as he finds her soaking beneath his fingertips. He looks to her face, finding her expression skewed, lost in bliss and the confusion of newness. He can feel it, in her and in himself, and presses gently against her lips, watching raptly as she gasps, her hips bucking forward to meet his palm.

A slave to her whim, Ben summons forth a new wave of impatient onslaught. His cock throbs against the chafing cloth of his subligar, but he bids it wait as he attempts to recall what little knowledge he can.

He slides his fingers up and down, flossing her folds, savoring the wet glide of her arousal—a part of him wondering if she had been this way before he revealed himself to her—before moving his longest finger in slow, probing circles.

Rey gulps for air, drowning as the heat and pressure gathers between her legs. Her body tells what
little remains of her mind what his intentions must be, and, gently, she takes him by the wrist, guiding him higher—to that place she found when he’d awakened her.

The difference is like dawn and day. Ben grunts his understanding as he feels the swollen bud of her crest beneath the pad of his finger, then his thumb, continuing on in those circular movements. Rey shudders and sobs, tossing her head back into the hay. Ben stares at her, his gaze falling to her neck, and he lunges, taking her exposed throat in his teeth. Like a predator he bites, claiming her in a trail of blooming red and drying spit. He latches onto her breast and she keens, her hands flying into his hair, holding on for her life.

“Yes, Puella,” Ben sighs into her decolletage, his free hand caressing the soft of her breast. “Finish for me. I want to see you come.”

His words call to her so garishly, the term known deep within, even when she has never heard it spoken before. Her body rises to answer him, a sweet pressure building deep inside—yet caving in at the same time. “I’m,” she gasps, “It’s close, I— hahn… ah!”

Ben huffs, close, but not close enough. He latches onto her breast once more, rolling his tongue over her sensitive peak and pressing his longest finger inside her. He mimics what he would do with his cock, pumping in and out, and groans at the feeling of her walls clutching onto him with the same desperation as their mistress.

Rey opens her legs wider, bidding him closer, deeper, as the pleasure begins to mount. He gains speed in his thrusts, his arm pumping as he strokes within her furrow. In a flash of blinding light, he crooks upwards, sending her spine bending. A strangled shriek spills from her lips as the pressure collapses in the form of him—white, pulsing heat shattering deep inside of her, spilling the stars from her body.

Ben releases her breast as he feels her womanhood convulse and seize, capturing and pushing against him in a wave of incredible warmth. As Rey shudders down into the hay he watches, dazed, as his fingers leave the tight sheathe of her cunt, coated and gleaming in the glowing light of dusk.

Rey blinks at him, her senses dulled, the shape of him blurry—but real. Her eyes rove his face as he stares back at her, then down the length of his torso, the firm plains of his stomach, down the path of dark hair, and finally land on the bulge of his subligar.

They melt into each other again, the earth reclaiming him into her arms. His fingers are damp and sticky where they rest at her hip. He wipes them at the torn cloth of her tunica while her fingers trace down his chest, resting over his heart, feeling it pound. She breaks their kiss to find his eyes again, pinched with want and lingering hesitance. Sweat lines his brow and she kisses it, too, taking the salty taste of him with her as she wraps her legs around his hips, pulling him flush against the lingering pulses of her groin.

Ben moans, closing his eyes, and thrusts against her, feeling as her release seeps through the black cloth of his subligar, fueling the fiery heat of his throbbing member. She lays a kiss at his temple and whispers her ascent into his ear. The words fall to him lame and deaf before her, yet his hands move, his heart pounds, as he unfolds the garment and tosses it aside.

Rey glances between them, spotting more of him than she had before—finding the tip of his shaft swollen and red, glazed with arousal not so different from her own. She remembers the feeling of it inside her, how large, how inexorable he’d become, and shifts closer, parting her legs wider, seeking his lips for a kiss.

He grants it, panting through his nose as he slides his hand between them. His knuckles brush her
groin as he grabs himself, squeezing tightly with a laborious grunt, threatening himself to last for her. When he opens his eyes hers are waiting for him, bright and wide yet dark and endless, their expanse the width of his heart. Bracing his arms around her, touching her in silent worship, he buries himself deep in her eyes—and in her body.

Rey winces, the pinch of his entry less intrusive than it once was, her walls shifting to accommodate him. She bids him still for a moment and he complies, shaking with the effort of delaying his impending orgasm. The feeling of her now is so unlike before—where her love—*her love!*—surrounds him with all its beauty and pleasure.

When she nods he attempts a gentle thrust, waiting for her reprimand—but nothing comes. Her body tenses less notably now, the throb of his heart meeting the sweet pulse of hers here, in the cradle of her thighs, where the two become one.

He thrusts again, pushing deeper inside. He breathes against her jaw and she moans, seeking and finding the pleasure of how thoroughly he fills her, fits her, the perfection of his hard manhood sending her reeling in his arms.

The sound of her moaning sighs pulls him from his dazed stupor, his hips learning speed and rhythm until he is pumping into her, feeling as Rey’s cunt welcomes him with each thrust.

“Oh,” he moans softly, his voice rumbling back at him through her chest. “Rey… Rey!”

Rey clings to him as he moves above her, her arms clutching beneath his own as he uses them to pull himself through her. Her legs split wide beneath the width of his body, the brush and steady pound of his hips maddening, but not enough! “Harder,” she whimpers, her head buried against the damp skin of his neck. “Harder. Please—ah!”

Before she can finish he obeys, unleashed, thrusting wildly into her. The hay and dirt shifts under their bodies, burying them deeper as he gives her all she will take. “Rey,” he gasps, feeling himself beginning to slip, his body betraying him to ecstasy. His voice comes choked, a whisper all he can manage. “Please… Placeo, mea Puella…”

His darkened voice calls to her from the deep well of her need, re-surging within a world beyond them. A world of words, and parchment and ink. A place where he yearned to be where they are now. A garden, an Eden, overseen.  

*Come my Love, know me.*

Oh, how she knows him, now! Yes, yes—will always know!

*And call me by my name.*

“Ben!” she cries, the impact of his body enough to feel in her throat. She repeats his name with every thrust, crying out for him every time their souls collide, her voice a resounding testament to the stable walls. “Ben… Ben… Ben—Ben!”

At the sound of his name from her lips, Ben’s erratic thrusts suddenly still. His heart entwines with his will and he is lost, scrambling to pull her close, to seat as deeply as he can as waves of his come spill inside of her. He shudders and moans into her neck, struggling to breathe, or even remember how, when all he can stand to know is that the only woman he has ever loved will never leave his arms again.

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Beyond the door, as night falls, a slender, aging hand braces against the wood.
The woman smiles to herself, content enough in knowing what lies beyond that she need not look inside.

And, as quickly as she had come, she leaves, the sun laying itself to rest on its horizon bed.

Chapter End Notes

[The stunning calligraphy piece for Ben's poem was made by the SENSATIONAL Reylocalligraphy, who is and will always be a blessing to the Reylo community. Please follow and support her work on Tumblr and Twitter!]

[This WICKED graphic art was done by the INCREDIBLE Selunchen only FIVE HOURS after this chapter was first posted. Please go leave her and her new Reylo comic, Maroon, some love!]

[•“Amica mea, mea Puella” ("ah-mee-cah may-ah, may-ah pweh-lah")
•“Amor tantum mihi” ("a-mor tawn-tum mee")
•"Placeo" ("plah-chay-oh")

"My love, my sweetheart"
"My only love"
"Please"]
The theme for this chapter is "Just and Just As" by Penny and the Sparrow. Listen to the Glory's Fray Spotify playlist here!}
Wow wow WOW! Thank you all so much for your outstanding support of the last chapter! I can't believe we are already 40 chapters into this mess... and the fun is just getting started! Obviously the heat is going to start picking up rather rapidly—and I hope this small chapter will help that along in a satisfying way :D

Again, thank you so much for your support! You're amazing >////<

Sunlight spears through the cracks in the roof, peering down from the rafters to gaze on them, entangled in the morning dim.

It warms Rey’s face, coaxing her slowly from a deep sleep. Her body stirs before her thoughts, her lashes flickering open. The heavy weight of arms around her, a leg between her legs, moves in rousing reply as they awaken each other, Ben’s soft snores leaving them to the gentle shift of cloth and straw and joining eyes.

They look at each other among the streaming halcyon rays, dust floating sleepily through their blinding currents, in and out of the waking darkness.

Breath escapes Ben as memory and reality conjoin, the feeling of her in his arms too astounding to believe. And when she smiles he knows he must be dreaming, but cannot bring himself to mind in the slightest as he joins her in the quiet chorus of chuckling sighs, an open smile of his own blooming between his cheeks as their brows meet—as their hands and fingers venture to probe heartbeats and faces so near and realize that, yes, this is real.

Rey backs away first, blinking away the enduring traces of sleep in exchange for this waking dream. Her thumb sweeps over his cheek, brave in its journey through the stars burned into his gentle face. His eyes never deviate as hers wander freely over him, her lips parted in awe of how complex such a simple thing like skin could become.

His hand rests on her hip, thumb stroking soft licks of fire over her sensitive flesh, urging vague memories to reemerge in clarity.

Last she was awake—oh, so awake!—she had felt the hot pulse of his passion claim her from within, abided the slump of his massive frame until she lost the room to breathe. He’d moaned such earnest apology, slipping from her body, leaving her shivering with the dwindling throb beneath her crest. In the darkness they shifted as one, his arms quick to claim her against the chilling damp of his chest—and, as it so often does, exhaustion won out the slowing pound of her heart, lulling her to sleep by his.

Her silence strings along the passing moments. She can feel as Ben’s arm flexes under her neck, the ends of her hair toyed in his long fingers. The smell of them lingers in the air, enchanting her, enticing him. “Are you alright?” he murmurs, lips plush beneath her fingertips.

Rey finds his eyes and sees them gleam with guilt and pride, her own autonomy making itself
known by the exposure of her breasts, and their reaction to his voice. “I think so,” she replies, hushed in this sacred place. Mindfulness passes over her, scrutinizing herself as she remains still, wondering at the state of her body left so long undisturbed. “You?”

“Mm,” Ben nods, following the hot twinge of hunger in his neck to press his lips to her nose, her mouth. She returns it soundly—practiced, now—their kiss a sweet, lingering chaste before he parts to look at her, his head tilting to appreciate the sight of her supple, succulent breasts. “Very much.”

Power shudders through her when his eyes linger on her chest, her only defense against the sudden onslaught of its double-edged embarrassment a quick push at his collar. He offers a laughing scoff and swallows her hand in his, eyes fluttering closed as he pulls her wrist to his lips, assailing her with a flurry of venturing kisses.

When his lips reach the soft of her arm Rey sighs, this foreign bliss threading its fingers through the hairs at her scalp. His eyes crack open, hooded and focused on her breast. Slowly, he pulls her arm away from her body, sliding his fingers along her skin, tracing past the slope of her shoulder to caress the impossible softness of her breast before taking it fully in his hand.

Rey swallows, closing her eyes as her heart begins pounding anew as he squeezes, the slight callous of his palm pushing against her tender peak. “Ah,” she hisses, squirming as desire twines around her waking crest.

Ben pauses, his thorough study of her malleable flesh halted by the twisted look in her face. If it is of pleasure or pain, he cannot tell, too new to the language of her more intimate expressions. So he leaves her nipple be, for now, relishing the sensation of her lingering in his palm as it goes to rest at her ribs, anchoring them together. “For a woman so strong, you are quite sensitive,” he muses.

Rey frowns at the knowing quirk in his lip, silently appreciating his mercy on her. It seems her body had been affected more than she thought. His thumb resumes its waiting stroke, the feeling of it under the slope of her breast shooting steady chills across her skin, keeping her erect for him. Heat rises in her cheeks. “Is that a bad thing?” she challenges.

He pouts, shaking his head, rustling the hay. It’s too tempting to keep his eyes open anymore and not ravish her; his erection has begun its vengeful resurgence beneath the slight cover of the cloak—but it can afford a moment of patience on her behalf. Closing his eyes, he kisses her, pressing blindly into her lips, tasting her as he pulls her flush with him, her soft skin spread along the planes of his chest as he fits her head under his chin. “I find it preferable…” he rumbles, stroking down her hair, exploring the taut, bare flesh over her spine, along the slope of her curves. His lips find the crown of her head, breathing her in.

Rey leans into him, sapping the heat from his body, bathing in the stroke of his hand with speechless ecstasy. In the golden light she sees one of his marks, low on his throat, and presses her lips there, focusing on the feeling of muscle and tendon giving way to a strong and steady pulse; yearning to meld with it beyond measure.

“Rey,” Ben sighs, nuzzling, nesting himself over her. His hand travels up again, holding her close, relishing the sweet softness of her against him. Her kiss streaks through him, her slight gesture like fire in his veins.

“I love you,” Rey whispers, winding—wedging—her arms around his neck, rising along the hay to bring herself level with his wide, vulnerable eyes. She kisses him, then, on the bridge of his nose, between his eyes—leaving him trembling and seeking her lips, instead, her words returned in a breathless rush.
They kiss beyond any pretense of brevity, Ben’s tongue a more patient liaison in his negotiations with hers than their fervent entanglement last night—a slow, sensuous exchange of smacking lips and traded wetness gathering in their corners.

It’s only when Silencer whinnies that Rey leaps out of Ben’s mouth, breathing hard. Ben’s hand has found its way to her breast again, squeezing with a thinly-restrained deftness.

Rey looks down between them, marveling at the sheer girth of his hand over her, how mysteriously her leg had pitched over his side in an effort to bring him closer. He continues to play contentedly with her, offering more of his mouth when he remembers to, the occasional squeeze shooting a bolt of pleasure down to her core. She looks at his face, watches his eyes as they dart about her bosom, flickering down where her partial nudity fades at the tattered remains of the tunica.

His lips lie parted and plush, and Rey lays down and groans, the sheer impossibility of her new claim to them overwhelming.

Ben slows his inspection, broken from his trance by the way she slumps down into the hay. His hand slides from her breast up her neck, burrowing into the warm roots of her hair as he studies her. “Puella?”

“What are we going to do, Ben?” Rey murmurs, eyes cast up into his dark stare.

Ben chews his cheek, glancing down between her thighs.

Rey would laugh at that—or better yet, keep his gaze right where it is—were it not for the pressing urgency for his answer. “I mean it,” she chides, poking his shoulder.

Ben grunts ruefully, letting her prod shove him onto his back. He turns his head to look at her, watches as the rising sun illuminates the fine hairs on her face, catches and clings to her lashes, takes root in the endless fields of her eyes.

“I’m not sure,” he mumbles honestly, frowning at his own answer. But it is the truth. He had never expected her to return his love—was so prepared to cast his life aside in the name of vengeance. And yet she accepted him, forgave him, yearned for him as he had her… a feat somehow more miraculous than escaping his own death at the hands of injury and illness not two weeks ago.

*She made love to me,* his heart sings—possession, meaning resurging within him. Rey embraced him, yes, welcomed him into the sweet warmth of her hearth, accepted his sacrifice as he’d thrust it upon her altar, taken him in full. *She will stay with me.* Somehow, impossibly, wonderfully, Rey has decided to stay, and he knows that he could never cast her aside. Not after all they are—and have become.

“Tell me what you want me to do,” he urges, his voice soft, almost timid as he strokes her face with his knuckles, watching raptly how she is framed by him.

Rey sighs under his caress, allowing herself this moment to wonder what she could ever want but this. It comes to her, then, when she opens her eyes, looking at his face in the glow of morning love. Reminds her of a distant dream she’d forgotten, but never stopped wanting. “Well, I…” she murmurs, suddenly losing her nerve as his brow lifts attentively, his gaze too intense for rational thought. She shakes her head, glancing away. “Nevermind.”

Ben frowns. She seems flustered—but not in the way that he enjoys. It is the way he has observed some women can be, a way he never learned from his mother. But as a man of strategy, he knows he could never let such an interesting lead go to waste—when the war is almost won. “Are you
afraid I would disappoint you?” he challenges smoothly, treading light.

“No!” Rey gawks, offended on his behalf, but as soon as the feeling comes it fades, replaced by something more somber, cold with reality. “No.”

Ben searches her eyes. “But you are disappointed…”

Folding her lips, Rey knows she cannot lie anywhere but in his arms, her lips too loosened by his, willing to bare the truth as she has her very body. “…Yes. I am.”

“With what?”

“With… myself,” she replies, lying on her back, staring up at the wooden ceiling as the light streaks overhead. Ben watches her as she continues, listening intently despite the distraction of her milky décolletage. “For years I prayed for my freedom. Dreamed of a life like any other woman, with a husband, and…” Her throat clogs. “And, with you, I… I’d hoped…” she shakes her head, covering her stinging eyes with her arm.

What has happened to her? Here she lies in the arms of the man she loves, and yet all she can think about is her own foolish hopes. Even though she could live the life of a loving slave, become her master’s mistress, she knows deep inside that happiness would only be hollowness. That this closeness, this beauty, she feels with him now would only lead to empty guilt. It’s enough to make her want to curl away from him—or throw herself over his marble legs and beg him to take her again, and take all her confounding thoughts with him.

Ben watches her fall into distress, helplessness roiling in his gut at the sight of her quivering lip. This experience must have been too much for her, he realizes—a feeling he can understand. Though her body was ready, as was his, he’d failed to listen to that righteousness she’s held within her all this time. Failed to appease it as it so clearly yearns to be appeased.

Well, perhaps he can remedy that.

Carefully, he takes her wrist in hand, shifting from their bed of hay to hover over her—loose straw left to hang at his cheek. He pulls her arm away once more, but now his eyes do not linger anywhere but in hers, burning, committing to memory the way Rey looks now, lying before him in all her beautiful brokenness—her unwavering faith. “…Marry me.”

Rey blinks, ears roaring with blood. “What?”

“Marry me,” he repeats, voice firm and pleading as he takes her face in his hands, holding fast to her eyes. “Rey, mea Puella,” he kisses her sweetly, a mere whisper of a kiss, his lips soft against her as he imparts, “Let me make you my wife—marry me.”

Her heart swells at his words, spilling over from her eyes. But doubt comes for her from beneath the ground, thorns unfurling their clawed tendrils, taking root in her hope. “How can I? Who would marry a master to his slave…?” she questions, voice shaken and crushed under the rubble of her dreams.

He backs away to find her eyes, so full of furious desire, and wipes away her tears, his voice low and steady as he murmurs, “Would anyone be enough for you?”

When he speaks she understands—understands that it matters not who, or how, it can be done—only that this could be the stone and mortar to rebuild these shattered limestone pillars of their ambitions, so brutally knocked down by the cruelty of Rome. This—this defiant love they bear.
So she nods, sniffling, holding his face as he does hers, clinging to this one moment where reality bends to their will. “Yes.”

Pressure floods Ben through the entirety of his body, awakening him to an extrasensory feeling of release, a feeling he has not felt for decades. Joy consumes his soul and he trembles beneath its awesome power, too immense to make room for anything but furious promise to her. “Then we will find a way,” he vows, heart like steel on his tongue. “Whatever it takes.”

His conviction thrums through her with rightness and Rey nods, tearful and devoid of speech, pulling him lower to press her lips to his cheek. He sighs down into her neck, pressing his mouth to anything that crosses his path. Her ear, her cheek, the line of her hair, her jaw—all of it—until she breaks away with a sobbing smile, anointing his head with a tender kiss, a shelter of hope between a man and his bride amidst the rays of the morning sun.

Chapter End Notes

[This exquisite art is from the lovely and generous Ava Marga, who sent this piece to me on Tumblr as a gift. Please leave her the love she deserves!]

[For a woman, especially a Christian woman, it was highly frowned upon to have sex outside of marriage. However, it was common enough for masters to sleep with their female slaves]

[Marriage to a slave was highly illegal in Rome, as slaves were seen as possessions, not people. The punishments could range anywhere from loss of property, minor dismemberment, or execution]
Hello, everyone!

It's been a while! I've taken a bit of a break from writing to focus on school and work and, of course, some much-needed personal time. Thank you all so much for your patience with me—I can guarantee that you will get much more content when December rolls around.

Until then, I hope you enjoy! *hugs* You are so amazing. Thank you thank you thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At length Rey’s stomach growls, her hands moving mechanically to pull the sleeves of the ruined tunica over her shoulders. Ben watches as she rises to her feet, his arms already cold without her to fill them. The torn heart of the cloth exposes the soft skin over her sternum and he stares unblinkingly while he can, frowning at the lust boiling deep in his belly.

He rises as well, spindles of hay falling away as he covers himself with his cloak, tucking it loosely around his hips. Rey plucks at herself, then goes to him, sending a small smile in the comforting silence.

Ben stills, humming appreciatively and bowing to let her remove the hay from his hair. He stares down into her tattered clothes, rueful in the absence of her nudity. It’s odd—how he’d never appreciated breasts until he discovered Rey possessed them, too.

“Oh,” Rey murmurs, glancing at the door.

“What is it?” he asks, still hazy from the ecstasy of her acceptance to his proposal.

A flush grows on her cheeks and she avoids his eyes, crossing her arms sheepishly over her chest. Damn. “I’d forgotten… Ahsoka, she… she was supposed to take me to the city—”

“—That doesn’t matter,” he persists. “You will stay with me.”

“I know that, but,” her voice lowers, “she didn’t. And what of Master Dameron? Didn’t you both make an agreement?”

Ben shifts his weight, taking her shoulder in his hand, urging her to meet his insistent gaze. “I sent him enough denarii to pay for one hundred slaves—and even that is not enough to be worthy of you.” He strokes his thumb soothingly over her freckled skin. “Whatever grievance he has is easily resolved. But you, my Puella, I intend to keep.”

Relief washes over her face, pulling apart the tension in her body until she smiles again. “I’m glad.”

He offers one of his own, small and crooked and close-lipped as it is—satisfaction warm in his blood. With that he leads her through the door, into their home.
Their bare feet tread lightly along the tiles as they travel close, intent on the culina. Rey, parched, retrieves a pail of water and drinks, relishing the smooth, cool flow as it spreads and settles into her belly. When she wipes her mouth she notices Ben at the counter, a small slip of paper in his hands.

“What’s that?” Rey asks, coming closer.

Her eyes widen before he answers without answering, passing her the card with a slim fissure in his usual composure. She takes it and reads to herself, her assumption melting between her toes in hot, mortifying affirmation.

Went to Rome, will return shortly

Did not want to disturb

~Ahsoka

A shift of cloth rouses her from her thoughts and she spots as Ben pulls a familiar gown into his hand from the countertop—her stola. It unfolds, length cascading to kiss the ground, hanging between them.

Rey scoffs, disbelief maddening as her throat throbs in laughter. The contagion of it passes to Ben, who offers one of his rare, wolfish grins, passing it to her. “Go change,” he encourages. “I’ll prepare breakfast.”

She nods, accepting it and rising on her toes, placing a chaste kiss to his cheek. It’s warm under her lips. “It will only be a moment.”

“Mm,” he hums, reaching halfheartedly for her as she leaves the room, pinching at her rear. He misses, but knowing that he will have plenty of opportunities not to eases him enough to spur him towards the storeroom.

When he comes out he notices a familiar shape trot past the open window. Setting the ingredients down, he frowns, following his eyes to the end of the hall. His feet carry him across the courtyard. As he moves Rey emerges, her cheery countenance darkened alongside his.

She follows him. “What is it?”

“Mitaka,” Ben grumbles.

Her eyes widen, hope snagging on her darker rationale. “A message from Master Dameron?”

“I doubt it.”

“Then…” Rey says, her hopes immediately tarnished. “…Snoke?”

Ben doesn’t answer her, opening the door just as Mitaka halts his horse. His shorter legs carry him up the small slope and Ben doesn’t move to meet him, motioning deftly for Rey to stand out of sight. She does, and he greets with a grim, “Mitaka.”

“Master Ren,” Mitaka bows. He digs into his tunic, producing a note in stiff parchment. “This summons came for you. The emperor says it’s urgent.”

Ben doesn’t thank him, nor offer any explanation to his mussed hair and strange state of dress, only snatches away the letter with a low growl. “Then I will go. Begone, Dopheld.”

Nodding a quick and timid understanding, Mitaka turns on his heel, mounts his horse, and nearly
flies back down the eastern road to Rome.

Ben sighs out, shaking his head as he harshly closes the door, walking back inside.

“You should be kinder to him,” Rey calls gently, moving to stand beside him as he considers the wax seal over the letter.

He glances at her, considering her for a moment. “You are too courteous to servants.”

“And you too enamored with slaves,” she smirks.

He could kiss that gleaming light in her eye as she teases him, but otherwise keeps to himself, allowing the letter to hold his attention. Taking a breath, he opens it, tearing the seal and unfolding it for her perusal.

“...Is he always so vague?” she wonders, eyes sweeping over the ragged lettering from beneath her furrowed brow.

“Typically,” he discloses, deadpan. “The emperor is better suited for drama than dictatorship. He will expect me to see him before sundown, tonight.”

Feeling drained, Rey settles her head against his arm, relishing the feeling of the cool, almost soft give of muscle. “I don’t want you to go.”

Ben understands what she means. The last he left for Rome, he returned trailing devastation in his wake. Whether she fears for him or for herself, or some mixture of the two, he knows he can only offer so much in pursuit of comfort.

So he tries, “Come. Let me make you that breakfast.”

Rey watches raptly as Ben busies himself with making cakes, his body once again covered by a modest tunic. She appraises him with an unabashed possessiveness—a curious feeling that she has never felt before.

Inhaling, she closes her eyes as she savors the sweet aroma, listening as the batter crisps above the flames. “Where did you learn to do that?”

“Roman soldiers are expected to cook their own meals,” Ben explains, gazing at her. “Though, for you, I might consider sharing.”

“Oh?” she probes, slipping off her stool to meander closer. As she nears his face seems to widen, his eyes taught and focused. It makes her feel powerful—thrum in her arms and her legs, challenging her to see what more she could make him do. Deftly, she places her hand on his wrist, feeling its warmth beneath her fingertips as she blinks prettily up at him. “And how might I convince you... fully?”

Ben swallows, exhaling sharply as the blood in his neck begins to migrate to less thoughtful pastures. “It depends,” he intones carefully, heart pounding as her eyes swallow him whole. “Could you stomach it?”

“I thought I told you I was always hungry,” Rey murmurs. Look at him—he’s blushing.

“Indeed. Well, then...” he rumbles, setting aside his spatula with a physician's care. “...I’m sure
one bite couldn’t hurt.”

He descends on her then, their bodies clasping together, awash with a heated agony. Rey’s appreciative grunt is immediately muffled by his mouth and she lets her eyes roll back, her arms tossing themselves over his neck as he bows her in a passionate kiss.

Time slurs as he moves to seat her on the countertop, his hands resting on the slope of her hips, large fingers squeezing. He relishes touching her this way, tasting her so freely, the feeling of inexperience lingering far on the borders of his more intrusive thoughts. She wets his lip and a low growl builds deep in his throat. He drags her against him and laves heated kisses down her neck, latching on and sucking over the tender meat of her joint. She shudders and moans, slipping her hands into the nape of his tunic, fingers warm as they burrow in his hair and set the skin of his scalp on fire, the burning in his nose—burning in his nose?

“Futuo,” he spits, parting reluctantly to pull away the smoking pan. He hisses and drops it in a full basin, smoke and steam intertwining as he waves away the scorch in his hand.

Rey covers her mouth as she snickers, knowing she shouldn’t laugh. “What does that mean?” she asks. Though she may know more of Latin than she ever cared to in the past, hearing him switch so easily from Greek can be somewhat disarming.

Seeming to sense that, he wipes his hand on the cloth of his tunic, wrinkling his nose at the lingering odor. His eyes, however, darken—as if embarrassed to say. “A common expletive.”

Rey’s eyes widen, only somewhat scandalized. “Oh.”

“Does that put you off your appetite?” Ben probes, almost warily. It’s been quite some time since he was in the presence of a Christian. And even then, he was never particularly gifted at holding his sinner’s tongue.

But Rey shakes her head slightly, hopping down from the counter to stand before him. Considering him for a moment, she kisses the pads of her fingers before pressing them against his mouth. “There are greater things to concern ourselves with. Don’t you think?”

His eyes gleam with understanding, her lack of judgement warming his bones. He takes her wrist and holds her fingers more firmly to his lips, murmuring a gentle, “I do.”

They seat themselves with their own respective plates, Rey spreading a liberal coating of honey between her cakes as Ben hunkers down beside her. The silence is interspersed with stolen glances, that same feeling twining around her heart whenever she catches him looking at her.

It’s hard to stop staring, to stop remembering where they were only hours ago—laying entangled on a bed of hay, in the sunlight… That same sun shines in the black strands of his hair through the crossed-iron grates of the window. He passes a bite through his lips and a rush of warmth slithers down her body, knowing how they feel on her mouth, on her neck, on her breasts…

She Swallows a thick bite, forcing herself to look away. These feelings are still so new, no matter how willingly she’s embraced them. Things are different now. Once, in her mind, the worst she could do was imagine his kiss, forbidden as it was. But last night, she’d transcended all she thought possible. Abandon came to her so easily, love and lust held so close to one another, impossible to discern.

Deciding to write off the confusion, at least for now, she works to chew slowly. As she keeps her eyes away from the temptation at her side, they drift to the letter left unfolded on the table.
She skews her lips. “Do you think he knows?”

Ben follows her gaze, his mouth full and scowling. “Snoke?”

Rey nods, looking questioningly to him.

Swallowing stiffly, Ben shakes his head, picking at his food. “After losing my virtus that night, I doubt he would care to consider you beyond leverage.”

She doesn’t know whether her heart is swelling or breaking, knowing he cares for her so deeply. But still, worry teeters dangerously on the tip of her tongue. “You don’t think Mitaka would have told him about sending me to Master Dameron?”

Ben’s frown deepens, hearing that man’s name from her lips so consistently waning his lingering bliss. “I doubted it would have mattered,” he answers unthinkingly.

“‘Wouldn’t have mattered?’” Rey echoes, studying him. She watches as a dim light of horror flickers between his eyes and leans forward, searching them intently. “Ben, is there something you’re not telling me?”

Caught, he glances at her with wide, doleful eyes.

“Ben…?” she probes, voice dipping low.

“I may have acted… rashly,” he admits at length, choosing his words carefully.

Rey, having enough of his avoidance, turns to face him fully, placing her hand on his thigh. It’s warm under her hand. “Tell me. Why wouldn’t it have mattered if Mitaka told Snoke?”

He sighs through his nose, folding his cheek as he covers her hand with his, tight, as if trying to keep her beside him while he still can. “Because he would have been dead.”

Blinking, Rey sits bewildered that Ben could be so certain of Mitaka’s death, until she realizes by the taut strain in his gaze that it was not Mitaka who would have died, but…

“Kill Snoke? That’s suicide!” Rey gasps. “You wouldn’t—”

“I would. Rey,” he persists, squeezing her hand. He looks into her eyes, their dark depths blazing in righteous fury. “I thought I’d lost you. I couldn’t live with myself. Without you.” He swallows back the building sheen in his eyes, blinking them away with firm resolve. “And if I could avenge you with my life, then so be it.”

“No,” Rey whispers, his words gathering in the pit of her throat. With her free hand she reaches for his face, urging him to focus on her, fighting away the hatred she sees smoldering in his stare. “Ben, no… you never lost me.” Closing her eyes, she moves to kiss him, pressing herself firmly to his mouth, a seal over her words. When they part she stays close, offering him reassurance in her caress. “There’s so much we never said, but I know now that I’ve always been yours.”

Against his will, his lip trembles, raw relief basking under the light of her face. He takes it in his hands and joins them together, returning her chaste kiss.

Rey hums, content with his wordless reply before separating, her tone unwavering. “But I need you to promise me something.”

“Yes,” he murmurs, stroking her hair. “Yes, anything.”
“Promise me that, whatever happens, you won’t throw yourself away.” Her voice penetrates him, imploring as her gaze. “Don’t let them change who you are.”

Ben’s frown persists under her, her holy visage one of gentle correction—far from any condemnation. He yearns to appease her, to please her, to fall and worship at her feet.

And yet, what she asks is impossible. He would rend heaven and earth asunder if anything happened to her. To think he would be capable of anything so human as what she proposes—compassion, forgiveness, mercy—in the cold, gaping hell of her absence…

“I don’t think I can,” he confesses, shame burning behind his eyes.

The smallest of understanding smiles blooms between Rey’s cheeks, her fingers ghosting tenderly over his temples, his cheeks. “You can. I’ve seen it,” she whispers, every word steeped in her relentless faith. “You’re different.”

He is. He knows he is… has been changing in ways he never knew he could. The past he’d killed, strangled with his own hands, Rey had called back to life. “I don’t know who I am,” he admits, emotion weighing him down, the memories of all he’s pushed away sweeping over him with its crushing swell. He scrambles to her for purchase, pressing his head to hers, breathing wet and ragged.

Rey accepts him, pulling him close to her. He wraps his arms around her waist, the truth of this secret unwinding, uncoiling between them, leaving him bare to her once more. “I do.” She smooths his hair as he clasps her tightly, relishing in the change she can feel happening inside this man in her arms. “You’re a shepherd. You’re a teacher. You’re a man.” She pulls back to hold his face, all lust replaced by love alone as she says, “You’re mine,” and crushes her lips to his.

The air is clean when they enter the gates of Rome, the scent of summer flowers drifting along the city walls.

Ben dismounts first, offering her his hand to ease her from Silencer’s back. He takes the reins, walking alongside her down the busy streets, scouring the citizens with a wary eye.

The sweet words and embraces of the morning live on in the base of his skull, thrumming with newfound energy and vigor. Not normally one to smile, he is quite inclined to do so—and even more tempted to have her on his arm for all curious eyes to behold in stewing jealousy.

But, zealous as those inspirations are, he doesn’t dare add unnecessary risks, keeping pace and voice steady, devoid of investment. “I don’t intend to stay long.”

Rey bows her head, more in secretive showmanship than purpose. “What do you think he wants from you?”

“To discuss my employment.”

“To the Praetorian Guard?”

“Most likely.”

Rey, sobered by the presence of others, schools her features quickly. Ben is often one to make and dedicate all effort to his own schemes. And as she discovered over breakfast, he does not invest her in making plans as much as she would like. “What are you going to do?”
His hold on the reins tightens, slightly. “I’m not sure.”

Perhaps she should not be so pleased to hear that he hasn’t begun plotting without her. But still, it’s a reassurance to have someone just as helpless as her under these dire straits. “We’ll figure it out,” she says, just loud enough for him to hear.

Ben glances at her, impressed by her mask of professionalism amidst her tender support. How the mystery of love has always evaded him, he will never question again. “Have you finished your list?” he asks.

Nodding, Rey gestures in the direction of the Trajan’s Market, over the heads of travelers and their wares. “I’m thinking… fig and pomegranate?” she hums, glancing up at him.

He chuckles, turning back to the road ahead before she can make him regret asking. “Oh, really…”?

“Yes, really,” Rey replies, pleased with herself at seeing him so flustered. In her mind it is a flirtatious vengeance—loving retaliation for the lewd content he’d written about her without her knowledge. Regardless of how arousing it was.

Time passes down the branching eastward road, and the scent of flowers grows stronger. Ben looks to see a simple stall of roses and lilies, and halts.

“What’s wrong?” Rey pipes.

Quickly, Ben ushers her to follow him with a decisive flick of his hand. They approach the woman sitting behind the stall, her old eyes heavily sagged, as he peruses the lilies to find—there.

Plucking a purse from Silencer’s saddle, Ben produces an aurei and offers it to the woman. Rey watches, struggling to understand why Ben would pull them aside for flowers. Until he turns to her.

“Turn around,” he murmurs.

Rey obeys, warmth spreading through her chest as she feels him move behind her, his thick fingers gently manipulating her hair. She feels a weight settle into the tie, the soft, pointed kiss of petals and strong stem of a flower rooting soundly into her tresses.

Ben touches her shoulder, wordlessly shifting her for his inspection. She faces him, looking up and inhaling sharply at the sudden, consuming hunger in his eyes.

“It suits you,” he says, caressing the flower she cannot see.

“Thank you,” she bows, offering a small, warm smile, “Master.”

Suddenly, the hunger in his eyes becomes a roaring fire—before he blinks, breaking their gaze before he straightens and turns them back toward the road. As though nothing transpired at all.

But as he turns his back, Rey oozes satisfaction nonetheless.

They enter the market square to find it teeming—as it usually does on a day with such preferable weather. At the market’s edge Rey inhales with closed eyes, breathing in the savory smell of meats and spices. When she opens them again she spots a familiar outpost, and turns to Ben with excitement dancing over her features.
She needn’t say more. He hands her the purse from his belt and watches with Silencer from the road as she practically bounds to the stall, her long legs carrying her far and fast. He stares at them unabashed, his heart pounding at the innocent shift of her hips, the formidable slope of her rear, the white petals of the lily against her sleek, dark hair. Just watching her is enough to make his blood boil and his thoughts descend to most defiling possibilities.

Silencer chuffs.

“Indeed,” Ben sighs, glancing at his horse. The beast meets his eye as Ben offers him a companionable pat on the neck. The Colosseum looms beyond them and Ben stares at its towering walls, noticing a strange dissonance in the stone—as if the sun itself had lost its luster.

Rey returns soon enough, carrying with her two, skewered flamingo tongues. She offers him one—the smaller of the two—and asks, “Have you tried these?”

Ben scoffs, amused, and accepts, the stick ridiculously small between his fingertips. “Of course.”

“The tongues of birds—it’s like they can still sing in your mouth,” Rey sighs dreamily around a bite, moaning as the meat leaks flavor over her lips. She catches over-eager juice with her hands, licking it from her fingers as they retreat to an unoccupied corner of the building.

“That is,” Ben breathes out, watching her lips, mind fogging as his blood begins to gather in less-honorable places, “one way of putting it.”

Rey, unaware, leans against the wall, the shade of the building covering her eyes as she gazes lovingly at him. “Yours tastes better, though,” she shies, smiling flat-lipped at his feet.

That’s it—he can’t take this anymore. Looking around, seeing that the civilians are too preoccupied with themselves to notice, Ben grabs her arm and drags her into the alley. Her paces struggle to catch up with his, her questions silenced as he pins her against the wall by the mouth, slipping his tongue inside.

He moans as she accepts him, surrendering to the heat pulsing between their awakened desires. She drops her food to fist her hands in his tunic and he follows suit, the thrill of her taste setting his nerves on fire. “So does yours,” he pants, twanging their tongues again. “Rey,” he groans, laving wetness down her neck, kissing and sipping at her tender flesh, pawing at her thighs, “you taste so fucking good…”

Rey shudders in his grasp, stifling her cry as he sucks that same spot again, harder—as though she were his meal, instead. Her groin throbs and she wills him closer, to devour more, her voice a rasping, desperate whisper. “Ben—”

Something shatters, the sound forcing them apart like a wedge. Rey remains, dizzy as Ben holds her hips in silent will to stay put. With a furrowed brow he moves to the edge of the building, looking out to see the clattering din of Roman soldiers march into the market square.

Ben watches, concealed by shadow as the soldiers drag a woman out by her hair. It’s only a moment before Rey is at his side, like him, to investigate the commotion. She gasps softly, covering her mouth as the men tear at the woman’s clothing and bind her in chains. A few of the soldiers cast down a table of wares, sending gemstones and jugs shattering to the stone.

“What are they doing?!” she cries.

“It’s an arrest…” Ben frowns, holding her arm. A Christian? he thinks. There’s little else it could be. His blood runs cold at the thought. The woman out there bears similar enough traits to Rey—
enough to tighten his grip. Enough to make sure she’s still there.

He looks at his bride, finding her sultry passion replaced by quiet horror. Pain knifes through him at the sight, knowing what this must mean for her—knowing that not long ago, he could have been the one to... to...

Before he can think of something to say that will reassure her, the clamor of armor sounds again, the infantry marching closer. “Get back,” he orders, moving her behind him. Thankfully, she obeys without question, disappearing behind his massive frame as he holds Silencer’s reins, glaring as the soldiers pass by with the weeping woman in tow.

When they’ve gone the citizens return to their usual business, as though nothing happened at all. It sickens him to see as passerby pluck gems off the street, erasing all memory of the woman one by one until the road lies polished and empty.

Ben turns back to Rey to find her arms wrapped around her middle, tears in her eyes. “Puella,” he calls softly, holding her to his chest. She’s shaking. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean to harm you.”

“You didn’t,” she sniffs, her voice cold and hard. She burrows into his chest, her hands balled against his chest. “But, I…”

“What is it?” he murmurs into her crown, careful to avoid the flower in her hair as he caresses soothing lines along her neck.

She tilts up her chin to meet his eyes, her gaze sharp and red with unshed tears. “I’m afraid. Afraid of them. How,” she swallows thickly, “How can we ever be together like this?”

“I told you,” Ben answers soundly, stroking the blotchy skin of her cheek. “We’ll find a way. However we can.”

She sniffs once, shaking her head. “Please, Ben. I don’t want to marry for them,” she exhales wetly. “Not for them or their emperor or their gods—”

“Shh,” he hushes, pulling her back into his arms. He presses his cheek to her forehead, stroking her spine as her shivering stops. “It’s alright. Anything you want,” he acquiesces. Though he gave up religion long ago, he knew she would prefer to be married under her own. After all, they have condemned themselves to death already—what’s one more violation to the building heap? “Anything you want.”

When she manages to stop her trembling, wiping her eyes, they venture out onto the street again. The sun has already begun to inch towards the horizon line, its blurry edges still sharp enough to cause him worry. Snoke will be expecting him soon; but to leave her alone—

“Well, well. Master Ren.”

The oil of a familiar voice slithers through their ears, winding in Rey’s stomach as they halt and turn to meet the snakeskin smile of General Armitage Hux.

He stands clad in armor, though nothing of his slim countenance bespeaks time on a battlefield. The proud plume of his galea ruffles as he tilts his chin, bright eyes spearing into Ben’s without any of the fear from when they’d last met—when Ben forced Hux from his house.

“General,” Ben grunts, leveling the man a cold glare.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Hux croons, gesturing towards the soldiers as they march through the street,
forcing the citizens to make way. “Plebs in their place. Soon these streets will be rid of their ilk to make way for true progress.”

Ben scowls. “What do you want, Hux?”

“Hm,” the general huffs. “Merely to invite you to join me. I am en-route to the emperor’s palace, you see.” He glances at Rey with an imperious smirk, lifting his hand to touch the flower in her hair. “You can bring your bitch with you, if you like.”

Rey flinches, heat in her eyes as Ben smacks Hux’s arm away, standing between them. “My ancilla,” he snarls, “has her own duties to see to.” When Hux demurs in silent authority, his rusty brow perched high, Ben chews his cheek, deciding it would be best to go now, if only to drive his suspicions away. So he nods his chin. “Lead on.”

Hux smirks victoriously, turning to trail after his soldiers in the direction of the palace. His scarlet cloak billowing behind him.

Ben passes the reins to Rey, meeting her eyes with solemn mandate. “Use the denarii in my purse. There should be enough for the supplies we need.”

She nods, accepting his offering with a worried lip. “His voice is even less tolerable when I can understand him.”

Ben scoffs, offering a small, understanding smile. He dares a brief touch of his thumb to her cheek, wishing he could kiss her again, knowing that he can’t. “Be careful, Puella.”

“I will, Ben,” she affirms gently.

He moves away with reluctant steps, already dreading the distance between them. “Meet me outside of the Circus Maximus when you’ve finished.”

“Right,” she calls after him, wincing as Silencer chews impatiently at her hair.

Ben’s heart constricts to leave her, but the sooner his meeting with the emperor has finished, the sooner he will return to her.

So he trudges on, into battle.

Palace guards pull open the heavy doors to the grand atrium, backing away to let Ben and General Hux stride through. In another life Ben might have felt underdressed—but to be in this hall again fills him with nothing besides bitterness, dread, and disgust.

Snoke sits up from his chaise throne, his robe loose around his concave, skeletal chest. “General Hux. Kylo Ren,” he drones, pleasure laced through every syllable. “Welcome. Come closer, now. There is much we must discuss.”

“My Lord,” Hux bows, removing his helm and clasping a tight fist over his breastplate as he stoops low.

Ben remains silent, inclining his head.

Snoke does not seem to notice, waving dismissively for Hux to rise fully. “Report.”

“We found the Christian in the Trajan’s Market. As you commanded, she has been taken for torture and questioning.” A contented light gleams behind his striking stare. “It won’t be long before we
learn the location of the Resistance headquarters.”

“Very good, General. It seems that retiring you from the ranks has proven far more valuable to Rome’s greater aspirations,” Snoke chortles, reaching for a chalice.

He drinks as Ben subtly considers Hux from the corner of his eye. In their shared career just three years ago, Hux was no more than a politician in a general’s mask, commanding armies with a flick of his hand from the comfort of war tents and drinking parties. It seems he still is that man, but Ben—should he choose to indulge his instincts—may think General Armitage Hux much more than some simple, loyal patrician. Something cunning.

Something dangerous.

“I expect you to continue on with your investigations, General Hux,” Snoke intones, gesturing with the lip of his chalice. Red wine hangs from his mouth like blood, sticky and unnoticed. “Arrests, public executions, crucifixion—whatever you must. I want that Resistance flushed out.” He frowns, his warped eyes shimmering with menace. “Is that understood?”

Hux’s eyes widen, as though he were being strangled, before he bows again. “Of course, My Lord. Fear not. By the time I’m through, their traitorous throats will all be silenced,” He glances at Ben, a sickening grin in his eye, “once and for all.”

“Mm. Good. You may go.”

Before Hux is gone from the atrium, his shorter legs carrying him quite briskly towards the doors, Ben casts his gaze down, beckoning his mask of obedience. “You summoned me, Master?”

“Yes,” Snoke grunts, the word stretched and savored, long and slow. “I take it you’ve had time to consider my offer?”

“I have,” Ben replies smoothly.

“And?”

Looking up at last, Ben meets the cruel eyes of his emperor, willing himself to calm under the oppressive onslaught of fury at the mere sight of his shriveled, cadaverous face. “And,” he grits, tepidly, “I have decided to accept.”

Snoke laughs, a wheezing, hissing escape of air. It bounces off the armor of his Praetorian guards, resounding along the red walls and scarlet tapestries. When it dies at last the man sets his wine aside, laying a useless, bony hand on his lap. “Excellent. I knew you would see reason sooner or later. Of course, normally I would insist that you begin immediately, but seeing that I am a gracious ruler, I have decided to offer you even more reward than a place at my side.”

“And what is that?” Ben queries, intrigued.

“Autumn will be upon us sooner than we think. And what with all this talk of,” he waves his hand, sneering, “resistance, I thought it best to placate our citizens by hosting the annual tournament a little sooner than expected.”

Realization dawns on Ben, then, descending on him like the chilled dew before a frost. “The Tournament of Champions?” he inquires.

“Yes,” Snoke answers with a disappointed air. “Fickle citizens will require entertainment in such trying times. Which is why, my boy,” he grins, folding his knobby hands, “you will remain a
gladiator. And when the tournament ends, and Rome is once more at peace, you will join my guard and live in my palace.” His eyes shimmer with mirth. “If you survive, of course.”

Opportunity spreads out before Ben, then, as reality cuts through him like stone. “Of course,” he relents, inwardly relishing his luck. Because maybe, just maybe…

This could be their chance.

Chapter End Notes

[Christians in Ancient Rome were hunted and persecuted relentlessly. They were tortured and martyred for their beliefs, primarily due to an emperor's contrary views. It was common for emperors to see themselves as gods, or their gods as the only gods, which forced Christians into a position of heresy, punishable by death]

[Due to the persecution mentioned above, it goes without saying that Christians in Rome would not be able to have a legal marriage in a church. This, plus Rey's state as a slave, makes marriage nearly impossible]
Aid

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so so much for your continued support! I don't have a lot of time before my internet dies out, so here you go! I'll see you again in December! *hugs* Thank you all for being so supportive and amazing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun shines warmly down on the blinding limestone pillars as Rey leads Silencer along the curve of the market square, her eyes and nose hunting for any culinary intrigue.

A thrill races through her as she looks about, her first time entrusted to herself alone on these Roman streets both terrifying and exhilarating. Save for Silencer’s welcome company, Rey finds herself moving with independence and vigor, ready to fulfill her task.

She practices her Latin on the marketeers, recalling the names of quince and figs and pomegranates—sometimes after an embarrassingly long pause and series of meaningful gestures. She only slips into Greek on permissible occasion, namely when she requests assistance loading Silencer’s saddle with fresh fruits and vegetables, wheat, oats, oil, fish and garum sauce, and—not knowing Ben’s preference—at least one helping of each animal once bearing fur or feather.

“Poor Silencer,” Rey croons, stroking his snout as they linger beyond the bustling road. The sun has begun to bake into her head, and certainly into his—undoubtedly uninhibited by the weight he bears. “Well, at least you are stronger than an ass,” she smiles; he snorts. “And much more handsome, too.”

A titter of laughter suddenly sounds, and Rey glances out into the shuffle of passerby. A woman passes with her servants, her head and tunica adorned with a lovely cowl of soft, blue cloth. She holds her chin high, though Rey immediately forgets her face, her eyes glued fast to the way with which she carries herself among an endless throng of bodies.

When she is gone, Rey realizes her jealousy, and quickly works to dismantle it by busying herself with caressing Silencer.

This is not the first time she has witnessed such women. Women of surpassing beauty and status, their bodices adorned with jewels and layers of elegant cloth. A palla, Ahsoka had told her, when first they ventured Rome together. A symbol of a wedded woman, to be respected by all.

Rey, looking down at her own stola, feels a heaviness settle upon her.

As if sensing her dismay, the stallion shifts, snorting and probing her fingers with a sudden flick of the tongue. Rey smirks past his long, sooty lashes, into the endless black of eyes staring back at her. For a moment she could almost think the beast understands this newfound sadness she feels—for herself and their shared master.

“I probably taste better than I smell,” she murmurs, skewing her lips. After last night, she’s certain she reeks of hay and stale saliva. And though she had taken a moment to clean herself after rising this morning—walking somewhat easier than she had after that stormy night—from between her
legs there have been certain… excretions. She flushes just at the thought of it, swallowing her lust and tugging Silencer’s reigns. “Come on. I think your future mistress could use a bath.”

Silencer does not reply, only follows faithfully beside her hold on his reigns, his long legs striding forth and clopping in fourths against the road.

Rey keeps her gaze peered on the buildings and signs around them, searching for Latin terms she can recognize. Last she bathed in Rome, the palace bathhouse had been open to the public. She could try there, but decides against it—Ben would combust if he knew she had ventured so close to their enemies, and far be it from her to cause any more unnecessary strain on him.

At length, on the road to the Circus Maximus, Rey spots a generous building with steam pouring from its rooftops. A garden littered with Summer flowers acts as guardian to her timid entry, her fist clenched tight around Silencer’s chord as she approaches the entrance.

Male servants arrive languidly, bored, and ask if they can take her horse. Rey nods and passes them the reigns, praying silently that Ben’s belongings will be safely guarded, before righting herself and striding forth, her chin held as high as that woman on the street.

She is blocked at the door by a tall man, his arms crossed and brow crooked in silent question. “You alone?” he asks.

A dangerous question, though she senses no malice from him, only a vague irritation. “Yes,” she replies.

He cocks his head. “You’re a slave?”

“I am,” Rey says coolly, her expression held simple and respectful. Quickly, she scrambles for excuse, tapping fingers against her side. “My master ought to have a presentable ancilla. Sir.”

The title seems to flatter him, and his eyes sweep down her face. They linger just above her collar and she stiffens, now concerned by his intentions—although his expression declares not perversion, but a sense of intriguing discovery. But he betrays nothing, and stands aside. “Women to the right,” he grunts.

“Thank you,” she murmurs, ducking into the darkness.

The bathhouse is similar to the one in the palace, though much smaller, its steam trapped within. She strips and stashes away her stola, following the similar pattern as she had with Ahsoka. There are less servants here, especially in the Tepidarium, but Rey does not mind retrieving the strigil for herself, scraping the dirt away to leave her skin red, damp, and glistening with a thin layer of lingering water.

Rey taps at her hair, feeling the tender petals of the flower, and decides to let it go unwashed. Struck with a sudden desire to see it, she pulls from the wall a small hand mirror, using it to reflect those embedded into the walls. She smiles at it—a white lily, nestled securely in the tie of her tresses.

Before putting the mirror away, she gazes into it, and sees as she saw on that day not so long ago—when she still denied these stirrings within her. But it is different now—her cheeks look firmer, pinker, her lips fuller and flushed, her lids heavy and lashes captivating, and her eyes… her eyes permanently fixed within her skull, suddenly at home, as though they have become aware of themselves.

Then she sees it—on her neck, where that man had gawked, lies a dark mark shaped suspiciously
like the purse of Ben’s lips.

Knowing exactly what this must be, she immediately discovers a second on her breast, and, inwardly relishing this knowledge, returns the mirror back to the wall. She pauses in her place, considering, before eventually convincing herself to cover what she can with her hair before moving on to the final bathing chamber.

The open space of the pool is occupied by many women. A nude toddler rushes past her, chased after by his hovering mother as he explores the gleaming décor. Rey smiles after them, a pang of longing in her heart.

Sunlight streams down through the open roof, dancing on the rippling water. Rey eases herself into it, gasping at the initial chill before secluding herself to subtly wipe between her legs. Her fingers brush the apex of her thighs, that small bud of nerves, and all at once she is assaulted by the memory of his fingers, much thicker than hers, doing the same.

When her job is finished she leaves it be, not touching again. She sinks down into the water, its scent sweet like rose, and keeps her nose above its gentle, wavering surface, inhaling a soothing drag.

Though what she and Ben did last night was wrong, she cannot bring herself to regret it. As she lingers in the cool swell, feeling herself blissfully—almost frighteningly—submerged, so too does she linger on the border of condemnation. Though there is some guilt, as there always seems to be in the matters of her sex, she finds in herself a shared presence of festering need.

Closing her eyes, Rey sighs bubbles into the water. Surely, now, these feelings will be short lived. While Ben’s proposal had been a shock, the memory of his earnest declarations manage to keep her head afloat, bobbing sweetly beyond the shores of promise—promise that soon, whether she wears a palla or not, she will be free to explore this tender thing blooming between them without remorse or hesitation.

In a way that notion cleanses her more than the water does, her spirit of penitence to God reinvigorated by a newfound will to do things the right way. She believes in Him, believes in Ben, and knows that, if it is her Father’s will, then her life with the man she loves will be one of perfect unity, no matter what challenges they may face.

She rides this hope down the road to the Circus Maximus, having tipped the stable hands denarii she’s certain Ben wouldn’t mind parting with. The ends of her hair linger with the flowery scent of the bathwater, wafting to her as Silencer trots happily beside with a flicking tail.

“I hope he hasn’t been waiting too long.” Rey murmurs as they near the Circus. The palace looms high on the hill, glaring down at her from above like a vengeful titan. She doesn’t spot him anywhere.

Deigning to wait near the track entrance, Rey chews her nail pensively. Had she finished her chores too soon? Or had something happened to him again? Even the fruit cart nearby isn’t enough to distract her from these worrisome—

“Rey? Is that you?” A familiar voice calls.

Rey, startled from her thoughts, turns with wide eyes. “You…!”

Ben tromps down the steps, away from the palace, his mind awash with possibility.
The Tournament of Champions. He had forgotten about it. For the last two years, Ben had abstained from the main competition—always taking the Autumn season off from his oftentimes grueling Summer work. To be moved to Summer now could only mean great unrest for a creature like Snoke. From what he can recall, it was a competition held in celebration for the yearly harvests. A way to reward the patricians of Rome for their contributions.

Ben nearly sneers. Reward, indeed.

Never before has he given much attention to the status of slaves. Until he fell in love with one. Now the thought of farmlands rife with women like her, their hands calloused with labor and toil, turns his stomach violently.

_Puella_, he muses, considering the sunshine through the leaves of garden trees, the light it shares in her.

How slim were the chances that he had met her. The circumstance of destiny—something he once believed in so fervently—had led her to him. Of that he’s certain. To think that starvation could have claimed her in Egypt, or something worse… or that Snoke’s soldiers could have ventured in any other direction but hers…

His heart constricts at the thought of how easily they could have never known one another, intimately or otherwise. Any other woman would have meant less than nothing. They could never share her fire, her wit, her beauty, her innocence and hope. It has him burning to see her again, to hold her and show her just how awakened she has made him.

When he reaches the Circus Maximus he is already scanning for any sign of her and Silencer. Perhaps, if they make it home before Ahsoka does…

“You don’t say!”

Ben frowns, rounding the track monument. The sight before him rattles his lungs, driving him forward all the faster.

Poe Dameron smiles at Rey, arms crossed and eyes glittering with good humor. Rey grins in return, her lips peeled back as she laughs. “I do!”

“What’s this?” Ben huffs, making himself known as he lumbers toward them, his glare leveled on Master Dameron.

Ben’s glower does nothing to deter the man’s cheer. “Ah, Master Ren. We were just talking about you.”

Ben quirks a brow, looking to Rey.

She sobers, offering him an understanding eye. “I told him the deal is off,” she relates with a loud, knowing whisper, leaning closer him.

“And here I was, thinking she had only been running late to join my staff,” Poe smarts. “But when I mentioned her tunica was missing, well…”

Ben’s mind spins, racing dizzily to catch up, but when he understands, he understands it well. “I see.” He lifts his chin with superior pride, feeling it swell in his chest as he takes Rey’s shoulder in hand and draws her into his arm. Gratitude fills him with it, reminding him of this man’s—sometimes irritating—generosity. “We appreciate your willingness. If there is anything I can do—”
“Actually, there is,” Poe intercedes, holding up his hand. “But not here. Come with me; I insist we discuss more over wine at my estate.”

House Dameron lies grand and shining at the edge of the city, fountains trickling, gleaming in the courtyard garden. Rey abandons their small parade for only a moment to admire the flowers, taking in the sweet aroma of life. “This place is gorgeous!”

“You can thank Kaydel for that,” Poe calls in reply.

Ben watches as Rey’s eyes flutter closed, her contented smile capturing him utterly. It’s only when Silencer insists on following the scent of hay that Ben returns to himself, the three of them moving for the stablehouse behind the villa. The stable is similar to the one at the Circus Maximus, spacious and welcoming to Silencer after his load is removed—for now.

“Where is Bambino?” Rey asks, peeking into the stalls.

“Training,” Poe shrugs. “But no worries—I’ll be sure to let you visit him any time you please.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

At this point Dameron’s overt friendliness has begun to make Ben suspicious again, and having seen Rey bend over to survey the garden has done nothing for his waning patience. “Shall we, then?”

“Right,” Poe nods, clapping his hands and rubbing them with rapid eagerness. “This way.”

He leads Ben and Rey through an outdoor garden path, a hedged tunnel shading them overhead. The stone is clean and the view serene, and with Poe’s back turned to them while they walk, Rey reaches to take Ben’s hand, holding fast to it, delighted when he threads their fingers together in silence as they listen.

“Recent actions taken by the Empire have caused some upset in my place of business,” Poe elaborates, his tone darkened. “My staff grows concerned about the soldiers. Members of their families have been interrogated one by one—and some have never come back.”

They enter the atrium before either can reply, servants coming forward to greet them. The darker man Rey had once seen strides forward, his features sleek and stern.

When his eyes take note of Ben and Rey’s intertwined hands, Rey squeezes Ben’s fingers before letting go, reminding herself that her master’s intimacy with a slave may be best kept a more modest assumption.

But they miss each other instantly, nonetheless.

“Master Ren, Miss Rey,” Poe begins, patting the man’s shoulder. “This is Finn Freedman, my manager.”

“Pleasure,” Finn greets, leaning forward and extending his hand to Ben.

Ben’s hand swallows Finn’s as they clasp and shake in a polite pump. Rey follows suit. “Hello.”

“The reason why I called you here is a matter of trust,” Poe continues. He gestures to Finn. “Given the contents of your letter and the generosity of your payment, I’m sure you understand that what we discuss must remain in strict confidence.”
“Of course,” Ben replies.

Rey looks to him, then to Poe. “What letter?”

Poe gives her a knowing glance, but doesn’t answer. “I want to know what you know,” Poe says, returning his attention to Ben.

“And what would that be?” Ben challenges, crossing his arms.

“We know you have ties to the emperor,” Finn answers. “Soldiers have been patrolling the streets, standing outside of the Circus in greater numbers.”

“They’ve begun to harass our customers,” Poe divulges, “and my employees. We want to know why—oh, Kaydel, Tallie! Excellent!” he praises, turning their attention to the small woman as she enters with a jug of wine, another young, pretty woman following behind with chalices.

The four sit in the atrium chairs, water dribbling rapidly into the atrium pool from the open roof, flowing back out into the garden beyond. The air is crisp as the women fill their wine. Rey looks to this second woman, Tallie, noticing her lithe grace and shapely, feminine facial features. Something in Rey makes her glance at Ben, who watches them as well, and that same something in her heart breaks away, dropping like a stone into her gut.

Ben, oblivious to his fiancée’s sudden discomfort, takes his wine for the sake of manners, but narrows his gaze on Poe, more than ready to have this business well and done so he and Rey can return to their own schemes. He hunches forward, looking between Poe and Finn. “Snoke is hunting for something. He claims there is a Resistance in Rome.”

“You don’t believe it exists?” Finn asks carefully.

“I couldn’t care less if it did,” Ben replies evenly, watching as Poe silently sips his wine. When neither say anything, he continues. “He has dispatched General Hux as head of the investigation.”

“And who is this man?”

Ben leans back with a look of discomfort, as if it would be enough to distance him from the words. “Hux is not a man—”

“He’s a snake,” Rey spits.

“—to be taken lightly. But yes, Rey is right. He is a politician and experienced general. I served in the infantry with him once, almost four years ago.”

“Are you close?” Poe probes.

Ben glares at him. “Does your disdain for my profession make me one so apt to fraternize with men like Hux, or are you really that foolish?”

Rey pointedly taps his calf with her foot, but Poe’s hard expression cracks into a wry smirk. “Just taking precautions. Please, continue.”

“My hatred for General Hux outweighs any loyalty to my countrymen,” Ben discloses heatedly. “He assaulted my ancilla in my home—our home. I could have killed him then, if I’d had the opportunity.”

Rey looks over at him, her throat constricting. Though his rage burns both concern and strange
attraction in her veins, happiness stings the backs of her eyes. Our home, she smiles. He said ‘our home.’

“Well, that’s a relief to hear,” Poe grins. “So we won’t have to worry about any double-crossings. Will we.”

His tone leaves no room for argument. But Ben, not one to humor anyone attempting to overpower him, if he can help it, goes on. “You only need worry if any of your staff is Resistance. Or Christian.”

Rey’s ears perk, though she fights to keep her face impassive. She can feel Finn’s gaze trained on her, as a prowling lioness might her prey as she waits for panic to drive her food into flight.

Poe nods, serious again, and leans his cheek into his pointing fingers. “Hm. Tell me more.”

Ben tries to censor his words even as he delivers them clearly. Though he may not be looking at her, these words are for her, as well. “It’s as I said. Emperor Snoke has tasked Hux with a hunt for Resistance members. It would appear they think Christians may somehow be involved.” He pauses. ”Rey and I witnessed a woman being taken into custody—and interrogation.”

Silence falls on them as the water continues to splash and echo through the room, the notion of what’s to become of that woman not lost on any of them.

Rey meets Poe’s eyes in that silence, her memory of his parting words to her from the revelry sounding in ears. A cold drip of betrayal fills her, knowing that, while Poe asked Rey to join his staff, Ben is still unaware of Poe’s questionable allegiances to Rome.

“Master Dameron.”

Poe looks to Rey, his brow arched with kindly interest. “Yes?”

“This ‘Resistance,’” she murmurs, searching his eyes. “You’re part of it. Aren’t you.”

It’s not a question, and by the beat of quiet and sudden tension in Finn’s countenance, her statement is only affirmed.

Ben glares at Poe, his suspicions poisoned by a feeling of ignorance—had he given this man to Rey, what more danger could he have put her in? “Answer her,” Ben growls.

Finn starts. “You—!”

“It’s alright, Finn,” Poe soothes, leaning back in his seat, his hands draped over the arms. “Yes. I’m with the Resistance.”

“Poe! Are you mad?” He points to Ben. “This man works for the emperor.”

“Oh, please,” Master Dameron huffs, waving a dismissive hand. “Look at his face. He’s clearly as loyal to his master as you are to your old one.”

“Yeah? You were my old one!”

“Only for a few days, before I paid your freedom and made you my business partner,” Poe admonishes pointedly, jutting a finger around his chalice. “Besides—you read that letter. The Resistance will survive regardless of whether Master Ren knows who is in it.”

Ben narrows his eyes, something strange rippling through him. Something whispering that Poe
Dameron knows much more than he’d initially presumed.

“Then maybe you can help us,” Rey pipes.

Ben gawks at Rey, the same as Finn gawks at Poe.

Poe quirks his brow at her. “You want to join?”

“Rey,” Ben warns.

“It’s alright,” Rey murmurs to him. Love fills her eyes and she reaches out, laying her hand on his arm. “A wise man once told me,” she says, “that ‘as life condemns one to death, so too does the act of life itself.’” She smiles. “I didn’t know what that meant then, but now I do.”

Ben’s heart expands in his chest as he hears her speak, remembering when she had poured over her lessons as he would watch her, just as beautiful then as she is now. If not impossibly more.

“No matter how long we live, it’s what we do that matters.” Steely resolve smooths over her eyes, her hold on Ben tightening, strengthening her. “I am a Christian. And if I’m going to die, someday—I want it to be doing what’s right.”

Poe’s gaze warms understandingly and he leans forward, patting her knee. Though Ben’s wrath simmers just below the surface, the simplicity of the touch is not enough to distract him from her, remaining still as her hold tightens on him.

“You’re a brave woman,” Poe murmurs. “I may not share your faith, but I work with those who do. If you are willing to help us, in any way you can, then I and my house will do the same for you.”

A tear slips down Rey’s cheek and she nods, brushing it away. She had not come to this place prepared for such kindness and acceptance, the fear from the spectacle in the marketplace having struck her so deeply. “Thank you…”

Ben moves, covering her hand with his, stroking her knuckles tenderly, focused in her soft skin beneath his thumb.

Indeed, his Rey is brave. The bravest woman he has ever known. He remembers her fear from the morning, when they lied entangled, over what they would do. Then her horror in the market square, her plea to find some way out.

It’s then that Ben realizes what he now must do. What he wants to do—for her.

“I will trade my services as well,” Ben offers. “A favor for a favor, if you help us.”

This catches Poe’s interest, his humanitarian expression morphing into one of business. “What do you need?”

“Someone to marry us,” Ben replies simply, returning Rey’s tightening hold on his hand.

“A Christian slave and a Roman gladiator?” Finn scoffs lowly, tone more concerned than mocking. “Do you both have a death wish?”

Rey and Ben look to Finn, the first with dismay, the second with a deep, burning scowl.

“Actually,” Poe murmurs from beneath his hand, gaze pensive and thoughtful. “I think there is someone who can help you.”
“Who?” Rey asks, her heart pounding, hope heavy in her veins.

“A member of the Resistance, and an old friend with experience marrying Christians in secret. I don’t know him, personally, but I know he goes by a codename…”

As they lean forward, he smiles.

“…Valentine.”

Chapter End Notes

[Asses were more commonly used for carrying supplies, as well as people (famously Jesus Christ during what we may call "Palm Sunday")]

[Women of higher status would often wear more layers to demonstrate their authority. As Rey digests, a "palla" was an article of clothing worn by respectable women in Rome, particularly wives and mothers. It was a long cloth that acted as both a shawl and hood to portray modesty and protect from the heat, and could come in a variety of bright colors and textures]

[While slaves had limited freedoms, they would often be sent to perform menial tasks for their masters, like shopping. According to my research, they would also accompany their masters or mistresses into the bathhouse, and were given the same opportunity to clean themselves]

[As a reminder, the Tepidarium was the "hot room" of the Roman bathhouses, heated by underground hypocaust systems to create a sauna-like atmosphere. A strigil is the sharp, scraping tool people used to pry dirt and excess filth from their skin as they sweat in the heat]

[The name "Freeman" (or sometimes "Freedman") has existed for thousands of years as a last name given to freed slaves, who may have had no last name during their servitude]

[Saint Valentine was a Roman Saint who died in 269 AD, around the same time as Glory’s Fray takes place (roughly 278 AD). He was a bishop and Christian martyr, tortured and beheaded. He was imprisoned when caught marrying Christian Couples, who were at that time under persecution by Claudius. For the sake of this narrative, the name "Valentine" lives on]
Chapter Notes

Hey guys.

So a lot of stuff has happened to me this month, crap that’s left me feeling a bit rattled and offset. I’m sorry that it made you wait. I’m posting this chapter before editing because it’s been far too long since I saw you last. I hope it was worth the wait. *hugs* Thank you so much for reading and sticking by me. You're amazing!!!

“‘Valentine?’” Rey echoes.

“Yes,” Poe Dameron nods, rising to his feet. His features seem to brighten, his smirk embedding itself deep within his cheek. The gathered watch as he clasps his hands together in delighted finality. “Yes, he should do quite nicely. I will send word for him as soon as you leave.”

Rey blinks, motionless and gawking in pleasant surprise at this sudden development.

But Ben offers no such lingering sentiment, on his feet in a moment. He towers over the man, his gaze dark and intent. “And how can I know you will be true to your word?”

“Master Ren,” Poe replies smoothly, the only betrayal of his nerves the subtle flicker of his quirked lip. Yet his voice remains steadfast and earnest. “There’s a spark out there in the streets—one that can burn this empire down. An alliance with a man like you may be just what the Resistance needs.”

Rey watches as Ben inclines his head, can feel the menace rolling from him as he bores into Poe’s innocent gaze. “Then you know a man like me would kill you,” he searches his eyes, a twitch in his own, “if you betrayed us.”

“I’m sure you would,” Poe agrees, the slightest hint of laughter in his words. When Ben does not reply, he offers his open palm. “Do we have an agreement?”

Frowning at the man’s hand, Ben glances over to Rey. She meets his eyes with hands folded in her lap, her fingers hot and tight, in a shared moment of silence, wherein her heart pounds at the prospect of this chance, she nods.

“We do,” Ben affirms, righting himself to clasp Master Dameron’s hand.

“Excellent,” Poe grins, his teeth flashing. There’s an almost childish joviality in his movements as he pumps Ben’s hand, releasing him and ushering an arm forth. “Allow me to see you out…”

Rey rises, prepared to join them, when Finn comes near. She studies his face for a moment, finding a small, comforting smile waiting there. “A pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Rey replies.

Aside, Ben’s gaze lingers on their exchange, a stewing uncertainty roiling within him. But within it
there is a sweetness, a honey and wine of potential.

Poe follows Ben’s eyes to Rey and Finn, who have begun to trade pleasantries. Poe’s smile remains, his tone one of conspiracy. “You know, I doubted you at first.”

Curious, Ben shifts his attention to Master Dameron, listening as he goes on.

“I thought you were just another one of Snoke’s pets. A mad dog that would chew her up and spit her out.” He turns to meet Ben’s eyes, warm with sincerity. “But then she saved you that day, didn’t she? In the arena.”

Ben cannot help but look when her laughter sounds along the walls, bouncing from the water beyond. The sunlight catches in the seal of her lashes, the fine slope of her cheek, the strong jut of her jaw. The sight of her, the memory of it all, fills his heart, his voice, with love. “Yes. She did.”

“Word spreads fast around a city like this,” Poe says, “but my words spread faster. I will deliver the message to Valentine myself, and alert you when he is ready to begin preparations.”

“And what will you need from me?” Ben queries.

“For now, your patience. I’ll be sure to use your favor when I need it most.” He grins as Kaydel returns to pull Finn away, inspiring Rey to join them. When she nears he bows his head in slight, his eyes twinkling with mirth. “Besides, I’m generous enough to let the two of you have time to make your own preparations.”

Ben fidgets, the neck of his tunic suddenly too tight. “That’s—”

“No need to thank me,” Poe interrupts. “Come, I’ll escort you out.”

The land soon splays before them in a sea of green, freshly watered by the rains, the clouds sparse and heat blissfully mild as the sun begins its slow descent. They follow it’s intended path alone, the road barren and serenaded by the heavy press of Silencer’s hooves and occasional chirp of restless wildlife.

“I feel bad for Silencer,” Rey admits, her voice rumbling gently into the wings of Ben’s shoulders. “Carrying all this weight…”

“He can bear it,” Ben assures, his eyes fixed on the Roman countryside. The feeling of Rey’s hands anchored over his stomach prove distracting, the uneven rise and fall of the stallion’s long, slow strides only serving to encourage the grip of her slender fingers. Not that he would complain for it.

“Are you sure? I could walk—”

“I would sooner walk than you,” he asserts gently, looking over his shoulder.

“Oh?” Rey smiles, resting her chin on his back to meet his eye askance. The dark cloth of his tunic is warm beneath her jaw. “And you would carry the supplies too, then?”

“You are welcome to ride me, instead,” Ben rumbles, taking her slender wrist to place her fingers to his lips.

Rey swears she can see him smile from beneath her hand, and feels that molten heat flood her body with a fiery vengeance. Suddenly feeling quite shy, she buries her nose into his back, returning to her sound grip over his middle—mindful of his injury. “Maybe later.”
“Hm,” Ben grunts, satisfied. Silently, he must admit to himself, he enjoys her skittishness as much as her more emboldened tendencies.

As his mind peters into similar paths of thought, Rey’s linger still on the feelings stewed within her in the bathhouse. She recalls the mark on her neck, still hidden by her hair, and in that the warring feeling of rightness—and shame. “Ben?”

“Yes?”

“Last night, when we…” she presses her cheek to his back, watching the world pass across her vision, so unaware of them both. “Do you regret it?”

Scowling, Ben nearly stops the horse. He attempts to look at her, but her face is downcast, too far for him to see. “Do you?” he asks softly, his chest burning with sudden, inexplicable anxiety that she may reject his proposal, after all.

“That’s just it,” Rey murmurs. “I should, and yet… I don’t.”

Able to breathe again, Ben exhales, his free hand going to cover hers, his thick thumb stroking the ridges of her knuckles. “Neither do I.”

“Is this happening too fast?” Rey asks, terrified of his answer—of her own. “Are we doing the right thing…?"

Ben blinks, considering. Though it has felt like much longer, he cannot deny the reality that they only met little more than one month ago. And yet, in that time, something within him grew quickly, sprouting powerfully from the withered terrain in his heart.

So he grasps her hand more fervently, feeling as the heat from his palm bleeds into her skin. “I don’t know,” he answers honestly, knowing it will be of little comfort, “but I love you anyway.”

Rey laughs at him, soft and low, squeezing him in a firm embrace. “I love you anyway, too.”

“Did you want to preserve it?” Ben asks suddenly, drawing her attention.

“Huh?”

Too brash for awkwardness, Ben replies, “Our coupling. Did you want to preserve it?”

“Oh,” Rey sputters, the house finally coming into view. “That,” she clears her throat, internally damning the heat in her face, “that would be… ideal…”

“Then it’s settled,” Ben grunts. Rey slips off, landing gracefully in the grass, and Ben follows, his weight almost imposing. He comes to stand before her, taking her arms in his massive hands, and ducks his head to steal a long, chaste kiss. When he parts her lashes flutter open, her body still so unused to the war he so expertly wages within her, and it sings as he rumbles, “On our wedding night, you shall have your husband.”

Rey cannot withhold her quiet gasp, her heart alight with this strange, numbing joy coursing through her. Wedding. Husband. It’s almost too good to be true. She smiles into his kind eyes, taking his face in hand and holding him still to return his kiss, a gesture more simple, and yet more complex, than they have ever been. “Thank you.”

He smiles in the way he best knows how—only the slightest of upturned lips, the squint and telling shimmer of contentment in the engrossing darkness of his gaze. And though it is small, it’s enough,
and they ascend to the villa on foot, guiding Silencer to the stable to unload their supplies into the culina.

When they enter Lux is there, and Rey’s heart falls to the soles of her feet. “Ahsoka’s home.”

Ben glances at the mare, expression lost somewhere between impassivity and bliss. “Apparently.”

“What do we do?” she murmurs, glancing at the door as she pulls the bags from Silencer’s saddle.

Assisting her by carrying three times as much supplies, Ben makes for the door, opening it without preamble. “Tell her the truth.”

Rey balks.

He fixes her a quizzical look. Surely she knows Ahsoka’s sharp perception? The woman is essentially a hawk in mortal form. “There’s no use hiding it,” Ben intones gently, waiting for her. “She will think no less of you.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” Rey sighs, finally walking through the entryway. They manage to make it into the culina without fuss, unloading the fruits and vegetables into the storeroom.

Ben watches her crouch down to sort the greens, pushing the half-rotted from the fresh. He crosses his arms, leaning against the doorframe, his gaze transfixed on her. “Then what is it?”

“It’s me,” Rey presses, pausing in her work to look up at him. “I’ve already endangered you enough…”

_Endangered?_ Ben contemplates, realization dawning on the horizon of his view of his fiancée. _So that’s why…_

He approaches her without a word as she furiously puts the food away, her gaze hard and focused. He crouches down and reaches to still her, stroking her face with the back of his knuckles in an attempt to ease it away—knowing how she enjoys being touched. “Rey,” he murmurs, bidding her look at him. She does. His voice softens, secretive. “I am not the only person in this house you can trust.”

Rey closes her eyes, soaking in his reassurance as best she knows how. “I know that,” she whispers. “But what happens if we are discovered? If something happens to you, or Ahsoka—”

“And if something doesn’t?” he interrupts, his voice gentle. “She is more capable than you think. She can take care of herself,” his hand, warm and comforting, pulls her closer by the back of the neck, his lips brushing the crown of her hair, “while we take care of each other.”

Rey sighs into his neck, savoring this—this new expression they share, once so restrained.

He’s right. To worry now, when this news should bring them only happiness… she cannot abandon hope. Rome is a dangerous place, especially for people like them, but today was perhaps their greatest victory against Snoke, and for that, she should at least allow herself to act like it.

“Alright,” Rey accepts, laying her hands against his chest. The heat from his body rolls down her wrists, filling her with her own, and she wonders if his heart beats as hard as hers under this thin layer separating them—how long it will be before she can feel it again.

They put away their supplies together, the task done quickly and without interruption. They walk
together through the courtyard, darkness encroaching fast, thinking Ahsoka asleep and snuck easily by.

They are mistaken.

“It’s about time, you two.”

Rey and Ben pause like discovered criminals in the atrium, their eyes wide as they take in the sight before them.

The room has undergone a drastic change—the empty space, once left in barren shambles by Ben’s rage, lies freshly cleaned and polished, standing oil lamps speckled strategically over the floor. Their light chases away the emerging dusk, shrouding the space in a warm, fiery glow.

Ahsoka leans back in her chair, one of four new chaise pieces, a chalice of wine in her hand. She smirks knowingly when Ben meets her eyes, lifting it to her lips. “Your list wasn’t quite specific, Young Master. Forgive me for assuming your tastes.”

Rey takes in the sight of the newly-furnished atrium, her eyes tracing the scarlet velvet of the cushions, so new and plush-looking. The chaise lounge among them is rather… roomy, its space taking up the space in her mouth to speak.

Ben lumbers near, lips pursed thoughtfully as he pinches the cushion between his fingers, finding it soft and pliant, yet firm enough to suit his needs. “This will do fine.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Ahsoka croons, “because your new mattress will be made of the same materials. It should be delivered in a few days.” A glint dances in her bright eyes, her brow and lips unabashedly raised. “I took the liberty of ordering you a larger size. I hope you don’t mind.”

Rey feels a blush rising in her cheeks at the sight of this exchange, even more so when Ben regains that sneaking shadow of a smirk, himself. “Not at all,” he hums. “And… the rest of it?”

She swallows her wine, offering a gratified smack of her lips. “Waiting for you in the triclinium—what fine mulsum this is…”

“What?” Rey asks, joining them.

“Well done, Ahsoka,” Ben praises, pleasure rolling off him in waves.

Not liking being ignored, Rey frowns. “What’s in the triclinium?”

Ben turns his gaze on her, the look on his face so open and eager, she could almost think him another man entirely. He moves a step closer to her, only enough to reveal a mischievous gleam lurking shallowly in his eyes. “A surprise.”

Suddenly very interested, Rey nearly abandons them to seek out the dining room. But Ahsoka lifts her hand, drawing their attention. “Speaking of surprises…” she says lowly, her satisfaction molding with newfound sincerity. “… Sit. I think it’s time for us to have a little chat, don’t you?”

Trading silent ascent, Rey and Ben move to sit together on the chaise. Though he sits with respectful distance from her, the weight of his body is nearly enough to send her colliding into him, the comfortable plush of the cushion gently giving way.

When they’ve settled, Ahsoka sets down her glass, her brow furrowed as she snares them with a gaze. “Did you have sex last night?”
Ben’s expression darkens, his lips folded under the scrutiny of his most trusted servant. The question knocks Rey off guard, her face a burning fire as she answers, “…We did.”

“And…?”

Ben answers bluntly. “Rey will remain here, with me.”

At their answer, Ahsoka sighs, her shoulders relaxing into the spine of the chair. “Well it’s about damn time,” she grins, laughing softly, almost deliriously, into her hand. “I was worried the two of you would never admit your feelings.”

They gawk at her, but it’s Ben that speaks, his hand fistng over his thigh. “You knew?”

“Of course I knew,” Ahsoka replies soundly.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Rey asks softly, placing her hand over his clenched fist. He loosens it instantly.

A look of pain shadows Ahsoka’s face, as though she weren’t looking at them, but someone else. “It was not my place to tell. Your love is between you. For me to interfere… it would only take away what is rightfully yours.”

At that, Rey looks at Ben, and he at her, each remembering that night beneath the stars when he made his love known, and know together that Ahsoka speaks the truth. This was something only they could do. Not Ahsoka, nor anyone else.

Just them.

“There is something else you should know,” Ben begins softly, interlacing his fingers with Rey’s as he turns to meet the woman’s expectant gaze. “Rey has agreed to marry me.”

Ahsoka’s eyes nearly flee her skull, her grey lashes parted as wide as her mouth. “Oh. Well that was quick. When?”

“We… don’t know,” Rey admits, letting herself fall into Ben’s arm, sapping up his quiet support. “Poe Dameron is helping us find someone who will.”

“Agh, I see,” Ahsoka frowns, not seeing at all. “But why go to him? Surely there are plenty of priests who would marry a master and slave in secret?”

“Yes, but,” Rey shies, averting her gaze, “not… a slave like me.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” Ahsoka murmurs, crossing her arms soundly over her breast. “What makes you any different?”

Rey finds she cannot meet Ahsoka’s eye, her guilt for keeping this secret from her mentor burning deep in her belly. When it was a man like Poe Dameron, this was different—he was a stranger whose opinion of her mattered very little. But Ahsoka… the thought of her disappointment is almost too painful to consider.

Ben watches Rey warily, but when she doesn’t reply knows that perhaps her own strength is not enough to rely on in this. “Ahsoka,” he murmurs. “Do you remember when I was ill?”

“Of course,” she sighs. “I may never forget.”

He fixes his eyes steadily on Ahsoka, his voice stern and unbending. “As I lay dying, Rey came to
me late in the night. When she thought I was asleep, I heard her pray.” His hold on her tightens. “To the god of the Hebrews.”

“So she’s Jewish,” Ahsoka rationalizes.

Ben frowns.

Reality cloaks her expression like a veil, her shock carefully moderated as she finally sets her eyes on Rey, finding the young woman’s gaze pleading and vulnerable. “A Christian…?” she whispers. “You’re a Christian?”

Rey breathes out shakily, the freedom of her secret escaping in the form of tears she cannot feel. “Yes.”

Silently, Ahsoka rises to her feet. She moves slowly around the table to approach them, her shoulders stiff—before falling to her knees, pulling Rey into her firm embrace. When Rey clutches onto her, the woman’s voice rushes out in Coptic, leaving no room for breath, everything suddenly so clear. “Don’t cry—don’t be afraid. Sawf asaedak, Rey. I’m here,” she holds tighter. “I’ll always be right here.”

Rey smiles into the cloth of Ahsoka’s shoulder, her watery eyes finding Ben’s as acceptance fills and drains her all at once, this unexpected love more than she ever could have dreamed. It breaks in her throat, shivering relief in her gut as she sobs once, holding fast, never letting go.

He walks her to her chambers, keeping with her slow pace. The day has been so draining—from waking in the stable to his sudden proposal, all of these different changes happening so soon, obstacles both hurdled and incoming—that Rey fears she may fall asleep at any moment.

Rey lingers in the door, realization breaking through to her psyche like morning light through a shaded window. “What about you?”

He plucks at the sleeve of her stola, stealing the opportunity to feel the warmth of her hair, of her body, one last time. “I’ve slept in the tablinum before. I can do it again.”

She stiffens, his fingers ghosting near to that place his mark lies hidden. “That doesn’t sound very comfortable…” she murmurs distractedly.

“Unless you’d rather join me in the stables?” Ben asks, his serious expression tainted by the glint in his eye as he strokes the ridge of her jaw.

His touch is intoxicating—she can’t blame him for being so brazen. Quite the opposite. She hums, meeting his eyes with bleary memories of them together, her body stirring again, stoked like a dying fire. “Or you could join me here,” she offers, hushed.

Now is Ben’s turn to go still. The look in his eyes hardens, his breath shortening as he searches her face. “That could be very dangerous,” he warns lowly.

Rey blinks from her stupor, suddenly feeling like a fool. And yet… “I know.”

He folds his lips, the mechanisms turning in his body, fighting his rationalizations. Temptation sinks its claws into his shoulders, its breath hot at his neck, combating his conscience. He knows Rey’s value in chastity, but after having a true taste of her… he doesn’t know if he can resist the opportunity to pursue it again.
But as his hand moves her hair about her neck, he spots it—a small swell of red skin, standing humbly in the glowing lamplight. They gasp together when he touches it, energy flooding hot through them from the tips of his fingers.

“Is that what you want?” he asks tentatively.

Carefully, Rey nods, holding his hand in place over the evidence of him on her flesh. “Yes.”

Possession coils through him at her permit, his hand fixing her in place by her nape as he pulls them closer, ducking his head to nuzzle the skin of her neck. She sighs in welcome when he probes her with his tongue, feeling her heart pound unsteadily against his lips. He ravishes her quietly in the doorway, never straying far from that tender joint of skin, and captures her in his teeth.

Rey clings to his arms, feeling the taut flesh of his skin as she closes her eyes, relishing the feeling of him giving her another. Yes… yes, they can have this—this, though not enough, can do.

When he’s finished she smiles, holding him close to her, kissing his cheek, his lips. Wordlessly, he herds her inside, closing the door behind them, leaving them cloaked in the silvery silence. She pulls the covers and enters, him close behind. The mattress is small, but not the smallest he’s ever had to endure. They curl around each other, his arms pulling her back against his chest, his lips planting themselves at the base of her skull.

Rey hums, snuggling into him, sapping up the heat from his body. His leg moves between her skirt and she squeezes it between her thighs—suddenly feeling, annoyingly, awake. “Ben?”

“Mm,” he hums, rooting into her hair, breathing her in.

“Could you… tell me a story?” she asks shyly. She feels him question her through his silence, and elaborates, “I can’t trust myself to fall asleep.”

Ben grunts in reply, almost like he’s amused, his arms snug around her. His thumb traces the covered skin of her belly, shooting sparks through her. After a moment he mumbles, voice deep with weariness, “Would Greek myth offend you?”

“No,” she murmurs, shaking her head into the pillow, savoring the warmth of his words against her skin.

His hand continues to caress her, tracing a bold yet respectful trail back and forth along the curve of her waist. He brings his lips close to her ear, his Greek low and lulling. “Eros was the son of Aphrodite…”

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Eros was the son of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and desire.

He inherited her power over man, but shared not her lust for them, for he saw the cruelty of their hearts, and how desire could drive them to greed, foolishness, and crime. As a plague, he lived, forsaking love, cursing mankind with his power, revealing their true nature with the strike of his arrow—his aim ever true, its power able to sway victims into love for the first one they see.

As he lived, so too did a young woman. Her name was Psyche. Rumor of her grace and beauty spread over the land, the peoples’ worship of her reaching the ears of the gods. At this, Aphrodite was displeased, and in her wrath ordered her son to strike Psyche down with his arrow, and condemn her to desire the most hideous of crawling beasts.

At his mother’s command, Eros pursued the rumor of Psyche, blending with the shadows to enter
the gardens of her home. Hearing her, he hid himself, and readied his bow. But when he saw her, his arrow drawn and ready, he could not bear to let it fly, for in her he saw for the first time the purity of a human soul, un tarnished and beautiful.

So consumed by the vision of her was Eros, that terror gripped him at the sudden memory of his godhood. He swore allegiance to her then, taking one of his own arrows and drawing it across his flesh, so that his loyalty to her may never sway.

And so Eros began to scheme. He lied to his mother, and persuaded his relative, Apollo, to bestow Psyche’s father with a vision to leave her as a sacrifice on the mountaintop. In the dark of the night, the wind carried Psyche from the mountain deep into valley, where a palace of marble and gold awaited her.

Full of wonder and innocence, the young woman entered the house. As she explored, she found herself alone. But she was not alone—as a voice called to her from a body she could not see, urging her to make herself comfortable, to bathe and drink and eat as she wished.

Psyche obeyed, luxuriating herself, staving her hunger with all manner of delicious foods. And when night came, she followed the voice in her mind to a darkened chamber, and lied herself upon the bed.

In the darkness she felt a presence next to her, and the voice revealed himself as her husband. With their beauty concealed from the light, Eros laid hand on Psyche, and made love to her, consummating their marriage.

And it was in the darkness of each night that they met, his face never revealed, for Eros was consumed with love and fear—fear that if she saw him, she would not truly love him as her husband, but for the curse of his power over her kind—

Rey’s gentle snores sound as he speaks, and he stops, shifting to gaze on her. Tenderly, as not to wake her, he sweeps a strand of hair from her sleeping face, that same love and fear swelling in his chest. But he pushes it away, everything but her away, knowing that, if they are going to survive, he will have to let it go.

So he lies beside her, nestling closer, whispering and savoring this, their night in the blissful dark.

“Goodnight, Puella.”

Two days pass in equal measure to the other. In the mornings they awaken in each other’s arms, cramped an aching, yet eager for word from the Dameron estate. Ahsoka teaches Rey her skills in the kitchen, sharing her tactics for experimentation—of which Ben is quite willing to play subject. He continues to steer her away from the secret held in the triclinium, distracting her in the evenings with more myths and stories as they lounge together in the atrium, partaking of fruits and the fruits of Rey’s labor, alike.

They torment the other with their bodies, trading passing touches and lingering, simmering glances. They lie together at night in a bed too small to manage more than brief exchanges of lips and skin and sweat, exhausting themselves in the effort of that alone. Rey surprises herself with her own restraint, finding a delicious ecstasy in the prolong of their inevitable collision—unaware that, as she prepares with Ahsoka, Ben sits locked in his room, furiously taking himself in hand in hopes of managing the same.

It is on this, the third day, that a rider comes from the East, a letter carefully concealed in the
Ahsoka stands outside to greet him, the gentle summer wind stirring her face, ghosting over her with hope. When he dismounts she bows her head, unable to fight her smile. “Master Freedman. Rey has told me about you. Please, come inside.”

“Thank you,” he replies, following her through the door. He pales when he enters the atrium to find Master Ren and his slave in close quarters, reclined on a chaise lounge, his arm around her neck and tongue in her mouth.

Ahsoka clears her throat. When neither seem to hear, she clears it again. Loudly. “Young Master, Finn Freedman is here.”

At this, Rey jolts, her cheeks flushed, and Ben obeys, separating himself from her. His annoyance quickly fades when he recognizes Finn, his frame frozen with elation and shock. “Do you have it?”

“I have it,” Finn replies, rummaging through his bag to pull free a neatly-folded letter.

Ben rises from the couch, Rey at his side, watching as he takes the letter from Finn’s outstretched hand. They gaze at it in silent awe, neither moving to reveal its contents.

“It’s from Valentine himself,” Finn discloses. “Poe managed a meeting with him in the dead of night. He says he wants to meet with you before the ceremony. No one knows about this but him, myself, and Kaydel Connix.”

Their eyes snap to Finn’s, one far more threatening than the other. “What does she have to do with this?” Ben grunts.

“Poe wanted a confidant,” Finn admits, seemingly distracted—but not intimidated—by the man’s intensity. “In case either of you betrayed us, he trusts Kaydel to avenge him on behalf of the Resistance.”

Though Ben frowns, Rey lays a hand on his arm, tempering him. “We understand,” she says. “Thank you for delivering this to us.”

He risks a smile at her. “Your alliance with us won’t be taken lightly. If you’ll have me, I shall return tomorrow at dusk to escort you to the meeting place. The letter should explain everything you need to know.”

“Will there be anything else?” Ben asks impatiently.

“Not at the moment,” Finn assures. “I’ll just, uh,” he winces, “leave you to your business. Until tomorrow.”

At that, Ahsoka guides Finn towards the culina, offering him a drink as Ben and Rey stand behind, staring at the letter.

Rey squeezes his wrist. “Ben…”

He doesn’t reply, focused intently on the task of carefully breaking the wax seal, unfolding the parchment for her to see the Latin letters scrolled so carefully there.

I, Valentine of Rome, hereby send this message to the young lovers of which Master Gaius Poe Dameron is fond:
In recognition of a unity prohibited by the empire of Rome, and promotion of purity between those endowed by Resistance favor and Christian faith, I shall arrange an interview in accordance with these terms to ensure a union most befitting.

I shall await you in the Roman Forum at the midnight hour precisely one day from now.

If you wish to be wed, you will not forsake this conference.

May the Lord be with you,

Valentine.

Joy ripples through Rey at the words, her eyes ignited as they dance across the page. “Ben…” she scoffs, as if unable to believe the words before her. “…it’s a miracle.”

He looks to her, his gaze taking in every feature of her face. “It is.” Then, hard with resolution, he passes the letter to her, and makes for the courtyard.

Rey stares after him. “Where are you going?”

He stops, coming back to take her shoulders in his hands, his breath short and pupils wide with barely-restrained exhilaration. “Take Lux and meet me at the tree before sundown,” he instructs, squeezing gently. He stoops to kiss her cheek. “I’ll be waiting for you,” he vows, before rushing out of the atrium, leaving her thrumming with pleasant confusion.

She grins, the memory of his kiss warm in her cheek, and holds the letter to her chest, looking up through the open atrium roof and to the sun above, and whispers, “Thank you.”

Ben’s mattress arrives while he’s gone, leaving Ahsoka and Rey to fit it through his door and onto its frame. The merchants assist them with widening the base, readjusting the bedposts and their curtains. When they’ve gone Ahsoka shoos Rey out, set to cleaning up the remnants of Ben’s reclusion while Rey returns to her own chambers. She combs her hair carefully, washing her face and rubbing a mint leaf from the culina high upon her neck—hoping it will do in place of perfume.

She sets off with Lux, taking in the countryside, her heart pounding with every trot. The sun casts lower and lower on the horizon, its rusty glow shining halos over every long blade of grass.

When she nears the tree she spots his tall shadow leaning against the trunk, his muscular arms crossed over his chest. He stalks over to help her down, his hands encompassing her waist. She looks up to find him offering her a close-lipped smile, the crinkles in the corners of his eyes melting her bones. “Come,” he urges, guiding her to the other side of the tree.

“What is it?”

“Your surprise,” he answers, stepping aside.

Rey looks down, gasping quietly at the sight. A hoard of pillows and blankets rests splayed like a nest at her feet, their linens dyed in rich reds, violets, rusts and creams. The perimeter glows with light from small votive candles, and in the middle, a grand spread of succulent fruits.

Warm hands rub her arms, stroking up and down. “It’s time I courted you properly,” he rumbles in her ear, the stir of his breath making her shiver, “Mea Puella.”

“This is what you’ve been hiding?” Rey asks in wonder, moving to sit inside the nest. It sinks
comfortably underneath her, the cool touch of fabric thrilling her.

He seats himself close to her, but does not touch, reaching for the basket holding a jug of wine and two chalices. “Yes,” he answers simply.

Rey considers him thoughtfully, his earnest gesture of romance striking her. She wonders, then, about how these things came to be, and recalls him providing Ahsoka with a list on the day she was to leave him. “How long have you been planning this?” she asks, not withholding her suspicion.

He does not reply, pouring a glass with a pointed pout.

“Ben?”

Ben wets his lip, as though pensive. “I intended to court you long ago,” he admits, handing the glass to her. There’s a shy look in his gentle eyes when she takes it, as though his words are more in apology than confession of love. “But this occurred to me the night you ran away.”

Rey bites her lip, staring into the wine in her chalice as she recalls the night he first kissed her, when she had fled from their passionate embrace. Just the memory of it is enough to pool her rationale between her thighs. “Oh.”

He watches her, his throat tight, ribs closing in on his pounding heart. She looks so beautiful in the waning sunlight—he finds himself unnerved by the sudden pressure to ensure this night be one she enjoys.

“Come here,” he beckons softly, mirroring her by moving closer. Rey concedes, leaning into him as they sip from their chalices in silence. He wraps his arm around her, admiring the view both before and beside him, content in the nearness of her.

In the quiet Rey sighs wistfully, the taste of the wine sweet on her tongue. “Ben?”

“Yes?”

“The story you told me,” she begins, looking up at him, “of Eros and Psyche? How does it end?”

Ben strokes her bare shoulder, searching in his cup for the memory. “Happily.”

Rey scoffs, knocking her hand against his chest. “Don’t tease.”

“Hmph. Alright,” Ben smirks, taking a lengthy sip before setting his wine aside. He wraps his arms firmly around her, enjoying her sudden shyness as he meets her eyes. “It wasn’t long before Psyche discovered the identity of her husband…”

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*It wasn’t long before Psyche discovered the identity of her husband.*

*The mystery that shrouded him began to torment her. She started to fear that her lover was not a man, but a monster—that she was not his bride, but a sacrifice.*

*So, one night, as Eros lay sleeping, she forged a light in the darkness, prepared to slay him. But when she shined the light upon him, she saw that he was not a monster, but a man. She beheld his power and, in her shock, spilt oil from her lamp, anointing his body with a painful, burning scar.*

*Being harmed in the mortal realm, Eros felt betrayed by his love, and fled from Psyche to heal on Mount Olympus before he could return to her again. Psyche felt grieved by the loss of her husband,*
and in her love, pleaded to the gods for his swift return.

When Aphrodite discovered the truth of Psyche and Eros’s marriage, she forbade Psyche from reuniting with him. Yet Psyche would not be deterred. In her pleas, Aphrodite demanded the young woman complete four impossible tasks.

But Psyche was as cunning as she was beautiful, charming those around her to aid in her quest. She completed the tasks, but their powerful influence became too much for her human body, and she fell into a deep sleep.

When Eros finally healed, he returned to Psyche, his heart in agony over the curse that fell upon her. He begged his grandfather, Zeus, to grant his wife immortality, so that she may live with him forever. His ancestor agreed, and Psyche awakened in her husband’s arms. And, together, they shared an eternity of purest love.

“So they struggled,” Rey murmurs, “and yet they were happy, in the end.”

“They were,” Ben agrees, taking her empty chalice and sitting forward, preparing the food for her.

Rey is quiet for a moment, watching him as he works, memorizing the sharp line of his profile as his skin bathes half in light, half in shadow. “Will we be the same way?”

Pausing, Ben looks at her. “I don’t know,” he answers honestly. Slowly, he covers her hand with his, holding on to her gently. “But we can try.”

Smiling softly, Rey squeezes his fingers. “I’d like that.”

A slight smile quirks on his lip before it falls, his mind’s tenacity towards the unfortunate rearing its ugly, habitual head. He slices open a fig, presenting half to her. “Rey… there is one thing I haven’t told you.”

“What’s that?” she asks, curiosity furrowing her brow as she takes it, beginning to eat.

“Emperor Snoke,” he begins, watching as anger flashes on her face, “has postponed my rank in his guard.”

Rey blinks at him, worry seeding in her heart. “Why?” she asks around a full mouth.

“There is a tournament,” Ben shares, stroking her knuckles. He glances down at their hands, unable to look in her eyes with the familiar shame rising in him. “The Tournament of Champions. In a few weeks’ time, I will be called back into the arena. And when I am…” he frowns. “…it will be the last time.”

Pain knifes through Rey at the sight of him, hunched and penitent—and yet in that pain there is still joy. He has changed so much since first they met—but somehow not at all. Where there was once cruelty in his stony expression, now Rey sees the somber truth of his captivity, this yearning for freedom they both share.

She reaches out to touch his face, her palm fitting into the slope of his cheek. “We will find a way,” she promises, tracing her thumb over his supple skin. He looks to her, then, the last dregs of hope swimming in his dark, endless eyes, and she whispers, “Together.”

The sunset bleeds between them, illuminating her, every fine hair on her face, every last lash and spare strand of hair knocked loose from its band. They are pushed together by its flow, the steady thrum and pulse of life alive in them, in the joining of their lips.
When they break they feel short of breath, though the exchange was not the most impassioned—but the most *something else*—and Rey reaches first for the food, rifling through the contents of the spread.

She chuckles, her smile chasing back the tears lingering behind her eyes. “Figs and pomegranates?”

“I assumed you would enjoy them,” he grunts, moving to sit behind her. His hand finds purchase on her hip, the warmth rippling through her from his possessive touch. He rests his chin on her shoulder as she filters through a bit too slowly, distracted by him. “Pick whatever you like,” he murmurs in her ear, pleased by the way she shudders when he plants a kiss on her neck. “It’s all for you.”

Rey considers mentioning that these foods are not *all* she has an appetite for this night, but refrains. The sunlight continues to wane, leaving them little time to enjoy the other under the watchful eye of day. She takes his uneaten half from him with a blooming grin, holding it to his mouth. He bites it and chuckles as he chews before she plucks a pomegranate from the bunch and offers it to him with mischief in her smile. “Feed me?”

Hunger boils in his eyes as he takes it from her, his voice low. “Of course. Shall I sit on your lap, this time?” he jests flatly, cracking open the rind.

“No,” Rey replies. She shifts on the bed of pillows, moving closer. Ben freezes as she throws her leg over his lap, bringing herself to straddle him. When he looks at her wide-eyed, she only smiles, resting her hands on his chest, her heart in her throat. “I… I prefer yours.”

Ben swallows thickly, his gaze never leaving her as he pinches the soft seeds in his fingers. “Open your mouth,” he orders, every word dripping.

She obeys, closing her eyes as he passes his fingers through her lips, planting the seeds inside of her. The taste is tart yet sweet, flooding her with its delicious flavor. A quiet moan escapes her throat before she opens her eyes, her fingers tightening in the cloth of his tunic. “More,” she insists, breathless when he complies, the gentle push from the pads of his fingers, the warmth where their bodies meet, driving her mad with want.

His hands begin to tremble as he watches her, lust sinking in him like a stone. He can feel his blood rushing from his mind to his groin, the sight of his betrothed lost in such simple bliss presenting more temptation than he ever thought it could.

When she’s finished he prepares to wipe his hand, but she takes his wrist. “Wait,” she murmurs, holding his hand before her, her eyes and fingers taking in the masculine bulge of his veins. She eyes the red stain of the fruit on his thumb, and before he can move she slips her mouth around him, her tongue flicking its tip.

Ben’s mouth falls open as she sucks him, the sensations echoing a phantom promise in his member, and his blood runs too hot for him to resist. With his hand he cups her jaw, pushing his thumb further inside. She welcomes him, her teeth scraping his skin, the wet heat of her mouth agonizingly suggestive.

When she slides away from his thumb her breath comes in pants, need coiling through her at the hardness of him between her legs, a strange sense of power descending over her. “Ben…” she whispers, shifting over him, wanting more than she can say.

“Rey,” he huffs, dragging her close. He lunges to kiss her, to snare her tightly against him. She
tries to return his affections through his passionate onslaught, but her attempts are easily drowned as he claps her to his body, moving and turning them until she lies on her back, her hair splayed over the menagerie of color and candlelight.

He hovers over her when they pause to breathe, Rey laying her hand over her neck, as though to measure her own pulse. He pulls it away, replacing her fingers with his mouth, pinning it down. She smells of mint and sweat as he kisses her the way she likes, stroking her with his tongue until she gasps, threading her fingers through his hair. “Don’t stop,” she moans. “Please don’t stop…”

He grunts and submits, not stopping until she whimpers, trying to wrap her legs around him. He hovers on hands and knees as she groans at the loss, looking down at her as the sun finally vanishes from the sky, leaving them in the flickering candlelight. “What else?”

Blinking, Rey stammers, “What?”

His hands stroke her thighs, probing the upridden hem of her gown. “Teach me,” he rumbles, eyes shining in the near-darkness, consuming her from above. “Tell me what you like.”

Rey swallows, searching her mind for a reasonable answer. It’s a difficult task, she discovers, as the fingers swirling over her bare skin leaves her numb to rational thought. So she does what comes to her first—she reaches out, and places her hand over his heart. “I like this.”

He blinks at her. “My chest…?”

She nods. Bashfully, if not emphatically, so.

Without pause Ben sits up, crossing his arms to take the lip of his tunic in hand, and pulls it over his head. Rey stares dumbfoundedly as he frees himself, bared only in his subligar, and tosses the shirt away. He grabs her hand and pulls it to his chest, splaying her fingers against him, watching her intently.

Rey exhales swiftly, the heat of his body burning into her palm. Tenderly, she brings her other hand to join its twin, taking this opportunity to feel him for the first time—without the distraction of kissing or looming danger of battle.

She takes in his broad frame, exploring everything from the hard planes of his chest to the strong bones of his collar. Her hands travel down to his sides. He shivers when her fingers slide over his healed injury, the weight of his body suddenly too heavy as he nearly collapses atop her, his lips at her ear. “Touch me. Touch me there,” he hisses, his free hand moving to push up her skirt.

Rey listens, gently stroking him again, relishing the way he rut against her in reply. “Ben,” she moans, wrapping her legs around him.

“Yes,” he answers, planting a sloppy kiss on her jaw. “What else?”

“I want us naked,” Rey blurts.

Ben sighs into her neck, stroking her with his thumb. “So do I,” he murmurs. Regret laces his every syllable as he speaks, throat rasped with want. “But you know we can’t.”

Mildly exasperated, and still throbbing, Rey groans. “I know…”

He sits up, just enough to look into her eyes. Moonlight shines above him, fighting the soft light of the candles flickering on his cheek, casting shadows across his face with the stray locks of his hair. “I’ve taken too much from you, Rey,” he whispers, moving his lips at the soft under her chin. “Let
Rey exhales, craning her neck to encourage him. As he shifts, the length of his hair kissing her skin, she knows what he means—wants it just as much. How long have they wanted each other this way? To belong to the other as husband and wife? She wants to give herself to him now, every sinew and muscle and drop of blood crying out for his, but knows she must resist; the end is finally in sight.

The wet, gentle smack of his lips sounds in her ears, making her writhe. Ben grunts when her legs ensnare him, pulling their bodies together. He can feel her pulsing, waves of heat spilling over him through the cloth between them, as she points his nose to the soft skin above her breasts.

A warm chuckle escapes him. “Alright,” he concedes, nuzzling her. She shivers as the tip of his nose strokes the sensitive flesh, his fingers gently nudging down the neck of her stola. He miraculously resists the urge to expose her, bending to grind their hips as he laps and grazes her skin.

Just as he suspected, Rey cries out, moving against him with a hesitant form of abandon. Power cloaks him with how he can make her squirm, making him drunk as he kisses her lips, sliding himself against her concealed cleft.

Rey jolts, clinging to him as she feels him strike her crest, ecstasy building in her as he rolls against her, burying them deeper into the pillows. The hot pants of his breath fan over her neck as he braces his hands below her, unrelenting in his efforts to prolong her pleasure.

The pressure of his thrusts grows fierce, driving Rey higher with confounding speed. She can feel her arousal trapped between them, taste the salt of his sweat, the lingering flavor of his fingers. But it’s his hands that pitch her over the edge—the way he cleaves to her in the darkness, her name on his lips.

He doesn’t feel the gush of wetness, only the shuddering, lengthy moan that seeps from somewhere deep within her. “Ben,” she gasps, her nails clawing into his shoulder blade.

It’s then that he halts, hovering over her, looking down on her ravished, breathless body, and, realizing, is filled with no small amount of pride. “It would seem the student has become the teacher,” he muses, gently pushing hair from her mouth.

Rey laughs at that, her ecstasy molding into one of a different kind. She touches his lips with her fingers, sliding her thumb along their plump, swollen seam. “Does that make us both masters, now?” she asks sleepily.

Adoration fills him from her, and he nuzzles into her palm, planting a kiss there. “I suppose.”

She hums, her eyes falling down his body, fixing on the prominent bulge in his lap. She narrows her focus, reaching for him. He catches her wrist, stopping her, and she meets his eyes. “But, you —”

“It will fade,” he assures, leaning down to kiss her. She accepts it after a moment, letting him wrap his arms around her, rolling them onto their sides. “Don’t concern yourself with me.”

They breathe together in the nest and Rey settles her hand over his heart, feeling as it gradually slows. “But I want to,” she whispers, caressing him. “Even if I weren’t what I am, I would still want to please you.”

Ben sighs into her hair, caressing her arm. “You should never be anyone’s slave,” he whispers,
feeling the moonlight settle on them as the votives begin to flicker and die.

Rey turns on her arm, leaning to wrap them around his neck, holding him close. “Except yours,” she murmurs, feeling herself begin to slip away.

He scoffs at her, a low, fleeting thing, and smiles into Rey’s hair, joining her in the quiet death of light and wakefulness. “…Except mine.”

Chapter End Notes

[Sawf asaedak" is Arabic, meaning "I will help you"]

[The name "Gaius" is a Roman first name with unknown meaning, but held massive popularity in Rome given its link to Ceasar, whose name was also Gaius]

[The story of Eros and Psyche is hailed as one of the most romantic stories from Greek and Roman myth. Eros, Latin name "Cupid," is known as the god of love and sexual desire, while "Psyche" represents humanity. For the sake of this narrative, I have peeled some details away from the original story, but the overall message remains the same, and I encourage you to read it for yourselves, if you haven't already (It's quite steamy)]
Night comes quickly, the rising chorus of insects blaring as the sun sinks over the hills. Rey fixes the cloak over her shoulders, pulling up its hood. The smell of summer flowers and dyes fills her nose, Ahsoka’s lingering scent comforting her as she and Ben mount their horses, Lux’s saddle suiting her straddling legs.

Finn stays his horse, looking back at them. Dusk falls over his stern features, a gleam of lingering nerves in the wide set of his eyes. “Follow me. And stay close,” he orders firmly. “If anyone recognizes you, we’re dead.”

They nod, Ben sharing a glance with Rey as he fixes his sheathed gladius to his belt. A feeling of wariness falls over them when he mounts his stallion, the sensation colder than dew—both knowing what this night offers. Without a word, he tugs the hood of his pallium over his face, kicking Silencer onward.

The three trot through the glade, their eyes open for any hint of danger. Travel so late on the main roads could invite danger from thieves—the thought of it is enough to take precautions. Rey keeps her thoughts on the knife carefully concealed in her stola—regardless of Ben’s orders to flee should they be ambushed—comforted in knowing a last resort lies within her reach.

Finn’s presence is an added reassurance, though Ben would never admit it. They pass the hour in silent travel, slugging through the vortex of nightlife and moonlight as Rey travels flanked between them. The silver glows in Lux’s mane, Rey’s slender fingers tensely stroking the mare’s withers, catching her master’s eye.
When the gates of the city emerge, Rey goes stiff. She and Ben hunch at Finn’s leading gesture, their visages carefully concealed by the shadow of their cloaks.

A guard walks forward. He’s tall and lean, his voice hissing like a snake. “Who g-goes-s-s there?”

“Just travelers,” Finn lies smoothly, flicking a denarii towards the guard.

It shimmers before the man catches it in hand. Glancing at it, he bites down on its edge, seemingly satisfied by its taste. He nods toward the gate, his newfound disinterest in them palpable. “G-go ahead.”

They enter the gates without issue, the torchlight in the streets lighting their way on the empty outskirts. Dismounting their steeds, Finn takes all three to one of Poe’s stable branches, returning along the razor-edge of dubiousness and decency.

“We’ll travel on foot,” he informs. “Less suspicion that way.”

As they move on, Rey glances over her shoulder, unable to stop herself. “Are all guards so easily swayed by money?”

“Most of them,” Finn shrugs. “They call that one ‘Denarii Julius.’ All guards take different bribes. Sometimes it’s money, sometimes it’s… company,” he frowns. “We’re lucky to have the former.”

“I remember Ahsoka bribing a guard to let us bring the cart into the city,” Rey shares, keeping her voice low.

Ben frowns, traveling closer to Rey’s side. “Rome has always been corrupt,” he murmurs softly, watching over her. Clouds shift over the moon, a soft peal of thunder rumbling over the distant sea.

Finn shoots him a half-hearted glare. “Hopefully that can start to change.”

“Tell us more about the Resistance,” Rey urges, a glimmer of intrigue in her eye as she walks closer to him. “What does it do?”

“We call ourselves the SPQR, for the Senate and the People of Rome,” Finn discloses, eagerness bubbling in his throat.

Ben huffs. “The senate is dead.”

“It died with Ceasar, I know,” Finn grunts, shaking his head in dismay, leading them from the outer wall in the direction of the Forum. “When he died, the empire took over. From then it’s been emperor after emperor, building their cities and armies on the backs of slaves.”

This news is nothing truly new to Rey. “Egypt was the same,” she murmurs. “Even when slaves were treated well, it was still…”

Frowning, Ben reaches out, deftly touching the small of her back. She looks over her shoulder at him, swallowing her memories with a slight smile, hoping it will reassure him.

“We’re almost there,” Finn warns.

The sudden clamor of night watch sounds. They freeze. Finn waves his hand spasmodically, urging them to duck into a nearby alley. The smell of hay and refuse and oil and baking bread drifts through Rey’s nose.
So close, she thinks, her heart pounding.

When they reach the shadowy outskirts of the square Finn turns to them, walling up his hands to aid his emphatic whisper. “The Forum is heavily guarded after sunset. Since Snoke imposed a curfew, that general has been dispensing even more soldiers for patrol. For the sake of safety, we’ll have to go one at a time.”

“Go where?” Rey asks.

Finn points then to the courthouse building, gleaming in the torchlight at the apex of the Forum. “There.”

Ben stiffens. “No.”

Rey gawks up at him. “Ben—”

“There must be a way around,” he presses, glaring into Finn’s eyes. “Circle back and approach from behind.”

“That’s no good,” Finn urges, his voice raising in slight. “You’ll be ambushed there. Trust me,” he whispers, his voice haunted.

Rey grabs Ben’s cloak. “It’s almost midnight. We don’t have time for this.”

“He’ll get you killed,” Ben contests, facing her.

The look in his eyes, the warp of molten anger in his voice, forces her into an almost uncanny state of serenity. Pleadingly, she holds onto his arm, squeezing gently. “It’s the only way.”

He scowls, his knees trembling as he closes his eyes. Fighting to remain calm, he turns his heat onto Finn, voice like grinding stone. “You first.”

“Right,” Finn breathes out, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Watch carefully, and do as I do.”

When he moves out of the shadows, his hand on the hilt of his gladius, Rey and Ben skirt to the edge of the wall, their eyes fixed on him. He crouches as he bolts along the outer rim of the market square, his head swiveling to and fro. When the telltale clatter of armor sounds, he phases fluidly behind the columns of the nearest building. He vanishes from their sight until they see him next, darting from pillar to pillar, shadow to shadow, until he ducks through the fences and disappears into the court gardens.

Rey turns to Ben, her heart racing as she tries to remember Finn’s steps. How could she have been so foolish—to think this would be so simple?

“You next.”

She looks up at him. “I’m not leaving you—”

“You have to,” he says, taking her face in his hands. He gazes intently into her eyes, never faltering. “Rey, if this is the only way… you know what we have to do.”

His affirmation settles in her like a stone, waves of fear crashing over her. And yet, though terror swells through her, she cannot feel the instinct to give up, to sink in its tide—only a raw, ethereal comfort in her soul, a sense of peace and determination unlike anything she’s never felt before.

So she grabs his face and kisses him, hard, before tearing herself away. “If you don’t follow me,
I’ll kill you myself,” she threatens.

He scoffs, caressing her cheeks with his thumbs. “I’d prefer to have my wife before then,” he murmurs, using all of his strength to let her go. “Hurry.”

Rey nods, fixing her hood in place before she turns away, looking out into the Forum. Not spotting any guards, she bolts out, racing along Finn’s path.

She can feel her heart pulsing down to the soles of her feet, the slap of her sandalia on the limestone cobble too loud in her ears. In the throbbing roar between her ears and her bones she can hear it—the clamor of armor—and dives into the shadows of the nearest alleyway.

Her back slams into the wall, jarring her. She covers her mouth and nose as her head swims, hushing her heavy breaths as the guard pauses just beyond her hiding place. He glances around, the plume of his helmet like the blunt edge of an executioner’s ax. When he peers into the alley she fears he may spot her, but a sudden roll of thunder distracts him, pulling him back into the open.

She exhales softly when he resumes his patrol, risking a look out. She pulls her hood from her face, not daring restrict her periphery any longer. She waves at the shadows where she knows Ben lies hiding to reassure him before moving on.

She ducks from pillar to pillar as Finn had, her legs numb and trembling as she crouches. Her body cannot seem to stop quivering. She pauses for a moment to collect herself, setting her sights on the underbrush. She prepares to race for the hedge—

Two guards emerge from the shadows, one of them the man who’d halted outside of her hiding place. She hears them converse in Roman, watches petrified as they draw their gladii, making for the alley she’d occupied.

Oh no, she panics, pressing her back to the pillar. From this angle, the moment she moves from behind its cover, there’s no doubt she will be discovered. But as they move along her trodden path, she knows that, if she stays, discovery is even more likely. She closes her eyes and lifts her head, silent prayers casting themselves from her lips like deserters, knowing every breath, every rapid pound of her heart, could be her last.

I love you, he’d said. I love you.

It’s enough. Taking a deep breath, Rey reaches into the folds of her stola, taking her knife in hand. Inchng slowly from the pillar’s cover, she gazes out into the dark square. Flames of torches beat against the walls, the thunder crawling closer. It’s quiet; she sees her opening. A charge fills the air as she backs away in the direction of the hedge, not daring take her eyes off the lone guard.

Guard? Weren’t there two?

Something cold and clammy snags her arm, shocking her. But she manages to stifle her cry as she’s tugged forcefully back against the cold steel of an armored chestplate.

“It’s not safe to stay out past curfew,” the man sneers, holding fast as she struggles. “Especially for a pretty young thing like you…”

“Unhand me,” Rey hisses, holding the knife at her thigh, out of his sight.

“Of course,” the man says. “If you can meet my price.”

Rey’s eyes widen, trying to swallow him in the dark. “Whatever you want, I can pay it,” she lies,
hushed and fast, her throat tight as a waxen seal.

“Oh, I don’t want your money,” the soldier smiles, the sockets of his eyes left in shadow. He nears her face, teeth bared in a sickly grin, his visage like a skull. She recalls then, in the blackness, what Finn had said—that there are two types of guards in Rome—and recoils as the man comes closer. “Just get on your knees and open that pretty mouth of yours, and this will all be— gyah!”

Brandishing her knife, Rey doesn’t hesitate. In a flash of steel she strikes the man’s arm, managing to slip her blade through the armor and gouge his wrist.

His grip releases her as he holds his wound, spit flying from his mouth. “Gah! You fucking bitch! I’ll fucking kill you!”

Her feet move before her thoughts do, carrying her swiftly towards the gardens. She nearly makes it to the underbrush when the collar of her cloak is tugged, choking the air from her lungs. She gasps, reaching to loosen it, but the pull is too strong. The world abandons her feet, her body crashing hard to the unforgiving ground.

Her elbows catch the stone before her head has the chance, cushioned and tangles in the cloak. She hisses at the shock of the impact on her bones, keeping a deathly grip on the handle of her knife as she rolls onto her back, slicing blindly upward. But the guard catches her arm, pinning it down with one hand, holding her throat with the other and squeezing tightly.

He murmurs obscenities and threats she cannot hear past the roar of blood in her ears, her vision beginning to blur into darkness. She thrashes, kicking in vain at the man’s stomach, missing his groin. The iron stench of his blood chokes down her throat as she gasps and scratches at his arm, his face, trying to scream, but lost in silence.

“No so tough now,” the man grunts, oozing with satisfaction, “are you?” He knocks her head against the stone, just hard enough to hurt. She bares her teeth and hisses in reply, refusing to give in. “And to think I was going to spare you,” he sneers, his fingers burning into her skin.

In a roll of thunder and distant flash of lightning, a shadow looms behind him.

Suddenly, the hand around her throat loosens and Rey gasps, swallowing air. She coughs as the man is hoisted to his feet by his galea, his fingers clawing at the arm around his eyes. The helmet dents under the arm’s flex of strength, and in one, even swipe, the length of a long gladius slices a gash in the man’s throat, silencing him.

Rey skirts away, panting as Ben tosses the guard aside, his chest heaving. He crouches beside her. Dizzily, she leans closer to him as he takes her cheek, his face eerily calm as he tilts her chin, looking her over. “Are you alright?” he murmurs.

She manages a nod, holding fast to her knife as he helps her to her feet. “I’m fine,” she croaks, her gaze never leaving the lifeless body. His head is crushed.

“Go,” Ben instructs, his voice sounding so distant as he nudges her towards the garden. “Quickly. Before someone sees.”

Not wanting to risk staying any longer, she obeys, swaying at first before rushing blindly through the catching branches. Finn emerges from his cover on the other side, ushering her towards the gate. Only stumbling a little, she reaches the safety of the wall.

“What happened to you?” Finn gapes.
“He saw me,” Rey gulps, rubbing away the pain in her wrist. “But Ben—”

A large body crashes through the tall shrubbery, pulling their gazes back. They watch, dazed, as Ben crouches, dragging the corpse of the guard by its ankle as he enters the safety of the garden.

Panting, he tosses his hair from his face, glaring at Finn with wild eyes. “A little help?”

They blink, before Finn seems to jump back into his skin. “Shit. Right. Shit,” he babbles, rushing over.

Rey follows him, her dizziness finally fading. “What happened to the other one?”

Ben doesn’t look at her as he and Finn lift the body, carrying it over to a more secluded hedge by the wall of the building. “I took care of it.”

She stares dumbfoundedly as they dump the body into the greenery, its heavy form dropping into the bush, sinking through the leaves like a stone in a river bed. “So what, now?”

Finn wipes his hands on the skirt of his tunic, looking between them. “We get inside.”

Ben flocks to Rey immediately as Finn climbs the nearest statue outside of the building. While Finn knocks on the stone wall, Ben’s arm wraps around her waist, holding her fast to him. She burrows into his chest—and finds his heart racing faster than her own.

“There,” Finn grunts, dropping down into the grass. As soon as he does, a window opens high above, a rope ladder cast over the side. It tumbles down with a rolling clatter, swaying before them. He offers a tentative smile at the couple, stepping aside. “Ladies first?”

Ben sighs, his exasperation easy for Rey to detect, though Finn seems to miss it. She reassures him with a glance before taking the ladder, climbing up.

Finn looks up after her, but Ben reaches out, shoving him aside. Wrath remains pooled in his palms, his will to fight notwithstanding the simple death of two Roman soldiers. And with the skirts of his betrothed on full display, he would rather not invite this stranger to such privileges of peering underneath them.

So Ben climbs after his bride, his weight enough to make him only slightly unnerved, and soon finds himself in a large chamber, the walls adorned with tapestries, the ceilings jeweled by candlelit chandeliers.

He hears Rey’s voice, then the voice of a man—an oddly… familiar man.

“Commander Solo,” the stranger greets warmly, extending his hand in welcome. “Or,” he smiles, “is it still ‘Kylo Ren?’”

Ben steps forward, the light flickering across this man’s old, withering features. He recognizes those robes, those knowledgeable eyes. “I know you,” he murmurs, understanding consuming him with sudden clarity. “You’re the record keeper... Lor San Tekka.”

“That I am,” Tekka sighs, wielding a weary smirk, “but tonight, I am ‘Valentine.’ Come,” he gestures, leading them further into the chamber. “The midnight hour has arrived—we must prepare for your ceremony—”

Finn falls through the window, the three of them jumping. They turn to watch as he stands, righting himself with a sheepish frown. “Sorry.”
Valentine clears his throat. “Let us proceed,” he intones, opening the door to another, smaller chamber. Within awaits a polished table, a wax tabula waiting patiently alongside its stencil, a single candle burning within. “Who shall go first?”

“For what?” Rey asks softly. From within the room she feels it—a wraithlike presence of holiness. It chills her neck, chasing away all the pain in her body.

“Before I can commit to marrying a couple such as yourselves,” Valentine explains, “I must first make an inquiry.”

“An inquiry of what?” Ben questions, little room for patience in his tone.

But Valentine merely fixes him a grave look. “Your intentions.” He glances behind them. “I’m sure your companion here is quite aware of my meaning.”

Finn nods. “It’s an interview process,” he shares. “He’ll ask you a few questions—about each other.” His lip quirks upwards. “Don’t worry. If my wife and I could do it, I know you can, too.”

Ben furrows his brow. “You’re married?”

Rey stares openly. “You’re a Christian?”

Finn grins. “Amazing, isn’t it? How small this world really is.”

“Indeed,” Valentine chuckles, folding his hands in front of him. He nods to Rey. “It is customary for the woman to go first. If you don’t mind, Master Solo…”

Ben meets Rey’s eye in silent question, and she takes his hand, each of them holding tightly. “That’s fine,” he murmurs, watching as Rey drifts away from him, following the priest into the chamber, taking his heart with her.

It’s nearly one in the morning when Rey emerges once more, her eyes red and swollen. Ben stands from the chaise where he lay dozing, stalking to her.

“I’m alright,” she answers when he takes her shoulders in hand, tracing lines back and forth over the cloth of Ahsoka’s cloak.

“What did he say to you?” Ben asks, struggling to maintain the gentility in his voice.

“Many things,” Rey smiles. She stands on her toes, winding her arms around his neck. “Most of all that I love you.”

Ben sighs into her shoulder, letting his hands trace the curves of her body, his arms folding around the small of her back to pull her close to him. “I know,” he murmurs.

Valentine appears in the doorway, a solemn look on his face. A quiet roll of thunder passes beyond the window, a gentle breeze stirring the flames within. “Master Solo. It’s time.”

Ben looks up from Rey’s embrace, his pulse shattering. This is it, his heart cries, awakened and unfurling. In the dim light he pulls from her arms just enough to look on her face. He takes it in his hand, feeling the precious skin of her cheek, love, lust, and everything else gathering between them as she looks into his eyes with all the strength and devotion of her soul.

He dares press a lingering kiss to her brow before she lets him go, watching as he, too, disappears into the darkness.
The door shuts behind him, leaving him alone with Valentine. The candle casts its flickering orb over their faces, the room as warm and dark as a womb, and the two men sit opposite the other, saying nothing. The silence stretches on until he no longer feels at ease, as though trapped and suffocated, awaiting birth.

Until Valentine steeples his fingers upon the wood, his face as earnest as it is stony. “Tell me your name.”

The man blinks. “Ben Solo.”

“Why are you here, Ben Solo?”

Again, the man pauses, reaching for reason in this sudden blindness. “To marry the woman I love.”

“Why are you here?” Valentine presses firmly. “In Rome.”

The man looks away, searching in the darkness for his reply. His voice feels distant from him, though its honesty clings close. “To kill,” he murmurs, memories of blood, sand and gore playing before him. Of the man in the river, of the starving prisoner with prominent bones, of the soldier in the square.

“Do you think a man in your profession should marry a Christian woman?”

Now he looks at Valentine, seeing him completely. “No.”

“Then,” Valentine murmurs, his expression one of intrigue, “why should I marry you to one?”

“Because that is not what I am,” Ben grounds, beginning to feel himself rise from the mires around him. A cool rush slithers down his spine.

The flame of the candle rises and dances, before falling again. Valentine watches it, the fire shining in his dark eyes, before they train on Ben’s once again. “And what are you?”

Her face appears before him, her hold so gentle, her voice a beckoning call.


She kisses him—takes him. All of him.

Mine.

“I’m hers,” he replies, life in his lips, purpose flooding through him. “I would do anything for her.”

Valentine considers him silently. “… Even save your soul?”

Ben blinks, staring down into the candle’s wick, watching as the wax drips down like fat, rolling tears, unable to find an answer—even as its presence falls all around him.

“You are a different man from the one I met three years ago,” Valentine utters. “Your love for young Rey has changed you. Where there was once weakness, now there is strength.”

Ben meets the man’s eye as he goes on.

“You may try to deny the truth, but there will come a day when you cannot. Your strength will be tested, Ben Solo. More vigorously than ever before. And it will destroy you.” He frowns, leaning forward, his palms flat on the table. “Knowing this,” the candle trembles at his breath, “would you
truly continue to walk this path?"

A sudden heaviness weighs on Ben’s shoulders, voices of doubt crawling from his feet to slither into his ears. But he banishes them with every pulse of his heart—for it is not his to be shaken or deterred, but hers.

“I would,” he answers, sincerity coating his voice in myrrh. “I may not possess a pure soul,” he murmurs. “Nor one at all. But I will give my hands and my body. I will give my love and my life,” he vows, “as any husband should.”

“Mm,” Valentine nods thoughtfully, his thin lips folded in the barest hint of a smile. He leans back into his chair, folding his hands over his chest. “...Very well.” He rises to his feet, towering over all else in the room. “Go now, I must make my deliberation alone.”

Ben obeys, rising and bowing his head before opening the door, easing out, and closing it behind him.

Rey yawns sleepily from one of the chaise lounges, her eyes fixed blearily on him. As he comes closer she outstretches her hand and he takes it, crouching beside her, frowning at the bruises blooming on her throat.

“What did he say?” she mutters, yawning again.

“Many things,” Ben whispers, pressing his lips to the crown of her hair. “But most of all that I love you.”

She hums in reply, and chuckles when Finn snores loudly from his awkward positioning in the nearby chair. It isn’t long before the door to the chamber opens once again, revealing the stoic face of Valentine.

“Rise, and stand before me,” he commands.

They listen, coming to wait before him side by side. They look to him pleadingly, their hands reaching for the other, meeting in the roaring din of hope and anticipation.

“I have consulted the scripture in prayer, and the Lord has spoken to me,” Valentine intones, his expression pale and severe. And then, as though daylight has broken though the dead of night, a bright smile blooms on his face. “It will be my honor to wed you both.”

They breathe out together, cool relief pumping through their veins. Rey lunges toward Ben and he catches her, her legs shaking with respite. She laughs madly into his tunic, enough to summon a familiar onslaught of tears. “Thank you,” she cries, her voice echoing in his lungs.

Ben holds her close, looking to Valentine’s patient gaze. “Thank you,” he grunts, his throat closing.

Valentine steps forward, his hands folded in front of him. “I will arrive at your estate at dawn in two days,” he says, holding up two fingers. “That is, the sunrise after this. You have until then to find two witnesses, one for each of you, or else the union will be moot.”

“I understand,” Ben replies, feeling as Rey turns in his arms to meet Valentine’s eye. “Will you need an escort?”

“You’re generous to offer, but no,” Valentine laughs. “Besides, I already know where you live. I’m the record keeper, after all.” He winks.
A sudden admiration blooms in Ben for this man, as well as a sudden fear. “Of course.”

Finn snorts awake, immediately alert and grasping the handle of his gladius.

“Ah, Master Freedman! Impeccable timing, as usual,” Valentine grins, moving over to him. He pats the man’s back when he stands, looking to them all. “The hour is late, and I must retire. It has been a pleasure to meet you all.” He shares a look with Rey, a gleam in his eye. “May we meet again.”

They pass through the Forum as they had before, the lack of guards a standing miracle. The odd sight of Ben crouching across the road inspires a smile in Rey, her excitement warring against any lingering anxieties.

When they fall back into shadows, Finn sighs, wiping sweat from his brow—only to find the light smatter of gentle rainfall patter against his skin. Thunder purrs overhead. “The stables aren’t far, but… I don’t think we can avoid the rain,” he grumbles.

“Maybe we could find lodging here?” Rey asks, looking to Ben’s silhouette.

Ben ponders, folding his lips. The clouds have encompassed the moon, leaving them in sucking darkness. Suddenly, he murmurs, “Finn.”

“Yes?” the man shifts nervously. “What is it?”

“How many rooms does Dameron have in his villa?”

Seemingly catching on, Finn smirks. “As many as we’ll need.”

“Good,” Ben hums. “Take Rey there, quickly.”

Rey clings to Ben’s sleeve, tugging his arm. “What about you?”

He covers her hand with his own, pressing his warmth into her fingers, chasing away the nighttime chill. “Valentine said we need two witnesses. People who know us. We already have one—”

“Ahsoka.”

“—for you, yes. But we need another.”

Rey stills. “You mean—”

“I do,” he interrupts. Quickly, he grabs the back of her head, pressing her lips to his mouth. “I’ll come back soon, Puella,” he ensures, thunder rolling overhead. Rain begins to fall, light and steady, as he hesitantly pulls away. “I promise. It’s time we finished this.”

Though Rey cannot say she is happy about it, she trusts him to keep his word. Traveling during the day would be too suspicious—she knows he’s right to do this now. “Stay safe,” she sighs.

He nods, though she can’t see it, and fixes a warning energy on Finn. He walks near, ducking by the man’s ear. “She dies, you die,” he whispers, before trudging down the city streets, dawning his cowl and blending into the shadows.

Finn shivers, pulling up his leathery hood. “Shall we?”
The soldiers grow more sparse the further into residential areas Ben travels, their clatter providing plenty of warning. There are more walls here, more cover. All light is doused except the persistent burning of street-lit torches—but it is enough for him.

Following an old thread of memory, he manages to find a humble apartment, its roof still bearing that loose slab of clay. When the way is clear he bangs his fist against the door, waiting, his head at a constant swing.

When the door opens a man stands clad in white-linen subligar, his stomach bare and full, a gladius readied in his grip, a candle in the other. “Who goes there?!”

“Quiet,” Ben hisses. “It’s me.”

“Master Ren...?” Ematt sputters, peering out in awe. “What are you doing here?”

Ben pushes down his hood, meeting Ematt’s gaze in the dark as thunder crashes like a remote ocean wave, the swell of its foam catching like dew in his hair. “I need your help.”

“This way,” Finn guides, panting in slight as they ascend the hill. The peaks and valleys of the city do little to dissuade Rey, her eyes finally adjusting to the darkness. Rain taps the leaves of trees as they flank the wall, following a narrow road closer and closer to Poe Dameron’s villa.

She pauses to rest when they reach the crest, but mostly to let him catch his breath, and looks out over the darkened landscape. She spots a gathering of lights just beyond the horizon-wall. “What’s that?” she asks, squinting. “Barracks?”

“... Lepers,” Finn frowns, his expression grim. “It’s a leper colony. Outcasts living right where society can see them.”

Rey’s heart fills with pity, her weariness and yearning to rest bogged down once more with the memories of how cruel the act of living, of merely existing, can be.

But she holds fast to her blessings, even in her grief, as they finally approach the familiar villa.

“You both can stay here tonight,” Finn offers, smiling fondly at her from over his shoulder. “It should be safer for you to travel back home in the morning.”

“Thank you, Master Freedman,” Rey replies, bowing her head as they reach the shelter of the atrium.

“Finn,” he grins, a charming shyness creeping into his boyish features. “Call me Finn.”

Rey chuckles in soft relief, the feeling of safety settling into her tired bones. Worry for Ben lingers far from her—surely he has found Ematt by now. Though in the past she may have been terrified of history repeating itself, now she only feels the oddest sense of ease, as if that cooling sensation never abandoned her at all.

So she smiles. “Thank you, Finn.”

“What are you two doing out here?”
Finn turns, looking caught as Kaydel Connix strides into the room. He and Rey pull down their hoods, revealing themselves as he replies, “It’s alright, Ko. The plan is still moving.”

The smaller woman blinks, and though her features seem set to upset, she looks more pleased than Rey has ever seen her—though, that hasn’t been many times, in itself. “Valentine agreed?” she asks.

“Yes. They’re getting married, two days from now,” Finn shares, seeming a bit discomfited by the woman’s intensity.

“That’s excellent,” Kaydel praises, suddenly turning her intensity onto Rey. Her eyes sweep over her, and she reaches out, taking Rey’s wrist. “You must be tired. I’ll prepare a room for you.”

“Oh, a-alright,” Rey stammers. The woman certainly doesn’t leave room for argument.

They abandon Finn in the atrium as Kaydel pulls Rey down a long hallway, stopping at one door among a myriad of others. It’s unlocked and she opens it, guiding Rey inside.

The accommodations are humble, but not desolate; a simple bed and hearth and table with chaise seating. The rug under their feet seems freshly dusted, the only evidence of Poe Dameron’s opulent flair to speak of in an otherwise average chamber.

“I’ll make up a fire,” Kaydel insists, releasing Rey to the bed. Rey sits and watches as Kaydel ignites the waiting kindling, a yawn building from deep in her belly as she unlaces and removes the sandalia from her aching feet.

A moment of silence passes before Rey catches Kaydel glancing not-so-secretly at her. And then once more.

“Is something wrong?” Rey asks, feeling her throat, wondering if that is what the woman must be fixating on. Last she’d been attacked, there had been markings…

“It’s nothing, really,” Kaydel murmurs. Her fine hair glows in the firelight, now roaring, spreading its warmth. “Just… nothing. Forget it.”

“Please tell me,” Rey urges, her curiosity—and now, insecurity—piqued.

Her words may as well have been a holy blessing, as Kaydel wastes no time in striding over to the seat across from Rey, her round eyes as peering and intense as a hawk. “What is it like?”

Rey blinks, offering a polite, if not confused, smile. “I’m sorry…? I don’t understand. Is what like?”

“You know,” Kaydel murmurs, glancing at her own lap. She holds her hand close to it, erecting her pointer finger towards the ceiling.

It takes Rey a moment to comprehend the woman’s meaning, and when she does a burning fire stokes mercilessly under her cheeks. “Oh. That.”

The woman looks as though she’s struck lapis, leaning forward. “So you have slept with him!”

Rey furrows her brow. “Well, yes… a few times, actually,” she confesses, recalling the lovely nights they’d spent wrapped in one another’s arms. Although, given this woman’s context, it may have been an act more innocent than Kaydel Connix assumes.
“I couldn’t imagine that,” she sighs, shaking her head as she sinks back into her chair. “You poor thing.”

Now Rey quirks a brow. “What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“Well, from one experienced woman to another,” Kaydel shares gently, her gaze one of pity, “your master must be rather… big.”

A sudden fire builds in Rey at this woman’s tone, as helpful as it seems to sound. “Is that a bad thing?” she asks lowly, the subject feeling oddly, exhilaratingly forbidden.

“I can’t think otherwise,” Kaydel grunts, naked in her honesty. “Most women prefer a more modest member—like Master Dameron’s. They are easier to please.”

Rey toys with her fingers, suddenly feeling quite flustered. And yet her longing for Ben resurfaces as well, memories of his more devoted behavior lingering warmly in her skin. “I do want to please him…” she murmurs, recalling when he forbade her touch him the night before. “…but I’m not sure how.”

Kaydel’s gaze ignites, her small frame hopping from the chair. “One moment.”

Rey gapes as Kaydel stalks to the hearth, retrieving a candlestick. She brings it over and sits across from Rey, pulling the chair closer, her body buzzing. Rey, interested, furrows her brow at the object in the woman’s hands. “What are you doing?”

“Teaching,” Kaydel replies, a smile blooming between her rounded cheeks. “You’re an ally of the Resistance, now. What kind of ally would I be if I didn’t help your cause?”

“‘My cause,’” Rey utters, dumbfounded. “As in…?” she asks, making the same pointed gesture from her lap as Kaydel.

“Exactly,” she nods, holding out the candlestick lengthwise, and in both hands. “This is your master’s—sorry, husband’s— manhood.”

Rey nods fervently, leaning closer. “Right.”

Her naivety must have given herself away, for Kaydel lowers her voice. “Rey… have you ever actually seen it?”

Rey folds her lips, pondering. She recalls seeing his full backside that day before she helped bathe him, but he’d covered his lap with a cloth, then. Their first night during the storm, she’d only seen a flash of it—and then another flash, their second time. It had been a more impassioned embrace, then, leaving no time for gawking. Only an impossible fullness.

“I have… sort of,” she falters, suddenly realizing that they have never truly seen the other completely naked at all.

This news doesn’t seem to deter Kaydel Connix. If anything, it emboldens her. There’s an impish quirk in her lip when she speaks, now, holding the candlestick fast in her hand for Rey to observe. “I see. I’ll make this simple then.” She points one end at Rey. “First, start by touching the tip.”

Rey swallows, feeling somewhat ridiculous—but far be it from her to back down from a challenge. She pokes it. “Done.”

Kaydel nods. “Good. Good start. Now hold it.”
Rey obeys, wrapping her fingers around the thick shaft of the candlestick. Heat rises in her face, recalling when something similar had been inside of her. *Will* be inside of her. “Like this?”

“Maybe a little tighter. Men enjoy a tight vise.”

Rey tightens her hold. “Now what?”

“Now,” Kaydel practically croons, “slide your fist up and down.”

Swallowing, Rey does as she’s told, feeling the ridges pass by her palm, slowly growing warm from her sweat and friction.

She keeps going as Kaydel speaks. “It’s important to *stroke, not* to pull. I made that mistake my first time.” Rey nods, focused on her teaching. “If you’re doing it right, it will make him try to fuck your fingers. Once he bucks, move faster until—it fires!” she shakes the candlestick, waving it at Rey’s face, making her cry out in shocked laughter.

It’s in their fit of giggles that a slight knock sounds, the woman, Tallie, poking her head through. “What’s—oh. Again, Kaydel?”

Kaydel shrugs innocently, rising to her feet. “Just giving our aid,” she winks at Rey.

From the bed, Rey smiles.

“Oh, you’re that girl Master Dameron hosted,” Tallie gapes, moving into the room. Her tunica shifts gracefully about her. She bows her head, offering a friendly hand. “My name is Lintra, Tallie Lintra. Welcome. I hope you’re comfortable?”

“Very much so, yes,” Rey hums, subduing a yawn. As she shakes Tallie’s hand, she is shocked by the sudden, gaping emptiness of jealousy she’d felt before—and now feels only foolishness for ever having it at all.

Tallie seems to catch her yawn, regardless of her efforts to hide her exhaustion. “Kaydel, let’s leave her to sleep. She’s obviously too tired to deal with your ‘lessons...’”

Rey sits up. “Actually—”

“—Fine, fine,” Kaydel huffs, leaving the candlestick on the ground. “You should sleep, Rey. After all,” she waggles her brow, “I doubt you’ll be getting much of it later.”

The two snicker amongst each other as they herd out the chamber door, leaving Rey alone with the roaring fire.

She sits and stews in mild embarrassment before a smile cracks under its pressure, her eagerness too powerful to be overcome. She rolls her eyes and groans, tossing herself onto the pillows, and immediately loses consciousness.

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Late in the night, or perhaps early in the morning, a man in a black cloak comes near the villa, seeking entry. A man standing lone guard lets him in, pointing to the room of the newcomer’s beloved. He moves gently through the heart of darkness, entering her room in the black. He bares his feet, shedding his cloak. His foot knocks into something hard, chasing it away.

“Who’s there?” her voice sounds, awake, but not afraid.

He sinks into the bed behind her, his weight familiar, the feeling and warmth of his body so right.
“Your husband,” he rumbles, not without mirth.

Her hand moves back to trace his face—mapping the familiar length of his hard nose, soft jaw and supple lips. “Did you find Ematt?” she asks in the darkness, not opening her eyes.

“Yes,” he answers, settling into the pillow. “He said he will help us.”

“Hm… good…” she murmurs, falling back into the sucking void of a dreamless sleep.

At her back, he lets the silence fall over them, his relief in her safety more of a treasure than he may ever know what to do with, the voice of Valentine’s warning echoing in his mind as he finally succumbs to the night

*Your love for young Rey has changed you... 
*...and it will destroy you.*

Chapter End Notes

[There is little documentation of precisely how Valentine would marry Christians, other than having it in secret. The night-meeting is, to my knowledge, an added element of my own design inspired by the marriage counseling many Christian couples are expected to undergo before marriage, today]

[The roads to Rome were infamous for being the target of robbers, who would ambush travelers as they were on their way to trade—usually at night]

[It's unknown whether Ancient Rome had any curfews, though it is very unlikely. Although modern media would have one believe the streets of Rome are abandoned at night, this is actually false—the Roman underbelly would often surge when the sun went down. Just going out at night could put one's life at risk to thieves and gangs]

[Leprosy, today known as Hansen's Disease, is a bacterium spread through bodily fluids that can cause the swelling or collapse of extremities. It had no cure, and oftentimes affected the face, making it impossible to hide. In order to quarantine the contagion, lepers were ostracized and forced into their own small societies not too far from civilization. Sometimes they would have large houses by the roads leading to and away from the city in hopes of getting donations from passerby]

[Lapis, from Lapis Lazuli, is a semi-are blue stone that was often used in Ancient Roman jewelry. It's rich color is known as a symbol of power, truth, and wisdom]

[BONUS: In case it wasn't obvious, or I haven't made it clear, Roman beauty standards for men were adamant about having small dicks. So not only would Ben be considered unappealing to other woman, he would also be more eager to prove himself...]

[BONUS BONUS: Next chapter is the wedding chapter and the author is on the brink of tears, so happy and excited and thankful for all the support of her readers ♥]
When the morning comes they set to work, not one moment left to waste.

Ben, who awakens first, rouses his fiancée for a tender goodbye before he departs, withdrawing Silencer from the stablehouse and meeting Ematt at a designated location not far from the city gates. Together, they ride westward, finding Ahsoka waiting in the villa with angry impatience—and profound eagerness.

As they plot and scheme and inevitably work to tire their horses—as well as the wheels of the caravan—to gather the necessary supplies, Rey maintains her position at the Dameron estate, disclosing her personal affairs to Kaydel Connix. She tells them the strategy of the man, Valentine, of meeting them the next morning.

Poe Dameron reveals himself as a forthcoming individual, to say the least. In the afternoon Rey lunches with his house and staff, meeting many kind faces—some of them unaware of her true status as a slave. Finn Freedman boasts a convincing lie that she is a visiting noblewoman, just passing through their humble home. No one bothers question it as Rey forces herself into sheepish smiles and, gradually, real ones, seeing how Poe Dameron’s staff is made of servants—no slaves.

Late in the day she stands in their garden amidst a host of private rest and revelry, a chalice of sweet wine in her hand and laughter in her throat, when Finn taps her shoulder, gesturing to the exposed hall of the atrium.

Ahsoka stands alone in the shade, a serene smile on her face as their gazes meet.

Rey’s heart swells looking at her, and without a thought she hands off her wine to her companion,
trading with him a silent nod. Her feet carry her faithfully across the stone path, each step a ricochet through her veins—bringing her closer and closer to the fate that awaits her at its end.

She joins her hands with Ahsoka’s, the woman’s slender, aging fingers offering a comforting softness. She looks around, searching. “Where are they?”

“Still in the city. I’ve come to take you home,” Ahsoka shares, no small flicker of excitement in her eyes.

*Home*, Rey feels, her hold on Ahsoka tightening. A laugh escapes her, a joy unlike anything she could ever hope for rising through her body, and launches her arms over the woman’s neck, holding her close. “Thank you, Ahsoka. Let’s go home.”

They leave with their thanks and plans given to the Resistance members of the Dameron estate, taking the rocking caravan back to the villa before the sun descends over the hills. Though Rey helps unlatch Lux from her fastenings, Ahsoka forbids her from doing any more in the realm of carting in its contents.

“It’s meant to surprise you,” she discloses mirthfully. “An order from the young master.”

Rey rolls her eyes, leaning back against the wall, looking out into the endless sky—beyond the horizon where he could appear at any moment. And as she does, something pulls at her thoughts. A relentless type of shallow, lurking fear. “Ahsoka?”

“Yes? What is it?”

“After tomorrow,” Rey murmurs, her brow drawing taut, “when everything’s done… what will happen?”

“Well,” Ahsoka grunts, patting Lux’s neck, “you are already aware of the mechanics—”

“Not that,” Rey intercedes, her voice falling. “What will happen to *us*? My status in this house. His?” She holds her own arms, worms of doubt burrowing into her mind. Her heart tells her it must be his absence, or her own weakness, or some mixture of the two that makes her feel this way, and yet she asks, “Am I still my master’s slave?”

Ahsoka pauses in her movements, meeting Rey’s eye. In it she sees all the longing and confusion of youth—and for the briefest of moments, they are the eyes of another woman she once knew long ago. “In law, yes. That will remain unchanged. But in his heart?” She smiles. “What do you think?”

The woman’s smile is contagious, it seems, as the sentiment settles deeply within Rey. “...No,” she replies, more soundly than she thought she could feel. Knowing Ben’s heart, remembering every moment they have spent together, whether in anger or passion or purest love, she knows it would be foolish of her to think that this changes nothing about them.

As the sun falls behind the sparse clouds, Rey finally relents, padding back into the house. As she ventures through the atrium, she looks into the still waters of its pool, recalling when they had relaxed together, sheltered from the unbearable heat of the day. She smiles at it in passing, almost seeing his visage there again, snickering to herself at how bold they had been that day—and yet so unaware of where it would lead.

To think that things would never change would indeed be foolish. The more she muses, settling onto her bed, relaxing as she removes her sandalia, the more she brings herself to the same conclusions.
From the beginning, they have kept their secret; all along, they were never truly in their assigned roles. Though he was—and still is—her master, he treated her as another human soul. Never property, nor flesh to be used. As much as they spoke or prodded or teased or claimed their acceptance of Rome’s will, it was never true—and in that falsehood, she knows, they made a truth of their own.

She feels awake as she lies in her bed, awake and more alive than she’s ever felt. Valentine’s instructions ring in her ears as she closes her eyes, knowing that when dawn comes, their truth will become their law.

Their liberation.

When the men arrive Ahsoka is waiting for them, her plans scrawled out on her tabula, some tasks already complete.

Ben hops down from Silencer’s back, landing heavily. “Is she asleep?” he asks, carding a hand through his hair to right its wind-mussed tangles.

“Asleep or not, she’s sealed herself in her chambers,” Ahsoka answers, offering a hand to Ematt as he grunts and groans his way off his horse.

“Good,” Ben exhales, a hint of a smile on his face. He glances out from the stable door as the grey of dusk settles over them like an ashen plume. “Let’s finish this quickly,” he orders, taking the heaviest of the sacks from Silencer’s saddle, bracing it upon his shoulder as he trudges for the door. “I want to be rested for my bride.”

Ematt and Ahsoka trade a look, the man chuckling, “A one-track mind, that boy has.” He plucks Ahsoka’s load from her hands, ignoring her resentful expression and, with no small amount of cheekiness, bowing with a wide gesture for her to proceed him. “Milady.”

Ahsoka scoffs, but nonetheless steps through the door, racing against the moonlight to see this mission through. When they enter Ben is already crouched before an atrium, adorning it with ivy, revere and softness in his eyes and hands unlike any she has ever beheld.

She smiles, her hand bracing to her chest to quell the bursting dam of her flesh. The time has finally come, Anakin. I will not fail you again. With all I have in me... she swears, her eyes, her happiness, her love, falling on the focused face of her young master.

...I will keep them safe.

Rey sits on the edge of her bed, her eyes on the darkness beyond her window. Her stola clings to her in the stillness, the cloaking quiet ethereal; endless.

“Ubi tu Gaius,” she whispers, closing her eyes, breathing in the living air. “Ibi ego Ga—”

A soft knock sounds at her door and it creaks open, a long, silvery braid swaying into view. Ahsoka enters, an oil lamp in her hand, garments hanging loosely over her arm. “It’s time, Rey,” she whispers, her full lips barely moving beneath the weight of their meaning. Her eyes shine like sapphires in the darkness.

Though they have prepared for this, risked their very lives for it, Rey cannot bring herself to move, able only to summon the strength to meet Ahsoka’s expectant stare. “Is he here?” she asks shakily.
The woman smiles, closing the door behind her, and lays the lamp upon Rey’s small vanity. She does not answer her, instead unfurling a long, white robe from her arm, its hem falling to the stone floor.

Rey gapes open-mouthed at it, at last rising to her feet to come closer and admire its quality. She touches the cloth as she might a sacred artifact, its softness like clouds between her fingers. “This is…”

Ahsoka laughs gently, and if Rey had been listening more carefully, she may have detected the trace of wetness there. “Yes. The ceremonial bridal robe,” she shares, watching as Rey’s rapture consumes her wide, innocent gaze. “The very one worn by the young master’s grandmother—on her wedding day.”

Rey pauses in her perusal, her eyes snapping to her mentor’s pleased expression. Suddenly her touch feels dirty, and she withdraws her hands. “Oh, Ahsoka… I have no claim to this,” she murmurs. “I’m—”

“More precious to me than any sentiment,” Ahsoka asserts, holding the gown for Rey to accept. “I have kept this with me for almost fifty years, Rey. And I know that, if my beloved Padme were here, she would say the same. So take it,” she encourages. “Let it live again.”

Blinking away her gathering tears, Rey manages a nod, tenderly taking the robe in her hands. It’s so light, so carefully preserved, and she brings it to her nose, breathing in the lingering traces of spring and rain.

As Rey undresses, Ahsoka returns with a bowl of perfumed water and a rag, padding and swiping the young woman’s feminine extremities to provide a fresher air. She eases into a pair of golden slippers, the cloth inside like silk on her feet, and shrugs on the robe, covering herself as Ahsoka moves forward.

She holds out a long, thin strip of linen. “I would have purchased wool, but,” she winks, “I figured you may prefer this, instead.”

Rey laughs, feeling more nervous and giddy than she has ever felt. “It’s wonderful,” she says. “Thank you, Ahsoka.”

“Perhaps I should start calling you ‘Young Mistress,’ hm?” she teases, stepping behind Rey. She loops the belt around her closed robe twice, ensuring the fold is tight as she ties the first knot over her stomach, then the second at the base of her spine.

Unable to comprehend the woman ever saying such a thing—but nonetheless very aware of its potential—Rey scoffs. “If you do I may start scowling,” she taunts, deepening her voice to mimic her groom’s.

Ahsoka sniggers in reply as a light weight settles upon Rey’s head. A veil flutters down over her face, concealing her, and she gulps, breathing in deeply as the darkness beyond her window finally betrays the barest shade of blue.

The woman stands before her, her gaze a steady reassurance. “Are you ready, Rey?”

Rey’s legs begin to quake, her knees suddenly as weak as reeds in the wind. But the gust through her soul is not the cold swath of dread, nor the typhoon of agony and loss. No. It is warm and steady and sure—a gentle breath against her skin that leaves her trembling in awe—the sublime of its tenderness. It’s love.
So she opens her mouth to speak, feeling with certainty as that wind carries her words through the air, each syllable the scattered seeds of her hope, drifting blindly, stubbornly, along its endless current.

“I’m ready.”

They pass through the hall arm in arm, the dawn peeking through from the open space of the courtyard just beyond. In the hold of her matron, Rey reminds herself to breathe, her eyes taking in all they can from behind the sheer of the veil.

When they walk into the courtyard she gasps softly at the spectacle before her: lamps flicker steadily on their tall stands, illuminating a path into the grass where numerous bodies stand, poised and waiting. Her eyes dart across unexpected forms—finding Poe Dameron, Finn Freedman, and Kaydel Connix brandishing shining smiles. Beside them sways Ematt, his hands clasped before him. Valentine awaits there, as well, clothed in thick layers of rich robes.

And then she sees him.

He stands proudly, the set of his shoulders strong and firm, his gaze fixed ahead, away from her. It is when Ematt acknowledges their small, approaching party that Ben seems to notice, immediately turning, his expression breaking open like encased marble.

Transfixed, Rey nearly stumbles as they near, unable to look away from him. His visage is stunning—his frame cloaked by a brilliant white toga. Its collar hangs below the pit of his arm, exposing a generous mound of flesh to her gaze, making her swallow thickly—her heart pound even faster.

Ben watches as she sweeps near, emotion welling up in his throat, stinging his eyes with the brilliance of her beauty. In this dawn she approaches as the rising sun, the veil over her face doing nothing to truly conceal her from him. His feet itch to close this distance faster, his hands long to reach out and pull her into his arms—but still he waits, holding back the tears of an emotion he’d once thought had once long abandoned him.

They smile at one another in their own way once Ahsoka leads her into position, their gaze unbreaking as they remain at a fair distance. The friction of their eyes burns in Rey’s nose—how could she remember to breathe in this suffocating isolation from him, when he is finally so near?!

“Ahsoka Tano of Rome,” Valentine greets, his voice steeped in authority. The lull between his words fills with flickering torch flame. “Are you the matron of honor to this woman, Rey of Jakku?”

Ahsoka grins, barely restraining a sniffle as she takes Rey’s hand, closing her eyes and placing a sacred kiss upon her knuckles, her old wrists trembling. “I am.”

“And on this morning, you will this man, Ben Solo of Rome, the hand of the bride—and with that, your blessing of a most holy union?”

She nods, squeezing once, hard, on Rey’s fingers—enough to almost be painful—before letting go. “I do.”

“Then you may take your place as a witness,” Valentine smiles, at last turning his attention to Ben and Rey both as Ahsoka takes her place behind the bride. “Before our ceremony begins, are there any in this house who object to the marriage of the betrothed?”
Ben holds fast to Rey’s eyes, and she to his, each searching the other’s as the silence rings out in clear answer.

“Very well. Then let us commence.” He turns to Ben first, his wise eyes settling upon him like dew. “Ben Solo of Rome, formerly of Greece, and heir of the Skywalker name,” he chants. “Will you take this woman as your wife, to protect and endow, and to love in unending faithfulness, until death?”

“I do,” Ben answers firmly, not hesitating for a moment. He extends his hand to her, his dark eyes boring deeply into her own, his voice soft—only for her. “Wherever you go,” he whispers, “there I will be, your husband.”

Rey’s spirit soars at the sight of him, tears finally spilling over the hills of her cheeks, racing down to her chin. His hand waits for her there, here, so sure and so steady. When she looks at it she is flooded with memories—memories of those hands on her face, on her body, fingers laced together in the night.

“Rey of Jakku,” Valentine calls, returning her to the present, pushing her ever further towards this future. “Will you take this man as your husband, to nurture and support, and to respect with unwavering fidelity, until death?”

Wetting her lips, Rey lifts her shaking fingers to the veil, pulling it away. “I do,” she proclaims, tossing the sheer fabric behind her crown, feeling as it wafts gracefully down to join the careful comb of her hair. Her face revealed exposes her drying tears—never before has she worn them so proudly!—and Ben’s in turn, his shaven jaw and gentle, eager expression filling her heart with love.

She takes a breath, and offers her hand, her knuckles caresses by the rising sun as it streams over her flesh. Ben’s eyes follow it faithfully, the apple of his throat a heavy stone, every finger, every follicle, an impossible exaltation, leaving him in silent worship of her.

“Wherever you go,” she vows, quivering but unafraid as she places her hand in his, “there I will be…” Her eyes find his again, the touch shuddering through her with power and heat and promise, her arm juddering under its influence. “…your wife.”

At those final words, Ben’s hold on her tightens, filling her with warmth, their skin mere moments from fusing together under his pressure. Valentine says something she cannot hear over the pounding in her ears before Ben shifts, his hold pulling their hands over his heart as he ducks his head, claiming her lips in a furious kiss.

His hand at her back encourages her to melt into him and, realizing what has been done, Rey jolts, fisting her fingers into his hair as she returns the gesture—finding it somewhat difficult to smile and kiss at once.

Their audience applauds them, and once Rey finally regains enough consciousness to hear it, she breaks away, feeling no shyness whatsoever.

Ben treads a familiar path as his wife—his wife!—his countenance swelling with pride. He grins unabashed, unwilling to take his eyes off her, or even release her hand, as he leads her through the tablinum, passing by the place of their burgeoning love, and enters the atrium, where the walls and floors wait adorned with garlands of ivy and wildflowers.

The rising sun dances in her eyes, hypnotizing him as her joy persists. The party follows with words of congratulation, the men offering nods of approval or claps upon his back. And, while Ben
would normally be averse to such outward gestures of comradery, he finds himself smiling pleasantly, instead.

Ahsoka nears to escort them to the bridal couch, gently urging Rey to lie down upon the chaise. She looks about, confused as she keeps her fingers placed in Ben’s warm palm. “What’s this?”

“An honoring,” he rumbles in reply, pressing her fingers to his lips.

He steps back as Rey remains reclined, standing dutifully beside where she lay. He gestures to Kaydel Connix and she steps forward, a flower in her hand, its brilliant cluster of blue petals ruffling as she bows and tucks its stem into the crown of Rey’s veil. She beams down at the bride, offering a knowing look before retreating.

Rey understands then, as Poe Dameron takes Kaydel’s place, offering a yellow marigold. Its round plume tickles Rey’s scalp, pursing her lips with an unrestrainable gratitude as he affixes it. Finn follows him with a rich, violet flower, adding it to the gathering crown upon her head. He grants her a shining smile, his white teeth flashing brilliantly before he, too, steps back to join the observing line.

Ematt approaches next, bestowing a bloom of brilliant scarlet. Rey notices the stark contrast of the white at its center before it vanishes from her sight, the gentle curl of its petals delicately kissing her temple.

At last Ahsoka draws near, a crown of ivy leaves in her hands. With all the grace of her person, she bows to Rey and Ben both, stooping over Rey to gently weave the crown amidst the flowers, joining it with the veil to complete the headdress.

Her fingertips caress Rey’s cheeks and jaw, holding up her face as tears gather in their eyes. She speaks in quiet Coptic, the words for her alone. “What a blessing you are,” she whispers.

Rey sobs once, happily, her lips trembling as she shoots up from her recline, throwing her arms around Ahsoka. They embrace lingeringly, their eyes tightly shut to savor the memory forged between them, knowing in their hearts that when they part, they will never truly be parted.

When they let go, Ahsoka smiles at Ben, and bows her head, stepping back to round the couch. She looks up into his dark eyes, cradling his face to keep them tethered to her. “Oh, Ben…” she murmurs, her lip trembling. “...your grandfather would be so proud.”

Ben sucks in a breath, his heart seizing under her praise. He swallows the rising tide of her charity, the solace dipping his head in a bow.

There need be no more words between them; so she departs, leaving him to his future.

Rey’s attention returns to him without hesitation as he moves to sit beside her. His eyes rove over her—not in the calculating sweep she first encountered, in that night of darkness and chains, but in a gesture profoundly slow and savoring, like the dawning light of day.

In his massive hands he reveals a white lily. Rey nearly laughs; she should have foretold that. He leans forward and her heart pounds unsteadily, the smell and presence of him suffocating her with love and temptation as he tucks the lily’s stem into the belt of her gown, its stiff yet gentle prod against her body filling her with heat.

His gaze burns as it fetters to hers, his eyes pools of honey in the encroaching daylight streaming into the house. Rey’s eyes take in the sight of him as the golden light bathes across his handsome face, catching in the strands of his raven hair, spilling over the sturdy ridge of his exposed
shoulder.

Ben places his hand upon her waist, anchoring himself, feeling unsteady as the sight of her draws
him in. He takes her hungrily with his eyes, the crown upon her head an adornment of power and
beauty complementary—and yet sorely unmatched—to her own, and bends down to stroke her lips
with his, feeling again that endless desire to taste and be tasted.

His kiss is light and yet heavy with promise, too short as he pulls away, leaving her in want.
However, in the presence of company, Rey swats deftly at her cheeks, chasing lust away—for
now.

“So,” Rey starts, clearing her throat as she looks to her guests, trying and failing to ignore the
enticing presence of her husband. “What are you doing here?”

Poe smirks wolfishly. “Protection,” he assures, turning to expose the sword sheathed at his hip. He
juts his chin to the priest, his air a breath thin of smug. “Valentine is a member of the Resistance.
It’s our duty to protect our charges.”

“And ensure our deals are followed through,” Finn finishes, jutting his partner in the arm.

Ben straightens. “Indeed.” He offers his hand to his wife, pulling her to her feet. Her gown brushes
the cloth of his toga, filling him with warmth as they rise together, his gaze fixed—temporarily—
on their allies. “The feasting will begin soon. You are welcome to stay for it, as thanks.”

Ematt’s countenance immediately brightens. “Say no more.”

The surreality of the following hours is enough to make Rey dizzy, her steps occasionally sluggish
as she wades through the dreamscape of their atrium, newly transformed into a garden of ivy and
blooms. It makes her more thankful for Ben’s arm—which, of course, never leaves her reach. His
sturdiness and surety floods her with even more of this strange sensation. Her skin feels light, so
light that it may float away, unravel her into nothing.

She tightens her hold on him as they walk through the halls to the triclinium, leading the bridal
parade. Laughter from their guests echoes behind them, their words missed by Rey’s ears over the
cotton shoved inside them.

Ben chuckles, leaning towards her. His words are soft, the tickle of his lips against her sensitive
skin shivering down her spine as he bends to ask, “Nervous?”

She looks up into his satisfied smile, his mirth spurning on the heat of ire rising in her cheeks.
Unwilling to begin a marriage with lies, she mutters, “A little.”

“Mm,” he grunts, squeezing the hand draped over his arm. His palm swarms her with warmth, the
stroke of his thumb stoking the dormant embers in her bones. “We’ll see to that soon.”

He guides her into the triclinium, his words burning her curiosities. The party settles into their
respective lounges, Kaydel casting herself happily over Poe’s side as he lays. At the center, Ben
sits, pulling Rey close. She smirks, only mildly surprised he hadn’t forced her into his lap. He truly
is behaving himself.

Ematt and Ahsoka pour the rich, golden mulsum into everyone’s chalices. He winks at Rey as he
does, chuckling as he goes to take his seat.

Rey quirks a brow. “He seems… jubail.”
Chuffing, Ben does not reply.

Valentine follows Ahsoka within, stooping to lower a platter on the table before the newlyweds. Rey sits up to observe it, meeting the man’s eye. “Bread?”

“It is customary,” he replies soundly. He rights himself with a smile, and gestures to Ben. “Master Solo, if you would?”

Ben nods, taking Rey’s hands in his palm.

“Rise, all,” Valentine beckons, sweeping a ready-filled chalice into his grasp. He lifts it in toast as they obey, the honored couple standing close to one another. “Let us give thanks for this blessed day,” he booms heartily, “and for the victory of love over all. To Ben and Rey Solo of Rome, I bid thee: break bread, drink, and may the Lord provide the rest.”

At his cue, Ben leans down, taking the unleavened bread in hand. Rey understands as he offers it to her, taking her half and pulling until they share their broken pieces. Eagerness swarms her heart and, unable to wait, she tears away a segment, holding it to his mouth. He does the same, pushing the soft pastry through her lips.

Their company cheers, the sound of clinking goblets and applause banging along the limestone walls. The bread is passed along, shared by all as they turn to each other with their chalices, twining their arms to sip. Rey giggles as she stands on her toes, his height a formidable opponent—undeterred, they manage to swallow before sharing a chaste kiss, sweetened by the honeyed wine on their skin.

When all sit, distracted by their own conversations, Ben nearly loses his balance, sighing as he falls to the cushioned seat. This entire experience has been exhausting, but as Rey settles close, her fingers “accidentally” brushing the exposed skin of his chest, he finds the energy to wrap a possessive arm around her waist, nearly tugging her onto his lap with its force. “Is my wife satisfied?” he growls into her hair, nuzzling.

“Mm,” she hums, eagerly accepting his warmth, that feeling of fog punctured by a bright light. She grins. “Yes.”

Her bright smile captures him. He doesn’t dare blink, lost in the memory of the smiles that came before. His thumb caresses her cheek, fingertips teasing the petals of the flowers in her crown, unable to find the words to express this fullness inside him. So he offers her one in return, small and sure and crooked as it is. “Good.”

Rey studies him, and for a moment is able to, perhaps, comprehend the love he must feel for her. It is an uncanny, flickering realization, escaping her like smoke—that in his eyes, in the soft release of his furrowed brow, in the clasp of his arms around her, the fulfillment of his promise to make her a bride of her faith... that his vow will always be kept.

As though determined to ruin the moment, Poe lifts his chalice. “So, what comes next for you two?”

Ben strokes Rey’s side with his thumb, unwilling to let her forget where her attention should stay as he replies with a stern, “What business is it of yours?”

“Ben…” Rey chides gently.

Ematt snickers into his chalice. “Now now, Master Dameron. No need to badger them! Besides, I think we all know what comes next.”
A chorus of groans ascends, Ahsoka shaking her head. “You perverted old louse…”

“What? Love in physical manifest is a beautiful thing! One might say I am being respectable,” Ematt shrugs. He waggles his salty brow at Ben and Rey, tapping his nose. “Perhaps we should skip the feast and leave you both to yourselves, hm…”?

Kaydel guffaws, the unladylike squawk making Rey jump. She blushed, settling into Ben, prepared to use him as a wall to hide the mortification clogging her throat.

Ben frowns—Rey seems uncomfortable. Or, on second thought, looking at her face now, he recognizes that familiar tease of lust so often offered to him in their torturous nightly appointments.

His posture softens, eased by the inevitable reassurance of what new tortures—and reliefs—this night will bring. “It’s still daylight,” he grunts, hiding his smirk behind the lip of his wine glass. “You have until nightfall to make yourselves scarce. Unless my wife changes her mind.”

An unwitting charm seems to inspire laughter among them, Poe Dameron and Kaydel Connix looking somewhat frightened as Rey tugs harmlessly at Ben’s infuriatingly perfect hair. Valentine, however, seems more entertained than any might have thought a man of the cloth capable, smiling knowingly. “Do you intend to have children?”

Ben chokes on his wine while Rey laughs at him, satisfied with this vengeance and patting his thigh reassuringly. Trying to capture her social graces—uncertain whether she’s ever had them to begin with—she replies, “Don’t all of us?”

“Speak for yourself,” Poe grunts with a shy smile, shaking his head of loose curls.

“You don’t want little racers, Dameron?” Ematt teases, pointing between him and Kaydel.

“No, Sir,” he replies serenely, setting down his chalice. He slaps Finn’s shoulder. “After seeing this one’s little monster, I will keep my seed in its pod, thank you.”

His crude demeanor doesn’t take away from the message of his words. Rey and Ben look to Finn, the first in open surprise. “You’re a father?”

Finn grins sheepishly, swirling his wine. “I believe I was told there would be a feast,” he leads, his diversion missed by none as he sets aside his cup, rising to his feet. He bows slightly to Ahsoka, extending a hand. “If I may assist?”

“You may,” Ahsoka smiles pleasantly, accepting his gracious offer.

Rey gawks as they go, though perhaps she shouldn’t be so shocked. Younger men have borne children before. Why should Finn be any different?

Ben considers her expression, quietly thankful for her diversion from Valentine’s question. Their marriage is barely hours old—to think of children now, while not entirely unpleasant a possibility, would be an unnecessary strain on an already uncertain future.

They soon forget about it, however, as the food arrives. Steaming dishes of baked mullet are spread before the few guests, the white, flaky meat of the fish basted with a generous slather of salty garum sauce, dotted with dried grapes. Finn keenly sets the plate of sliced melon and quince upon the table, generously drizzling it with honey.
The appetizers are downed with ease, the sweet meats and fruits melting on their tongues. Conversation weaves around them like weeds, Rey growing braver as her belly fills. Ben sits in comfortable silence as they fraternize, time waxing on as he watches her beautiful lips peel back in laughter, folding around her tempting tongue to make fine music in his ears.

The main course is far from disappointing. The warmth of the afternoon drifts through the halls, sweeping through and dragging along the smell of Ahsoka’s cooking. As the hours passed she would often rise to check on it, and is rewarded with a choir of delighted moans as she sets the table with a generous helping of glazed ham, flanked with fennel, beets, and tender, pliant beans.

Finn arrives with another dish soon after, cradling it carefully in his hands. This does not go unnoticed by Kaydel, who calls, “What’s that you have?”

He smirks, his eyes shimmering with excitement. He stoops to show them all the fine, perfectly-cooked game within before offering it to Ben and Rey. “After you.”

Rey peers into the bowl, plucking out a small morsel. The meaty smell makes her mouth water, and, eyes darting to Ahsoka, she takes a bite. Her teeth sink into a tough but generous slab of soaking juices, the sweetness of the meat rolling her eyes into her skull. “Oh, my…”

“Do you like it?” Ben probes softly, teasing her spine with long, roving fingers.

Rey shivers, suddenly feeling overwhelmed. She nods, eagerly downing the rest with a ravenous hunger. No one among them looks at her with difference, taking her lead and eating with abandon.

Ben takes another swig of his mulsum, careful not to down too much. His Rey clearly enjoys the doormouse he had specially ordered for her, and he intends to be fully aware when she enjoys what else he plans to give her, tonight.

The desserts come later, after their appetites have risen again from the cinders, manifesting in simple dishes of fruits and nuts. Kaydel and Poe cheer as Finn fills his mouth with as many nuts as it will take, losing count somewhere in the forties-mark and enjoying every morsel he manages to fit.

While they are distracted, Ben readjusts himself on the couch, settling behind Rey. His large hand encompasses her satisfied stomach, the warmth soaking into her skin as he rests against her veil, breathing in the flowery scent.

Rey smiles, leaning into him as he toys with the rope around her waist. “Feeling eager, husband?” she whispers.

Ben moans softly at the name, nuzzling behind her ear, his eyes closed as he tweaks the linen ties. “Impatiently so, Domina.”

The translation emerges with weakening ease. Wife. Mistress. Rey shudders as the depth of his voice undermines her, covering his hand and squeezing, the urge to pull him to her bed surging to her groin from the soles of her feet.

But she must endure the temptation—the time for them will come soon enough. For now, she must enjoy the ceremony, this gift he has given her.

“But she must endure the temptation—the time for them will come soon enough. For now, she must enjoy the ceremony, this gift he has given her.”

“Soon,” she whispers, stroking the masculine bulge of his veins.

He grunts, letting his fingers rest and tangle with hers, reminding his manhood to behave itself. He settles for craning his neck for a kiss, stealing her lips and excusing himself from the room for a
necessary excursion.

Rey touches her lips with her fingertips, the inimitable trace of him lingering behind. She smiles watching him leave, already missing him. *Has he always been so frustratingly winsome?*

Finn leans over, no longer the cause for spectacle as Poe fills Kaydel’s mouth with grapes, earning cajoling encouragement from a drunken Ematt. There are nuts in his teeth. “I have a gift for you,” Finn whispers covertly, tugging out a folded piece of parchment from his tunic.

Rey accepts it, meeting his eye curiously. “Thank you. What is it?”

“Do you remember when you first came to the estate?”

“Yes,” she nods. “Of course.”

“You asked about a letter. *That* letter,” he points. When she studies it in her hands, he continues, “It’s the one he sent to us when… Well, I’m sure you’ll see for yourself.”

Rey considers him, understanding dawning on her, the secret she holds in her hand like a precious stone. “Thank you, Finn,” she smiles. “For everything.”

He shrugs, pointing at her around his chalice. “Better hide that. Don’t want lover-boy to get embarrassed. It’s some… graphic content in there, for him. I assume.”

Suddenly concerned, but not enough to be disturbed, Rey almost asks for details—but sensing the approach of her husband, she panics, and tucks the parchment into her robe. The absence of a fascia makes the rough texture brush her nipple, and she hisses at the brief moment of discomfort, but tempers it quickly.

Ben doesn’t seem to notice, settling back beside her. She fits perfectly into the crook of his arm, resolving to share this secret thrill with him when everyone leaves.

After she’s read it, of course.

Dessert and wine flows freely, enough to make Ahsoka distressed. She acts like a mother hen hovering over her chicks, peaches, pears, and pomegranate seeds doing only so much to allay their need to stretch their legs.

They all eventually migrate to the atrium. Poe stumbles into the pool, soaking his sandals and tracking water along the tile floors, earning laughter from his companions.

Ben hovers in orbit around Rey, his hand at the small of her back. On occasion, when their guests’ attention is elsewhere, he tugs at her belt, reminding her of the impending sunset. But the summer days are long, dragging on and on, it seems, as politeness and revelry rule their house. Vexingly.

But it provides a welcome opportunity. Ematt trades drunken insults and assurances with Poe Dameron, slurring words of affirmation that Resistance secrets will be taken to the grave with his old, withering bones.

Valentine seems to admire the man—though keeps a fair physical distance from his sweeping gesticulations. Rey has no shortage of thanks to offer him, and to her joy neither does Ben, his adamance of gratitude warming her heart. *And* her loins.

Feeling a pull in her bladder, Rey excuses herself. Her steps rush her away as the letter burns
against her breast, singing with temptation as she cleans her hands.

Isolated in the culina, she glances over her shoulder. Laughter sounds further in the house—she should be safe from prying eyes here. She pulls out and unfolds the letter with a quivering gut, her eyes sweeping over the message, thirsty yet sorely unprepared for the emotion laden there, in the familiar scroll of his hand.

Master Dameron,

I write to you in urgency regarding my ancilla, Rey. It has come to my attention that you hold interest in her potential to join your staff. I ask that you accept this denarii as payment for her employ, and heed me this one request:

Cherish her. If it be in your power—protect her. From me, if need be. The emperor has demanded my life of me—I will no longer hold stake in this world.

When I am gone, I ask that you then release Rey of her servitude. If this payment does not satisfy, Caluan Ematt will see to your gratification.

I do not beg, Master Dameron, for anything but this. Nothing matters to me any longer but her safety. Please—do not let her live in vain. Give her the freedom that I could not.

And let them say what they will of me; all but that I did not love her.

Ben Solo

Rey sniffs, reading over the last words, blinking back her tears. The painful memories come surging back and she recalls the state of them, when all was confused.

She was a fool not to recognize the signs of his love, so distracted by suppressing her own. But the poem he’d written, and now this letter… all of it, the evidence she had never seen. That Ben had—

“You enjoy reading things behind my back.”

She sets the parchment down, scoffing even as her heart swells. “One might say my teacher fostered an addiction to Latin reading materials,” she combats weakly, unable to hide her coyish beam.

“One might,” he assents, coming closer, surrounding her with warmth. His eyes burn deep into hers, their tenderness glowing in the golden light streaming through the window.

Rey feels herself begin to quake, the swirl of hope and love betwixt them impossible to fight. She leans into his body, wrapping her arms around his muscular torso, breathing in the scent of him, the crisp air of liberty in his flesh. His soul. “You do give me freedom, Ben,” she murmurs, fingers clinging to the taut skin hiding beneath his toga. “You always have.”

Ben’s chin quivers under her touch, but he is determined not to cry, the reminder of her trust in him too great a gift. For now he must only feel joy.

So he takes her into his arms, cradling her close, his hand lost in the silky sheer of her veil. “Rey…” he murmurs, caressing over her hair, her presence driving him mad with aching hunger. His hands grip her shoulders, fingers claiming her tightly as he struggles to breathe, meeting her eyes… “...the way I feel has not changed. I will keep my promises to you.” He searches her, intonation grave in the midst of their intimacy. “Tell me you understand that.”
“I do,” she nods, finally swallowing her tears. “I do…” She reaches up to feel his cheek, standing to press her lips to his. They linger together, their eyes closed, savoring the innocent press, the amity of their touch. “I love you,” she whispers, lashes fluttering as she falls away, studying the light as it bathes his face.

“I love you, too,” he advances, his voice thick as his hands slide down her arms, taking her wrists. He lifts her hands to his mouth, closing his eyes as he places soft kisses to the webs of her fingers, each receiving their affection in turn.

The plush of his lips makes her gasp as a surprising pleasure takes hold, the hair rising on her arm when his gaze captures hers once more, molten honey dragging her into their inescapable depths.

“Ben…” she sighs, her heart pounding against her bones. Heat pools between her legs, the pleasure of his touch making her tremble.

Something like fear, like excitement, curves around her like a snake, coiling and strong as he stills, looming on his haunches like a starving lion—and she knows she can resist him no longer.

“I… I can’t wait anymore…” she pants softly, laying her hand against his sternum. The heat of his breast brands her palm, the beat of their hearts rendering them into a living pulse, a throbbing, inescapable, inexorable need. Her fingers claw into the cloth, her every breath like fire as she holds his eyes, her voice low. Powerful. “…Take me to bed, Ben.”

“Yes,” he nearly snarls, tugging her close. With inhuman speed he dives, sweeping her into his arms. She cries out in gleeful surprise, elatedly wrapping her arms around his neck as he trudges into the atrium, his countenance fearsome as he roars, “Get out!”

Rey slaps his chest in embarrassment, but cannot help chuckling into his throat as their guests scramble away, their expressions wide with humor and justifiable terror.

Ahsoka, sobered, ushers them out with waving hands, grim yet proud and knowing all the same. Ematt cackles in reply, cupping a hand to his mouth and calling, “Mind the grape, boy! The grape!”

But soon enough he, too, is forced out—leaving the villa empty save for a man and his wife, treading the holy ground of sacrament towards the threshold of their waiting bedchamber, their lips entangled, their hearts entwined, ignorant of everything, anything, else.

Chapter End Notes

[It was customary for Roman weddings to be held in the atrium of the house. For the sake of romanticism in this narrative, I relocated them to the courtyard (more outdoorsy that way; I couldn't resist)]

[On the morning of the wedding day, a bride would usually be dressed by her mother. Ahsoka acts as Rey's matron, or "pronuba": a bridesmaid whose participation was essential for giving away the bride]

[The bride would be given bright yellow shoes and dressed in long white robes, normally tied in a woolen belt (called the "Knot of Hercules") that only the groom would be allowed to unravel. Because Rey does not subscribe to the Roman faith,
Ahsoka gives her a belt of linen, which is the primary element of swaddling clothes (to symbolize Christ's birth)

[The Latin phrase Rey whispers ("Ubi tu Gaius, ibi ego Gaia" / sometimes "Quando tu Gaius, ego Gaia") is what the Roman bride would say to her husband when joining hands. It, in essence, means "wherever you go, there I will be, yours")]

[The joining of hands was essential to consent in marriage. In a Roman wedding, the ultimate consent was given by the woman, so the marriage would only be legal when she took the groom's hand. The couple would then share their first kiss as husband and wife to display their commitment]

[The "bridal couch" was just a regular couch that the bride would lay on while guests adorned her with flowers!

- The blue cluster of flowers Kaydel gives Rey is called a Larkspur, the July flower (the month Ben and Rey are married) and a symbol of first love.
- The Marigold is a golden flower symbolizing passion, creativity, cruelty, and even grief. It is also associated with lions, a symbol of courage.
- The violet flower Finn gives to Rey is a Chrysanthemum, a plant of the Daisy family—the color is a symbol of well-wishes and health, and sometimes a deep friendship.
- The flower Ematt gives is an Amaryllis, a flower popular in Greek myth, wherein the nymph Amaryllis shed her own blood for her true love. It's pure-white center and sharp, red petals are a symbol of strength, pride, confidence, and the beauty of a woman.
- The Ivy crown from Ahsoka, being an evergreen plant, represents eternity, fidelity, and affection. It also symbolizes wedded love, as it can survive any environment.
- The White Lily Ben places in Rey's belt is a symbol of devotion, humility, purity of the soul, chastity, and virtue]

[Another customary display of marital commitment is "breaking bread," where the couple would feed each other unleavened bread—which has, today, carried on in the tradition of feeding the other cake!]

[Doormouse was actually an expensive dish to obtain, as it was not as common as beef, pork, or goat. It was a luxury item that only the most extravagant of revelries touted. As for desserts, there would normally be so much fruits and nuts leftover that guests would be given small bags to take home—hence the party favors we partake today]

[At the end of the festivities, the groom would typically "steal" the bride away in a pretend show of force, carrying her off to consummate the marriage (°_]°]

{The theme for this chapter is "Fall on Me" by Andrea and Matteo Bocelli. Listen to the Glory's Fray Spotify playlist here!}
OMG ya'll, I canNOT believe how far we have come!!! As of now, Glory's Fray is over 200,000 words long and has been blessed with OVER 3,000 KUDOS! (ishops)THANK YOU ALL SO SO SO SO SO SO MUCH for all of your relentless, unending support of this stupidly long Ancient Roman dumpster fire! Seriously, I'm in awe!

So~ I really hope that this chapter (as well as the next several, *wink wink*) are worth the wait. The slow burn is OFFICIALLY OVER! (/◡/)/*:・゚✧

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He carries her across the threshold, each step strong and sure as she clings tightly to his body, their lips joined and stroking, breathing hot and ragged, trading pleasure for taste. The curtains stir in the soft breeze of the gaining sunset, the brilliant light bathing them in its fiery glow.

Rey pants against his chin, gulping in a sweet, heady aroma. Returning to her senses, she looks around to find the chamber adorned with blooming roses and flickering votives.

“Ben,” she gapes, lost in awe as he sets her onto shaky feet. “Did you do all this…?”

“Mm,” he hums, wrapping his arms around her middle from behind. His hard chest comes flush with her back, the strength of his grasp leaving no room for resistance. “I knew you would like it,” he rumbles, pulling her veil away from her neck to press his lips against her throat.

“I do,” Rey sighs, leaning into him as his affections lead to her robe’s collar. His fingers tangle in the cloth of her gown, wrinkling it under his eager ministrations, pressing her more firmly against him. She offers more of her throat to him, certain he can feel her heart pounding under her skin.

“Mm, very much…”

His breath fans warmth against her, flooding down her spine. She can hear the smack of his lips with each gentle press, his every inhale ragged and deep.

For the first time since that morning in the stable, so long ago now, his hand climbs up her body, palming her covered breast. She gasps as he squeezes, his teasing gentle—and yet so merciless.

Heat crawls into her cheeks. “Ben…”

“Etiam, mea Puella?” he croons, his voice thick honey in her ear. She feels a tug in her belt as his free hand pulls loose the first knot, her gown sagging in slight. The heat persists as that hand roves over her waist, holding her tightly. His lips find her temple, the sensitive skin of her lobe. “What do you want me to do?”

Her arms, trapped above his, reach up to find his face. Her fingers creep into his hair, the softness clouded by the gaining swelter of eagerness, rising faster than a crashing wave. Her eyes fall to the bed, so patiently waiting in a streaming blanket of darkness and daylight. “Take me… there.”

Ben obeys, caressing from her breast to her waist, sending spirals of pleasure twining deep into her
flesh. As he comes to stand before her, his eyes heavy with desire, his hand falls to hers. She gives it to him freely, their gazes locked, each step taken in trance as he leads her across the floor.

In one moment she is upright, the world with her, until it is swept slowly down. It changes gradually, spread like venom in blood, until she is on her back, the world and sky the color of the ceiling—and then his skin, as he falls with her.

The dip of his knee into the mattress sends a jolt through her core, the reality of his mass and nearness like the crushing weight of a gavel come to deliver its final sentence. His toga hangs loose from his chest as he stoops to kiss her lips and her hands fly up to touch him, to wind around his neck and draw fate closer, still.

When he breaks away, Rey is left feeling light-headed, every muscle in her face stretched too taut. She can feel her veins shivering under her flesh, the skin thrumming and alive. She sits up with him, the crown of her veil prodding her like thorns. She ignores its sting to kiss him fervently, the dizziness addicting, the heat gathering between her thighs burning hotter as she rakes her fingers down his clothes, forcing the neck of the toga down to his waist.

Ben exhales when she touches him, the relief in disrobement only encouraging this freedom he feels. He straddles her, sitting on his knees to welcome her kiss, his hands squeezing eagerly at the cloth of her gown. Through the haze of his vision he notices how her robe has begun to part, and without the strength for restraint he reaches to glide his thumb along her collarbone, breathing in her heavenly sigh.

Though they have had plenty practice in such compromising positions before, there is a stiffness in Rey’s legs that will not abate—the constant quivering driving her mad. As he kisses her neck she tries to ignore it, but the pleasure of his touch only mixes with the bane of her blood in some sickening brew. Her stomach lurches, as though she may be sick.

“Wait,” she gasps, bracing a hand against his chest.

Ben pauses, scouring her face. Her lips are drawn tight, her face neither flushed nor pale. Worry seeds through him and he relents, moving to give her space. “Is something wrong?”

“No, I…” she murmurs, sitting up with him. As she does, the dizziness she felt recedes, in slight, settling between her hips. Her heart pounds in her throat; she can see her fingers shaking in the shadows of his body. “I... just need a moment…”

As she speaks, he understands. Although only moments ago she had seemed so eager, this is something to be savored, eased into with gentleness and care. Silently, he moves to work away the skewed crown of her veil, lifting it away to free her scalp—hoping this will make her more comfortable. Perhaps he should have done it sooner, but already his rationale is dwindling.

“Thank you,” Rey sighs, combing down the strays between her fingers. She watches him as he sets the crown aside, careful to avoid the flickering votive candles. The dimming sunlight flashes against his exposed skin, the shade of his broad chest shooting a pang of yearning—and squirming nerves—through her.

What is wrong with me? she mourns, averting her gaze as his burns into her. Something like shame rises in her chest, curling and suffocating like smoke. After all he had done for her, she still—

“Come here,” Ben intones, his fingers slipping tenderly around her wrist. At his words her thoughts are drawn from the mire, his arms winding coils of muscle and flesh as he draws her down to lay with him upon the blankets.
This is a familiar position for them, now, the warmth of his body drawing her close. Rey breathes out, trying to understand, *overcome* these sensations at war within her as she looks into his eyes. It couldn’t be fear she feels—she knows how much she wants this. That *he* wants this.

Could it be worry, then, that she would disappoint? That all they have saved for, waited for, *risked* for, wouldn’t be enough?

Rey frowns. Normally Ben would make some gently sardonic, if not brutishly romantic, comment by now, but he is oddly silent and still.

She nestles closer, breathing him in. He smells like himself, like skin and earth and the slight musk of sweat. With her eyes closed she can hear it—a rapid pound under her ear, the thick swallow of saliva down his throat.

“Do you think me any different from you?” he whispers softly into her hair, stroking down her back. Sparks trail in his wake, catching small, growing fires along the ridge of her spine. He turns her until she is offered to the ceiling, hovering over her once more, his dark gaze leaving her nowhere to run.

He caresses her cheek, the warmth in his eyes filling her with its heat. She searches them, finding what she’s always found. Her throat closes and, knowing that to speak is to weep, she shakes her head.

“Rey.” Pressing his head to hers, Ben holds her gaze steadfastly. “Don’t be afraid,” he murmurs, his thumb tracing back and forth along the slope of her cheek. “I feel it too.”

Rey narrows her eyes, still trapped in her disbelief. “You do?”

A smile plays at his lip and he takes her hand, holding it over his heart. He nods, hoping that she can feel for herself just what this night means to him—that the fear he feels, like hers, is one born from love. “It’s just us now.”

*Just us,* Rey muses, letting her hand venture to the soft skin of his cheek. She probes at one of his marks with her thumb, full of adoration for the shadows she casts in every divot. Sighing, she lays back into the pillows, finally feeling her heart begin to find a steadier rhythm. “Ben?”

“Yes, Puella.”

The name doses her with comfort. She plays his hair between her fingers, the soft strands curling around her knuckles, making her smile. “Could we… lie here? Until dark?”

His eyes widen by the slightest margin before he moves, wordlessly offering his assent. Rey tempers her breathing as best she can when he moves behind her, carefully avoiding the lily still trapped in her belt. She doesn’t bother taking it out, comforted by the lingering trace of him as he wraps his arms around her body, drawing her back to his chest.

Ben inhales the sweet aroma of her hair, taking what liberties he can. The cloth of her robe presses against his chest, the warmth of her skin bleeding into him.

His fear is beaten down by eagerness as he closes his eyes, drowning in her presence, grounding himself. He must remember his plans—the battle strategies put in place to defeat these feelings of inequity.

Their first time together was less than intimate, and the second, while profoundly more meaningful, still held the same qualities of impatience he is so apt to foster.
He will not make the same mistake again. Not tonight.

Rey opens her eyes to the sound of crackling fire.

By the time she sits up she realizes she had fallen asleep, but the mortification she may have felt by it is dashed as she looks beyond the foot of the bed.

Darkness cloaks the room, the open terrace doors betraying not the barest trace of moonlight. A soft breeze ghosts through the sheer curtains, dancing over the floors as they had that fateful summer night, when first she came.

Unbeknownst to her, her husband reflects on this as well, his back to her as he studies the hearth, now set ablaze. It snaps and puffs, glazing his eyes with its burning light, drawing him into something not quite thoughtfulness or memory.

Rey shifts, the shoulder of her robe slipping down her arm. The silhouette of him stands tall, as proud and hard as marble, and her eyes wander over the expanse of his flame-drenched skin, lust waking, blooming inside of her.

Wetting her lips, she rises on shaky feet. If he hears her, he does not betray it, standing motionless as she approaches, every sinew and sliver of muscle and skin aware of this dwindling space between them.

The rapid beat of her heart reminds her of the fear she’d felt, but as she slept she must have dreamt, and in that dream received comfort and bravery. Regardless of it now, Rey swallows down the cowardice of uncertainty—embracing its exploration with the touch of her hand upon his arm.

The muscle jumps under her touch, and he turns to meet her eye. A silent question passes between them when he does, his ever-patient impetuosity palpable under his skin.

She answers him first, reaching to her stomach. The flower remains, intact yet somewhat crumpled, and she withdraws it from her belt, offering it to him.

He hesitates before he takes it, twisting the stem between the thick pads of his fingers. When his eyes flit from their petals to her gaze, she gasps softly at how deeply they burn, as though his restraint has finally met its end.

Excitement rushes through her when he bows his neck, turning his head to press his lips to hers. His kiss, normally so eager and, at times, overpowering, finds her softly tonight, tentatively stroking her sensitive flesh. She opens to him, beckoning him inside with the crook of her tongue, savoring how slowly, how fully, he invades her.

When they part the lily is gone from his hands, his breathing heavy as they migrate to her belt. His fingers fumble with the knot at first, but soon it loosens for him. Rey holds her breath, carefully watching his expression as he pulls each end free from their bind with an almost painful slowness, as might a sculptor etching into virgin marble.

And, lips parted, shining and wet, his exhale matches the sigh of her robe as it’s pulled open and left to fall, crumpling to the floor in a silken heap, leaving her exposed.

Rey sucks in a breath, her instinct to cover her breasts hard to defy. His stare bores into them as they rise, the sweep of air cast upon them standing their peaks fully for him, inviting his claim.

He reaches out, the touch of his fingers against her belly making her jolt with the sudden bolt of
pleasure it incites. Stepping closer, Ben crowds her as his hand slides up, his palm hot as it smooths along her gooseflesh. He cups her breast, the plush flesh engulfed in warmth.

Her heart throbs when he probes at her puckered peak, a hiss of pleasure breezing through her teeth as his hand joins its twin, leaving her helpless in hot, succulent agony.

Ben’s mind clouds as he fondles her, her name a soft reverence on his lips. Her head lolls back as he explores, slowly re-learning her body. Her subligaculum covers her womanhood still—and perhaps she is better for it. Where she completely nude, he may have caved under her influence and forgotten to take his time.

Though her moan does little to help such sentiment.

His cock twitches under his toga, awakened, seeking. Having her so close as she slept, and now the striking beauty of her ready, waiting body, has him longing for his wife. It aches within his chest and he bows under its influence, devouring her lips as he sacrifices a hand to pull her flush against him.

Rey whimpers, letting him have reign of her mouth, reaching blindly to feel his body, so strong and warm under her hands.

Ben grunts when her fingertips brush his scar, the pleasure gripping his bones. They feel so small as they wander along his back and he shifts, moving his hand over her buttocks and between her legs, pressing against her heat through the cloth of her subligaculum.

“Ben—!” Rey pants, her nails digging into his flesh.

It stokes the fire inside him, burning him to the core. Holding her eyes, he probes again, relishing her listless expression, the way her lashes flutter with confusion and bliss. “Tell me what you want me to do, Rey,” he tries again, his heart racing for her answer.

She pauses, lost in his gaze, his touch dizzying—but not enough to deter a lingering desire burning resiliently within her. Wetting her lip, she taps the hollow of his throat, riding a wave of empowerment to stand on her toes and kiss him there. “Would you do anything?” she whispers, clinging close.

A rumble purrs deep in his chest, the press of her breasts against him divine. “Yes. Yes, anything,” he swears, his hands holding her waist, fingers peeking under the snug cloth at her hips.

Suddenly, Rey shifts, holding his wrists to stall his progress. Her eyes gleam with a devilish sheen, all lingering trace of fear vanished as she steps forward, moving him until the back of his knees hit the end of their bed.

She pushes him just hard enough to make him sit.

Ben starts, meeting her gaze. “What’s this?”

She climbs over him, settling on her knees above his lap—giving him full view of her pert breasts. He accepts her readily, his hands sweeping up her thighs to hold her ribs—now barely visible at all! —keeping her still as he nuzzles their soft, shallow valley. Oh, how he missed this…

Rey sighs, carding her fingers through his hair as he kisses her sternum, the suckle and press of his mouth sublime. She tugs until he looks at her face, his hazy countenance only solidifying her resolve. She kisses his plump lips and whispers, “Wait here.”
Then runs right out of the room.

Ben gapes into the emptiness, his hands empty of his wife’s lovely curves. The wind blows tauntingly from beyond the terrace, the gossamer curtains shifting with laughter from the corner of his eye as its sight settles on the rumpled cloth of her gown, lying limp and lifeless on the floor.

He scoffs, rubbing over his mouth, catching the sparks of her kiss. “Ah, Rey…” he whispers. *You never change.*

He settles a determined glare into the floor, swearing to himself and the lily resting there that, no matter how many times she runs, he will always wait for her.

His musing is short-lived. From the door a partially-nude woman enters, her dark hair begging to be rumpled, her milky décolletage waiting to be ravished.

But what lies cradled in her arms pauses all his lustful intentions.

Dumbfounded, Ben stares as Rey kneels before him, placing a bowl of water onto the ground at his feet.

When she moves to take his ankle, he flinches. “Rey—"

“You said ‘anything,’” Rey reminds him, her words calm, her gaze sharp.

Ben frowns. He had expected her to ask for pleasure, not for… *this.* It doesn’t sit right with him, the sight of her beneath him churning in his gut. “You don’t have to—"

“I *want* to,” she asserts, cutting him off. The hazel fields of her eyes sway in the summer breeze, the votives shining embers under her lashes as she refuses to look away from him. “Ben…” She takes his ankle in her hand, holding him tenderly. “Can’t you see? I’m not your slave,” she murmurs, sincerity folding her lips into a honeyed smile. “I’m just yours.”

All at once Ben is transported back to that night where the rain battered mercilessly against his face, where she looked at him with such hope, such trust… just as she is now. He swallows, shuddering as the thickness of his pride fights him, remembering when *this* was the only way he could tell her he loved her, before he had the courage to give it voice.

When he closes his eyes, Rey’s heart feels light in her chest, his quiet acceptance giving her leave of his faculties. She trickles the cool water over his skin, his large, calloused feet charming, the occasional tickled curl of his toes endearing as she washes them, the silence basking them in something sanctifying, holy.

Finished, she looks up, finding his eyes red and shimmering.

Understanding thrums through her at the sight and she rises, taking his face in her damp hands, kissing him warmly. “Ben,” she whispers. When he blinks a tear falls, and she wipes it away, recalling that day when she’d first held him, seemingly so long ago. “I’m not afraid. Not tonight. Not anymore…”

Breath flees from his body, the only response it has manifested in the fling of his arms to ensnare her, to crush her to him. His hand buries itself in her roots, savoring the silky sliver of each strand against his wrist as he buries his face into her shoulder.

“I love you,” he pants against her flesh.
Only somewhat shaken by his sudden embrace, Rey moves to straddle him again, wrapping her arms around him, leaning her cheek into his hair. She smiles. “I know.”

They lose track of how long they hold one another—it could only be second, or perhaps minutes, until the patience of their bodies wears thin.

Ben’s heart paces behind the cage of his ribs like a wild beast. After her demonstration, the sweet assurance of her affection, he’s found himself thrust into a throng of greed for her flesh. He licks her neck, his hands roaming over her naked back, her breasts, everywhere they can reach.

Rey shivers and moans, settling her weight onto him, rocking against him to seek that familiar bulge. No matter how often she may have felt its presence during their racy nighttime... escapades, she could never tire of the way he feels against her, even with the burden of cloth in their way.

He pants against her neck, taking her hips in hand and moving her along his concealed erection, thrusting in that way she likes. A soft “oh!” spills from her lips, encouraging him—he’s found the right spot.

His moment of success is quickly usurped, however, as Rey’s hand slithers between them, slipping under the toga bunched at his waist. Her fingers brush over the cloth of his subligar and he jerks, her touch searing fire through his veins.

“Ah—Rey,” he gasps, blinking as she wrenches at his toga. “What are you doing?”

“I want to see you,” she insists, pulling harder.

What was once pleasure turns to terror in his veins. Reigning in his trepidation, he stills her hands with all the softness he can muster. “There is nothing to see.”

“I doubt that,” she rebuts, a shine in her eye. When he looks at her he knows she doesn’t understand, but her hand on his face, the love in her voice—and the proximity of her bare skin and sweet, supple breasts—begins to sway him. “Please, Ben. I…” she whispers, kissing the shell of his ear, “I want to touch you, tonight.”

She palms him again over his subligar, her clever fingers finding and forming around his shaft. He huffs into the room, mindless as he concedes to her echo of his familiar plea, lifting to help her remove the toga from his hips.

They inch up as a tangle of crawling limbs and lustful intentions, at last occupied fully onto the bed. The mattress accommodates them perfectly, leaving him the room to stretch out beneath her. Rey wets her lips, edging away from him, urging him into a recline. His thighs are massive as she straddles him on her knees, her hands—and his—trembling as she moves to undo his subligar, easing the fabric apart fold by fold until his cock springs free, baring him completely.

Ben turns away as Rey sucks in a breath, her gaze transfixed on the angry redness, the massive mound of flesh and vein she had only caught glimpses of before. She rests her hands on his thighs, lost to silence as she studies him.

Rey has seen plenty of naked bodies before, man and woman alike. And yet, of all of them, the size of Ben’s alone could almost be enough to frighten her. For a moment she wonders how it had ever fit, the impressive length drawing her closer, the need to inspect brushing off any notion of subtlety. The dim light of the room cannot hide him; the orange glow of the votives catch in the thin patches of his coarse, raven hair, illuminating...

Oh.
Scars. Close to the precipice of his rod, she spots them—marred, angry, white—all around his tip. Her gaze flickers to his face, upon the generous dust of rose on his cheeks, the fear in his eyes as he looks at her saying it all.

He was converted at an older age. Rey remembers, it, now. She has seen only a handful of circumcised men, but in her passing glances none had ever carried such pronounced marks—the distance from their childhoods healing them from the knife’s cut. But for Ben…

She meets his eye. “Does it hurt?” she whispers.

He shakes his head. “No.”

Rey nods, distracted by him again. Experimentally, she caresses his hip bones, watching raptly as his chest inflates, her ears full of his sweet, gentle rasps. As she takes in the sight of him completely, the fire’s glow bathing over his flesh, his face turned to her once more—so open, so enthralled!—her heart fills with warmth, spilling out of her like gold.

“You’re perfect,” she sighs, finding his hands at his sides, entwining his fingers with hers. His lips part, as if in shock, and she takes it as an invitation, stretching over him to place a lingering kiss inside.

Frozen, Ben can only groan, her soft, pointed tongue claiming him. Perfect rings in his ears, an immobilizing tonic, leaving only her name in its wake. “Rey…”

“Let me,” she murmurs, moving back to where she can see him, the wet tip of his erection sliding against her stomach. She nearly moans as he leaves his trace there, primal desire rising in her like flames, heating her face with its clinging smoke and steam.

With great care, she wraps her fingers around his base, gauging his expression as she remembers her instructions to grab tightly. As soon as she does, Ben’s entire body judders—from his feet to his neck—his eyes dark, wide, wild as he watches her.

Mouth suddenly dry, Rey wets her lip, stroking upwards. A long moan drags out of him, his arms faltering as they brace him upon the mattress, his head craning back. She follows the memory of direction, caught on the tide of will and power as she begins to pump him.

Ecstasy rattles in Ben’s mind, her touch so warm and right. She’s moving much slower than he might have liked, but he cannot bring himself to give one—

“Fuck… oh, fuck… Rey...” he gasps, the pleasure of her touch maddening. He can feel her driving him higher, the sensation of her hand weaving along his spine, making him arch from the bed.

Hearing him speak so filthily rushes through her—each syllable pools between her thighs. She swipes the bead of arousal from his tip to aid her slide, but still it doesn’t feel like enough.

Ben’s head bobs when she releases him, wondering why she's stopped, until the sight of her reaching into her subligaculum disrupts any other thought. His cock twitches back into her hand when she returns it, now slick with arousal of her own.

She pumps him harder, faster, the speed slapping her fist against his flesh. Ben writhes under her, bucking up into her hand, his words slewing together in different languages, some of which she doesn’t understand—all seemingly punctuated by her name.

Ben’s breath shortens, his sac growing tight. “Rey… Puella,” he gasps, unable to take his eyes off her. “I’m going to come. I—nngh…”
He twitches in her hand, but the pulse does not come. Rey slows a bit, dragging each at the speed of his panting breaths. She plays with his spongy tip, feeling his slit with her thumb. “Do you want me to stop?” she asks softly, dreading the worst.

Ben searches her eyes, feeling himself on the brink. They are hopeful, and with his mind so far from him, he too is hopeful—that his answer is the one she craves.

“Don’t stop,” he huffs, wrapping his hand around hers, encouraging her to stroke faster. As she obeys, he feels something like joy wash over him, her eagerness only feeding the warmth twining low in his belly. Growling, he bucks into her hand once more, his fists clenching into the sheets. “Rey… Mea Puella-ah…” he pants, sweat rolling down his temple. His eyes flit everywhere—to her working hand, her working breasts, her parted lips, her devoted gaze—all of it, all of her, ripping from him all sense, all sight, all sound—dragging him into bliss.

He cries out, the sound so soft, so breaking and inhuman in Rey’s ears. His cock throbs in her hand, a sudden spurt of white streaming from him, spilling into the air, coating her wrist and the undulating flex of his stomach.

She lets him go as it sags, still somewhat engorged, watching as he struggles to chase his breath, his eyes screwed shut. There is a smell he gives, a heady, rich type of musk that she wipes off with the cleaner side of his subligar—although the texture seems somewhat lingering, clinging to her skin and finer hairs.

Ben covers his face behind his hand, a grimace twisting on his lips, the temptation to weep vengefully in him. What she had done… to touch him, to take him without hesitation, when she had at last seen the shame of his body… his heart is too full, so full it might burst and leave her widow to a man devoid of any courage at all.

Discarding his soiled subligar, Rey notices his plight, something like sadness sweeping through her. Riding on its gust, she brings herself closer, pressing her lips to the back of his hand. She speaks softly, as if afraid to frighten him. “Why do you hide from me?”

He could scoff, could ask the same of her for all the times she, too, has hidden—but he is no fool. She knows the answer. It is he who has not spoken it; can no longer deny it. “I am not worthy of this,” he murmurs.

“You are,” Rey contests, wrapping her fingers around his wrist. She pulls gently at his hand. “I told you: I’m yours. So look at me.”

He concedes, breathing wetly, feeling none of the worth she promised him. The final chimes of ecstasy fall far from him as her hand cups his face, as he chokes, “Why?” His eyes sting, his voice no more than a trembling whisper as he touches her cheek, so delicately, as though she might fade. “Why me? Why me…”

Rey’s heart burns, trapped in yearning to understand something she never may. But there is a crack in the amber of his gaze, the brokenness there a reflection of her own.

Summoning the words to speak, Rey strokes him, easing him with her touch, letting the truth take hold. “Because you couldn’t stop me.”

Ben peers at her, fighting through this haze, searching for the light. “Rey—”

“I felt it, too,” she murmurs. “The doubt. For so long I told myself these feelings were only gratitude for the way you loved me.”
Now Ben seems more present, more awake, and so she continues, finding freedom in her tongue.

Rey smiles. “But I was wrong. Neither of us could stop it—not even me. Even if I wanted to, I could never lie to myself that way again. Master, slave... none of it matters.” Tentatively, she leans in to caress his lips with her own, urging him to feel this love washing over her. “I just want you.”

At her encouragement, he returns her kiss, confusion behind the purse of his mouth. But her words ring within him new, brighter chimes of euphoria, bleeding slowly into his body.

Of course—it all makes sense now. This feeling of inequity, of imperfection... how useless! Had she not called him perfect, when he so clearly remains flawed? And yet here she lays, draped over him as a nymph, a goddess of love and beauty—all his for the taking!

Master and slave, the roles therein, lie beyond this place, this bed. How foolish could he be, to allow them entry where only man and woman, man and wife, belong!

His kiss grows bold, emblazoned with this new fire rising inside of him, the revolt against his insecurity toppling the stone edifices of his pride. He pulls her to his chest, satisfied by her victorious moan, showing her his gratitude with the winding swirl of his tongue around hers.

A lifetime he spent waiting in ignorance for this—this treasure, this unparalleled felicity. It is an intangible pleasure, one felt in body and soul, to know how many lifetimes he would spend in that cold loneliness, if only to hold her again.

When at last they break to breathe, his saliva clinging stubbornly, deliciously, to her tongue, Rey smirks. “So,” she pants, “is my husband satisfied, now?”

“He will be.” Ben murmurs darkly. In a blur of pale skin he lunges, pinning her to her back. He presses his chest to hers, fitting between her legs, the cooling sweat sinking into her bones as he rumbles low into her ear. “Once his wife is satisfied.”

Rey shivers, his words an almost threatening breed of promise. She will have to remember to thank Kaydel later—Ben seems more keen to please her now than he has ever been before. It’s... exhilarating.

He trails wet, open kisses down her neck, laving his tongue over each patch of sensitive skin. With lasting presses and fleeting sucks, each growing louder the closer he comes to her opposite ear, Rey feels herself beginning to leak. “Ben...” she sighs, nearly whining as she wraps her legs around him, burning as his softening cock brushes languidly against her thigh. “Touch me. Please...”

“Yes, Puella,” he croons, his voice like satin and silk against her flesh. As he nuzzles her shoulder, she feels him trail his fingertips over her hip before pressing them between her legs. When she shudders he chuckles, the sound low and transient. “I can feel how wet you are...” he murmurs, kissing a cluster of freckles, injecting her with more of this flustering heat as he rubs his palm over her clothed mound. “Just relax. I’ll take care of you.”

Rey does as he commands and lays back into the pillows, sighing out as he continues to ravish her body, his hand heavy and wreathing as he rocks his palm over her subligaculum. The cloth shifts over her cleft, shooting sparks through her.

Eagerness pulls a smile to her lips, trust and arousal a heady brew in her blood. She bites her lip. “Mn, that feels good...”

Ben doesn’t reply beyond a humming nestle into her neck, his progress slipping down her chest in
a trail of lips and tongue. His hand leaves her writhing against the mattress, impatience boiling hot under his mouth as it travels down the flush of her skin.

He kisses her breast, briefly toying her sensitive peak with his tongue, forcing a whimper from her throat as he continues. He slinks further down her body, holding her hips with stroking thumbs, her eyes with smoldering embers.

She gasps when he kisses her navel, his pointed nose nuzzling a surprisingly sensitive patch of skin. The heat of his breath ghosts over her, blooming ever lower. Unable to resist, Rey buries her hands in his hair, praying he will understand when she cannot find the words to speak beyond, “Ben…”

Ben readjusts his weight, his breathing growing erratic again. Determination burns in his chest and he skims over the side of her subligaculum, continuing his careful exploration down her long, sumptuous thigh. She shivers in his hands, under his open mouth, replenishing his pride as he strokes his tongue over the tender back of her knee.

He watches raptly while he does the same to her shin, as her lashes flutter closed, her lips red and parted, her face a blooming rose. He kisses the knob of her ankle, and then the other, he cannot help but linger on the sight of his wife so disheveled, so vulnerable, panting and gasping for him.

His kisses trail back up her opposite leg so achingly slow, the throb in Rey’s womanhood pounding in a terrible need. When his lips pause at the inset of her thigh, Rey shivers awake, the lapse in her trance startled by the sudden grip of his hands at her hips, pinning her down.

Rey blinks. His face is dangerously close to her subligaculum, his eyes shining in the darkness. “Ben?” she asks. “What are you— ahn!”

Ben prods against the linen with his tongue, the pressure of his tip spearing through her body. Her toes curl into the sheets, her hands frozen in the blankets at her sides while she watches helplessly, hopelessly lost to any illusion of modesty as the heat of his mouth sinks into her. He laps upward, the cloth bunching between his teeth. Their eyes meet, the meaning not lost on her as he bites down, withdrawing her last defense, leaving her naked on the bed.

Ben drops the cloth and breathes out, his heart hammering as he sees her at last—his maiden, his wife! Her skin glows in the candlelight, the risen bumps of her flesh innumerable, the unsteady rhythm of her breasts bewitching, the fire in her eyes incinerating the final remnants of ignorance.

Her subligaculum discarded, Ben turns his study between her legs, maneuvering to cup the soft of her thighs. He spreads her with his thumbs, exposing the plush, shining flesh of her folds. They are dark and, as promised him, engorged with blood, the bud of her crest rousing obediently under his scrutiny. On a breath he takes her in, the heady musk of her arousal a sweet echo of his own, an evidence of her love for him he can no longer bear to go without.

And so he tastes.

Rey doesn’t dare move—she couldn’t if she tried, this grip proves too encompassing!—the impossibility of this flooding through her every vein. She cries out as he strokes her cunt with his tongue, the lush of his mouth folding over her to kiss, to suckle and nurse. She covers her lips with her hands, something like a scream trapped beneath her palms. His mouth! She had never considered his mouth! To do such things—how foolish, how unaware she had been to never conceive such euphoric inspiration!

Ben moans in reply to her hushed cries, rolling the bud of her landica under his tongue, tasting the
salt of her shores. She coats him, possesses him, his senses dimmed to all but the close of her soft thighs around his head. Dizzily, he nuzzles, holding fast to her as he probes within her body, feeling as her walls welcome him warmly.

“Ben!” Rey gasps, reaching down, desperate to touch him. When she looks she whines, her vision blurring when his hair is all to be seen! She grabs onto it, tugging in vengeance for this sweet pain he elicits within her, arching against him as his large hand ventures slowly up, clasping onto her breast. He squeezes gently at first, growing rougher as she feels herself begin to climb. He returns to her crest, the pressure setting her ablaze. “Ben—Ben!” she pants, the back of her mind surging, the wave gathering, racing to shore. “More! Please, more!”

He obeys, giving her all she wants, stroking her faster, moving his hand to her other breast. She twitches when he tweaks her puckered nipple, the beauty of his beloved lost to her pleasure rising in him with eagerness. He thrusts against the mattress, rocking his face against her until at last she bellows the deepest moan, her lips formed around the sound as her walls collapse, a surge of her release rewarding him in fire, flood and fury.

Rey crumbles into the bed from the arch of her spine, her eyes glazed and sightless. Pleasure numbs her to all but the pitched, deafening whine in her ear, the blankness of existing as no more than pulsing, raw flesh.

Ben savors the sight of her this way and kisses her softened bud one last time, taking advantage of her position to hold her legs to his chest as he crawls back up her body.

Rey blinks, torn—somewhat—from the spell he’d cast. He hovers over her, his chest pinning her thighs to her breasts, her feet suspended in the air behind his head.

She opens her mouth to question him, but is cut off by the hard stroke of his member between her soaking folds, the touch colliding deliciously with the lingering throbs of her climax. She meets his eyes, distracted only for a moment by the shine on his lip.

“Rey,” Ben sighs, stooping to take her mouth. She accepts him, the salty musk on his lip undoubtedly the remnants of herself. The gesture arouses her with its intimacy, the promise to taste him in return buried, for now, by the end of his slow, sensual kiss. “It’s time.”

Rey sighs as he grinds against her, flossing her folds. Her legs have begun to numb from their posture, the pins in her feet pleasurable as he moves against her, coating himself with her arousal.

All hesitation far from her, Rey nods. “I’m ready.” With his arms planted over hers, leaving her only the room to reach between them, she takes the hot skin of his shaft in her trembling fingers, guiding his tip to her entrance. “Take me, Ben. Make me yours.”

Mine, he considers, if only for a moment, as she touches him, leads him to her. What a difference that word means now, in this place where what they are is no more than that.

No more than one.

Ben huffs, his hips following her guidance as he slips slowly into her. She closes her eyes and he pushes through, careful to heed her tender womanhood. Her arousal aids him, the stretch of her body far more accommodating than before, the feel of her intoxicating as such welcome is not without the sweet, pinching clutch of her body.

He moans, unable to do anything else as he goes deeper. Rey gasps as he fits himself soundly inside, both of them pausing to catch their breath. Sweat grows cold between their beating chests,
the skin fusing as he lunges to claim her mouth in a furious kiss.

She opens for him, their kiss unbreaking beneath his shallow, testing thrusts. His girth stretches her, the pain from their earlier encounters now a distant memory. All she can feel is the pleasure, the friction of his cock thrusting into her, the taste of her on his mouth fading back into that of his own, the mix of their own.

This position brings him deeper than before, they realize, the need for closeness satiated with the piston of his hips. Rey’s hands find his thighs and buttocks—she squeezes him, moaning into his mouth at the generous mounds of flesh, all for her to freely touch.

Ben begins to lose focus, his thoughts traitorously trying to draw him back to the pleasure of her body, the feeling of her hands on him. He shuts it away, determined not to let his sensitivity get the better of him.

Last they entangled, that fateful sunset in the hay, he had thrust madly, losing himself to ecstasy without her by his side. But if she can come on his tongue, he will be damned not to feel that sweet seize of her around his cock, tonight—will be damned not to feel her love!

With great control, he retains his steady thrust, the hard smack of their bodies slapping wetly along the walls. The gossamer curtains dance violently around them, the votives bearing witness to their parted lips and feral moans. The stroke of their meeting flesh claws into their souls, the heat of her hearth embracing the devoted tend of his rod, the beat of their shared pulse and body like twisting flames.

Their open mouths caress the others’, teasing the flesh of their lips, their cheeks, their jaws. Rey whispers a plea for him to give her more, to take her harder, and he does, pounding into her hard and slow, the snap of his hips bringing him deeper, closer.

His body collides against her crest with each thrust, bringing her higher once more, the build low and pulsing in her loins. She manages to withdraw her arms from their trap beneath his, wrapping them around his neck, her fingers resting against his curved back. He stops kissing her neck to kiss her lips, his sweat smearing her cheek, his breathing short.

“Ben,” Rey warns, the coil winding tighter, the pulses of arousal contracting. “I’m, nn, close…”

He kisses her again, taking her cue. He speeds up his thrusts, colliding into her, touching his head to hers, holding her eyes. “Etiam, mea Puella,” he rasps. “Veni ad mihi. Come to me…”

The depth of his command ripples through her, the impact of him against her crest, the fullness of him within her body, the love in his eyes rendering her mortal flesh unable to do anything but obey. But it is that name, the name he had given her, that tears her asunder. Her spine bends as raw pleasure races through her, spiraling tendrils unfurling like fire, searing her soul to his.

Ben grunts, gasping, unprepared for the feeling of her body pulling him in. She pulses tight, her walls slick, her moan searing the last thread of his restraint. He pumps into her, his arms straining as he holds himself aloft, gazing down at her as his force jostles her breasts, her face contorted in the pleasure he—her husband, at last!—has given her.

Victory peels back his lip in a carnal snarl, the beast within him unleashed. Rey takes him fully and completely, her hands on him, all around him, so soft and welcoming. He closes his eyes, panting into her palm as he tightens with pleasure, her touch summoning a memory of sunlight—the way she had smiled at him that moment the sun broke through the darkness.
The moment he knew he loved her.

It seizes in him, then, gripping him beyond hope of escape. He bursts through any distraction from her, thrusting at last into the threshold of finality. “Rey!” he moans, her name and his ecstasy entwined as he comes, burying himself deep inside her.

Rey groans with relief, the hot pulse of his come caressing her walls. He releases her legs, the numbness beginning to fade as he slumps, burying his face into the mattress, his hand winding in her hair.

She smiles through her panting breaths, her hand sweeping over the taut, damp skin of his back. He slips out of her, the emptiness no longer gutting with the knowledge that it will not be long until she can feel it again.

Turning over, she finds his eyes, so warm and welcoming. She touches his face, savoring how real he is as he lays beside her, and whispers, “Te amo, Ben.”

At that, Ben smiles, the sight illuminating the night surrounding them. As rare as gemstones, the precious expression draws her into his arms, their bodies settling together as sleep encroaches on their sudden weariness. They retreat together into the covers, sharing the lingering rapture, knowing that now, at long last, nothing will ever take it from them.

He kisses the crown of her head when she nestles into him—his precious Rey, his wife, his.

“Te amo... mea Puella.”

Chapter End Notes

["Te amo" is Latin for "I love you"]
Happy Valentine's Day, everyone! (/]ω\/]*/^*.✧✧ As always thanks for being such amazing, supportive readers, please allow me to treat you to some smut—Ancient Roman style!

She is awoken by a pressure against the back of her neck, silent, sweet, and familiar.

Turning in his arms, Rey nuzzles into his collar, breathing him in. It's still too dark to see anything but his outline, though the scent is illumination enough. “Mn,” she hums sleepily, lost in a yawn. “Yes, Husband?”

Ben sighs as well, stretching his legs to fit one between hers, enjoying the plush, cool pressure of her thighs enough to almost admit it. He doesn’t reply beyond a second kiss, and then a third, against her crown, the coil of his embrace tightening.

The sounds that escape her from his touch still feel so uncommon despite their growing presence in her arsenal. But she can hardly bring herself to mind.

Morning comes in the grey, then blue, casting shadows over the corpses of faded votives. The light itself seems to look away from them, as if to give them privacy, as they whimper and moan into one another’s mouths.

It was a wordless collision, spoken in a language of strokes and curious touches, stirring the burnt embers of the night before. And now, as quickly as time slips through the sphincter of an hourglass, he is inside her again, and she around him, their fires roaring in a shared hearth.

He grasps her by the hips, helping her with her tireless rhythm over his body—to rock himself for her seems only to throw off such music, so he dares do just this much, for now, promising and immediately forgetting a contrary future as her walls squeeze him mercilessly. Her hands brace the planes of his chest, her breasts dragging over him with her rapid thrusts, her heated breath driving him mad with mindless, bleary lust. He joins her heavy pants with his own, this melding sensation too sweet, too hot, too much.

Unfocused by the dizzying morning, the helplessness of his place beneath her, the way she runs her whole self over his soul, his seed is pulled from him with wild, arresting rapture. It captures him utterly, swarming his mind with bliss, shattering his throat in a whine.

As Ben gasps, his arms losing their strength, Rey rides the last of his hardness over her throbbing, needy crest, the sound of his voice pitching with pleasure enough to cast her over the precipice. He whispers something she cannot understand, something like a plea, and the merciful morning dark sinks into her mind, parting her lips, then her shores, flowing pleasure through her bones.

Her heart still pounding on, she relaxes, sinking onto the firm flesh of his torso while her body lazily suckles his limp cock, squeezing and milking him as she sighs under the relief of satisfied
Ben breathes out, appeased by her ability to seize him for her pleasure in his... ineptitude. It had been a miracle to have withheld himself so long for her last night, so much so that it must have exhausted his reserves.

But now… there will be all the time in the world to replenish them; to make them grow.

"'A sojourn?'

Ben shrugs, avoiding the popping oil in the pan—cooking naked does not come without its risks, and he doesn't particularly feel like getting burned. "It’s a common enough occurrence. I assumed it would be something you may enjoy."

Rey sips at her hot tea, the brew mixing well with her relaxed muscles. The light from the morning casts over her bare body with a comfortable warmth. "Where?" she asks.

He looks at her over his shoulder, a flicker of mischief in his eye. "I have decided not to tell you."

Shaking her head, Rey berates herself for assuming he would be completely forthcoming in the realm of romance. "Fine." Another sip. "Is it far?"

He scoops the last of the cakes onto a plate, his gaze pointedly ignoring the mess of dishes piled beside him. "Two days' journey," he reports, setting them before her, then himself beside her. "I've arranged for an escort."

She smiles at them, then at him. "Thank you. So..." she picks at them, the wheat less than bland on her tongue. "...when do we leave?"

Ben squints out the window. "About an hour."

Rey nearly chokes on her bite. "Well," she splutters, "thank you for the warning, Ben!"

He smirks at that and does not reply, shoving half a cake into his mouth, ravenous. A night—and morning—of rapturous love-making seems to increase one's appetite. But eventually, his mouth full, he rumbles, "You're welcome."

They store their meager packings into the caravan, dressed and waiting in the soft wind and shade. Silencer grazes in the fields, the world quiet and peaceful as they sit together against the walls of the stable, watching the horizon line.

At length Ben’s mind falls—as it is prone to do—into worry. He leans his cheek against her warm hair. "Rey."

She gestures her head as one of attention, not bothering summon the energy to speak, too pleased by his nearness. "Mm?"

"This journey," he begins softly, stroking her side with his thumb, his throat tighter all of a sudden, "as brief as it is, know that, when we return..."

Rey frowns, remembering when he’d spoken of some tournament—a tournament the emperor had ordered him to endure. She reaches for Ben’s hand, her fingers small and thin as they thread through his. She squeezes. "Tell me what I need to know."
Her permit releases a pent breath from his lungs, reminding him that he cannot keep such things from her—things of such import. To keep her in darkness, he knows, would not keep her safe. So he says, “Snoke has postponed my joining his guard. He wants me to fight in the Tournament of Champions for him.”

Rey turns in his arms to scour his face, finding only shadows there. “When?”

Ben thinks for a moment, then, “A fortnight. Maybe sooner.”

Nodding, Rey wets her lips, her mind running on rattling wheels. “That doesn’t leave us much time to plan…” her thoughts cinch as she speaks, tightening like a belt. “You think he is afraid of the Resistance?”

*So sharp,* Ben marvels. “Without a doubt.”

Rey seems to relax at that, the pieces fitting together before her eyes. “I see. So it’s a trick, then. A show…” she represses a shiver, unholy rage beginning to brew in her veins. “Fighting, killing for sport, all to turn eyes away—”

Ben reaches out, interrupting with a stroke to the back of her head, soothing her hair. “Upsetting yourself won’t solve anything.” His voice softens, his touch deft on her cheek. “Trust me.”

Breathing out, Rey lets the surge of anger retreat. “I *do* trust you, Ben,” she urges, holding his lifted wrist. “I just don’t want to lose you.”

Her earnestly nearly bowls him down, the sentiment as forceful as her spirit—and just as dear. “I know, Puella,” he murmurs, pulling her close, the thought of losing her a burning dread and deadly urgency. “I know all too well.”

She leans into his mouth with a rising passion, feeling the heat of his body from her hand’s rest on his tunic. His heart beats against her palm, possession and devotion impressed more deeply with each breath, each caress of lips and hands and tongues.

They break, his sigh ghosting her ear with the headiness of having her so near, of finally possessing the right. “Rey,” he whispers, butting their heads together. “I’ll do whatever I have to. To keep this…”

He kisses her again, melting her into him. Her fingers cling to his sleeve, to hold on to him, to let go of herself—neither of which she can allow to distract her. Catching her breath, she meets his eyes. “What can we do? What choices do we have?”

Ben trails his fingertips thoughtfully down her spine, the caress making her shiver. His gaze ignites, those dark eyes hesitantly inspired. His hold on her tightens. “We could run away together.”

The words, the thoughts and notions they incite, are almost enough to make her kiss him again. Yet her brow pinches under a sudden sting of memory. “What about the Resistance?”

He frowns. “What about them?”

“We made them a promise,” she presses, searching his eyes, suddenly so hard and lacking in sympathy. “We can’t just leave them without keeping it.”

Ben looks down, down to where their hands have absentmindedly intertwined. Thoughts and plans, their potential outcomes, swirl about in his mind, each one more devastating than the other
the more their execution is prolonged. The thought of losing this hand, of his only love sapped of all the warmth in her body, takes precedence over any promises he may have made to secure them. He will not lose them; will not let anything take her life from her.

In his silence, Rey can sense his hesitance. His devotion, as it so tends to do, enamors her as much as it concerns. So she takes his cheek in hand, turning his face back to her. “We still have time,” she reassures, stroking away the shaded chill in his skin.

He looks at her wordlessly, marveling at what happy circumstances these are—and how woefully timed. He covers her small hand with his, if only to hold her there for one second longer.

The thunderous sound of hooves rounds the treeline. They separate and rise, Ben going out to the pasture to receive their guide. He captures Silencer and returns with Finn Freedman, the man’s face clean and bright, as if he weren’t completely inebriated the night before.

“Welcome back,” Rey grins, folding her hands behind her.

“Looking radiant as always,” Finn bows, ignoring Ben’s half-hearted glare.

The men secure the caravan to Silencer’s broad flank, Ben offering his hand to help Rey step inside. She sits at the reins as he stands alongside, watching him attach his gladius and scabbard to his hip. “Planning to do battle, Master Solo?” she queries teasingly.

He shoots her a scathing smirk. “If my Mistress sees fit to send me.”

Although she rolls her eyes, laying back into the shade as Finn starts the wagon rocking out onto the hilly slope, she feels reassured nonetheless.

Rey tries not to linger on these dark thoughts, lying down in the back of the caravan atop the sparse blankets and clothing. Eventually Ben abandons traveling on foot to take Finn's place at the reins.

As she falls in and out of sleep, she could almost swear she feels him touching her.

When she awakens, Rey looks out the back of the caravan, taking in the endless green of the countryside. She doesn't recognize this place, can see no roads in sight.

“Where are we?” she asks over her shoulder.

Finn is the one who calls back, startling her. “Many leagues south of Rome, Madam!”

Rey scoffs at the name, crawling over to look about from his back.

He and her husband must have traded positions again, for the dull coat of his horse lies beyond him, tugging the caravan along. Squinting out into the bright daylight, she frowns. “Where’s Ben?”

Finn smiles, waving his hand forward. “He went to scout ahead for somewhere to make camp. He said he would find a safe place for you.”

Rey sits a bit more easily now, feeling warm. “Oh.”

Now Finn pouts, looking down at her. “Am I such poor company?”
“What? No!” Rey denies, a bit flustered. While he laughs she lays her chin on her arms, watching the hooves of his horse as her stomach cries out in protest of her hunger. She fishes through their stores for unleavened bread, handing him a loaf.

They eat companionably, their shared silence broken when Rey wipes her mouth and asks, “So… you’re married?”

“Yes.”

“She must be beautiful,” Rey murmurs, imagining what his wife might look like. Could she possess the same sleek, rich ebony of his skin? Or perhaps something else? As far as she knows, there are no strictures on human creeds in Rome besides those not considered human at all—slaves marrying non-slaves the only taboo beyond denying the Roman gods.

“She is,” he shares. Chuckling, ripping his bread before eating it, he recounts, “She’s short. I thought she was shy—but that was before she knew me. We argued so much, I didn’t know how much I loved her until she kissed me!”

Rey turns away from her food, captured by this image. “How did you meet?”

Finn shrugs. “How does anyone meet? Destiny, I think. Some force greater than me. To be honest, I’m not sure.” His grin grows sheepish. “She knew me—that I was a slave who became a second master in his own master’s house. It was flattering.”

Curiously, Rey watches him eat. To not say it was God, or some other deity, but an unknown force who brought them together answers an earlier question: No, this man is not Christian, but he very well might become one.

Was that why Valentine married her and Ben? That night the man had questioned her, she feared that payment and love would not be enough to satisfy his hidden loyalties to a world-damned religion. Could it be that Valentine shared her hopes that Ben may one day return to the God he once loved?

Rey frowns, again trying to push away the worries of their future, weed away the nagging feeling of worry in her gut regarding the faith of her own husband. She swallows. “And you have children?”

“Just the one,” he replies, chest swelling. “A son.”

“I’ve never seen him,” Rey challenges softly, feeling lost for appetite, but intrigued nonetheless.

“He’s hidden,” Finn assures her. “Beneath Poe’s villa is a second home, very well concealed with tunnels leading out of the city. We’ve hidden refugees and spies there for weeks before, smuggled them in and out of the wall, and not one of them or us were ever discovered.” He claps the crumbs from his hands. “Don’t tell anyone, though. It might get you killed.”

Very abruptly does Rey remember who she is dealing with—starting to sympathize with Ben’s worries even more. She nods, closing her eyes. Lord help us.

He studies her. “Hey now, chin up,” he stoops, meeting her eyes. “We’ll make our move very soon. And with the two of you on our side, we might just win this war.”

Rey returns his studious look, gazing into him, not bothering hide her own righteous suspicions. “I
understand why you want his help. I know he’s powerful, even if he belongs to the emperor. But what does that have to do with me?”

A look of fear crosses Finn’s eyes, but as soon as it flickers, it’s snuffed out. “You mean you don’t know?”

She shakes her head.

Wetting his lip, Finn hunches closer, speaking as if they might be overheard despite the sprawling landscape of green. “The Romans love you.”

_The Romans love you._

Screwing her lip, Rey leans away. “I’m sorry, you must be mistaken.”

“I’m not,” Finn asserts. ”Why do you think Poe wanted your help so badly?” He frowns, his features stern, his voice low. “He’s not _that_ generous.”

Rey averts her gaze, scoffing. “I don’t see how that’s possible. I don’t even know anyone; I _am_ no one.”

“It’s true.” Finn reaches over, taking her wrist in his hand. It isn’t threatening, but enough to get her attention. “Listen to me, Rey. After you ran into the arena to save Kylo Ren, word of the slave girl who spared him spread like a plague. What you did was _illegal_, but more people are calling for you to reveal yourself than die!”

She blinks, the news surreal in her ears. The first reply she can scramble for crawls out of her throat like flies. “Does Ben know?”

Finn releases her, holding onto the reins. “I’m not sure, but if he hasn’t mentioned anything, then I doubt it.” He smirks. “To be honest, the man barely listens to anyone but you. Is it really a surprise?”

Rey laughs behind closed lips, not surprised by her husband’s behavior so much as this development. “I take it Master Dameron wants to,” she waves her hand around, “reveal _me_, somehow.”

“Exactly,” he replies. “We just don’t know how yet, but believe me, you are an inspiration to slaves all over the city.”

She looks at him. “...I am?”

His smile is brighter than pearls. “I may have lied to our staff about who you were, but Poe said it was necessary. It’s better to use you at the proper moment.”

Rey nods, his words perfectly sensible. But, “What for?”

Finn leans back, wincing as if something uncomfortable has caught in his tunic. “Like I said, we don’t know yet. But imagine the possibilities,” he calls, gesturing to the endless fields and sky. “The Romans have women in their temples _and_ their battlefields—they were the Spartan warriors, the goddesses of virtue and wisdom, and, before Snoke, the mothers and sisters of the Senate!”

Rey leans on her knees as he goes on preaching, his gusto, that spark in his eye waking her to the hope he and his Resistance hold so dear. It’s a contagious feeling, despite the lingering doubts that will inevitable resurface. “You want to bring back the Senate.”
“By tearing down the Empire,” Finn agrees. He points back and forth between them. “An Empire built on the backs of slaves, just like us. Think of this,” he says, holding her eyes. “Slaves outnumber their masters by the third, three for every one master. What would happen if all of us, all at once, were inspired to destroy that which enslaves us?”

“Revolution,” Rey whispers.

Finn nods, now more excited than before, his dark eyes wide with joyous resolve. “Freedom. A return of power to the people. Away from the emperor’s dictatorship—A new Republic. Could you imagine that?”

Gazing blindly at his face, at his shoulder, at the horizon where their future lay in wait, Rey… cannot imagine it. It is hard to picture something she has never known.

And yet, all the same, it is not so difficult to dream of it.

She meets his smile with her own. “Yes.”

“That help us,” Finn pleads gently, searching her face with anxious eyes. “We may keep to our promises, but promises mean nothing without truth and loyalty.”

At his words Rey remembers that look on Ben’s face—his obvious distrust of the Resistance. On instinct she knows her husband will not be swayed by the hope in their causes, his gritted reality already too devoted to ideals of his own.

In time, perhaps she could convince him otherwise. But now she can only think of what they will do to him if they realize he would abandon them… even if it meant protecting his family.

“I will do what I promised, Finn. However,” Rey murmurs. She narrows her gaze, hardening herself, steeling against any flippancy or fear. He nearly shrinks at the sudden shift; it spurs her on, the energy of it twitching in her eye. “I'm not an idiot. If you betray me, my family, or my husband,” she leans close, her voice lowering, “if you try to use me against him, our deal is off. Is that clear?”

“As the sky,” Finn nods, extending his hand.

Rey looks him over. His gesture and expression are not those of smug confidence like Poe Dameron’s. Instead, they are hopeful. Humble and true.

Deciding to trust him, she takes his hand and shakes, holding harder than he was ready for. When they let go, she relaxes in her seat, feeling calm in this new sensation of power and influence she holds. “Where are we going?” she asks.

Finn scratches his temple. “Your husband said it was supposed to be a surprise…”

“A hint, then,” she encourages, blinking innocently. “Please?”

Sighing, Finn shakes his head, unable to hide his amusement. “Alright, alright. I suppose a hint wouldn’t hurt.” He taps his knee to conjure the words. “Our journey will lead us to Naples—but that is not it’s end.”

When he looks expectantly at her, Rey feels even more lost than she was prior. But before she can ask for another more helpful and revealing hint, a shadow rides in from the west, just ahead.

Rey stands in her seat to get a better look, watching as a soft wind stirs, bringing him back to her.
Silencer carries Ben to them and Rey laughs, holding on to the caravan as she covers her mouth. “Your hair!”

Ben tosses it with a pointed flourish and frown, the windblown curls knocked loose, combed back by a quick thread of his fingers. In the light she notices a trace of stubble on his lip, over his chin, as he glances at Finn. “The way is clear. We’ll make camp for the night on the bluffs. You can meet us there.”

Finn and Rey balk. “What?”

Ben reaches out from his saddle, snagging his arm around Rey’s waist.

She screams and kicks in shocked laughter as his grip over her middle secures her, hard and fast, to his lap. He kicks Silencer into gallop, putting space between them and the caravan, his wife captive in his arm. Rey jostles and bounces, holding onto him, only a breath from falling. Exhilarated, she looks up to find his eyes dark with intent, and surrenders herself to his hold.

She leans up into his embrace, his other arm dedicated to the reins as he pulls her tight, his mouth at her ear. “Forgive me. I couldn’t stand another moment.”

Smiling, she looks up at him through the whipping wind at her hair. “There’s nothing to forgive,” she laughs, and presses her lips to his.

Eventually, Ben slows Silencer from his gallop, then his trot, to a steadier pace.

Rey hums, her back leaned comfortably against his chest. The arm he drapes around her waist toys at her hips, his thumbs and fingers drawing promises into her flesh. They trail after the setting sun, the steady rock and sway of the horse lulling her into hypnotic bliss.

Ben sighs into his wife’s hair, treasuring her nearness. Her smaller body trusting the strength of his own is a maddening form of pleasure, one to transcend even his own ignorant visions of marital benefits. “Comfortable?” he murmurs, squeezing her.

She nods and hums again, readjusting a growing ache in her tailbone. “Are we there yet?”

He cannot help but smile. “Patience, mea Puella.”

That word in her ear inspires her to back into him, as much as she can. To her chagrin, she cannot feel him as she had while they slept. She misses the touch of his body. “How long?”

“What did I just say?” he chides softly, drawing his thumb along her belly. He feels her shiver against him, her honesty showing itself. Deciding to tease her even more, if only to savor her delicious desperation, he lets his fingers brush over her split thighs, caressing their sensitive inset, avoiding their apex. “Patience.”

Rey nearly whines, but settles for butting the back of her head against his shoulder in retaliation. “You shouldn’t deny your wife, husband.”

“Again, you attempt to teach me,” he chuckles against her neck, the tip of his nose sliding down her skin, his lips tickling as he speaks, “things I have no desire to do.”

It sounds like a lie—Rey has no doubt he would deny her pleasure, if only to prolong this sweet suffering. His ego is too large. But it does not stop her from covering his hand with her own, leading it away from her thighs and back to the chaste hold over her waist.
When he looks down at her, his lips pursed and confused, she blinks prettily up at him. “That doesn’t mean you can never learn.”

Ben holds her fast, the urge to take those perfect lips consuming his every thought. That same wave of possession, of rightness, crashes over him, but he will not be caught in its swell this time—he is willing to wait.

For now.

“Mm,” he grunts, nuzzling once more to smell that sweet scent at her temple. “Then I shall be…” he kisses it, then her jaw, “…a most studious learner…”

The hot breath of his words at her ear, down her neck, makes Rey shudder. In the last week, he has learned well already what elicits a desired response from her. She has learned him much the same way—and here, as they approach their first destination, they both resolve not to let those lessons go to waste.

Realizing where they are, Ben straightens, tugging on the reins.

“What are you doing?” Rey asks, watching as he jumps down.

She slides into his grip like silk, the need to wrinkle her clogging in Ben’s throat as her feet touch earth. He takes her hand in his, leading her away. “Close your eyes. You’ll see.”

Rey does as he says, trusting him to lead her blindly through the grass. The wind stirs more here, the air itself more temperate, and a rushing sound, like the rustling of distant trees, grows louder and louder in her ears. “Ben?”

He leads her on, not taking his eyes off her for a moment. The setting sunlight bathes her in a powerful, golden glow, casting her body in heavenly light. Love fills him at the sight, furious and determined to stand forever under its ambiance. To amplify, to endure.

At last, the sound at its pinnacle, he stands beside her, leaning to whisper, “Open them.”

Rey obeys, squinting at first into the powerful orb of the sun as it changes in color and size, big and dark in its brightness as it hovers over an endless stretch of crashing waves.

Realizing what this must be, Rey gasps, left speechless as she beholds the horizon—a once limitless plain of green now transformed into the rich, flowing tapestry of violets and blues.

Into the sea.

Rey steps away from her husband, close enough to the edge to look down over the lip of the cliff, down to the white, foamy swell of water battering rock. Ben keeps near to her, prepared to draw her back, if necessary, as he watches her enraptured stare.

She shakes her head, chasing away her disbelief. The awe remains. “I…” she murmurs. “I don’t know what to say.” Tears prick her eyes, from the gaze of the sun to the crashing emotions in her heart, their currents leading her back to him. Always back to him. She looks over her shoulder. “Thank you.”

Ben steps forward, standing with her on the precipice as he takes her cheek in hand. Their eyes lock together and pull, his words softer than his touch, but no less true. “I love you.”

Rey breathes out, the sound like another wave slamming into the wall of the bluffs. When had he
begun to say those words? When had she finally been able to trust them like this? So completely, so fully, so freely? When had she found the strength to say them back?

Now, she cannot remember, cannot fathom anything beyond this—his touch, this warmth, these eyes as they hold her, welcome her. This oneness between them, sealed with bodies, with breath, with words.

“I love you, too,” she whimpers, letting him kiss her, letting herself kiss him back, treasuring the freedom they have to share these feelings without restraint. She tastes salt on her tongue—from the ocean? From her tears?

Neither can be bothered to care, too lost in the other, arms winding and slotting back where they belong.

Together.

He starts a fire, grunting off his gladius. He takes the blanket from Silencer’s back and lays it out for them, leaning into her.

Rey stares into the fire, pulling up her knees, the dark of night falling over them. “Should we have left Finn behind? There might be robbers.”

Ben shakes his head, offering her a flask of water. “They target the roads, not the wilderness. There’s no need to come where no one travels.” As she drinks, he toys with her stola. “We’re all alone.”

Swallowing hard, Rey sets down the flask, put at ease by his reassurance. Warmth floods through her at the look in his eye, the way the fire dances inside. “Oh.” She bites her lip, turning her back to him. “I see.”

Ben’s eyes rake over her, honing in on the exposed skin of her throat, flickering in the firelight. “This wilderness,” he rumbles, creeping closer, “is full of predators.” She jumps under his hand as he lays it on her hip, trapping her as he begins to ravish her shoulder, the ridge of her neck. “It isn’t wise to turn your back on a starving lion.”

Rey reaches back, bracing her hand in his mane. It’s soft and cool on her fingers. “What,” she gasps, a spike of pleasure racing through her as he licks a tender spot, “what happens if I do?”

Pulling down her sleeve, Ben turns her towards him, trapping her against his chest. “He’ll devour you.”

She exhales sharply as he makes good on his word, holding her arm aloft. He bites and nips at the tender flesh, his ragged breath making her squirm with arousal. She curls into him, stroking his ear over his hair in the way she knows he likes. His touches turn ticklish and she giggles, “Ben! Stop it!”

He does as she asks with a pout, resting his lips on her cheek. “You taste too good to resist, Puella,” he growls, unapologetically planting kisses down her neck. “I could swallow you whole.”

Rey finds herself more than willing to permit it, letting free a moan of encouragement. “I love that name,” she sighs, leaning back, allowing him more access to her throat. “‘Puella.’”

“Oh, really?” he croons, nuzzling into her hair, his lips teasing at her ear. A deep chuckle rumbles past his teeth. “I couldn’t tell.”
Impatient with his teasing—though enjoying it nonetheless—she smacks his chest. “Oi, you shouldn’t lie to your wife.”

He licks the shell of her ear, smiling as he bites so gently, his arms wrapping tighter around her waist, dragging her closer. “Mm, you’re so right…” She shivers; he drops his voice. “Perhaps you should make an honest man of me.”

“What are you, then?” she teases breathlessly, fisting a hand in his tunic, the vision of him threatening in the darkness. “A man, or a beast?”

Ben brushes her hair from her face, his careful look of apathy thinly restrained as he leans close, his whisper a breath on her tempting lips. “Let’s find out.”

He pushes her down onto the blanket, enjoying the dazed and inviting look on her face as he hovers over her, her mouth begging to be kissed again. He tastes her lips, her tongue, her teeth. Her small hands trail fire down his chest, along his scalp, making him groan.

As he works down, Rey pants, her pounding heart and the weight of his body making it difficult to breathe. “Oh, Ben…”

He stops to meet her eyes, their glazed look doing little for his twitching cock. His name on her lips inspires him to touch them, to accept her offer to teach. “Tell me, wife,” he murmurs, his thick fingers breaching her skirt. “You call me husband. You call me Dominus. What else shall you call me?”

Rey blinks. “What do you mean?”

A gentle smile quirks at his lip, revealing his sharp canines. He looks almost… shy. “I want your name, Puella,” he hums, stroking her thigh. “A name only you can give.”

Suddenly, Rey understands. He wants her to give him… a name.

Surprised, she sits up, looking down at him as he remains on his arm, waiting patiently for her reply. She searches her mind, finding nothing. “You don’t like ‘husband?’”

“I do,” he murmurs, his hand still making progress on brushing aside her skirt. “Your ‘Sýzígos’...” he goads, pinching the soft skin on her calf. “...ignites me.” His eyes darken. “I want more.”

His touches distract her, but she slaps his knuckles when he pinches. It doesn’t daunt him in the slightest.

Rey wets her lip, considering her options. It feels like a large responsibility, one she wishes she had more time to undertake. But that look on his face, knowing how much this means to him, has her spouting, “Zuji.”

Ben blinks. “‘Zuji?’”

“It’s Egyptian,” Rey shrugs, her face hot. She couldn’t think of anything else. The man obviously already knows Latin, and they have spoken Greek and Hebrew to one another more times than she can count.

Now Ben sits up, facing her with a look of boyish eagerness in comparison to his usual gloom. “For what?”

Rey tucks her hair behind her ear, avoiding his pressured gaze. “I means… ‘my husband.’”
In the beat of silence she frowns, thinking that her lack of imagination has disappointed him. Until he presses himself against her, his fingers wrapping around her calf. “Say it again.”

She gapes at him, finding his eyes wild and burning. Her heart leaps into her throat. “Zuji.”

He sucks in a breath, stealing hers for himself in a feral kiss. It feels archaic, like he truly is trying to eat her. “Again,” he pants.

“Zuji,” Rey gasps. “Ben—”

He flips up her skirts, leaving no room for decorum as he pushes apart her legs, lowering himself between them. Her lips spread in a silent cry as his thumb shoves aside her subligaculum, baring her to the night air for only a moment before his tongue slides through her slit.

“Ben,” she shivers, “we shouldn’t… we could be seen—ahn!”

He strokes her crest with the tip of his tongue, hands squeezing her thighs against his hot palms. His eyes find hers in the firelight, the stars above choked out by this sudden dizziness he pushes through her. “Relax, Puella. We have time. Just…” he sucks a sloppy kiss against her folds, pushing her further from rationality. “…lie back and take your Zuji’s tongue.”

With a command like that, his every movement draining her of her sanity, Rey has no choice but to lay down on the blanket.

He works her slowly, her eyes fluttering shut in helpless, building ecstasy. She basks mindlessly in the sound of the world around her. The breathing swell of the sea, in and out through the rocks below the cliff. The crackle of the fire, logs snapping, embers popping into the hearth. The wet smack of his kisses between her legs, his lips folding around his deep, throaty moans.

And he does moan. Her taste is like honey on his tongue, her sweetness a sacred ambrosia, salted by the water’s majesty. He could come from the memory of her face alone, the sound of Zuji passing through her perfect mouth too much for him to bear.

It’s unfair how right she probably is—they are due to be interrupted. His attempt to woo her with the view certainly served to get her wet and writhing, her gentle bucks against his face make it quite clear how much she needs him.

It clutches him with its heady influence, the compulsion to please her overpowering his patience. He forces his hand down his subligar, pulling out his cock to stroke hard and fast. This damned erection has plagued him since he saw her standing at the caravan, the image of her waiting for him, her eyes only for him… Nothing else could ever compare.

Well, almost nothing.

"Again. Say it again."

Rey sobs, so close to falling over that familiar edge. He holds her over the cliff by his mouth, the world vanishing beneath her back, leaving her at his mercy. “Zu,” she pants, “Zuji!”

“Oh, yes,” Ben huffs, pumping faster, breathing her in as he hurdles closer to his impending orgasm. “Yes.” He kisses her once. “Say it.” Twice. “Say it when you come. Say it when you come for me.”

His persistence pulls through her like strings, the sight of him when she opens her eyes striking her body like a nerve. His thumb rolls over her crest while his tongue builds pleasure within her, his
other hand stroking himself with a near-frightening violence.

The menace in his eyes, their fire and wrath, floods her with excitement until her body pulses, release bursting through her like a crashing wave. She grunts, arching her back when it comes, her hands instinctively reaching to push his face away, her crest too sensitive for any more. “Zuji! Ben!”

Ben wastes no time in returning to his place over her, his lips shining and wet in the firelight, his eyes dark and dazed as he continues to take himself in hand. “My Puella, my…” he moans, his hips jutting forward. “Rey…”

They both watch as he coaxes out his orgasm, his semen painting her heaving stomach. As his sweaty head falls to her shoulder, Rey stares at the sky, chasing after her breath.

When he inches closer she pecks him, tasting herself on his lips. Understanding his need to rush, she turns on her side, tucking him back into his subligar. “I’ve decided,” she chuckles. “You are definitely a man.”

He sighs, as if exasperated, wiping his mouth with his palm. As he does, the sound of the caravan betrays itself. Ben moves quickly to conceal her.

“Wait,” Rey grunts, stopping him from covering her stomach. She doesn’t want to ruin her stola—she must get rid of it some other way. So she swipes the globs of white onto her fingers, flicking it onto the grass.

And licking clean the rest.

Ben gapes, something like a hopeful twitch pulsing in his limp cock. It’s doused soon enough, with her body covered and their ally finally catching up.

He says nothing about it when Ben comes to help unload their supplies. They pitch the tents before unloading the fruits and salted pork, the three of them eating around the fire as though pretending nothing at all had occurred—when the tension in Finn’s uneasy glances says otherwise.

Rey trades looks with her husband often as the men inevitably begin to speak about fickle ideals, debating the ethics of Plato and Aristotle. She doesn’t recognize the names, but watching them interact is intriguing. Of course, Finn is rather boisterous, fervently declaring Aristotle as the preferred of the two. Ben, on the other hand, has no qualms challenging every last one of his claims.

As they speak, Rey notes how Finn casually avoids any mention of the Resistance, or the emperor. Watching them together, conversing as something almost like companions, feels like an oasis in the desert.

Finn stands, flexing his arms over his chest. “Well, this was indeed refreshing. I think I will stretch my legs and stand first guard. You two should get some rest. You must be exhausted,” he smirks, fleeing on slow steps.

While Rey blushes, Ben shamelessly takes her by the waist, encouraging her into their tent. “He’s right. You need rest.”

“How could he resist? He crawls in after her, obediently settling by her side beneath the roof of the small tent, his breathing already deep and even as he pulls her close.
Rey lays her head on his arm, sighing into his embrace. He smells like earth and tinder, the warmth and firmness of his body drawing her into the safety of his arms, shepherding them both into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

[While the "Honeymoon" wasn't invented until roughly 200 years after the events of Glory's Fray, the term itself was inspired by cultures that used moon cycles to tell time. The Honeymoon acted as both a celebration of a new marriage and the impending doom of the newlyweds' "honey" sweet love. However, it was common for Roman married couples to go on little "tours" to see family members that couldn't make it to the wedding, which resulted in a nice, long vacation]

[The "league" was a unit of measurement in Ancient Rome and many other countries in Europe and the Mediterranean. Different from "sea leagues," a "land league" today would be roughly 3 miles (4.8 kilometers)]

[Rome was a very diverse place full of various cultures. In my research, traces of racism were slim, so while it may have been rare, marriage between races was not impossible nor frowned upon. Unlike marriage between slaves and citizens, which was highly illegal due to class differences and perception of humanity]

[In the year 200, Emperor Septimus Severus banned women from spectating and participating in gladiator games. However, there are eye-witness records of females who both watched and fought under Emperor Domitian beforehand. Even so, Rey's intervention of a gladiator match would still be considered an illegal act]

[A free woman had far greater liberties and freedoms in Rome than those in Greece, and in some cases more than women do in many countries today. Women served as respected priestesses in temples; half of the twelve Roman gods were women; Spartan women fought wars alongside men, and those who died in childbirth were honored just as much as a man who died in battle; Women were not allowed to vote or hold office, but their influence in the private sectors influenced the policies of their husbands or family members, which was far more advanced than most of the world at that time]

[Though I have mentioned Finn's statistic in a previous chapter, I find it beneficial to reiterate that Roman citizens were vastly outnumbered by their slaves. The reason why no slaves wore any telling symbol of their status was because, if they were to realize how great their numbers were, they might have attempted to stage an uprising]

[Naples is an ancient seaside city that still stands today, about a two hour drive from Rome. The distance is almost exactly 140 miles (225 kilometers), or about 47 land leagues. (Realistically a mounted horse can travel 30 miles (50 km) per day, making the journey to Naples about five days by road. But this is fanfiction and they're taking a shortcut, so pffftb)]

[When Rey says "you shouldn't deny your wife," she is referring to 1 Corinthians 7:5, which states: "Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control."]
[Sýzgos is Greek for "man, husband." Zuji (pronounced "zoo-jee") is Arabic (then Coptic) is an affectionate term for "my husband"]
Hey ya'll! It's been a few months!

As some of you know, this season has been a little rough. I'm doing okay. Although fatigue and general busy-ness has taken precedent over fanfiction. I'm at a critical stage in my college education, which means a lot of reading and writing "real" content. (・_・;) Stressful.

But as always, you are ever-so amazing and patient with me. I love you so much <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It takes a second day of travel before they finally reach Naples, the gleaming white edifices of villas and temples dawning over the hilly road, glimmering in the light of ocean tides.

Rey, her eyes wide, stares into the endless watery horizon until her view is inevitably covered by rooftops and open windows. Summer winds blow through her hair, loose strands sweeping like the curtains overhead.

Finn dismounts, leading them forward in steady procession down the streets. It is not so busy as Rome here, their travel unimpeded in the passing glances of few passerby. The city smells of salt and flora, its earthy compulsion heavy in Rey’s nose. The road gleams in sunset limestone underfoot, her legs stretching as she walks, energized and eager for movement. She braves ahead, knowing not where she goes, trusting the men to follow her in their own time.

Ben eyes the buildings, seeing little sign of guards. His wife, distracting a visage as she is, is too far to witness him speak to Finn as they walk, his voice low. “Where’s the inn?”

“West,” Finn points, his arm heavy when it falls back to his side. “I would stay with you, but I have business of my own here.”

“And when we return?”

Finn smiles. “I’ll still be here when you get back. There are friends here—Naples isn’t nearly as strict as Roman persecution. How long did you say you would, uh,” his lip twitches, “enjoy the island?”

Ben considers, watching as Rey stops before the intersection of road, her face turned to the sun, hands folded behind her. “I don’t know.”

Finn scowls, halting to stare up at his counterpart as he, unflinchingly, carries on to his wife. “What do you mean, ‘I don’t know?’” he calls.

Now Solo, man and woman both, gaze at Finn with stark expressions—the first of hot impatience, the second, curiosity.

Rey returns to them. “What’s the matter?” she probes, her voice deceptively even.
The hairs on Ben’s neck stand to her attention as Finn chews his lip, frustration throwing off his posture as he replies, hushed, “The movement can’t begin without you two. We need you here; I need to know when you’re planning to come back to Rome.”

Ben’s eyes narrow. “Then you know as much as I do.”

Finn opens his mouth with teeth bared to retort, his dark eyes lit with rising panic, until Rey intercedes, standing against her husband’s arm. “We won’t break our promise to you, Finn. Or the Resistance.” Her hand winds around taut, warm flesh, linking her with Ben in a silent plea for him to remain civil. “You can trust us.”

Finn looks to her, almost distraught, before scrutinizing Ben. The rigid lines of focus snap across his forehead and he sighs, shaking their wires to and fro, hands on his hips. “I admit, we both have our share of secrets. I can respect that.” His eyes harden on Ben. “But this is the future of Rome we’re talking about. So please, tell me what’s next.”

Rey holds her breath, feeling Ben stiffen under her hand. When he does not reply she glances up—to see him looking to her, his eyes cast in silent entreaty.

She blinks. Is he…?

Oh.

With as much effort as she can assemble, she reads in him a passage she once thought she may never behold. Realizing at last that he is looking to her for her word, she takes his trust and allows her tongue to loosen, her mind to clear, and her steadfast gaze fix unto their ally. “We will return before the Tournament of Champions, so we should find out when that is,” she breathes out, strength exhausting on each syllable, “and plan our next move”

Ben relaxes under her, the burden of reply eased from his shoulders. Her solution sounds far superior to his own—he had intended to stay for a fortnight. To never return, if she let him. “Have you heard anything about it?”

Finn leans against the cart, his arms crossing over his chest. “That it’s coming early this year. But I don’t know why.”

“Uneasy!” Rey blurts. When the men look on her, her small smile a confusion to them, she rights herself, elaborating, “The emperor is uneasy. We think he’s afraid of the Resistance.”

Scowl deepening, Finn looks between them. “You mean he’s trying to, what? Distract people?”

Ben looks around, up at the windows. He sees no one. The street is bare, houses quiet—they haven’t been discovered. “Potentially.”

Finn stares thoughtfully at his sandals, releasing a heavy breath. “Sounds like something an emperor would do. But how do we know when the tournament will be?”

Rey offers up first. “We could ask. Perhaps someone in Naples knows.”

Ben turns down to her, his lips pursing with their usual unrest. “I don’t want anyone recognizing us here. We can’t risk being seen until we’re on the island.”

She lifts a brow. “‘Island?’”

Caught as a mouse in a lion’s jaw, Ben blinks. It is Finn who saves him from Rey’s marital spell,
clearing his throat. “Alright, fine, I’ll ask around myself. I have some business in the temple anyway. Here,” he hands off Silencer’s reins to Ben. “You two go to the inn. I’ll meet with you at the harbor in the morning if I hear anything.” With that, he mounts his mare, steering her off to the North, in the direction of the square.

Ben eases his arm, taking Rey’s hand as it slips down into his while they walk. The air twines with wood-fires and smoking fish, the rattle of the cart and sounds of fishermen returning with their catch a chorus of life from the harbors.

The inn, not possessing a stable, offers them more time to walk and store their belongings in a nearby collection of stalls. The price is hefty, but not unaffordable.

Hunger roils in their stomachs as one, and with guided hand on the small of her back, Ben steers Rey beside him in search of an open vendor. They need only round the slightest cloister of buildings before approaching a simple stand of prawn and crab.

As night descends they shepherded their catch hidden in cloth within their room, where the low bed of straw welcomes their quiet, secretive picnic.

Rey leans into his warmth, the bed hard and coarse underneath her, reminding her of her youth in Egypt. Night air breathes down on them with the cool, bidding her shut her eyes. “An island, Ben?”

He leans his cheek into her hair, sweetly filling his lungs with her scent. The bed is too small for them both, though ideal for wrapping an arm around her, pulling himself closer to her side. “Mm.”

Smiling, Rey toys with the belt of his tunic, too weary—and, more intimately, too sore—to let it lead anywhere in this foreign and temporary housing. “I’ve never been to an island. What are they like?”

“...Like land,” he replies quietly. “Small.” They ease down upon the bed, folding around the other with practiced ease. He settles his chin upon her head, closing his eyes. “Remote.”

She lays a hand on his chest, feeling the warmth of his heart bleed through. Her gaze flits out the open window, into the stars, lost in them. A reply almost comes, but is lost to the moment, the in and out of time as fleeting and ethereal as a breath.

The sun arises with heated vengeance the next morning, the fog from steaming dew scraping and sweeping along the limestone as they make for the harbor. Paralian houses stand over them like shimmering tombs, the rich scents of the waning dawn like the glowing embers of sweet, charred flames. Women hang clothing on garden lines; a baby’s cry sounds fitfully, unseen past the high windows.

They touch the docks when the sunlight reaches its Eastward cusp, the distant sky a rich blue, saving the coolness of the heavens for itself. Rey makes use of a tie from her belongings with a quick twist of her wrist through her tresses, relieving the heat from her damp skin. Ben watches this, their packings slung on his shoulders, fascinated by her speed. She smiles at him when he is caught, then down into the water.

Beneath her feet, the stone peer stands a fair length above the water. It laps calmly up close, splishing and popping in hollow dregs. Her reflection distorts in the clear grey, too far to bother touching just yet—as eagerly as she wants to do so.

As a tender breeze from the waves takes mercy on their sweating necks, the sound of slapping sandals comes closer.
“Twelve days,” Finn says, his expression grim, eyes hollow.

They understand what he means at once when they see him. Ben was right; they have less than mere weeks until the tournament falls on their heads.

Rey and Ben stare openly at him, each thinking the same. *So soon.* Ben frowns at her freckled shoulder, his gaze pensive and calculating, until, “Five days.” His eyes close. “We will return then.”

Finn nods, his shoulders tense. Slivers of light and water dance over his taut brow. Rey can see the acceptance curtain over his eyes, the calculations, the concerns. “Fine,” he drones. “I’ll be here.”

“Just what are you doing in Naples?” Rey asks.

His eyes soften on her, but the upset persists, ripe in the salty air. “Trying to garner support. Send messages, that sort of thing.”

*For the Resistance,* Rey and Ben predict, trading a glance. Rey supposes it makes sense for them to send messages outside of Rome’s sphere of influence. The more she thinks on it, she realizes that it was perhaps part of their plan to ensure Mitaka had not attended their ceremony yesterday.

As she thinks so, Ben’s thoughts dart to the houses standing sleepily further inland. The residents here are wealthy enough; to gain their resources would help Poe Dameron and his sympathizers. It’s a wise idea. “And if you’re not here?” he asks.

Finn merely shrugs. “I’m sure you’ll find a way back somehow. If I get killed, so be it. I know my family is safe.”

Rey stares at him, holding her tongue. A scold, hot and itchy, had risen in her throat at his willingness to so freely let his wife and son live on without him.

Ben says nothing, only steps back, closer to the cluster of boats rocking back and forth in the cradle of the harbor. Finn notices the inclination, raising a hand with a sincere, “Safe travels.” He begins to leave, but stops short. “Oh! And one more thing!”

He returns to Rey, rummaging through his belongings, pulling out a long slip of yellow cloth and offering it to her.

She takes it, and all anger she’d felt drains from her feet. “What’s this?”

“From Ahsoka Tano,” he smiles, a knowing shine in his eye. “She wanted me to give it to you before you left. Said it would help you blend in where you’re going.”

The cloth unfolds in Rey’s hands, and for a moment she stands confused, until she recognizes the seaming. Her eyes begin to sting. “A palla…”

Finn nods. “She said she’ll take care of the house until you both return. If anyone asks, you’re away on personal business.”

This lie doesn’t seem convincing to Ben, but for now he can’t be bothered to care. The men look on as she figures the cloth, slipping it around her, fixing it over her head and shoulders. The pressure weighs on her like a veil, equally freeing as it is heavy. She smiles. “Thank you, Finn.”

If he understands what this means for her, he doesn’t betray it. “Stay safe,” he says, almost warningly, at last turning and hurrying off, leaving them alone.
Watching after him, Rey loses herself in the horizon above his head. A strange light gleams over him—but flickers and dies in the sunlight against the white stone of Naples when she blinks. Though gone, it is not forgotten as she follows Ben away from the shore.

They approach a small ferry, the long oars stuck like pikes from the bottom. A man, squinting and silent as they near, possesses a remarkable stillness, and for a moment Rey wonders if he had fallen asleep.

Ben steps forward. “Baze Malbus?”

The man stands and nods, and as they board, she casts a silent prayer that she and Ben might find one moment to themselves wherever this ship takes them, that this sojourn will not be in vain.

They sit and wait for some time—for other passengers, as it seems—before Baze Malbus pounds the deck of the ferry with his foot. The oars pitch forward, as if on their own, fighting through the initial resistance of the waves. Rey and Ben observe, fascinated as Baze releases a single sail, tugging the rope with impressive strength. The wind catches, the snap of cloth resounding over the splash of the water, and it is only when Naples is gone that Rey truly realizes what they are about to do.

“Well now you must tell me where we are going,” she presses, excitement trembling in her chest.

Ben pretends to ignore her, letting his hand travel to rest on her thigh.

She scoffs. “Brute.”

His smirk goes unnoticed as Rey leans over in her seat, watching as the oars match one another in a breathing rhythm. She suddenly feels light-headed, sick—but not for her height from the surface, nor the motion of the water, but for the souls she cannot see. Souls like hers.

Ben looks at his wife, hoping to find wonder there, but seeing only the haunted pinch between her brows, the slight sharpness of her distant frown. Squeezing her leg, he hopes it can offer her some reassurance, for he knows he could never ask her to look away.

She does on her own, eventually, when Baze grunts over the sound of wind and spray. “Land!”

Their heads snap up, all on board peering ahead. A small node of land juts from the horizon line, and as it grows larger and larger, so do Rey’s eyes.

She stands, joining the other curious onlookers when the cragged edges and risen hills of an island comes fully into view. The sunlight burns against the green of trees, sparkling and dancing along the water of the surf. White birds pass overhead, swooping daringly close before flocking to shadowy cliffsides. In the clear, blue waters, white, bulbous creatures follow alongside the boat, traveling peacefully.

A large rock with a hollowed middle towers from the waves, right in their path. Rey clutches the rail, knuckles white at its dangerous proximity.

Baze strikes the floorboards three times, the oars pulling into the boat, the sail lowering as he calls out in a language she doesn’t understand. Until, “Hold one another close!”

Thinking them all about to be murdered, Rey watches Baze in disbelief, unaware of the couples standing together, watching the rocks with patient, eager eyes.

Any opposition Rey may have voiced is silenced when a warm, familiar hand finds her waist. Ben
turns her into him, his gaze warm and mischievous, just as the ferry loses its momentum and slides leisurely under the stony arch. He ducks his head and kisses her, softly, lingeringly, his grip tight with promise.

He stops when the sunlight burns over them once more, leaving Rey in swoon. “What was that?” she asks, blinking from her trance.

Ben toys with the hood of her palla, his thumb brushing against her cheek. “Faraglioni, mea Puella.” The smallest of smiles lingers on his lip. “The Lovers Arch.”

Rey looks back into the wake of their travels, the formation of rock standing faithfully behind. Her hand moves to her palla. The feeling of the cloth is soothing, though her flush remains. “It’s beautiful.”

He doesn’t reply, savoring the sight of her. Ahsoka had chosen a wise color. He hadn’t ordered this, has no idea where it came from—though he does have his suspicions. Regardless, she looks alluring in this light, the yellow against her dark hair and the creamy smoothness of her cheek making him ache with longing to keep time at bay.

Soon enough the small wharf appears, and the passengers depart before them. Ben passes Baze his payment and ushers Rey down the ramp with a hand steady at her back.

This peer, made of wood, rocks under their steps. Rey holds onto her husband’s arm, pausing. “Wait,” she urges him, crouching down. She looks into the clear water, her gaze alight at the sight of living fish coasting just below the surface. She reaches down and they scatter away, but doesn’t mind in the slightest, lost in the cool touch of the sea.

Ben, of course, is less impressed by this than his wife, but does not interrupt her. It is as he’d hoped—she enjoys it.

Pride swells in him when she returns on his arm, the weight of her a reassurance as they ascend the knoll and pass through the gates, onto city streets.

Rey looks around, the hilly roads barred by tall trees, the sight of brilliant villas partially hidden by the shallow canopies. Smoke rises from chimneys, the scents of baking bread and salt somehow sweeter, richer than those of Naples. She squeezes Ben’s arm, her blood thrumming. “Where are we?”

“Capri,” he replies simply, figuring it would be useless to keep it hidden from her.

Rey presses her lips together, having never heard of this place, though says nothing. There would be no point in spoiling his fun when she enjoys what she sees. “It’s beautiful,” she admires, knowing full-well she couldn’t muster anything better to say—nor that she will able to say anything else so long as he continues to show more of this world to her.

The hill mellows as they climb, becoming a rounding square of buildings. Their columns are Roman in architecture, though the dialect of passerby is more Grecian. Red banners stir in the sunny winds, trickling fountains and aqueducts making Rey’s mouth dry.

She eyes the flags of the empire warily, though Ben leans to her ear, his voice low. “Don’t be afraid. Snoke owns this place for its land. Nothing else.”

Rey nods, understanding what he means. In Jakku, the region had been effectively toothless—operated more by mob than by law. Though here in Capri the beauty and temperance seems to live on in its people, so Rey doubts they will have much to worry about.
As they stride past a verdant garden of what looks to be a temple, Rey realizes how well of a locale Ben had chosen—they are not too far from Rome to prevent return, nor are they too close to danger.

She studies him in the sunlight, finding his eyes already on her, and feels her bones, her flesh, returned to the languid swoon of when she had first begun to love him. Back then she had thought him only capable of following his emotions, even when they were hidden from her, unable to lead as tactfully as he projected. Even so, though their plans—his plans—had never truly come to fruition, this one, she knows, will bring happiness as they will it.

He takes her to a long and narrow building, stone steps hugging the walls. The innkeeper leads them to the uppermost floor, the climb and want for drink burning in Rey’s lungs, before leaving them to their own devices.

The space is not luxurious by the standards of their own house, but the accommodations themselves are notably more pristine than their night in Naples. The bed is larger, its coverings ornamental and intricately designed. Rey flits to the long window, opening the shutter and letting light fill the room.

The squawking of gulls echoes up the hillside, the sea stretching out beyond the green. She gasps, her mouth hung open, so lost in the view that she jumps when steely arms wrap around her from behind.

His lips tickle her neck and she giggles, letting him have more of her. “Ben…”

“Not Ben,” he grunts, nuzzling her ear. “Zuji.”

“Hmm,” she hums, laying her arms over his, falling back into the cradle of his chest. She closes her eyes. “Any more plans for us today, Zuji?”

He purrs against her, the rumble of his body vibrating deliciously through her spine. The taste of her neck lingers on his tongue, intoxicating him here, in the solitude of their residence. “Anything you want,” he murmurs, his hands beginning to stroke her belly, her sides, fingertips teasing under her breasts.

The thrill of his touch makes her sigh with want, but her stomach growls with a different hunger. She grins wryly, craning to look up at him. “Lunch?”

A short, scoffing laugh sounds deep in his throat. “Of course.” He slips away from her, offering his hand. “Shall we?”

Smile ever persistent, she takes it.

Ben tells her what kind of place Capri is—the rest she can determine for herself.

It’s a small island, but a rich one. In land and people, alike. It had been discovered some centuries ago, the natives enveloped by the Greeks, and now, the Roman empire. From their place within the township, on another steep hill flanked with canopies and seats for outdoor dining, Rey can spy the spotty villas and property lines, the slow progress of ships in the gulf.

Rey squints up to the cliffs in the West, pulling apart her bread. “What’s that mountain called?”

Ben ponders for a moment. Then, “Monte Solaro.”
“Can we go there?”

Considering her, Ben leans back in his seat. He doesn’t seem too pleased by the idea, his voice weary. “It’s imperial property. You won’t find anything but empty villas and rain reservoirs.”

Rey shrugs, unwilling to fight him on it. She’s full of energy, and the climb doesn’t seem too difficult, but the view from here is stunning in itself. Just breathing in the flora is enough to make her feel at peace. “I’d like to walk around before sunset.”

“You want to explore.”

“I do,” she smirks, challenging him with her eyes as she mindlessly toys with the folds of her palla. “But if you’re opposed—”

“No,” he interrupts, his fingers tight over the arms of his seat, brow grimly determined. “I’m not.”

Her nose scrunches over a satisfied grin. Emboldened, she leans over, resting her hand on his, teasing over his masculine veins and knuckles. “Just for a little while. Then we can go back to the inn.”

His eyes flicker with intrigue. Turning his wrist, he snares her thinner fingers and squeezes, the skin warm from the sun. “I’m looking forward to it,” he rumbles, drawing them to his mouth.

Rey exhales shakily, wetting her lips. She can feel her femininity already beginning to succumb to his influence, the darker, carnal side of her whispering to find the nearest spot of relative seclusion. But she restrains herself, reaching under the hood of her palla to loosen her hair, feeling it curl neatly at her shoulders. She’s on her feet in moments. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

A smirk pulls at Ben’s lip. He rises, standing very close to her, his voice deep and dangerous. “Lead the way.”

Determined to resist, for now, her sandaled feet slap along the limestone roads, languid pace directed by the sail of her eyes as they sweep over the colors of the town below. Ben follows her like a shadow, earning curious glances from passerby.

The settlement is closer to the larger marina on the North side of the island, the smell of fish, salt, and brine strong. She follows the coastal roads, admiring the flowers, watching fishermen raise their nets from the shoals.

No one looks at her like they do in Rome. Here, the glances are dim, yes, but without the usual scorn or apathy. She feels almost regal under the veil of her palla; like a woman, born to be no more than that.

When they reach the market square, Rey wanders into the first shop, Ben close behind. He ducks under the low frame, the dim light glowing red from the shade of the curtains. Decorated jars and kylix vases flank the walls in a menagerie of designs, drawings of men with weapons and tools prominent over their curves.

“Welcome,” the shopkeep calls, stepping in from the back room. He holds a vase in his hand, polishing it with a cloth. “See anything you like?”

Rey smiles politely. “Just looking, thank you.”

Ben surveys him as he trudges closer. The man is just short of his height, generous in the face and
stomach, his friendly gaze keen to manipulate.

“I don’t recognize the two of you,” he muses. “Are you here for the sports festival?”

They both look up; it’s Ben who speaks. “‘Sports festival?’”

“Yes,” the man blinks, his smile softly faltering. “Two days from now. I’d thought Lady Holdo had told everyone on the island about it.”

“I’m sorry,” Rey offers, “we aren’t familiar with anyone by that name.”

She looks to Ben, expecting him to second her statement, but is surprised to see his features riddled with distress. He steps towards the man, and for an instant Rey thinks her husband may attack him, until he looms as a dangerous force and strains, “Lady... Amilyn Holdo?”

The man blinks, shrinking back. “Y-Yes, Sir. Do you know her?”

“Where is she? Where does she live?” Ben urges, stepping forward, his presence forcing the man into a shelve of pots.

They rattle and shake as he clutches the vase to his chest—his only shield from Ben’s sudden storm of wrath. “Not far.” He gulps. “I can take you there.”

Rey lays a hand on her husband’s arm, signaling him to step back. “Ben,” she murmurs. “What is this about? Who is that woman?”

The shopkeeper retreats to the back room, asking for a moment to prepare, as Ben turns to his wife. His face is paler than usual, his breathing shaky. “I’m not sure.” He blinks rapidly, searching. “I know the name. She... she knew my mother.”

Rey steps back, her eyes wide. “Your mother?”

His eyes find hers soberly, and he nods.

She remembers what he told her about his mother. They had been somewhat close through his childhood, but have been separated since his years as a student of the church. They’d sent letters to one another before he left everything behind. To think that they could be reunited, after all this time...

The shopkeeper returns and waves for them to follow him out of the storefront, towards the neighborhood of Eastward villas they’d seen from their perch. The man tells them that his name is Wexley, that he originally came to Rome as a fisherman who later discovered his love for pottery. Then he came to Capri to start a new business selling wares.

It is difficult for Rey and Ben to focus on this, however, a feeling of foreboding fogging around them as a stretching villa gleams in the open spaces. The walls span into the covering of the trees, perhaps twice as large as their own estate. Horses feed on the lawn of the yard, their ears flicking away buzzing gnats ignited by the orange, sunset glow.

Wexley tromps ahead to the door, banging his fist against the wood. When it opens, little animals sprawl out, racing and weaving around them.

Rey cries out softly, surprised. *Dogs,* she realizes. Small dogs, their noses long and spines hunched, long, thin legs scuttling over the grass, trot around her, sniffing and licking at her ankles. She laughs, stooping to stroke down a pale one’s back, its slight tremble of excitement endearing.
The servant who answers leads them into the house, down a long, open hallway. The courtyard shimmers inside, each stone pristinely white. The dogs’ nails click against the tile as they follow, echoing off the walls and pillars, and Rey looks out into the garden. In passing she sees a man, older than her and Ben, sitting with his head turned to the sky, hands wrapped around a staff.

“This way,” Wexley says, stealing her attention away.

The servant bows and waves them through, Ben hesitating. Rey caresses his back and he animates, swallowing and striding into the chamber, Rey behind him.

The dogs trot over to an elderly woman sitting in a chair, her red hair shining and white robes pooling along the floor. A dog leaps into her lap and she pets it slowly, lethargically—unaware of the presence of company.

Wexley seems undeterred by this, coming near and crouching by the woman. She does not acknowledge him. “Madam Mothma,” he whispers, tenderly taking her wrist and placing a reverent kiss upon her hand. “You have guests.”

Rey steps closer to Ben, warily calling out to Wexley. “Is that Lady Holdo?”

“Not quite,” a voice answers.

A woman, tall and lean, her hair like flaxen straw, emerges from the red curtain of the wall leading to the tablinum. The rich colors of her chiton hang from her shoulders in long, loose sleeves, and the high of her cheeks sharpen the gaze of her eyes with a deep, falcon-like focus.

She smiles and rights herself with folded hands. “Can I help you?”

Ben stares at this woman with wide eyes—and does not recognize her. But there is no mistaking it. This must have been the woman whom his mother had known in her youth, the friend and comrade she spoke incessantly about. Summoning himself, he steps forward. “Amilyn Holdo?”

Her gaze flits to Ben, brow raised as she sizes him. “Yes?”

His jaw tightens. “My name is Ben Solo. You knew my mother.”

Her expression cracks open into one of shock, her shoulders sagging under a sudden weight, her hard focus wavering.

“…Leia?”

Rey can’t keep herself from looking at Ben, her heart rending at the sight of the bobbing apple of his throat. In his pause, she speaks. “Do you know where she is?”

Holdo shoots her a helpless glance, closing the distance between them with a careful step. The smell of perfumes follows her. “I’m sorry, I don’t. I haven’t heard from her since Mon Mothma and I were exiled.”

Ben frowns. “When did you last speak to her?”

Folding her thin lips, Holdo glances between them, then to their companion. “Wexley, watch after her, won’t you? I need to speak with our guests in private.”

Wexley nods. “Of course, ma’am.”

“Follow me,” she says lowly, striding back through the curtain.

Rey takes Ben’s hand, wincing as he holds her tight, pulling her through as if terrified she will slip
through his fingers.

The house is dark wherever the light doesn’t shine, the sun sunken behind the slopes of Monte Solaro. In the privacy of the courtyard, Holdo sighs, sitting at the stone edge of a trickling fountain. “I never expected to meet you, Ben Solo. I wish it were under better circumstances.”

Ben glares in reply, hungry for answers. “Who are you?” he grounds.

Shadows pass over her angular features. “I was a neighbor of your mother’s before she married and started her family in Athens. We wrote each other often, and... every letter she sent mentioned you.” She looks at Ben, a deep hurt and hope in her eyes. “It broke her heart when you disappeared.”

Rey shifts to sit beside Holdo, her eyes pleading. “What did she say to you?”

The woman shakes her head. “It was so long ago. I... left the letters in Rome. I couldn’t tell you what they said, only that she thought…”

Her silence says it all. Leia must have believed her son was gone.

Ben turns away from them both, his shoulders taut, rising with each unsteady breath. “Is she alive?” he asks softly.

“I don’t know,” Holdo answers honestly. “The last letter I received was over a year ago. Anything could have happened since then.”

Rey’s gaze hardens fast to hers. “Where did the letters come from? If she still lives in Athens, maybe we could reach her.”

“I’m afraid not. She moved to Corinth after her husband was ambushed on the road to Seres. The loss was too much for her to stay in Athens—or anywhere.”

Ben jolts, turning back. “He… what?”

“I’m so sorry, Ben,” Lady Holdo mourns, folding her hands in her lap. “Your father is dead.”

He doesn’t move, his heart pounding in his ears, gut twisting into knots. He can feel himself being pulled from within his skin, turning him inside out, and knows he cannot stay. Cannot let it consume him.

Silently, his fingers clenched into his palms, he turns on his heel and storms out of the courtyard, back the way they came.

Rey rises to her feet, excusing herself. She clutches onto her palla as she races after him, the hall long and lonely, echoing her voice back at her. “Ben— Ben!”

One of his lumbering steps falters. His breathing comes short, as though he may begin to weep, but the tears do not come. He stops, feeling her close behind him, her comfort beyond where he can reach as his thoughts spiral down into memories of the gold morning light over calm waters, of cast lines and a father’s smile. Of an empty seat in his mother’s atrium.

He wonders where this grief comes from, unable to grasp it fully. Why should he? He had never truly known his father. The man had wanted him dead from the beginning. What did it matter that he was gone now, when Ben had long ago forsaken him?
Gentle arms wind across his torso, soft, slender hands holding onto him. Breath fills his lungs and he floats with her anchorage, finding shore again.

Rey lays her cheek against his back, squeezing once, tightly. “It’s in the past, Ben.”

Those words. Those *words*. They were the ones he’d offered to her that night, when she told him what her own parents had done to her. How easily they traded her, abandoned her.

How easily she holds him now, here in the palm of her hand. His muscles unwind from around his bones, growing loose without the will to fight. Heat pricks under his eyes and he blinks it away, his lip trembling once—and that is the end of it.

He turns in her arms and crushes her to him, silently begging her to drain him of this damnable ache. He feels it leaving him, his rotted memories brushed away, out of sight.

“Thank you,” he whispers shakily.

Rey folds her arms around his neck, moving to let him bury his face into her shoulder. He hides in her with soundless quivering. “Your mother might still be alive, Ben,” she murmurs, soothing her hands over his hair, his back. “Do you know what that means?”

At length he releases himself from the sanctuary of her, leaving only the room to meet her eyes, the feeling of her fingers in his hair a numbing balm. Yes, he knows what this could mean. Yet he knows he will not be strong enough to do it. Not alone.

Rey sees this in him, the conflict of reconciling with his past. Could she give him the true peace he requires, the closure he truly desires deep down in his soul, she would have. But now is not the time. For now, she must remind him of the hope in his grief—a light in this present darkness. She cups his cheek in her hand, keeping him tethered to her. “This isn’t finished yet. We have a chance to start over.”

His hands tighten where they lay on her hips, his head drifting down to meet hers. When they touch a feeling of calm sweeps over his unease. A hard breath races from his nose and, knowing she is right, he nods.

They stand together this way for unmeasurable time, satisfaction filling them, almost overflowing. They only pull away when they hear Holdo clear her throat.

Her eyes are red and somewhat swollen, though the rest of her remains impeccable. “It’s getting late,” she muses, offering them a weak smile. “I insist you stay and eat with us.”

Rey and Ben share a glance. “We would be very grateful,” she replies.

Holdo leads them back to the triclinium, its furnishings lavish and far less old-fashioned than Ben’s earlier décor. The dogs swarm them with attention as they sit, one hopping onto Rey’s lap with dark, expectant eyes. She lifts a careful hand to stroke along its back, immediately relaxing. Ben, however, sits stiff even as two dogs make room in his lap, and pointedly ignores them. It doesn’t last—he is patting one in minutes.

Their host shoos the animals away by the time their food arrives, Wexley guiding Madam Mothma into the tablinum with slow, careful steps. She is seated carefully in her own chair, her hunched spine leaning back for support.

“So,” Lady Holdo starts, leaning fully into her couch. Her sharp eyes glint with interest. “Tell me about yourselves. Is this your wife?”
“She is,” Ben answers smoothly.

“She’s very beautiful,” Holdo smiles, at last turning her attention fully upon her. “What is your name?”

“I’m Rey,” she says, a blush creeping under her skin.

“How long have you been married?” Holdo asks, taking a sip from the chalice of wine offered to her.

Ben gives Rey his cup, letting her drink first. “Three days.”

She chokes on a laugh, patting over her chest to relieve it. “‘Three days!’ Did it take you all these years to propose, then?”

Rey bites her lip, but fails to hide her smile. She can see Ben blushing behind his chalice as he takes a slow, lingering sip. “Actually, we only met more than a month ago. He was in the army before.”

“Really?” Holdo says, more of a reply than a question. Her eyes narrow. “Where?”

“In Rome,” Ben answers, his voice low with something like challenge. “I served as a commander until the emperor discharged me.”

“I see. And what do you do now?”

He lifts the cup to his lips, his reply dispassionate. “Entertainment.”

Wexley scoffs at that from his own couch, tearing into his bread with gusto. “Romans. Always trying to emulate the Greeks! I promise you that our entertainment will forever be more civilized.”

“I won’t disagree with you.”

Rey pales, not wanting to discuss this. She averts her eyes from Holdo’s suspicious gaze. Thankfully, the woman says nothing, giving Rey the chance to pluck an olive from the plate. It’s succulent and ripe on her tongue.

“How are things in Rome?” Lady Holdo asks, her casual air an obvious ruse.

Neither Ben nor Rey know how best to answer this, but Ben endeavors to try. “Political and unpromising. But I’m sure you knew that.”

Her lip quirks. “What makes you so certain?”

“You said that you and Mon Mothma were exiled,” Ben recalls, the intensity of his gaze clashing against her unwavering coolness. “I may not know you well, but I recognize that name.”

“It’s true,” Holdo sighs. “We were, how did Snoke say, ‘upheavals?’” A short, sardonic laugh crawls up her throat. “Not convictable enough to kill without backlash from the community, but just enough to be banished where our ideals could remain harmless.”

“What ideals?” Rey asks, studying her.

Rey’s eyes snap back to Holdo, disbelief and joy equal, insuppressible. “You’re with the Resistance?”

“In my day it was called the Rebellion, but yes, we are,” she replies. Gesturing to the shopkeeper, she continues, “Wexley would inscribe our hidden messages on his pottery. Mon Mothma was beyond your mother’s generation, Ben Solo. Though she was never allowed into war rooms, she always had a gift for strategy. It’s what kept us alive for so long.”

“Does everyone on Capri know about this...?” Rey asks incredulously.

“Oh, no no no. It’s still Roman territory,” Wexley huffs, shaking his head. “Loyalists everywhere. Can’t trust them.”

“I assume you know Poe Dameron, then,” Ben drones.

Holdo sighs. “Only rumors. It was never enough for me to trust him completely. IWe never spoke more than once, and that was years ago. Though I must admit,” she smirks. “I do like chariot racers.”

Rey snickers; Ben scowls. At this point, he should stop being so surprised by all the usurpers living amongst him, or even if that, how quickly Rey can draw confessionals from them. Were she born a man, she might have made a terrifying general.

The main course consists of vegetables and a dish Holdo calls ‘totano,’ an oily meat stuffed with rich tomatoes. Rey barely finds the patience to chew, so enthralled with the sweet, almost nutty taste and rich plume of fruit and subtle tang of garlic. Her hand blurs to claim another.

Holdo studies the lovers by the time all is finished, polishing off her slender hands and ringed jewels. “What brings you both to Capri? I doubt it was to ask me about Leia Organa.”

Rey glances at Ben for an answer. The way she looks at him makes him take her hand in his, his thumb habitually stroking. “We married in secret. I wanted to take her where no one knew what she was.”

“And what are you?”

Shifting a bit in her seat, Rey holds onto Ben’s hand, wondering if this woman of luxury will change the way she sees her. “A slave.”

There’s a beat of silence. Then the woman starts laughing. “That’s all? I thought masters fornicated with their slaves all the time in the city.”

Heat floods both of their cheeks at that, Ben clearing his throat and averting his gaze. “I assumed Capri would be better for that,” he murmurs.

Holdo and Wexley guffaw, the man’s shaking body and drunken flush forcing him giggling to the ground. Rey pinches the skin on the back of Ben’s hand. Hard.

“I think I understand,” Holdo sighs, worn off her delirium. Something tells Rey the woman may have had too much wine. “At your ages, newly married, it would be hard to keep your hands off one another.”

Ben’s shoulders stiffen. “You’re too bold, madam.”

She only shrugs, not intimidated by him in the slightest. She rises and smooths the skirts of her
chiton. “Well. Do you have a place to stay while you’re in Capri?”

“We do,” Rey replies, hiding a yawn behind her hand.

“Good. Well, the sun has set, and the moon is especially beautiful rising out of the sea,” Holdo sighs dreamily, helping Wexley from the ground. He leans heavily against her. “Oof—you can stay with me tonight you smelly potter. Ben, would you mind?”

Ben nods and moves to take the man’s other arm, guiding him out of the room as he babbles in protest. When they’ve gone, a servant tends to Madam Mothma, who had fallen asleep in her chair.

Rey leaves the triclinium, fitfully adjusting and re-adjusting her palla. This garment will take some getting used to. When she looks up, she catches a glimpse of a dark robe disappearing around a corner. She thinks she recognizes the man she’d seen in the garden and, seeing as no one else is around, moves to follow him.

She turns down the hall, expecting to see him, but is met instead with an empty isle and the open curtain to the tablinum. She glances over her shoulder.

She probably shouldn’t.

And yet she is inside of the study within moments, her hands behind her back as she wanders, appraising the fine shelves of bronze busts and scrolls. This tablinum is larger, more ornate than her husband’s—her own.

Then something catches her eye. Held by thick bindings and embroidered with golden seams, a collection of thick papyrus scrolls juts out from the uppermost shelf, partially untied. Telling herself she is merely going to roll it and set it back, she opens it. Immediately she is captured by a language she has never seen, the page adorned with an image of a couple in—

Rey’s eyes fall wide open, her breath caught in her throat.

The scrolls depict images of lovemaking, each position more intriguing—and impossible—than the last. She rifles through them, fascinated. One in particular draws a lingering thought. It is of a woman on her knees and palms, the man mounting her from behind. For a hot moment of shamelessness, Rey wishes that she could understand the words written there.

“Find anything interesting?”

Rey nearly jumps out of her sandals at the sound of Lady Holdo’s voice. Heat creeps up her neck as she meets the woman’s expectant eyes, and shame tugs her lip between her teeth. Her mind scrambles for an explanation. “It was untied, and I… I’m sorry, ma’am—”

Holdo chuckles, sweeping into the room. She doesn’t have to look at the scroll in Rey’s hands to know what it is. “Curiosity is nothing to be ashamed of,” she whispers conspiratorially, leaning in, her hand open.

If Rey wasn’t already mortified, then she might have fled. This feels different from Kaydel’s feminine instructions or Ahsoka’s patient mentorship. This woman comes from Ben’s childhood, knows Ben’s mother. She can’t help but feeling like an intruder—or apparently behaving like one. She places the scroll in her waiting fingers.

Her host’s smile falters in slight, as if privy to the sudden awkwardness. But her voice is a soothing reassurance. “Ben is waiting for you in the atrium. Walk with me.”
Rey nods, summoning a grateful smile. They leave the scroll behind, face down, and trek side by side down the generous hall.

Cool air streams around them from the open space of the courtyard, every breath clean and renewing. Rey’s lungs fill slower and slower, her body relaxing again.

“You love him,” Holdo says at length.

Rey glances at her, but senses no ulterior motives, no questions. Just a statement. “I do,” she replies unabashed, thrilled by the freedom of saying it aloud. “More than anything.”

“Mm. Then I’m grateful.”

Confused by her meaning, Rey studies her. “For what, ma’am?”

The woman looks serene when she meets Rey’s eye, their stride unbroken as they break into the atrium. A smile unfolds from between her cheeks, joy and solemnity living deep inside. “That Leia’s son found something she spent a lifetime searching for.”

Rey blinks, struck with emotion, and is thrust into a feeling of familiarity so potent she cannot imagine how their circumstances could have led them here. How much Ben has changed—how much she has changed. It makes her feel weak, fragile. Makes her feel how she had last night, when the stars passed over her. When there was nothing she could do to stop them.

But when her gaze flits to Ben, his frame turning to find her, his eyes soft and wide with gentleness, the love swelling in her heart is stronger.

Rey has been oddly silent.

Ben does not like this. It is not the companionable silence they sink into when there is nothing to say, but those telling of intrusive thoughts and gnawing emotions. He knows that silence all too well—he might have invented it.

He trails his thumb back and forth across the small of her back, hoping it will reassure her, return her to him, but it only makes her stiffen.

He wishes that she would melt into him, would show him his worries are unwarranted. But she doesn’t, and he’s left wondering—stewing—until they’ve returned to their modest suite. A servant appears to have lit the room for them, the oil lampstand drenching the walls in soft luster.

He watches as she begins to pull off her sandalia, her back turned to him. “What’s wrong?”

She hesitates, but doesn’t stop. “Hm?”

“Something is different,” he claims, stepping closer. He hopes the proximity will drive it out of her. Making her flustered is perhaps the most harmless method of interrogation he’s ever enforced, and he would be a liar to say he doesn’t enjoy the way her face blooms with color whenever he decides to implement it. He lowers his voice, bending to speak into her ear. “Tell me.”

Rey shivers, her bare feet cold and bracing on the floor. His lips tickle her ear, the heat of his body cascading down her back, doing nothing to subside the pressing ache that has been gathering within her like a fiery tempest.

She had been eager to return here. Though now, she cannot know how she is to feel. Could she
speak the truth to him now, tell him how her mind wanders to his body when she should be nurturing his wounded heart…? Or could the two be one in the same? Should she offer herself now, surrender to the hand that spans her waist, squeezing her, pushing her further down into a spiral of rushing blood—or ignore it?

Rey still does not answer him, and Ben frowns. Perhaps she is angry with him, but for the life of him he cannot imagine why. He wraps his arms around her, pressing his nose to the back of her head, breathing her in. “Please,” he whispers.

His penitence, though misplaced, reminds Rey that he is waiting on her reply. She wets her lip, trying to ignore the bed. She fails. “I’m concerned.”

He blinks. “About what?”

She starts to pull away, but he doesn’t let go. A thrill runs down her body when she realizes that he won’t. “It’s about that woman,” she says, hushed. “And what she said about… about your father.”

Moving to face her, his arms clasped tight, Ben furrows his brow. “What about it?”

Rey glances away, her cheeks burning.

“There’s something else…” he murmurs, realizing she hides more than he can uncover alone. He squeezes, taking a chance. “Are you worried for me?”

She meets his eyes. His patient gaze stings her with guilt. “I don’t like it when you’re upset.” She rests her hands on his chest, focusing on his warmth, his life. “We came here to escape from our past, but it’s still here.”

“Rey. Puella, look at me.” Ben crooks a finger under her chin, holding her gaze. He understands, he thinks, what she means. His expression is deadly solemn as he lets this yearning to comfort take possession of him. “My father was dead to me before this. It changes nothing about my life,” he murmurs, cupping her face, “or how much I want you here, just like this.”

Searching his eyes, Rey nods, accepting the feelings inside of her—and him—without restraint. His kiss is soft and certain, the passion warm and languid, driving her away from thought of disparity and into more intimate, instinctual desires. There will be no thoughts of anything else, here. Not for them.

Rey sighs into his mouth, winding her arms around his neck, pulling him closer. Ben grunts, tugging down her palla, his tongue flicking over her lip as satisfaction hums low in his throat.

He finally has her right where he wants her, and has no intention of letting her flee this burning hunger that has tormented him throughout their journey. He refrains from tearing at her clothes, settling for pawing at her hips, her breasts, her ass—shuddering with pleasure as she brushes against him, goading him on with all of her soft moans and teasing bites.

Rey pants into the room when he moves to lick and lave at her neck, swirling at the tender of her jaw. She squeezes his shoulders, holding onto him as he tugs her flush against him, rutting his hardening bulge against her stomach. “Zuji…”

He nearly growls, the name in his ear as seductive as her caress. He pauses his suckle on her neck to huff, “Yes, my love,” and immediately returns to continue ravishing her exposed skin.

A moan seeps out of her when he begins to search for her crest over her clothes—he’s eager to have her quickly, tonight. The thought only encourages her, makes her throb with need. “I want,”
she gasps, a bolt of ecstasy rattling her when he presses hard, rocking his cradled hand between her legs. She finds his eyes, just as dark and hungry as her own. “I want to try something.”

His eye twitches with an impatient, animal interest, his hand slowing. “Oh?”

Her hands curl over his belt, tugging at it. He pulls back and begins to strip, giving her the room to tenderly lay her palla and stola aside. Ben watches her with a rapid pulse when she discards her undergarments, leaving her bare.

He lunges for her, but her hand on his chest halts him. His fingers stroke her greedily before she is once more beyond his grasp, easing to her knees on the foot of the bed.

Her thighs quake when he follows suit, the two of them inland upon the bed, him on his knees behind her. Her coy expression drives him mad, the clever tilt of her head exposing her neck once more.

A low rumble builds in his throat, his hands roving up her soft, strong thighs, over the bones of her hips, past the sensitive skin of her full belly, cupping her breasts and wringing the air out of her lungs. She juts back at him, the hot, damp tip of his cock twitching against her spine.

“Puella,” he whispers, kissing her ear. His thick fingers trail down her sternum, making her shiver. He briefly rounds her navel before crawling past her shores, pressing into her heat.

Rey cries out softly when his palm grinds against her crest, the stretch of him inside of her the sweetest agony. She bucks back against him, the writhe of their bodies an archaic dance of unsatisfied need and mindless desire for wholeness.

Feeling herself growing closer, Rey whines, summoning her will to take his wrists and pull them away from her. A sound escapes Ben, something not quite a hiss, before she places his hands onto the swell of her hips and breathes, sinking down onto her palms.

Ben remains upstanding, watching as she lowers herself. His eyes widen, lust and realization twining like snakes around his spine.

Rey glances over her shoulder, her beautiful eyes, her lengthy lashes, the beckoning part of her lips compelling him with their uncertainty, their curiosity, and their willing submission. Fire rises from his core, his manhood throbbing, steering him against her dripping folds.

Experimentally, he thrusts against her, the shudder of her shoulders rippling under his hard grip. The sight of her presented to him, the trust of her closed eyes and bowed, blushing face, breaks the shackles of his restraint. He lines against her and feels where she gives—and buries himself inside of her.

This place, this angle, is a difference realized as soon as Rey cries out, her hands fisting in a strangers’ sheets. The head of his cock slams somewhere within her body she’d never known existed, somewhere deep and disorienting.

Ben huffs, his lips parted as a flush crawls up his chest. He grunts something neither hear, gaining speed, pulling her body to meet him. Sweat builds on his temple, in his hair, the pleasure of her hold on him dragging him deeper into the need for more. Her creamy arousal coats his sack, covers him wholly, completely.

The force of his thrusts knocks each exhale from Rey’s lips, the sensation of heat beginning to gather. It sweeps like ocean tides, back and forth, inside of her, waiting to collide in their tempest and drown her in that sweet bliss. Her moans leak past her lips as whimpers. She closes her eyes,
holding onto the feeling, picturing him behind her, taking her like she never knew she’d wanted.

He screws his eyes shut when he feels her begin to flutter and convulse around him, the pulse of her around his cock making him grit his teeth with effort. She neither screams nor goes limp under him, and with the last of his self-control he falls to his knuckles, palming her breast and biting her shoulder.

The pain shocks her, the pitching moans and soft sounds of her name crashing down in her body. She cries out as pleasure consumes her, her arms too weak to support the rest of her. She collapses into the sheets, her fingers clenched over their embroideries as Ben manipulates her hips, holding her as he comes.

“Nn—nm,” he groans, pumping his hips, pushing every last drop of his seed inside of her. Steadily catching his breath, he runs his hands up and down her sides before falling behind her, turning his face to kiss her jaw.

Sleepily, Rey turns, meeting his lips as the lingering pulses of her climax numb her every muscle. She nestles into him, snug and warm, exhaustion mumbling her words. “Did you like it?”

He hums softly, pushing his leg into its proper place between her own, his hand greedily stroking the soft of her breasts, toying with her nipples. “Where did you learn that?”

Rey smiles, resting her cheek on her folded hands, realizing for the first time just how soft and comfortable the mattress feels. She yawns. “Reading.”

His eyes already closed, his brow furrows in question, but it’s too late. They won’t be opening again. He nuzzles her hair and does not reply, only hold her tighter, closer, savoring the treasure of her in his arms. A distant piece of him thinks of his seed still scattered within her, foreign, unspeakable promises spiraling beyond his reach, this hold they have on one another.

The light continues to burn in its lamp—neither mind enough to put out the flame, already claimed by the darkness.
Because of its proximity to the sea, Naples was primarily a fishing settlement, named "Neopolis," or "New City." The Romans occupied it from Greece around 7th century B.C., and was highly respected for its loyalty to Greek roots (aka "Hellinism"). Its people hunted fish, shellfish, mollusks, and squid, and had it transported across the region along with word of their rich artistry. It would later be visited by Paul, who helped introduce them to Christianity.

The palla (as you might recall~) was a traditional garment worn by women of nobility, similar to the pallium cloak. It was also the tell for married women.

The ferry Baze commands is based off the large-scale Greco-Roman style warships called "quintqueremes," (or, more famously, the "triremis") which used multiple levels of rowing oars to control the boat. The distance to the island is about 24km (or 14-ish miles) across the Gulf of Naples, so I'm guessing that the boat trip took all morning and the greater part of an afternoon. Again, like last chapter, I'm gonna just yadda-yadda through this one.

The shores of Capri were home to a menagerie of creatures, including "Monaci" (manatees!) and blue lizards, thought to have evolved to blend in with the striking blue waters.

"Faraglioni," or "The Lovers Arch," is a rock formation off the South side of the island (where Naples is North). The height is roughly 20 meters (about 60-some feet), just large enough for a ferry to pass through. Legend has it that those who share a kiss under The Lovers Arch will be together forever.

While one would think Baze would land in the modern day Marina Grande, the largest port on the island (and closest to Naples), he takes them to Da Gioia, a Southern beach—one of very few on the rocky, non-volcanic land mass.

Capri itself is divided in half, one half much higher than the other. Monte Solaro acts as a giant plateau, making the West side its own property, called "Anacapri". It was not nearly as well-populated as the lower-level Capri in the East, which was still rather hilly.

Because the island did not have many sources of freshwater, Capri citizens used reservoirs to capture rain. Though sunny and scenic, rain was common enough to support the slim population.

Like Naples (actually partly owned by Naples, though Roman territory), Capri kept its ties to Grecian traditions. This carries on to celebrating sports and the arts, including pottery. The buildings were villas which, like in Rome, could have their atriums converted into shops.

The "kylix" is the name for ancient vases painted with men, usually in battle position or in the midst of sport.

Italian Greyhounds (also called "Iggies") are small dogs with long legs, and are known to trot with high steps, almost like a horse. Their lineage dates back about two-thousand years. Though called "Italian," they actually originated in modern-day...
Greece and Turkey. They are fragile sight-hunters, and make great companions.

Capri was an island where the wealthy would vacation, and emperors would sojourn to flee from assassination. It's easy to speculate that wealthy aristocrats could have been exiled there.

"Totano" is a classic dish from Capri, consisting of squid meat, garlic, tomatoes, and oil.

The Kama Sutra, originating from India, was a breif "novel" written entirely on scrolls. While we think of it as a sex manual, it also contained instructions for marital harmony and healthy relationships. I haven't found the exact year when it became somewhat widespread, but it was definitely before the Glory's Fray timeframe.

This ADORABLE portrayal of Rey and Ben is from the amazing LemonLaLaLand! Her art inspired Rey's yellow palla! :D

Want better imagery for Ben and Rey's honeymoon on Capri? Follow this link to use Google Earth and explore the gorgeous island for yourself!
Siren

Chapter Summary

For my readers who don't like smut: feel free to skip this chapter.

Chapter Notes

Oof, this month has been busy busy busy! But a lot of great milestones are happening for me. I'm at the home stretch. Your support really means so much in these trying times ^_^ This is a very relaxing, stress-free chapter. I hope you enjoy~

(Also this chapter has been posted un-edited, because it's late and I'm sleepy. I'll come back and fix any mistakes tomorrow. <3).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rey wakes to the sound of leaves scraping against one another in the wind, the stillness of daylit darkness cloudy in their room and heavy on her eyes. She fades in and out of sleep, and remembers where she is when her side begins to ache, her body needing a new position.

She turns away from a small sliver of spittle she’d accidentally left on Ben’s arm, burrowing into the cool, silky skin of his chest. Hairs on his chin, small and itchy, poke at her scalp as he sleepily accommodates, his legs shuffling with hers under the blankets. The warmth of his palm sinks into her back.

Now awake and unable to sink back, Rey grows restless, pitching her thigh over his hip. Ben’s cock takes a moment to realize what’s happened, but eventually twitches. He sighs, groggy, and turns his weight, fully slumping onto Rey and effectively burying her into the mattress.

“Ben—” she puffs, laughing, her legs instinctively wrapping around his waist, “—gently, please…”

“Mmn, but…” he groans, a resistant squeeze in his closed eyes. His fingers find the soft of her arms, her ribs, his wide frame easing down to settle more firmly against her. The hair on his lip scratches at her breast as he speaks. “You like it rough…”

Torn between flushing and hitting him, Rey does both. A chuckle, soft and deep, rumbles in her ribs, and his impish tongue darts out against her chest. Her back arches and she lets fingers thread through his hair, holding him where he is.

He continues to lick and slobber her, the point of his nose ticklish, the plush of his soft lips belaying the slight scrape of his stubble. A sigh of pleasure leaves her as his near-mindless obedience to her unspoken whims pools between her legs, his attention and the wet, breathy sounds from his mouth chipping away her sanity.

This doesn’t go unnoticed by Ben, whose worship continues down. Heat surrounds him under the
sheets, the wriggling hands in his hair and scrape of nails sending shivers down his neck. The spill of his name from her lips when he kisses the sensitive span of skin below her navel twitches in his hard cock, the length tapping his stomach.

Rey’s caress slides down his neck, squeezing his arms. At last his eyes flutter open to meet hers, his thumbs pressing into her soft, supple skin. “You like it slow…” he presses a lingering kiss just above her mound, “…and deep.”

“Yes,” she moans, writhing under his hands.

His eyes glint in the streaming light from the open window and he lays his cheek on her thigh, brushing his knuckles from her thatch to her hip, and back. He can feel her pulse, here. The rise and fall of her desperate breaths. The heat of her fire. “Is that how you want me?” he whispers, glancing up at her.

The flit of his lashes tickles Rey’s skin. She bites her lip, unable to resist those big eyes. Her hand cups his cheek, urging him to crawl back up her body. “I always want you,” she murmurs, sweeping his hair from his face, her thumb savoring the mosaic of his cheek. She leans up to kiss his nose, his lips. “Always.”

Closing his eyes to fall into her, Ben’s heart constricts, his hold on her tight, possessive of her words. “Then own me,” he huffs, his very bones throbbing as he trails his lips down her jaw, her throat, needling her pliant in his hands. “Claim me.” He buries himself in her neck, fitting himself between her thighs, moaning at the sweet slick coating her shores. His voice comes as a shivering rasp. “…possess me.”

Rey arches into him, pushing herself down against his hard shaft. “Yes,” she hisses out, her desire feral, the whole of her in want. Her arms sneak under his, her hands embracing him. “Zuji, ah — Ben!”

With a roll of his hips he wedges inside of her, the clutch of her hearth spilling over him with rapture. They’d only had one another hours ago, and yet she is so eager, so willing, he thinks he may still be lost in some listless dream.

He makes love to her slowly, at first, panting into the crown of her hair as it splays over the pillow, breathing in her scent. Her simpering goads him faster, his knees digging into the mattress, his hands clutching her tightly to him. The blankets fall off with their shifting.

Rey’s head lulls back, her eyes squeezing shut, hyper-focusing on the feeling of him sliding through her. Her body is already close to the edge, the stimulation of his teeth against her neck, the tender spot under her jaw making her shudder and swell.

Feeling close himself, Ben speeds up his thrusts, reaching deep inside of her. She takes him, all of him, as wholly and completely as she always has, sheltering his heart. Their bodies have already inched up the mattress, her soft puffs in his ear, her sweet, encouraging mewls pushing him beyond the point of any return. He grabs her, throws himself into her, his every muscle coiling until it is released.

“Rey,” he gasps, going limp, his mind blank. The cooling sweat on her neck smells of skin and sex and love, nearly lulling him back to sleep. The stroke of her fingers in his hair slows his pounding heart. He caresses her; rises to kiss her perfect lips. “I love you.”

Rey smiles, her impending climax halted, but willfully ignored for that handsome, lazy adoration in his eyes. “I love you too, Ben,” she whispers, coy and secretive—as if all the world was them.
He grunts appreciatively, withdrawing his manhood from her. His hands run over her in a slow caress, his gaze searching from her eyes to her groin. “Did you come?” he asks casually, lifting his brows to her. He can’t seem to recall her seizing or screaming, this time. The sheets aren't wet enough.

She shakes her head, appraising his chest with her fingertips. “It doesn’t matter.”

His eye twitches when she strokes his nipple, the sensitivity surprising him. It is filed away for later; there are more important matters to attend to. He sits on his knees, pulling her thighs apart. White globs of his spend seep onto the mattress, and pride swarms in his throat, stretches his lips into a smirk. He will have to tip the innkeeper extra for this.

He toys with the globes of her knees, the image of her beneath him, her breasts surging once more with arousal, lowering his voice to a growl. “Which would you like, mea Puella? My hand, or my tongue?”

Rey sucks a lip between her teeth. The cold slither of his seed trickling out of her stirs in her bones. When she tries to close her legs, his hands hold her still. How could he possibly expect her to answer in this state?!

Her lack of immediate response only feeds the gluttonous monster under his skin, the need for her pleasure, her ecstasy, tightening his fingers around her legs. “I suggest you hurry, Wife.” He dips at the waist, his head nearing her center. “Or you won’t get a choice.”

Rey’s heart springs into her throat. “B-Both, she gasps, worming under the fingers already teasing up and down the inside of her thigh. “Both.”

“Mm,” Ben rumbles, laying back down between her legs, maneuvering them over his shoulders. “A wise decision…”

The touch of his tongue shoots fire through Rey’s body, the prolong of her orgasm resurging with a vengeance. Fire bathes her face as she feels herself drip onto his tongue, as he moans and sucks at the taste of her.

Ben works his jaw at her crest, pushing a finger inside of her. He crooks up—beckoning her to him. The flavor of them, melded together, suffuses him with satisfaction, returns the energy to his tired mouth. He savors her muted cries as her hard crest goes soft, her final shiver and the push of her palms against his head signaling him to let her sink down into bliss.

He hovers over her, brushing her hair, watching as her parted lips and closed lids exchange their roles. He smiles. “I’m not sure who enjoyed that more.”

Rey sits up, planting a kiss on his cheek. Her eyes sparkle in the light when they sit, capturing him as he strokes her face, fettered helplessly to them. Her smile is far brighter than his, reaching deep inside of him with its light. Nourishing, renewing.

“Neither am I,” she croons, nuzzling his handsome nose. “Maybe we should do it again.”

He growls and pulls her onto his lap for a scathing kiss when the sound of crowds spills in from the window. Rey starts, mortified as she wonders whether or not they’ve been heard. Curiosity pulls her away. Ben pouts when she scoops her garments from the floor, covering herself as she gazes out the window and into the sunshine.

Their place mid-hill allows her a decent enough vantage to spy a gaggle of young men and women carrying baskets down the road, laughing amongst themselves.
Ben comes to stand behind her, following her gaze. Rey looks over her shoulder. His lip seems more prominent when there is hair on his face, his resting frown more pronounced. “Think it’s for the festival?” she asks softly.

“Maybe.” He returns to the chamber, his pale backside exposed to her roving eyes. Though satisfied and still somewhat dizzy, she can’t help but lust after him, every mole and taut expanse of muscle all hers to touch and take. She nearly rushes into him, predatory instinct demanding she leap and cling and clamor, but manages herself.

He dresses first, then leaves and returns with a pail of water, rags, and slim blade in hand. He lets her scrub herself down first before flicking the blade across his cheeks. Rey watches him shave, fascinated. He leaves the patches of hair on his lip and chin, glancing over with lifted brow. She smiles her ascent, tracing her forefinger and thumb around her mouth, laughing at him when he washes his face.

“Something amusing, Puella?” He corners her with slow steps, snagging her by the hips. His grip is damp and ticklish, making her struggle as laughter bubbles from her throat.

“Ben, stop that!” she giggles, bending over his arm. He doesn’t, at least not right away, bringing tears to her eyes. She beats harmlessly against his chest. The intensity of his fingers raises her pitch. “Ben!”

He takes mercy on her, chuckling into her hair before looking down at her in his arms. “Any preferences?”

Knowing he means breakfast—or, perhaps, lunch—Rey wets her lips, fixing his belt. “Hmmm… Figs?”

He scoffs at himself. Of course she would request that. He doesn’t know why he’d even asked.

They do find figs, eventually, as well as enough packings for another one of Ben’s surprises.

“What is it now?” Rey asks around sweet lavender juices.

Trekking up the mountain slope, the stony road jagged with dirt and grass and shaded by arching branches, Ben holds fast to their supplies in one hand, taking hers in the other. Finding no use in omission any longer, he replies, “Grotto Azura. The Blue Grotto.” When she looks at him he elaborates, “A sea cave.”

She tosses a rind into the wild shrubbery. “Do you know this place?” she asks, brow raised.

He shakes his head and ducks under a particularly low-hanging branch, letting her pass beneath his arm. “Only rumors,” he says. “Infantry soldiers—braggers, mostly—spoke of it.”

When they walk together again, Rey recaptures his fingers. To her pleasant surprise he continues to speak as they travel, recounting more from his time as a Roman soldier. He tells her the places he’s seen, the civilizations and languages he’d encountered, each one more fascinating than the last. Rey wants to see them all.

“Someday,” Ben murmurs, his tone and eyes light, the pull at the edges of his lips gentle as he squeezes her hand, “I’ll show you.”

The talking, walking, and smiling is enough to make Rey near-winded. A sharp sting cuts into her heel and she hisses, leaning on her husband's arm to remove her sandal and shake free a

Ben chuckles, stooping to sweep her into his arms.

She cries softly in protest, torn into laughter and heated cheeks. “Ben, you don’t have to—”

“It’s not far,” he rumbles, pointedly tugging her closer. “Did I not say you could ride me whenever you wish?”

Rey lovingly whaps his chest, her fluster averting her eyes to the straining cloth of his tunic. It’s warm where she burrows her nose. “Brute.”

He only offers her one of his rare, wolfish smiles before it fades back into focus and careful steps. He was not mistaken in claiming it was not far—they only need carefully descend a moderate slope down into a bordering land of plain grass and sparse trees. They stand close to cliffs; the sound of waves calls from nearby.

A stone pillar stands in the shade. Rey wiggles down his chest when they come upon it, reading aloud the Latin phrase and Greek translation chiseled beneath it: The Blue Grotto; Beware thee of sirens.

“‘Sirens?’” she echoes.

If he hears her, Ben does not acknowledge it, moving on to the cliffside, his eyes sweeping down along the coast. Rey comes to stand beside him when he seems to find what he is looking for.

On the other side of a small, rocky gulf, not a league away, they spot a cavernous maw bowing over the sea. The rocky outcropping shines white under the sun, the precipice sprouting a column that disappears into the clear blue surf. The shape of the cliff reminds Rey of a man lying on his side—like Ben wrapping an arm around her.

He scales down the large rocks first, forging a path. Rey follows his steps, taking his hand when he offers—even when both know she doesn’t require it. Rocks crunch and waves sigh, the water foamy and bubbling near her exposed toes. The wind ruffles the soft cloth of her palla, stirring in their hair.

They find a softer patch of sand and finer rock, where Ben lays out a blanket he’d “borrowed” from their suite. Rey helps him weigh it down with rocks at each corner before she is called by the water’s edge, the shy waves crashing, inviting her touch.

Ben watches her wade to her ankles in the surf, the hem of her stola damp as her smile fills him with sloshing pleasure.

“Can you swim?” he calls, removing his belt.

Rey turns, breath hitching as he throws off his tunic, leaving his lengthy hair a mess of inky windblown strands. The sun bounces off his cheeks, his shoulders; the exposure of his torso amidst the cliffside a striking vision, revealing a Poseidon. The heat of his gaze nearly burns her tongue, yet it speaks, “I don’t know.”

Catching the flush, recognizing that familiar loosening of her jaw and sweet parting of lips and teeth, Ben’s ego stokes. “Mm.” He steps closer. “You’ll need to learn, if you want to escape the sirens.”

She searches his eyes. Her heart lives in her throat. “Is that another one of your soldiers’ stories?”
He doesn’t affirm her. “Sirens are merciless,” he murmurs, closing in, his body casting shadow over them. “They know your every want, your every desire.” His eyes take on that ignited quality, his gaze dancing with hers as he bows his neck, as if to share a secret. Slowly, he lifts his hand to her face, brushing a windstrewn hair from her lip. “And they will give it to you. If you surrender to it…”

Rey lays a firm hand on his breast, halting his attempted kiss.

The skin is warm under her hand—it is just as she’d thought. His heart is pounding.

She smiles. “Don’t worry,” she croons, standing on her toes in the sand, her mouth brushing over his parted lips as she speaks. “I’ll protect you.”

She leaves him standing there to return to the blanket, his loose hands useless at his sides. Her hands strip her to her undergarments.

When she bends to lay them safe and folded on their camp, Ben stares openly at her backside, his throat constricting. Sirens, indeed.

Their sandals removed, the two navigate over the larger rocks, rounding the bend. The sea spills under a raised level of rock, a hole the size perfectly acceptable for a rowboat leading to unknown darkness within the wall of the cliff.

Ben turns to his wife. “Follow my lead.”

She nods, and steps behind him, wading into the water. They linger in the shallows before the drop underfoot, Rey not daring venture beyond where her feet can touch. The waves are calm here, allowing them proper time to commune. He teaches her to circle her arms in outward motions, to kick with her feet, and keep her chin above water. Floating proves difficult—the man sinks like a rock and bears no beneficial example. But Rey, being light and nimble, learns this quickly enough.

Rey swims ahead of her husband when the pull of the cave becomes too irresistible, her curiosity and eagerness propelling her forward with slow, easy strokes. As she enters, the soft sea surface tickling her chin, her eyes widen.

The cavern is larger than they expected—its dome-like edifice carved with sharp rock, the ceiling dancing with reflected light, supported by a generous outcropping and its beam at the far end. But the water, the water, is blue. Blue as the sky, glowing underneath her, illuminating their rippling forms into shadows.

They swim to the landing on the other side of the cave, holding onto it for a moment of rest. Their eyes venture along the inside of the grotto, Rey’s voice bouncing off the water as she says, “It’s beautiful.”

Ben can only nod, distracted by the shimmering, silken beauty draping over them. Holding his breath, he closes his eyes and sinks below the surface. Rey observes him as he moves below, turning to brace his feet on the rock. He pushes off, sailing to the opposite wall, before twisting his body to repeat the movement and return to her side, reemerging with a sharp twist of the head and puffing gasp for air.

The water from his hair flicks in Rey’s face; she splashes him. “Oi! Watch it!”

“Sorry,” he offers, only somewhat meaning it. No man who has seen Rey in true rage would be intimidated by the face she makes now. He juts his chin at her. “You try.”
She considers him for a moment, then the distance he’d just crossed. Not one to back down from a challenge, she takes a few deep breaths, closes her eyes, and lowers herself into the water.

It fails miserably—she’s up again in less than a second, coughing and sputtering.

“Breathe out of your nose,” Ben instructs patiently, a demonstrative flare in his nostrils.

Rey nods. “Alright. Alright…” Sucking in a deep breath, she tries again, pushing the air from her lungs, forcing herself to ignore the impulse to breathe in. She holds onto the rock, feeling herself sink, and opens her eyes.

Blue surrounds her endlessly, shivering like living air. All she sees before her is light and rippling dark, the ends of her hair dark and wispy at the edge of her vision. The world is quiet and loud, all at once, neither heavy nor soft, and time bears no meaning, no frivolous need for breath.

God lives everywhere, Rey decides, but here most of all.

When she resurfaces Ben is there, his eyes expectant, waiting. A beat of quiet stands between them, filled with her shallow, human breaths, and memory returns for her in his challenge, his call for her to strike out into that vast, swallowing emptiness—and return to him.

Wetting her salty lip, Rey lets go of her support and slides down, back into the swell. She does as Ben had done, planting her feet upon the rock, and letting it give her the strength to sail beyond.

Ben cannot take his eyes off her, hoisting himself onto the ledge to watch her swim, his lower half still mostly underwater. He sees her arms, her long legs, bend and twist with weightless grace, catching onto the opposite wall and providing that same force, bringing her back to him.

Praise is on his lips when she rises from the water, her own parted for a desperate breath, but is paused by the location of her breech. Between his legs she holds to the rocky outcropping, supporting herself on the land, water sliding down her cheeks, her jaw, her neck, between her breasts....

Ben breathes out, an old, familiar fantasy of her wringing out his throat. The cool air of the cavern becomes stifling, his thoughts torn to pieces like ships in a storm.

Rey looks up, water fleeing her lashes as she blinks, and feels a familiar pulse of longing. The expression on his face is one of focus, of determination, and fear. A heady brew with dark, wide eyes, projecting, perhaps, a thought of sea-dwelling women.

Slyly, she rests a hand on his knee, relishing how it twitches at her touch. Her eyes slide reluctantly from his face down his sternum and lower, fixing onto the clinging, wet cloth of his subligar. Her pulse rattles, her mind abuzz, when they trace a recognizable, steadily growing bulge.

Unable to help herself, she reaches for it.

Realizing what she is doing, helpless to stop it, Ben sits back on his palms, his breath shuddering.

“Rey—”

“Shh,” she soothes, tugging at the folds of his loincloth, pulling one end free. She finds purchase in the water to bring her face closer, right where they want her to be. “I know.”

Her words sink down his chest, dripping like honey and wine, leaving him in delirium. A hiss of relief claws out of his throat when she bares him to her, his manhood already hot and pulsing with need.
Rey studies him for a moment, having never seen him this close. Shine slips from the slit of his swollen head, the veins and scars and ridges inviting in the ethereal light. With her only free hand she lays her palm on his thigh, caressing his soft, sparse hairs, thrilled by how it makes him quake.

Love fills her as she moves for him, hears his hitching, heavy breaths, and *tastes*.

The slide of her tongue on his cock shatters something within Ben. He moans, long and slow, the deep cadence of it ricocheting off the cavern walls.

Fueled by him, Rey lets her tip meet his, sinking into the slight divot. With pleasant clarity she realizes he tastes like the sea—like salt and sweat and fire. The flavor clings to the roof of her mouth, and she wants *more*.

“Fuck,” Ben grunts, sweat gathering on his brow as her lips fold around him, her tongue prodding and caressing. His lips curl with effort not to buck into her for more of her delicious, wicked mouth. The blue waters cast light around her face, cloaking her like a veil, a halo for his most seductive of temptresses.

The sight has his twitching in her mouth, his hand bracing against the back of her damp head, encouraging her to take him deeper. Rey hesitates for a moment, teaching herself how to move as she might where she straddling him, instead. She follows the pitch and rapidity of his breathing, watching the blurry undulation of his heaving stomach lose rhythm. She moans softly, a wordless question.

“Yes,” he groans in reply, his head lolling with ecstasy, his expression tight, hazy. His fingers cradle her, the movement of her head bobbing on his manhood, the sweet, hot pressure of her silky mouth driving him mad with lust. “Please,” he gasps, “please, don’t stop.”

Of stopping Rey has no intention. Taking his permit and his lead, she works herself faster, tasting more of him, looking up to watch as her husband writhes with unbearable pleasure—pleasure that only *she* can give him.

It fills her up, makes her wild with intent to feel his spend fill her, too. She grabs the base of his cock, stroking it hard and fast to meet her lips.

Her touch, this *siren*, is his undoing, their eyes meeting in the ambient light too much for him to withstand. “*Hoh,*” he moans, his body coiling, release crashing over him. “*Rey.*”

Thick, sticky liquid strikes her throat, making her splutter. She releases him, the taste still inside her, watching fascinated as his seed pulses into the water, the white dancing down and disappearing into the depths.

His toes uncurl from below the surface when he regains consciousness, bending down to take her chin in hand. “Come here,” he whispers sleepily, kissing her.

Rey hums, kissing him back, wondering if he can taste himself as she’d her own body when he’d loved her before. Joy spears through her at his pleasure; she resolves to do this for him more—perhaps, next time, not a drop would leave her lips.

When they part for breath Ben sighs, slouching back against the rocks in a position that would definitely *not* be comfortable without aid from her affection’s lingering glow. He asks her to let him rest a moment, knowing he won’t survive the return to shore without any bones.

Rey is all too happy to accommodate, sinking back into the nothing.
They lay upon the blanket, listening to the waves, their own breaths, quiet words of no meaning but love. They’d lost their clothes long ago, laying them to dry on a sunny rock, hands wandering over sunlit skin, flesh caressing, writhing, fingers groping, stroking, savoring.

A barren cluster of what once held grapes lies discarded by their feet, the jug of wine nearly emptied. Rey kisses bread crumbs from her husband’s lip, replacing her mouth with fingertips to stroke the bristled hairs there.

“Do you like this?” he asks, touching it, too.

Rey lays her head on his arm, eyes wide when they gaze up at him. She moves to stroke his drying hair. “I don’t understand Roman men. It seems that none of them grow beards at all.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I like your face,” Rey says, kissing his chin, arm draped over his neck. “That is my answer.”

Discontented, but not caring enough to press the issue, he cranes his neck to let her pepper him with small kisses. He shivers when she trails upwards, the soft smacking of her lips at his ear triggering a sensitive pull in his groin.

Yawning, Rey rolls away, shifting to lie on her stomach. The water must have done something to her body; never before has she felt so exhausted, so lazy and languid. “Ben?”

He looks away from her pert, smushed breasts to her drowsy face. “Yes?”

“I think I would like to go to that sports festival tomorrow.” She yawns again. “It will be nice to see more of this place before we go home.”

Go home. Ben frowns. He would much rather keep her right here, where he can have her all to himself. “I don’t want to.”

Her eyes open slowly, finding his. “Please?”

His pout persists, but it’s all childish resistance. He knows she is right. This could be the only opportunity she has to enjoy communal sport and festivities. What proper husband would he be to deny her to satisfy his own agendas?

“Very well,” he murmurs, ignoring his erection.

Her smile returns, her eyes closing once more, their mistress appeased. “Thank you, Zuji.”

His gaze sweeps over her, admiring the rise and fall of her back as she begins to slip away. Struck with opportunity, he shifts, retrieving a jar of scented oil from their packings. He kneels behind her, touching her tentatively. She doesn’t stir nor reject, and so he plants his hands at either side of her, working the oil into her skin.

Rey, on the cusp of deep sleep, moans as his thick fingers and strong palms sink into her pliant flesh, massaging the muscles underneath. “Mmm, Ben…” she sighs, wiggling in need for more of his touch.

He gives it to her, continuing the soothing strokes up and down the expanse of her slender back. His thumbs rove in steady circles, always moving, forcing out any imperfections they can find. His eyes focus on two, slight dimples just above her buttocks, and he wonders what it would be like to hold them.
Rey shifts restlessly, damp and cold and vacant between her legs. After all their teasing, her body has wound itself again. She spreads them, her thighs, shifting her hips from side to side along the blanket.

Ben heeds her silent call, already hard and eager for her. Slowly, he lifts her hips, letting her lay comfortably as he sits on his knees, inching forward. Rey’s heart thrums with eagerness when her stomach lifts ever so slightly from the ground, the calm breeze sliding underneath her.

Finally in position, Ben soothes his hand down her spine, caressing her with his knuckles. She hums and nods her reply, and with gentleness, he fits himself at her entrance, pressing inside.

Their sigh is lost in the sound of ocean waves, guiding his movements as he takes his time with her. This is not rushed as it was last night, when need was all-encompassing amidst the pain. This is comfort for comfort’s sake, ecstasy passing back and forth between them, ushered by the slow rock of his hips.

Rey’s toes curl as sweet bliss builds within, the head of his length pressing inside of her, his body calling to her own in tender rapture. He is touching her, exploring her, and she invites him in, embracing all of him, in every angle and span of intimate flesh.

By the time she is beginning to flutter he has begun to crest, and so he sets his thumbs into those little dimples at the base of her spine, thrusting into her harder, deeper, right where she cries the loudest. As he’d hoped, she lets go, her climax milking his come from him.

Lost and mindless, they lay down, breathless and drowsy. Their syllables are brief, their eyes closing, fingers intertwining as the Capri sun smiles with them.

Chapter End Notes

[The Blue Grotto is a popular tourist destination on Capri, known for its transcendent, clear-blue waters. The descriptions here are based of of current images and artist renditions of what the cave looks like. The Blue Grotto was thought to be a popular swimming hole back when Capri was populated. For the sake of this narrative, we can say they were undisturbed because everyone in town is busy getting ready for the sports festival]

[BONUS: Capri Sun, the soft drink company, openly came out in support of the Reylo fandom in December 2018, which was very validating, being as this chapter has been plotted since September 2018. *ensue manic laughter*]
Chapter Summary

The one-year anniversary chapter of Glory's Fray! Thank you so much for your love and support!

Chapter Notes

Okay so, one year ago today I started something that spiraled out of control, and a story that was meant to be seven chapters long became THIS monstrosity. It's been a great journey, and a scary one, but as GF has grown I have grown along with it.

And I couldn't have done that without you. Coming into this I never expected such warm and open support from so many wonderful people. You gave me the confidence and the courage to keep going, keep writing. We've all come so far in such a short period of time, and I'm so excited to see where everything goes from here!

With that said, I'm so pleased to announce that we are now 2/3rds of the way through Glory's Fray! This is going to be the longest chapter, but it's a long road ahead, with many more twists and turns to come. I'm so thankful and so blessed to have you here with me ❤️ To celebrate, I've opened up a CuriousCat account where you can ask me questions about GF (or anything, really—I'm not picky). You can follow this link to come talk to me—I'll post this again at the end of the chapter, too ^_^

Anyway, thanks you so much for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She dreams of ocean waves.

Of nearing an island in the distance, the sea silvery and dim under a stormy sky. The wind blows her hair, her clothes, her very skin, until everything she is flows behind her in an endless stream—an unending, unwinding torrent, silent and formidable. She feels pulled to the land, knowing something, somewhere, is alive. Something she cannot see. Somewhere all around her, within her.

Rey wakes with a start, the memory of dreaming fast fading. She checks herself and, yes, her skin is still there, so she reclines back against the pillow, stretching tired limbs.

Beside her, Ben’s soft snores pass from parted teeth, his dreaming undisturbed. Rey watches him, balancing on her arms, unable to keep herself from noticing the slight smile on his lip, the rapid shifting of his eyes behind closed lids.

She takes a moment to appreciate the center of his mass, curling into his space and resting her cheek on her hands, tempted to lounge a little while longer. Until Ben turns onto his back, the thin sheet twisting around him and exposing a slight protrusion in his lap.
Rey’s throat dries, an indelible sense of humor and skittish lust fluttering in her belly. For a moment she wonders, and, with another glance at his unsuspecting face, decides.

Slowly, very slowly, she inches down the bed, just shy of sliding along the body of her blissfully ignorant husband. The excitement of it arouses and pebbles her flesh, her finer hairs, her nipples, the tip of her tongue—shakingly sure in her fingers as she pulls the blanket away to unveil him, already hard and waiting.

She wonders what he is dreaming about to make him so. Though she need not venture far to guess. The memory of taking him in her mouth the day before resurges within her mind, visions of his squirming and writhing pleasure pouring hot down her thighs. It snaps in her belly like a belt and she considers doing this again, but refrains, wanting to see how his expression might change under her hand, while she can be free to watch and see how he responds more thoroughly.

Deftly, she caresses the bone of his hip and down, lining the sparse hair trailing from his navel. He exhales, the flare of his nostrils like a bull, but doesn’t wake. The skin bleeds heat against her fingertips. She can go further than this.

Licking her palm, Rey swallows the base of his shaft in her hand, stroking him slowly, watching for any betrayal of wakefulness. That slight smile on his mouth is gone, replaced by a pinched brow. A thrill runs through her as she feels him clench, his long limbs twitch.

He growls—or perhaps begins to say ‘Rey’—his cock stirring in her hand, already seeping down towards her knuckles. The flush on his cheeks is insipid inspiration, guiding her faster just so, a soft, lulling “Zuji…” crooning down her chin.

She feels a strong pulse in her hand and he moans. He is already close. Whatever he is dreaming must be powerful. His naked chest heaves under her own, his subconscious birthing sweat from his pores, his fingers waking, twisting at his sides.

Maneuvering her wrist, she moves up his body and pumps him between her legs, kneeling over his helpless, bewitching frame. His tip is so close to where she wants him most, the ache of wanting him there already beginning to pool, ready and waiting at her lips. Summoning the derangement of it, the awe and power of reducing this man to a mound of simpering, subconscious pleasure, Rey lowers her lips to his ear, right above the sensitive lobe. “Etiam, Zuji,” she whispers, tightening her hold, possessing him, desperation passing back and forth between them as the sound of her beating against him rises in deadly chorus. “Let go. Let me have you. Ben…”

At his name his hands lunge from the bed, grasping her hips, eyes snapping open. He bucks into her hand and gasps deep into the room, the depth echoing off the walls of her bones, and comes, specks of white flicking over their hot skin as she continues to manage him—more roughly than she’d realized herself. His voice shatters with mindless pleasure, the shards piercing to her very core.

He meets her satisfied smile heaving, part-mouthed. It warms her, realizing how shocked he must be, how pleased. It’s a pure look from him, one Rey enjoys far too much not to prolong. So she leans forward, kissing those surprised lips, her arousal a faded pink on her cheeks. “Good morning.”

He gulps, finally catching up with his lungs. He tries to speak. “You…”

His hands soothe up her flanks, chilling her all over. She wonders at what he might say, but given the many plethora of enticing names he could call her, finds it best to leave it a varied mystery. “What were you dreaming about?”
He strokes her hair and pulls her nose to his, nuzzling her cheek, finally waking enough to thank her with gentle touches and tender caresses. He sighs. “You.”

“Good,” Rey whispers, unashamedly possessive, even over his dreams. She leans into his kiss, welcoming the way he handles her like fine glass in its forge, molding and mild and warm. “I had a dream, too.”

He meets her eyes, politely interested. “What was it?”

“I can’t remember.” She shrugs and rolls off him, standing from the bed and stretching the lingering sleep from her legs. Sunlight kisses her toes. She smiles. “The festival is today. We should find that woman again. Or Wexley.”

Ben frowns at the semen on his stomach. It rises and falls with his grunt as he sits up on his palms, his tired gaze flitting to her.

“You said you would take me,” Rey reminds gently, but not without a teasing flicker in her lip. “Pouting won’t get you out of your word this time.”

He pauses for a moment. Then, wordlessly, he pulls the sheet away, holding it out for her in invitation, his eyes shading in silent command.

She scoffs, turning her back on him to sort through her packings for clean clothes. As wet as she may be, she has a purpose to see to, and his cajoling would be a missed opportunity. So she tries to ignore him. “That won’t work, either.”

Ben’s arm drops heavily to the mattress, defeated. Even though she says it won’t convince her, it doesn't stop him from pouting anyway.

Half-watching Rey crouch and sort out her garb, his loose fingers tighten around a hot cleverness. He rises as a vise, closing the distance between them, and lowers his head to meet her eyes evenly. “Are you sure?”

His purr is deep as a tiger’s, lips precariously close and tempting to her own. But Rey reaffirms her stance, unwilling to budge, meeting his challenge with steadfast resolve. “...Yes.”

He smirks. “You hesitated.”

Arousal lingers in her thighs, scratching insistently that she give in, just this once—something she must not do. He's already had his way, awake or not. She will have hers.

Ben senses this, too, their thoughts moving along a similar path. But his is more of vengeance, for his sweet Puella had denied him the pleasure of her romance and company. Yes, he dreamed of her, of their debaucherous tryst in the silken waters of the grotto, but that was not the same.

His tongue tastes of delicious flavor, of opportunity for retribution equal to his lust. “Very well.” Gently, easily, he slips his finger tips down the curve of her neck, the betrayal of her shiver filling him with resolve of his own. His voice dips to a whisper in her ear; he can almost see her eyes closing under his touch, a notion that, if he thinks too hard about, might make him tremble. “Later, then, I'll let you decide.”

Rey squirms. “Decide what?”

Victory lances a smile over his face, but he tempers it quickly, his hand continuing its steady path down her shoulder, the side of her breast. “Whether I love you...” he looks down her collar, her
naked body already so warm and responsive to his promise, her shaky inhales pitching when his
breath rasps over the tender vein of her throat, hovering close to the edge, “...or fuck you.”

She starts, his calloused fingertips catching the soft flesh at her hip, the growing hair on his face
tickling her in the sparse distance, the obscenity slipping so freely, so intimately, from his tongue
tightening that band inside of her again. “Ben—”

He pulls his warmth away, then, leaving her in want. His eyes seem to know it, too, as they slide
languidly down and up her body, burning holes into her hot skin. “Later. You took something from
me. Now, I take something from you.” A hungry look passes between them, and a shadow of a
smile returns to his lip. He crosses her to grab a rag, speaking over a shoulder to her endearing
glare. “Consider it carefully, mea Puella.”

Rey watches ruefully as he dons a skirt and rushes down to the water reserve, her passions circling
over his words.

*I'll let you decide whether I love you, or fuck you.*

Holding a hand to her neck, right where his warm breath had branded her, Rey forces the
hammering pulse beneath her fingers to quell. But it persists, even as she shrugs on a creamy tunica
borrowed from Ahsoka's dresser. She whispers something like a curse, her fingers trembling as she
fastens the clasps of her sleeves.

“Rey.”

She jumps, but it's only her husband returned from washing. He looks like he might laugh at her,
but he doesn’t, just appraising her attire with warm eyes before dressing himself in a simple black
tunic and long sandals.

Then, without preamble, he offers his arm.

The air is hot, just threatening of muggy, a wall of grey rising on the distant horizon even as the
island itself remains sunny. The light drapes over them like a veil on all sides, the smell of storm
threatening the pads of their tongues, though neither remark on it.

The same path they took to the grotto reveals traffic by crowds, making it obvious to Ben and Rey
that where they lead must end where the festival begins. They follow them up the mountainside,
Rey with palla draped over her shoulders, savoring the way the winds cool her the higher they
climb.

They reach a plateau overlooking the Capri villages below, their red-clay roofs peeking through
the sharp, speckled green of trees. Young men usher the crowd together at a trodden path close to
the precipice of Monte Solaro, where the ocean lays itself bare before the warring storm and sun.
Older men and women wait in the shaded grass, while youngsters fashion themselves into
chattering groups. Rey watches as little children flit around women’s skirts, tapping one another
and screaming with delight.

“All be still for Lady Holdo!”

The voice and fussing draws everyone in the large crowd to an eager silence, in whose thickness
Holdo streams through like a blade. Her extravagant tunica becomes a fluttering sail in the wind,
and, as expected, her expression falls over everyone with open approval. She spreads her hands.
“Welcome, all, to the Capri Panhellenic Games!”
A chorus of cheers rises from the crowd. Rey and Ben clap their hands, trading a curious glance. “Games?” Rey mouths, though she shouldn’t be surprised—having known this would be a sporting event.

Ben shrugs, raising a brow at Holdo. He’s never heard of any Olympian sports played off the mainland. And even then, is this a gaming year? The entire affair reeks of community desperation for event, although… it’s not that he would complain. The light in Rey’s eyes is worth abandoning any curiosities.

Holdo touches a finger to her head before bowing it, holding palm over her heart. “We give thanks to Zeus, father of the gods, for blessing our island with his powerful rains, which cloaks the land with plentiful harvest. May we be hallowed, children of Olympus.”

“May we be hallowed,” a few onlookers murmur, nodding their heads.

Holdo’s eyes sweep over Rey with gentle serenity, her elegant fingers held aloft as she addresses the crowd. “Today there will be five games, but only one champion. He who stands victorious will lay claim to the coveted laurel crown, three days in the Villa Jovis, and,” she smiles, “a feast to feed all the island in his honor.”

Rey’s mouth waters while the citizens—and visitors—holler with excitement. She bumps into her husband’s arm, squeezing his wrist. “You have excellent timing.”

Ben would agree with her—if he weren’t so surprised.

Lady Holdo’s voice pitches again. “All please migrate to the ground track of Anacapri. We have until sundown before the storm breeches the shore, so all contenders must hurry,” she calls, clapping her hands twice, her gaze punctuated. “Let’s move, people!”

Many herd off towards the treeline, further into the sparse woodland, as if they were birds following instinct.

As they go, Holdo strides over to Ben and Rey, folding her hands. “I’m so very pleased you came. I’d hoped to see you two again.”

Rey and Ben bow their heads in good manners. “This all seems very exciting,” she compliments. “Indeed it is,” her white teeth flash to Rey’s companion. “Will you be taking part in the games?”

With both women’s gaze on him Ben shifts, looking to his wife. He perhaps expected to see some manner of pleading in them, but finds nothing except curiosity.

Rey expects nothing from him. However, he cannot help but imagine a look of splendor on that perfect face, his precious Puella crowned, worshipped by all who lay eye upon her.

He considers Holdo. “Only if my wife can stand beside me.”

Rey’s heart thuds as she studies him, thrill and tremulous dread battling inside her as Lady Holdo crooks a finger to her thin lip. “Hm. Well, she cannot be allowed to play. However,” she smiles, “I see no reason why the victor cannot share his spoils. You will have to win, of course.”

“Obviously.” Ben rights himself. “I think you’ll find me more than capable.”

“Then we will be watching you,” she appraises, tenderly taking Rey’s arm. “Please, come with me. You must be given a good seat to watch your champion fight, wouldn’t you agree?”
Rey shuts her mouth, having not realized how far her jaw had sunk into the rapidly swirling torrent of changes spiraling out before her. She nods, unable to lose Ben’s heated stare. “I would be very grateful, Madam.”

“It’s settled.” Lady Holdo’s hand tightens its grip, her graceful strides already leading the young woman away. “Best of luck to you, Ben Solo. Come, Rey, I’ll show you to our seats.”

They march on, Rey carried off in the current, relinquishing herself to the elder woman’s urgency. She looks back to find that Ben has not moved at all, only stands and waits, watching her with that same warmth sinking from the soles of her feet into the rich soil.

Though the island is not big, it is large enough to contain some secrets. Holdo explains the territories dividing Capri and Anacapri, its western sister. Though their population has not grown enough to inspire others to live within its mountainous borders, there was enough room to construct a modest track and arena; the arena has no walls, its meager markers only white rocks and boulders, flanked on one side by stone risers.

Amilyn takes Rey to an elevated bench, wherein Madam Mothma lies half-awake beneath the shaded canopy. As Wexley had done a few nights prior, Rey kneels and kisses the woman’s hands, hearing no reply to her quiet greeting. Some other villagers—almost all of them women and children—gather in the stands. The men—the ones who aren’t playing—huddle around one another on the other end of the field, likely preparing for the first game.

Rey leans over to Holdo. “What are they doing?”

“Hearing the rules,” she explains, fussing placidly with her skirts. “Our Hellanodikai is quite strict about following proper procedure. By now your man has been told not to bite another contestant.”

“Ah.” Unbidden, Rey recalls a certain passionate embrace—involving a dark corner and some quince—just the thought of being bitten by him only lifting the warm, summery temperature. Then, as if to make matters worse, she notices the men begin to peel away their clothes. She startles, suddenly recalling the island’s half-Greek origins, and averts her gaze behind a hand. “Are they going to play naked?” she asks, hushed.

Holdo laughs at Rey, patting her hand. “Oh, no. Romans are not so dedicated to tradition as they might be in, say, Athens. You need not fear any dangling carrots, sweet girl.”

She blushes, but dares look again, relief flooding through her as the men stretch and fit themselves into matching linen skirts. As they move to form a circle in the middle of the arena, Rey counts exactly sixty men, unable to recognize the affluent from the poor—only Ben, standing tall and imposing within the ring of bodies.

A man, the Hellanodikai, shuffles into the middle of the man-made circle, a silver urn in hand. Rey stands in awe of him and his wide face and dark complexion, his gaunt frame even taller than that of her husband. His voice is monotonous and authoritative as it is informative when he speaks to the crowd, holding up the urn. “The players will now draw lots to determine their matches. None shall reveal their lot until instructed. Those who fail to follow this rule will be excused from the games.”

Rey looks to her husband. He is too far to read, though she wonders how he must be feeling, if this is anything new to him. Her pulse thrums under her wrists at the thought of what he might do.

Hellanodikai walks to a stout man first, who bows his head in prayer and pulls out a slip of parchment, closing his fist around it. The judge continues on this path, all bowing and praying first
—except for Ben and another man, whom Rey studies closely, feeling a sudden yet untouchable sense of recognition.

When it is finished the judge begins the lap again, this time inspecting what lies in their hands. He matches them with those sharing similar lots, forming over twenty pairs. Ben is paired with the stout man, whose countenance clearly stiffens upon realizing he may be defeated sooner than he’d hoped.

When it’s done the Hellanodikai pulls out a smaller list and scans it dispassionately. “The first event,” he drawls, his Grecian voice booming, “is shot-put!”

The crowd applauds this, some women cheering with calls and shrieks to rival that of their children’s. Rey, who has never seen shot-put, claps her hands and hopes for the best.

The young men from the hilltop file out onto the field, laying down what appears to be round iron stones upon the hard dirt of the track. Hellanodikai ushers the non-playing contestants to the sidelines, and in the following events Rey understands that, to win this game, the man must throw his stone the farthest.

Ben is almost-last—entering after a particularly older man which, to many onlooker’s horror, had dizzied himself so much he’d nearly thrown the stone into the stands. Fortunately, his toss was too weak.

Rey hears a murmur break over the crowd. They must have recognized Ben as a traveler, their eyes fixed on him with dubious expectancy as he steps barefoot onto the silt.

She leans forward.

He stoops down to take the ball in hand, testing its weight in his palm. He turns away from where the markers of his fellow players lay, holding the ball up to his neck. From here Rey spots a familiar tightening bulge of his arm, his knuckles and fingers flexing, before his legs shift into a wide stance, the pivot of his feet almost like a jump. In a blink the ball is flying from his palm, soaring and landing heavily onto the dirt, where a young man—an assistant to the Hellanodikai—places another stone marker with the Omega symbol painted over it.

Rey joins the crowd in cheering, clapping longer and louder than the others. While Ben’s throw wasn’t the farthest, it was formidable, winning him a place in the semi-final match.

Pride rises in Rey's throat like steam. She has never had the opportunity to see him compete in anything as wholesome as this. Last she saw him fight for anything, it was to kill or be killed. The comfort of watching him now settles in her stomach like coals in a low-burning fireplace. Calm, warm, and smoldering.

Again the remaining men draw lots, and Ben is paired with a man of muscular build and decent frame, his skin rich and sun-kissed. Something about him is familiar and Rey jolts, recognizing him as none other than Baze Malbus, the ferryman!

Ben nods to Malbus, whose powerful physic comes as no surprise. The man has strong handle over the sea, after all. It’s only natural for him to be powerful in arm and control. He almost worries about his chances.

Glancing to the stands he notices Rey’s colorful palla gleaming from the boxed crowd, can see her eyes wide on him.

The heady sensation of her attention soothes down his chest like oil. His hands clench, his
shoulders draw back, chin lifted to welcome her gaze. He knows that she will be watching when he stands victorious before her, for her, and such knowledge threads through him with power and will to rival the coming storm.

They are summoned by Hellanodikai with a wave of his long arm, Ben to go first. He does as he’d done before, the turning, hop-skip momentum of his thrust like a ballista’s fire. Rey perceives a difference in his adjustment—he’d thrown higher, farther this time. A hopeful smile spreads between her cheeks, though her fingers wrinkle the cloth of her skirts when Baze Malbus takes the ball.

The ferryman squats low, his muscled thighs clenched taut against the stark contrast of his skirt, and spins rough and fast, a harsh grunt erupting from his belly when he throws the ball, higher and farther than Ben’s.

The audience applauds when it lands victorious. Ben skews his lip.

He ends the final round in fourth place—which, given the numerous adversaries, whom had likely been training for such sport, is not disappointing in comparison. Least of all to Rey, who cannot help but wiggle and shift with excitement, finally able to watch her husband at work.

Hellanodikai holds up his hand, his voice calling once more from stadium to stands. “So ends the first, the second begins. The next event shall be… discus!”

Though separated by a decent length, husband and wife share the same thought: More throwing.

The long process of drawing lots begins anew, and Rey can see how some children fidget and grow restless under the sunlight, yearning to stretch their legs. One of them, a tot by the looks of him, escapes his mother and runs, passing Rey like a stumbling colt. The mother catches up with him, scolding, holding, and crooning as she carries him away, his little mouth large and sprouting little teeth as he laughs.

An echo of longing pangs in Rey’s heart at the sight.

Ben, meanwhile, offers his lot to Hellanodikai, who pairs him with a scrawnier man with red hair. He is beaten without issue, either due to his inability to rotate his shoulder or, if Ben’s psyche and desire to defeat is to be considered, his proximity in appearance to General Hux. The man, whom was introduced as “Rufus,” eyes Ben with similar hatred when the next round begins.

Rey watches as the discus are thrown out into the grass of Anacapri, only to be returned by running boys, too old to be watched by their mothers, still too young to play. When Ben’s turn comes again she is captured by the difference in movement. He is more fluid as he spins, his weight not bowling heavily down but arching upward, the turn of his feet measured and precise. The disk leaves his extended fingers, his expression furrowed in heated focus.

She recalls tales from when he was a boy; throwing discus was common among the schoolchildren, and she wonders how long it must have been since he last played, marvels at how well he’s managed to recall old habits.

Before she knows it the game is finished, and Ben stands in fourth place once more. Rey cups her hands around her mouth and rises, cheering, “Vincere, Zuji!”

Ben catches the tail end of a familiar voice calling out, his wide eyes flitting up into the seats, where Rey stands, her bright smile shining, the crown of her hair illuminated beneath the unearthly light.
He swallows his relief, savoring the simmering bliss of her praise. *Victory, my husband!*

A gong is rung, and the Hellanodikai waving his arm once more, now directly in addressment to the crowd. “All will break for nourishment! The games will resume when the ring strikes five!”

Rey doesn’t hesitate, descending from the observation box and trotting to meet Ben amidst a crowd of sweaty couples that gradually disperse themselves.

“That was incredible!” she shouts, throwing her arms around his neck.

Ben welcomes the embrace, squeezing her once before letting go, not wanting to soil her gown with his perspiration. He shifts his weight, eyes cast down as a smile haunts his full mouth. “You are too generous.”

“I mean it,” she presses, poking his chest. “I have never seen anything like it. I enjoy watching you.”

His gaze rakes over her, then, his sheepishness evolving into something darker. His voice etches deep. “Thank you, Puella.”

Rey blinks, suddenly very aware that he is not touching her, and wishing for the opposite. But she resists, wetting her lip. “Are you thirsty?” she asks, gesturing to where their fellow participants gather around a transferred reservoir.

At his nod they move on. Couples and families gather at the water, drinking from cupped hands and waterskins. Ben drinks heartily from it, rubbing some on the back of his neck. Rey, as is her great talent, finds them food to eat from Holdo’s private reserve, passing him bread and fish as though it were a secret barter—when they both know Holdo gave it freely.

They share their meal under a tree safe from the hard sun, dwelling in the rapidly-gaining wind that carries the scent of rain. Rey remembers what occurred the last time it had stormed but quickly pushes the memory down, giving silent thanks for the difference in circumstance. Though it only serves to remind her what waits for them on the other side of the clouds.

In an attempt to distract herself before her husband can notice her lapse, she asks, “What’s the next event?”

“Palé,” he answers around his food, wiping the crumbs from his hand onto his skirt. Rey follows his gesture to admire his legs, but only for an instant. The gong rings twice.

Rey lifts a brow, though she shouldn’t be surprised. “You’re going to wrestle?”

“Does the thought disturb you?” he asks good-naturedly, a gleam in his eye as it traces the line of Rey’s cheeks, finding redness there. He leans in closer, voice dipped and devilish. “Would you rather I force you to the ground and hold you there until you beg for mercy?”

The cadence of his proposition does nothing to ease the heat chafing against her skin. The image of him restraining her, his hands bending her to his will, makes it worse.

“Brute,” she murmurs, polishing off her lunch.

Ben chuckles.

When the gong strikes three times they rise, a professional willingness and intimate unwillingness to separate gnawing at their ankles. It is when they look around that they notice a harvest of men
and women down the way, in the border of sun and shadow at the edge of the field, touching one another.

Rey squints. “What are they doing?”

“Rubbing oil, for the match,” Ben observes. He eyes her askance. “Shall we?”

She lifts a brow to him. “You’re serious?”

His reply comes in the form of walking in the direction of the crowd. Rey follows, her heart thudding against her breastbone as they draw closer, watching in something not quite horror as they enter the orgy of women slathering their men in oil. One of them eyes Ben uncertainly, though passes over a jar.

He turns to Rey, the jar held like a babe in his hands. “At your behest,” he murmurs, offering it to her.

Rey studies the jar, the scene before her strikingly familiar. But there is no force to this, no order, only quiet request. Looking in his eyes, so dark and deep, both mirthful and pleading, Rey cannot help but bloom with love, yearn to assist him in any way she is able.

Ignoring the public around her, she takes and pours a copious amount of oil into her hands, rounding and smoothing the substance along his back, first.

Ben shudders, closing his eyes, melting under her touch. He feels preened and pampered as she makes steady progress around his torso, the four chimes of the gong echoing dim and distant in his ears. When her fingers sweep delicately over the scar at his side he jolts, conflicted by pleasure from her touch, and pain from memory of the last time he fought and failed. But no, this will not end as it did before.

This time, he will win.

Rey circles Ben, allowing herself to gaze unabashed at how he is transformed by her work, how the hardness of his breast and firm flesh of his stomach glistens with a protective layer of oil. Her pulse quickens its pace, her face flushed as he breathes, the in and out as strong and threatening as an ox. Perhaps she was wrong in calling him a man, after all—perhaps he truly is a beast, trapped in human flesh, all hers to claim and caress.

Mine , her thoughts hiss. Yes, he is hers. Any woman watching must be left to stew. Let them rot and agonize for want of ownership to Rey’s hands. They will never have this man, no one, no one but her. Never feel him as she can, never memorize the beat and rhythm of his heart, never treasure the secrets of his body, or know the depths of his soul.

His hiss brakes Rey from her trance and she gasps, realizing as red marks bloom over his chest that she had scratched him. She tears herself away, skin hot, unbearably hot.

Ben stares at her, his shoulders beginning the slightest of heaves. “Puella…”

She meets his eyes and nearly collapses under their weight, feeling that, if she holds them too long, she may burst into flames. Light streams down through the trees, showering him in gold and speckles of silver, the sight reducing her to little thoughts save for the most despicable kind. Her crest pulses from under her clothes, a sudden urge to take and be taken gathering on her tongue.

The gong strikes five and she swallows, forcing herself to hand the jar back to him. “Good luck.”
In a blur of movement he snatches the jar by its neck and snags her wrist, uncaring of the lingering sheen as he draws her fingers to his mouth, kissing their sensitive webs, making her gasp—his every touch like fire. His stare sears into her with molten promises and threats, drowning Rey, leaving her nothing but blind footsteps as she is released and left to join the stands when the games start again, the memory of his face and wet lips branded into the back of her eyelids.

Rey has heard stories of Palé, the Greek sport of one man wrestling another to the ground. From them she learned that Palé is played in two phases—the first, while they are standing, and the second, when one is forced onto the earth, left with little time to return to the first phase. For those who do not rise three times, there is no victory.

Of the sixty men Ben is listed first, second to a man equal to his bulk, but short of his stature. For this game the adolescents act as the spawn of Hellanodikai, allowing for judging four separate matches at one time, drawing measured rings with sticks in the dirt.

The Hellanodikai watches over Ben’s match himself, his long arm held up in signal for them to ready their stances. Rey bites her lip, anticipation worming between her shoulders.

Ben studies his opponent. The man is Greek, perhaps with Persian ties, his olive skin smooth and slippery. But he is a large enough adversary, and should be easy to wrangle. All Ben needs is a grip.

He lowers himself to a crouch, fixing his eyes on his opponent, his mind on his prize. The man does the same, and when the judge shouts, Ben lunges, meeting the man in a furious clash.

Their legs dig and kick dust as they push against one another, palms sliding over shoulders and arms, unable to grab hold. Rey stirs, her eyes fastened on Ben’s attempts to wrap his arms around the other man, their heads smashed together like bulls as they spin.

Ben huffs with the effort of writhing around his opponent’s flailing advances, finally managing to lock arms around his neck. He hears the man groan with disapproval even as Ben grunts, building the strength in his back to force the fighter to the ground.

Rey’s hand tightens to a fist when Ben pushes the man into the dirt, his body like lightning as he maneuvers himself to a position where the other cannot untangle himself, his arm on the back of his opponent’s neck, arms pulled back. The Hellanodikai calls it—Ben has won.

He continues to succeed the next two rounds, nearly losing his footing once, but only once. When the final round results in his victory Ben releases the man and hops back to his feet, flexing the wings of his shoulders. As the Hellanodikai lifts Ben’s arm he realizes his breathing has grown harsh, his every vein vibrating with energy.

He turns his gaze up, and there she is, looking back at him. Pleasure thrums through him to see his wife in high spirits, will wrapping its Herculean hands around his heart.

And so Ben burns through his every match with growling intensity, his eyes ablaze with purpose, his arms bows strung with flaming arrows. He rains down wrath on anyone who crosses him, no matter their size or strategy. He runs into battle, hands brandished swords. He conquers, makes war.

By the end of his fourth his skirt and hair have rumpled, his oiled skin—speckled with caking dust—shining with sweat. The final match comes with Ben at its crux, his opponent also of heavy weight, though more in belly than brawn. Much more.
Ben breathes deeply, clenching and unclenching his fists, thankful to have his muscles primed by the earlier fights. This is the last competitor, and may prove difficult. He’ll be damned to underestimate and ruin his chances.

Rey chews at her nail, feeling Holdo’s eyes on her. Ben and this man—Hutt, his name was—are the only spectacle left upon all the field, and the other fighters form a second ring around their crouched, readying stance.

Hellanodikai lifts his hand and swings it down. Ben rushes Hutt, who waits and catches him in a violent embrace, beginning to shove him towards the ground. Ben pushes himself off from the man’s belly, going to wrangle his shoulders, instead.

Hutt gurgles in his ear with the effort of resisting Ben’s tackle. The balls of his feet dig into the dirt, Ben’s troweling to little effect. He grunts when Hutt dives, wrapping his arms over Ben’s stomach from behind. Suddenly Ben is in the air, sailing over until he is slammed onto the ground, a heavy weight settling over him while the air is knocked out of his body.

Wincing, Rey can only watch as the large man essentially sits on her husband’s back, losing him the first round.

When the weight lifts Ben remains down, seizing back his wind. He spits dust from his lip and snarls, forcing himself back onto his feet. He turns, fixing the man a dark glare. But Hutt only lolls his tongue from his lip, taunting him.

Ben glances at Rey; their eyes meet. She folds her lips and nods, holding up her closed fist.

He swallows, nodding, and returns to his position, breathing deeply. Air fills his mind and he clears his thoughts, the sight of the enemy morphing into no more than a pillar of salt to be scattered over the earth. Rage seeds in his chest, an anger not unrighteous, a desire to win—to win with her eyes on him—pulsing from the tips of his fingers to the soles of his feet.

Hellanodikai swings, and Ben rushes Hutt once more, a snarl buried deep in his throat. Hutt stands baffled, knocked unsteady by the suddenness of his opponent’s rage. He is tackled to the ground, his rump landing heavily in the dust before he begins to scramble, his arms falling on Ben’s shoulders like the trunks of falling trees. But with a twist of his torso Ben remains upstanding, rolling Hutt onto his side and sitting on him, forcing his arms behind his back until he is submitted, flopping uselessly like a beached Monaci.

Hutt growls and murmurs in a language Ben does not know, though by the pattern can guess that its nature is expletive. Hellanodikai calls it and they stand. A shadow of a smirk passes over Ben’s lip and he readies himself on the edge of the ring, his heart pounding. What comes next will decide the fate of the Palé.

This time Hutt rushes at him in return, the clash of their bodies banging in Ben’s bones, a wave of flesh battering a wall of muscle. His ankles hold strong until one slides in too narrowly, his stance knocked down to one knee.

\textit{Vincere.}\n
Hutt crowds him, the stench of his exertion rotting Ben’s nose—but there have been worse foes fought before. Ben channels those memories, now, warring against them, holding back the wave, the storm.

\textit{Vincere...!}
The men clasp their arms behind the other’s heads like the mandibles of beetles, pushing and rocking, strained flesh and oil and grime. Ben’s heart constricts as he feels himself being pushed lower, lower.

_Vincere, Zuji!_

He closes his eyes, levying his resolution. Sweat stings them, drips from the ends of his hair as he grits his teeth, grunting low as he summons the strength from deep within, turning himself in a powerful, desperate snap.

Hutt wobbles, crashing down onto the ground. Taking his chance, Ben leaps to his feet, his skirt sailing as he moves to stand behind the man, locking arms around him and pressing down, holding fast even as Hutt struggles and whines.

Ben shudders with vicious achievement, riding the power laced through every sinew of his arms, hands tightening their vise, the energy in the muscles of his chest focused on sealing his victory.

It is at Hellanodikai’s call that Ben releases Hutt, panting as his arm is lifted high, the citizens of Capri rising to their feet.

The audience claps for him, their gazes following this strange man with different lights in every eye. Some of the women enjoy what they see, others stand terrified. But Rey, who is among them both, looks on him with pride beyond compare. And when he finds her, his chin lifted, breast swollen with dignity, her heart beats for him.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Holdo asks as they return to their seats.

The men disperse to begin the fourth game. Lightning strikes on the horizon sea, but the thunder is too far to hear. Rey smiles. “Very much.”

“Your man is quite the fighter,” she chuckles. “He may win this yet.”

“Maybe,” Rey acquiesces. She does not tell Lady Holdo that she much prefers watching _this_ than those awful gladiator fights. She had once been told that Ben had never lost with his sword in hand—at least, not until the day she had been there to witness it. But compared to the brutal carnage and death of the arena, sparring and sport suit him far better.

Even deeper within, forged in words she can barely express to herself, there is a manner by which he fights that entrances her. Yes, the movement of his body in throwing was entertaining, but as he overtook another, channeled his fury and might into his hands, every movement became... _entrancing_. And Rey wanted _more_ —even now, with the match over and done, she still does.

She clenches her thighs, holding folded hands over her lap. “Do you know what the next game is?”

“Pankration, I think,” Lady Holdo replies, fussing with Madam Mothma’s hood.

Rey frowns. “What’s Pankration?”

“It’s very similar to Palé, actually. Just more… intensive.” She turns to Rey with lifted brow, her bright hair stirring in the gentle wind sweeping from the sea. “It’s a sport used to train Roman soldiers in combat.”

“So… fighting,” Rey grasps.

Holdo smirks. “Fighting.”
Ben rolls his shoulders, stretching his arms over his chest. Still riding the euphoric waves of battle, being told that *Pankration* of all things is coming next only affirms the hope that he may take a second victory. Two firsts and two fourths would be everything he needs in a small pool like this—he could take it all.

“There will be no biting,” Hellanodikai warns with pointed finger. He levels it down on the ginger-haired man. “*No* biting.”

They draw lots and Ben is pulled somewhere closer to the middle. Like the Palématches, they are divided into four groups, left to be judged after by boys. The whole thing is profoundly unprofessional compared to his days in the infantry. Not that he minds. He is here to win. Where and how he does it means nothing when the result is Rey, well-fed and honored, at his side.

Just the image of such a thing exhales from his lungs in a furious huff. No one on this island knows what she is, only that she is, and he will be damned not to preserve it—damned not to make them exalt her, worship her like Rome never could.

He stands across the ring from one of the men from the boat, a man who also came from Naples. Perhaps he, too, has a wife he wants to win for. They circle one another, eyes locked in wordless battle, awaiting their extrication. Ben feels the earth packing under each heavy step, his hands balling and loosening from their fists. He can feel Rey’s eyes on him, watching him as his mind bleeds red.

Rey holds her breath. Something is different, here. Heavy, dangerous. Before Ben is released she sees a different pair erupt into fighting from the corner of her eye, their hands and legs whipping at one another with swift and manic savagery—and then is given no more time to think.

The Hellanodikai swings his hand and Ben lunges forward, meeting the man in a flurry of strikes. His arm cuffs down onto the man’s neck, pulling him in close, as if trying to suffocate him. His knee strikes up, fast and cruel, into the man’s stomach, making him drop rocking and coughing to his knees.

Rey covers her mouth as Ben backs off, letting the man have his space while the judge raises his arm high, signaling Ben’s point.

So fast, she thinks, startled by how quickly he’d forced his opponent down, how fervently he’d gone after his victory. Her lip quirks under her hand.

Ben tosses his hair, flicking away the loose strands pestering his eyes. Thunder rolls over the waves, coming ever closer. His opponent begins to circle again, a bounce in his knees—as if that will help him. But when the hand comes down so does Ben, lunging forward in violent offense. The man lands a lucky blow to his stomach, but the clutch of muscle holds firm, doing nothing to slow Ben’s strutting kick. He sticks his leg between his foe’s, tripping, pushing him until he’s toppled onto his back.

A judge comes to signal a halt before Ben can punch the man in the chest; he hops back onto his feet, the match over.

Rey claps for him with Holdo, who leans in close. “He seems to know what he’s doing. Just what method of entertainment is he in?”

Mouth dry, Rey shrugs. “Oh, contractual performances, mostly.”

Her prayers that Holdo won’t ask any more questions are answered, though she worries if the lady
is as unconcerned as she seems. “Ah.”

Rey looks over the woman, her kind eyes dancing over the crowd. “You do this every year?” she asks conversationally, content to ignore the fighting until Ben’s turn comes again.

“Oh, yes. It was my idea.”

“Really?” Rey regards. “For how long?”

Holdo smiles. “As long as I’ve been here. Even though I was taken from my home, as soon as I saw this island, I fell in love immediately…”

They speak about production and trade, two things Rey would have never considered a topic of interest before now. Many of her suspicions are confirmed by Lady Holdo’s words, flowing so confidently, languidly from her lips. She is an affluent woman of influence here, and though no one—save for a few—knows of her allegiance to the SPQR, to the Resistance, she does all she can to provide for her people.

“I’m content to have been exiled, in the end,” Holdo sighs, gesturing to the people below. “Were it not for them, I would have lost my way.”

Rey tilts her head. “What do you mean?”

“People have a way of existing around you, whether they know what you are or not. So, without them,” she muses, “we would not exist, either. I wanted to become someone who saw them for what they are. So I did.”

“And what are they…?” Rey murmurs, considering her.

Lady Holdo looks at her as she might something precious, the light in her brilliant eyes bathing Rey in warmth. Her voice is low, serene. A whisper in the roar of the crowd. “Human.”

It’s only when Holdo points down to the field that Rey remembers where she is, her mind having suddenly numbed. She watches thoughtlessly as Ben enters his circle, facing a small, lithe man with rich skin and dark, close-cut hair.

Rey squints. “Who is that?” she points.

“Chirrut Imwe,” Holdo enlightens, something like a laugh in the name. “I’m afraid your husband may not be as triumphant as we’d hoped.”

Rey’s lips part. “I’ve seen him before.” Where have I seen him before?! She searches her mind wildly, trying to catch a glimpse of recollection—and then it’s there. She turns to Holdo. “He was in your house. I saw him.”

Lady Holdo does not reply, only smile and fold her hands in her lap.

Below, Ben considers the man they have set before him with a curious glare. The man, Chirrut, does not circle. Does not display menace or fear. He simply stares forward sightlessly. Blind.

Blind, Ben realizes. His chest hollows. They’ve allowed a blind man into such violent sport? Ben scrutinizes him, his thoughts tailing one another like dogs, rabid for elusive rationale. If this man were talented, then he would have been a more prominent foe in the Palé games. But here he stands, unmarked, unbruised, cool and collected. Had this game proven too violent for another man to even land a blow on a blind man?
Ben huffs, running his thumb over his fingers. If this man is expecting pity, he will receive none.

Hellanodikai lowers his hand and Ben doesn’t bother rushing, striding over to lay hand on Chirrut’s shoulder—his intention not one of pity, but certainly not one to lose.

And that is his first mistake.

Like lightning Chirrut twists, his arms snaking over Ben’s, trapping him. Chirrut kicks one side, then the other, the second blow landing on Ben’s scar. He hisses and wiggles free, limping backward as pain slices through his ribs.

But Chirrut advances, his eyes wide and grey. Ruthlessly empty. “You are overconfident,” he calls out, his Greek tinged with the satin lilt of the Seres.

His hand lashes out and Ben steps to the side, avoiding the circle of the ring. If he steps outside of the boundary, he will lose. His ears are full of cotton while Chirrut’s are sharp steel, the scratch of Ben’s steps in the dirt betraying his position. Chirrut lunges, his hands a fast flurry.

Ben focuses his blocking on his side, and in his concentration fails to protect his face from a sudden fist. He grunts, wet iron flowing over his lip, dazed as Chirrut lowers himself, spinning his body in a vicious whip. His leg knocks Ben down by the ankles, the gladiator’s body a crashing pillar onto the ground.

Hellanodikai takes Chirrut’s arm. “Point Imwe!”

Ben shakes his head, tongue poking out to taste the metallic twinge of his own blood. A firm hand reaches down in offering, its owner placid and smiling. “You’re a wall. That’s why you fall so hard.”

Ben smacks Chirrut’s hand away, standing up on his own. He spits his blood into the dirt and returns to his starting place. He doesn’t dare look up. This man mocks him—made a fool of him, when this game is his to win. He cannot fail again.

He cannot fail her again.

Rey gapes, stunned by the smaller man’s prowess and ability to fend off an opponent much larger than himself. From here Rey can see the blood on Ben’s chin, her heart heavy at the sight of his tightening shoulders.

“Zuji…” she whispers.

Ben breathes in deeply, forcing the air from his lungs. He taps into the well of fury within him, the same vault of rage from whence he’s withdrawn all these years. Wrath, ever his ally, must lead him once more into victory. He won’t be beaten that easily.

At Hellanodikai’s call both men rush forward, Ben attempting something different. He dives at the man’s legs and binds them together. A knee pounds at his jaw, rattling his teeth, but he does not let go, hoisting the man up and slamming him down onto the ground in one vicious swing.

When it is done Ben hovers over the blinking Chirrut, his voice a minacious growl. “Don’t knock down a wall you can’t crawl away from.”

To his surprise, Chirrut laughs, his pearly teeth parted in good-nature. “Ah, yes!” The men stand and Chirrut nods, holding a hand over his stomach as he continues to snigger. “Indeed! Let us see who the true Samson is!”
Rey shakes her head, her heart pounding in her throat. *Why is he laughing?* “Who is that man?” she asks again.

“One of my advisors,” Holdo whispers, curiously careful not to be overheard. “He lost his sight when he was very young, but has traveled the most perilous roads and has seen more faces than anyone with their sight. He comes here at this time every year.”

“For the games?” Rey guesses, suddenly possessed by the mystery of his person.

Holdo only looks at her, shaking her golden head. “Not exactly.”

Rey almost asks for what purpose he could be traveling, but the sound of the Hellanodikai draws her back, morbid fascination sinking like talons into her shoulders.

Ben and Chirrut dive at one another, their bodies weaving in opposite directions, dancing across the other in volleys of offensive blows. Chirrut seems to see without seeing, his movements, once branched outward and seeking, narrowing to precise and deadly strikes, aiming for Ben’s throat, knees, and wounded side.

But Ben holds up his arms, blocking with downward strikes, trying instead to ensnare Chirrut. He’s learned this about the man by now—Chirrut Imuwe is a man who waits for his prey to come to him, their confidence in his non-existent weakness the key to their undoing. That and a blind cartography of the body. It is likely he knows the outline of Ben’s physic already.

He almost manages to catch Chirrut’s leg, but the man is too fast, already switching his stance to the next attack, landing another blow to Ben’s side.

Snarling at the white fire in his ribs, Ben snaps, reeling back to jab for the man’s unguarded shoulder. But Chirrut is faster, more agile, closing in on Ben to deliver a torrent of strikes against his chest, forcing him back, step by step, beyond the line of the ring.

“Out!”

Ben pants, gaping at his feet, then the man, in disbelief.

“A wall does not have to fall to be overcome,” Chirrut says when Hellanodikai is done with him, smiling widely. “Now if you will excuse me, I am going to crawl away to my next match now.”

Ben watches him walk past, scoffing dumbly. He’s out of the running, now. He won’t even take fourth placement for Pankration. He’s lost.

Rey watches Ben’s shoulders fall, her heart clenching as he goes to sit on the stone lip of the well. She lays hand on Lady Holdo’s arm and squeezes, slipping out from the box.

Ben sighs, his eyes cast down as he spots her familiar shadow coming closer. Self-pity writhes in his blood, blacker than sin as she stands waiting before him. He stares hard at her toes. He can’t bring himself to look at her face, not after another failure.

Her frown gentle, touch even more so, Rey takes Ben’s chin and lifts his face. His eyes are left without choice; they slide into her own, wide and dark and dim.

She shakes her head, her frown morphing into the slightest of smiles. The trail of blood is dry over his hairy lip, his long hair ruffled and silky from wind and dried sweat, every inch of him battle worn and weary-breathed. Every inch of him *hers.*
“That was amazing,” she murmurs, rubbing away the dried blood. It turns to dust beneath her thumb. “You were amazing.”

He searches her eyes. “I lost.”

Rey scoffs. “I’ve seen you lose before,” she chides, dipping her hand into the water and returning it to his brow, wiping away the filth, sweeping the hair from his eyes. “This was not losing.”

Both of their minds return to that day in the arena, when the ax had almost taken his life from them. Ben sighs, closing his eyes, letting her touch him. “I don’t want to fail you,” he whispers.

Rey pauses, not knowing what to say, then cups his cheek. “Oh, Ben… look at me.” He doesn’t. She strokes her thumb over his skin, gentling her voice. “Look at me.”

When he opens his eyes there is a hardness there, but underneath it all something rattling. Quivering.

Then Rey understands. So she dips low, hovering just over him, both of her hands holding his face in an inescapable grip. “No matter what happens,” she murmurs, snaring the stars his eyes, “no matter how many times you fail, I will never stop loving you. You don’t have to win.”

Breath hisses from Ben’s nose, her words burrowing in his chest like daggers. But I do, he wants to say. Because if he doesn’t, then Rome wins. Snoke wins. And they will lose everything.

Rey smells his worry ruminating and lays a hand on the taut, warm muscle of his shoulder. “But we haven’t lost, yet. There’s still another chance.”

The fifth game, Ben recalls. Dividing the rounds in his mind, Ben attempts to calculate his odds. With his higher placements among the sixty men, his repeated victories should have given him high enough standing for just one shot at victory. But only one.

He will have to place first in the next game.

Ben lifts his hand, wrapping large fingers around Rey’s elegant wrist. The light returns to his eyes, sharp as glinting sunlight off steel. “I can’t do it without you.”

“What do you mean?” Rey asks, squinting.

Ben stands, the sway of leaves hissing over them as he folds her hands in his, leaning down to kiss her cheek. The press is warm and gentle, the stroke of his thumb over her knuckles stirring deep inside her. “Just keep your eyes on me. Stay with me,” he murmurs. “Please.”

“Of course,” Rey whispers, leaning her head against his, their noses brushing. “Always.”

The calls from the field draw their attention away, a sudden shift and ripple in the crowd moving in a wave towards the players. From here they catch echoes of Hellanodikai’s voice.

“For the last game all members must stand! Only four of the highest scorers will compete for the prize. The first, Baze Malbus of Seres… the second—”

“They’re starting,” Rey says, pulling Ben forward. They walk together and join the crowd to listen, players and watchers standing intermingled now, wriggling with eagerness.

“…the fourth, Ben Solo of Rome…”

Ben frowns. Whatever this game is, he will need to win both of his prospective matches.
He steps forward at the beckoning of the younger judges, looking back at Rey. She smiles, squeezing his fingers before letting go, pressed hands tapping her lips. “Vincere, Zuji,” she mouths.

He nods, his heart full of her blessing as he steps out onto the silt, standing tall in the line of his fellow fighters.

Hellanodikai stands in front of them, his voice booming thunder. “The storm will be upon us soon. The gods bestow their favor, today. May we be hallowed!”

“May we be hallowed!” the Capricians cheer.

“The first of the games was a test of force,” Hellanodikai calls. “With the force of their will, these men moved mighty stones. The second of the games,” he continues, “was a test of discretion. By the judgement of their hearts, they released the discus as mighty eagles, flying them free and far…”

A hand touches Rey’s and she jumps, but relaxes. Lady Holdo has found her.

“…The third of the games was a test of mettle. By their courage these men thrust themselves into the ring, using only their hands to best fear and foe alike…”

“Is he nervous?” Holdo asks softly.

Rey folds her lips, Ben’s impassive stare and folded hands betraying nothing. “I don’t know.”

“…was a test of precision. By the sweat of their brow and the power of their spirit, these men fought cunningly and with dignity in the way of the Roman might.”

Ben’s eye twitches.

“Now, at last,” Hellanodikai says, his voice seeming—for the first time—exhausted, “we have come to the end of this year’s tribute to the island of Capri. The fifth game shall be one to test all of the virtues these men proclaim. They must now demonstrate to us their force, their discretion, their mettle, and their precision, each together representing the very heart of strength. Ladies and gentlemen, the final game shall be—"

Ben’s gaze finds Rey’s, their breath held together.

“— javelin throw!”

Voices scatter through the crowd as Ben turns to look at Hellanodikai, his jaw slipping apart. Baze Malbus grunts appreciatively beside him.

Javelin throw, Rey wonders, swept along with the other onlookers as they migrate to the sidelines. All who are able are asked to stand and watch the final match. She and Holdo manage a decent place in the front.

Wexley, sweating profusely in only his skirt, trots over to them. “Lady Holdo. Missus Solo! I had no idea your husband was playing today.”

“It was a last-minute decision,” Lady Holdo smirks. “Madam Mothma is napping in the shade. Come, watch with us, Wexley.”

With a bow of his head he goes to stand by Rey, grimacing. “I got so close to winning that last one. Damn sweat got in my eyes.”
Rey smiles, not believing a word of it. Although there is no way to know—he wasn’t the man she’d been watching, after all. “Maybe next time.”

He scoffs, leaning over to witness as the four competitors fall into line, the first—Baze Malbus—given a javelin spear. “I saw your man in the Palé. Crazy look in his eyes, that one.”

“He gets that way sometimes,” Rey concedes, warmth rising in her neck.

On the field, a young judge passes Ben a javelin spear of his own. He bounces it in his hand, adjusting his arm to the weight, his palm to the feel. It’s no different from any standard javelin. At the touch his mind falls back into memories of a sunlit vineyard, of green fields and gentle breezes from the sea, of his mother’s white robes.

There is a target placed out across the plateau, a decent throw’s length away. Hellanodikai spouts more jargon about aiming true and other dramatic adages, but Ben already understands. There will be no room for error any longer.

Baze Malbus throws first, running down the line of dirt before bellowing a deep and lengthy grunt. His long hair flies around him, his thick arm flexed as he unleashes the spear. It slices out as the crowd watches, their cheers rising as it hits the center mark.

Rey, Lady Holdo, and Wexley applaud alongside the rest of the audience, their attention drawn to and fro between the contestants and the approaching storm. A claw of lightning rakes over the sea—thunder quick to follow.

The dark clouds have begun to pass shadows over the island by the time Baze defeats his opponent. Another peal of thunder rolls when Ben squares his shoulders, marching into position. Hellanodikai stands by, his long arm raised.

Ben breathes out, narrowing his focus and lifting the javelin to his shoulder, his fingers clenched tight on the shaft. When signaled he darts forward, his legs thrusting out, stirring wind behind him. A familiar heaviness sinks the balls of his feet into the dirt, the knobs of his ankles anchoring him as he stops and pitches the spear.

A chorus of applause sounds when the javelin sticks just south of center. Ben frowns, and retreats.

Rey doesn’t miss the disappointment knotting in his shoulders as he falls back, replaced by his opponent on the line.

When the man throws he nearly misses the target completely. Wexley offers a sympathetic hiss. “Looks like your man’s got this one,” he murmurs, leaning near to Rey.

Hope and disbelief twine together in Rey’s chest like ivy and thorns. She nods, her fingers clutching the cloth of palla over her heart. The clouds are drawing closer now, like a giant wave from the sea.

Ben takes his javelin from the runner, swallowing hard. He feels eyes on him as he stands at the line, their attention like dull needles. If only the world were quiet, he might hear the rain on the ocean surf. The sound of her every shallow breath.

His grip tightens as he lifts his arm, bending his knees to launch forward at Hellanodikai’s bidding. His muscles wind themselves tight, the silt crunching underfoot, his wrist strung like an archer’s bow as he pulls back and thrusts the spear, grunting past gritted teeth.

The javelin sails over the grass, sinking like a blade into the target. It lands on the center’s border
—a near perfect throw.

Rey claps, unable to keep from hooting out a cheer of praise. Holdo laughs beside her, Wexley nodding his approval.

The next man doesn’t best Ben’s dexterity, and loses. Mindful of the storm, the match is called early, Ben advanced to the final round against Baze Malbus.

Lightning strikes, making many of the crowd shrink down. A baby’s cry rings out, brief and quickly hushed. Hellanodikai cups a hand to his mouth. “One round only! He who strikes closest to the center takes victory!”

Rey gawks. “Only one?” she asks, looking over to Lady Holdo.

“The storm is getting too close. Besides, sometimes it’s a mercy to end things quickly,” Lady Holdo sighs, folding her lips. “He’ll only get one shot.”

Rey searches the horizon line, a black wall of rain sliding like a curtain over the roiling sheath of blue Capri shores visible from their plateau, turning everything in its wake to shadow.

Zuji…

Ben runs a hand through his hair, frowning back at Baze Malbus, who takes his position. The Hellanodikai releases him, the whole of the crowd on their toes watching as Baze barrels forward and careens his powerful arm, unleashing the javelin. It strikes like a bolt through the air, hitting just within the central border.

Rey claps distractedly for him, dismay mooning over her.

She told Ben he doesn’t have to win, but from here she can see the trepidation on his face, the tremble in his fingers as he wipes them over his mouth. She knows how much this means to him. Be it a victory here, or elsewhere, he could never stand to lose. Even for something as frivolous as this—to be strong, she knows, is all he can bear to be.

Ben takes his javelin in hand, thunder pounding under his footsteps. It throbs in the apple of his throat, everything tight.

He tries. He tries to summon it—the anger, the fury and rage that gave him all the power he needed to win in days before. It fills him with blackness, blurring the edges of his vision, the colors of the sky bleeding into his eyes. And yet he feels nothing. No strength, no will, no facility. Nothing.

As Rey chews her nail, Lady Holdo leans into her ear. “Leia, Ben’s mother, used to send me letters. Many of them were about her son.”

Rey glances. “Lady Holdo?”

“She told me so many stories. I forgot most of them, but one in particular always caught my interest.”

“What was it?” Rey asks, lightning striking overhead. Heat crawls up from the ground, the air thick with gathering rain.

The Hellanodikai raises his arm. Ben breathes in. Breathes out. Searching madly for something to grasp, to hold onto, to return his strength to him.
“When he was a baby, an angel visited her in the night. She said he told her that her son would become strong. Stronger than anyone. And he did, in schooling and in sports. He never faltered.”

Holdo looks to Rey with marvel eyes. “He never missed.”

The hush that falls over the crowd tears Rey’s staggered gaze back onto her husband, her fingers clenched into the cloth of her palla. “Ben…” she whispers, lower than anyone but God can hear.

And then he has it.

The world slows around Ben as he stands alone, the grey of clouds morphing into clear skies, the short grass of the field growing long. Soft wind blows the scent of grapes through the air, the javelin in his hand light, straight, narrow—too thin to support the heaviness of anger, of wrath and pain and darkness.

They fall away from him, piece after piece, leaving nothing but himself. Innocent and exposed. Rey’s touch lingers in his neck, in the palm of the hand holding the spear to his shoulder. Its warmth fills him, its light, its whisper through the dark.

*We haven’t lost, yet.*

When Hellanodikai swings Ben springs forward, his every step heavy and gaining. The earth packs under his feet, power rising to the surface of his skin as he tightens his hold on the javelin.

He is in Athens again, in the fields behind his mother’s house, his teeth bared, a righteousness, a *righteousness*, filling his lungs. His arms become *her* arms, *her* eyes his eyes, staying on him, with him—and that is enough.

The javelin soars from his palm with mighty force, and, in a blink, lodges itself deep into the heart of the target.

Uproar sweeps through the crowd in a thunderous wave, boos and cheers alike. They drown in Rey and Ben’s ears as rain stings foreheads and bare feet. Lady Holdo rushes to Hellanodikai, both grabbing Ben’s wrists and hoisting them high. “Behold your victor,” he shouts, “Ben Solo of Rome!”

Rey abandons applause to worm through the crowd. Rain has already begun to sink into the hood of her palla, the downpour fast approaching. The bodies are packed and writhing, blocking her way. “Ben!”

He hears her, his head snapping to watch as she comes forward. He goes to her as a young judge fumbles the laurel crown on his head, the people making way for him. “Rey—”

She throws herself over his neck, gasping as he clasps tight. He’s slick with sweat and oil and rain, warm and alive to the touch. She cradles his head in her hand, his damp hair caressing her fingers, grin unabashed. “I’m so proud of you.”

Ben pulls her closer, pressing his smile into her shoulder, his mouth against her neck.

Lady Holdo approaches them as the crowd disperses, one of the younger boys by her side. He holds a parasol over her head as best he can while she shouts over the gaining bluster. “Congratulations!”

Ben nods. “Thank you!” he replies, a little louder than he means to.

She takes a lump of black cloth from the boy and hands it to Ben—his tunic and sandals. “The
feast has been moved to tomorrow night. The storm should pass by then. There will be a festival in your honor.” She smiles at Rey, though the weather melts it into a grimace. “This is Temiri,” she says, gesturing to the boy. “He will lead you to your suite.”

Rey squints, rain dripping into her eyes. Thunder fights her voice. “Suite?!”

“At Villa Jovis!” Holdo points, her finger directing them to the far end of the Capri side, up the smaller mountain. “The old sojourn-place from emperors past. It’s all yours for the next three days!”

Not waiting for her reply, the little boy holds the parasol over Rey’s head instead, tugging her skirts toward the palace.

Rey daunted, Ben takes her arm. The storm is fast-evolving into a monsoon, the black clouds swallowing the island. Trees shake and bend overhead as the little boy leads them down the path and through the village, amidst the grey dusk and rain.

They stop at the inn to retrieve their belongings, soggy and tired, but determined. The innkeeper, a kind, older gentleman, offers the island victor his own parasol—to be returned whenever suitable.

“La’y Hol’o been taking care of it for years,” he reminisces. The air is hot and stirring, sparse breaks of clouds creating gaps in the rain. “It coul’ fit half all Capri-folk in those rooms!”

The little boy tugs Rey’s sleeve, urging them to follow. They thank the innkeeper and continue to walk under the canopies of trees, passing homes until they ascend into the wilds of Monte Tiberio.

Eventually, Rey spots a wall looming high above the rocks, a round, domed carapace flickering into view under lightning’s glow. By now her clothes have soaked through, making her shiver. She can’t imagine the chill Ben must be enduring, having forgone his tunic—though there would have been no point to wear it. She cannot tell whether they have walked for hours or for eons.

But they march on, following the boy up the winding cliff face, until they are at last safe in the atrium chamber of the abandoned palace.

“Where are the rooms?” Ben asks, his quiet timbre loud in the empty walls. Thunder growls outside.

Temiri wordlessly points down the hall, deep into abysmal blackness. Standing on his toes, he snags a lamp from its high stand, using the nearby flint to light it, and offers it to Ben.

Rey opens her mouth to bid the boy wait, to ask if he wants to stay in from the storm, but when Ben takes the lamp he is already gone, slipping away into the night without a word.

Rey fiddles with the wet cloth of her palla as Ben drips down the hall lighting more lamps, watching the rain come down. Her mind lingers on the little Temiri, hoping he will be safe.

Ben ignites most of the hanging lamps, illuminating the atrium chamber in a lap leading back to her. He doesn’t miss the worried look on her face. “Something wrong, Puella?”

“He’s so small,” she murmurs. “How old do you think he is?”

Ben purses his lips, re-shouldering their packings. “No older than ten.”

Rey nods distractedly, turning away from the door as Ben closes it. He watches her wander down the gallant halls, the sound of rainfall heavy over them, echoing in the vast emptiness. They walk
through it together, admiring what little ornaments they can see with limited sight, the eyes of busts vigilant among them until they enter the master chamber.

Ben’s sandals clap and squeak over the mosaic tile as he goes to the fireplace, igniting the kindling while Rey takes his lamp to strike more, one by one, until the room pulses with warmth and light.

Rey shivers, still cold, and peels away the soppy layers of her clothing one by one. She silently apologizes to Ahsoka's tunica. And her precious palla. They will need to be hung.

Ben, who had been focused on the fire, looks up, his eyes feasting on the exposed skin of his wife's collarbone, how the white cloth of her fascia clings.

“Have you decided?”

Rey pauses, glancing over at him. “What?”

He rises to his feet, slipping closer. Water drips from his chin, lingers on his cheek, his eyes like smoldering coals. They slide slowly, scathingly down her body, his fingers twitching captives at his sides.

When he doesn’t answer Rey realizes what he means, her body juddering—but not from any chill of rain or wind. She swallows. “Oh. R-Right.”

He lifts a hand to brush his knuckles down the creamy expanse of her arm, his touch feather-light, hairs rising in its wake. The sudden rapidity of her breathing does not escape his notice, the gentle heave and fall of her maidenly bosom the most tempting of betrayals.

His eyes meet hers again, far less gentle. “Well?”

Rey blinks, holding herself firm, refusing to falter under the sudden onslaught of womanly debility elicited by his ministrations up and down her arm. She knows what he is doing. This touch is a warning. The final, unwinding sliver of his control.

In his eyes she sees it—sees the same raw, animal carnality displayed beneath the Capri sunlight—see that the choice to unleash it upon herself is hers to make. The waiting darkness in the way he looks at her, the beast pacing behind its cage, restless for its mate, can only be freed by her.

Slowly, she catches the wrist that strokes her, moving it to wind around the small of her bare back. She steps closer, pressing herself fully against him, her palm sliding up the strong, hot skin of his arm. It smooths over every muscle, every divot, every mark and slightest scar, until it lands cupped at his cheek, angling him down into her gentle kiss.

And when it breaks, she meets his eyes, want boiling deep in her belly as she whispers, “I want you to fuck me.”

Ben’s breath hitches, her vulgarity, her wicked touch, twitching his cock. He leans down, his fingers already beginning to dig and wrangle the subligaculum clinging to her hips, searching her eyes for any traces of uncertainty. “Are you sure?”

Rey answers with a kiss, her hands shooting into his hair, her tongue fighting through his mouth. His gasp shoots down her throat before he gives in, all the energy of battle rising in him with furious vengeance as he pulls her flush against him, moaning into her mouth and tugging down her brazier.

His kiss is bruising, his hands rough and hard as they encompass the naked skin of her back. The
fascia’s cloth peels down over her nipples, tweaking them, the sensation waking in her womanhood.

Rey arches into him, forced to swallow for air, offering her neck. He takes it between his teeth, biting down on its juncture, steamy breath hissing against her skin. She cries out, scrambling to both push him off and hold on fast—neither of which managing to dismay him.

Like lightning he strips her naked, tossing her underthings aside and tugging away his everything to reveal the readiness underneath, already swelled and bobbing to life. Rey backs away, defenseless under his towering presence, eagerly succumbing to the power of his arms as they encircle her, control her again.

Ben puffs against her ear, licking the skin down to place hot, open kisses down her jaw, his teeth hungry for the taste of her. They pinch and prod, the hurt a delicious taste. Rain and salt linger on his tongue, the warm, summery scent of Rey living there. He growls, thrusting his hard cock against her soft belly, gripping her ass to drag her until he can feel wet, silky flesh smear over him.

Rey squirms and nods, his thick finger pushing so easily inside of her. She hovers trapped between his arm and his chest, his flesh surrounding her in heat and musk, making her whine with need. Warmth floods her face as she feels more of her arousal pool betwixt her thighs; the very same that has accumulated watching him at play. Yes, yes—oh, yes she has wanted him. Wanted him more desperately than ever before. She moans at the memory of his savage offense, at the hard stroke of his tongue against her throat, of the vision of him gleaming and powerful in the sunlight, his proud chest and ravenous gaze devouring only her.

His finger sinks deep inside and thrusts, invading her beyond all hope of defense, and, shuddering, a mewl seeps from her mouth. “Master…”

Ben stops, breathing hard, and his heart stops with him.

“Master.”

He looks down into her glassy eyes and they, too, suddenly seem to awaken, both of them realizing what she’s released. Wind struggles into Ben’s lungs, his chest beginning to rise and fall in uneven bursts. “What did you say?”

Rey, still standing on his finger, her hands once hungrily roaming his torso, lies buried beneath his scorching stare. Want, need coils and uncoils within her, a truth of her heart leaking past flushed, parted lips. “Master,” she whispers, rocking against him.

Ben’s arm stutters back to life, his finger slowly pumping in and out of her tight sheath. He doesn’t let go of her eyes, consuming her, his lower lip twinging. “Again.”

“Mmn, ah,” Rey pants, needing more, needing more. More of this spreading fire. “Master…”

Mouth wet, he lords over her, pressing his head against hers as he slips another finger inside, crooking them both to fuck her with his hand.

Perhaps it should startle him how deeply he longs to hear her call him that name again, but he can’t bring himself to mind it anymore than she can. She’s already lost, moving blindly, smearing her slick all over his palm, her moans building into soft cries as her arousal trails down his arm.
“Yes,” he groans, her hot palms drifting down his flanks, stilling, unable to move from the pleasure. His palm claps against her flesh with each pump, the rapid claps and wet slurps of her cunt a chorus of sapid lust. “Yes, that’s it. You have been waiting for this all day, haven't you? Waiting for your master to fuck you?”

Rey’s nails press into his skin, not enough to break the surface, just enough to hold on. “Yes—yes!” she gasps, his fingers dragging her down, further into ecstasy. “Please, Ben, I—nn, ah!”

Her pleas unchain another link in him, his ferocity leveling his shoulders into a sudden hardness. He rips his fingers from inside her, her cry of loss ignored as he grabs her hips—and throws her onto the edge of the bed.

Rey sits up, her hips still bucking against the ghost of pressure, her teeth bared in challenge. But Ben does not retreat, his hands wrapping around her ankles, dragging her towards him until her legs wrap around his hips, her rump hovering over the foot of the bed. “You want this cock?” he growls, grinding it against her.

She writhes. “Yes…”

His eye twitches, his hands firming their grip over her waist, effectively stilling her. The halt of friction makes her groan. Ben, however, does not relieve her.

“Then beg for it,” he rumbles, quivering as he ruts once against her, heat on heat, leaning down to meet her eyes across the tip of his nose. “Beg for mercy. Beg for your master's cock to fill his slave’s aching little cunt.”

His words corrupt her, her very bones tightening, trying to fill the emptiness of needing him inside. They swarm around her with images and thoughts, each one promising and deliciously dark. “Master…” she whimpers.

Ben maneuvers himself until his tip prods her swollen landica, caressing her wings. He sacrifices a hand to direct it, to tease it up and down her quavering seam. Its heat sinks into him, urging him to plunge inside and give her what she craves. But he relents. “Say it.”


He huffs, moving the tip of his cock until it brushes over the hood of her cunt, rubbing it against her sopping crest. The pulses shoot through her, building her higher, higher, so close to the edge. “What was that?” he grunts, unblinking.

Lips parted wide, Rey stares transfixed at his work on her womanhood, until the pleasure forces her eyes closed. She can feel her climax coming over closer, fast and fluid, and she wants it, needs it so desperately. Her hands curl into the sheets. “Mercy!”

Ben growls. “As you wish.”

Taking her legs in his hard grip, he throws himself inside of her, filling her fully with one stroke.

He doesn't relent, taking her rough, fast, teaching her what it means to be fucked. Rey can only succumb to it, invite the storm into her very body, take all of his power, his love and fury, within her.

He strikes her deeply, making her gasp. “Ben!”
Ben, his eyes fixed on her face, leans over her again. Sweat blooms on his brow, over her breasts. “Who takes care of you?” he pants.

She whines when his tongue flicks the peak of her breast. Her hand flings up to catch his hair, tugging. “You—!”

His thrusts lapse in speed, slowing to an even, teasing brand of fucking. Her eyes manage to open, melting under his own, their possession like a touch as his ragged voice grounds, “Who gives you everything you desire?”

The slide of his cock rolls her eyes back into her skull, her rationale fast-fading, the only word on her lips a soft, “You do.”

Her angelic surrender undoes him, unwinds the last shred of decency and remorse. With manic gaze he captures her, returning to his relentless claim over her body. “Whose are you?” he snarls, hammering into her, his moans faltering into harsh grunts, battered by the roaring wave rising within him. “Tell me whose you are!”

“Yours!” Rey nearly screams, the tide of ecstasy racing forward within her, hollowing out her bones with its merciless swell. “I’m yours!”

His grip on her hips tightens to a bruising vise, but Rey is too far gone to feel anything as mortal as pain. His hips buck forward, the length of him filling her so completely, the bone of his lap striking against her crest with every pounding thrust, driving her higher, madder. Tears seep from the corners of her eyes, her mouth pried open as if to weep.

Small bursts of her arousal leak onto his cock, making Ben growl with animal greed. He can feel her clenching, giving in around him. Diving into her, sweat and rain flecking from his body onto the floor, he lifts her, standing himself upright until he can force the head of his cock against that place even deeper within her—where he would crook his fingers to tear her apart.

Rey cries out, clawing and scratching at his chest, the heat too bright, too much. “Please—Master! Ben!”

He bares his teeth, relentless in his speed, hissing with ecstasy as her nails break the skin. “That’s it, Puella,” he growls. “Take it. Be a good ancilla,” he grunts, thrusting hard and deep, his visage trembling, “and come on your master’s cock.”

Rey slams her head back against the mattress, her veins seizing. Everything is so warm, so contorted, pulsing. She can’t feel anything but him, all of him, and all of her. Her hands fall to his wrists, holding him as he holds her, her mouth splitting wide as something inexorable begins to wash through her. Something she can’t hold back.

“Ben, I’m—oh, God—!”

She moans so helplessly, so high, that it almost sounds like a scream. As she does a wave of wetness spurts, more than Ben has ever taken from her before. It squirts and paints his belly with her love, the rest splattering onto the floor, perfuming his feet.

The clutch of her, the build of wanting her since waking under her hand, overcomes him, the sight of her flushed face, the sound of her crying out his name, and the unbridled release of her lust ripping his seed from his body. He roars with the rapturous theft, his voice booming, then heaving off the high ceiling as he buries himself deep inside her, trembling with liquid ecstasy.

Still pulsing from her climax, Rey pants into his shoulder, her body sunken into a mire of lingering
pleasure. Until a sudden shame pulls her from its waters.

She covers her face. “I’m sorry.”

Blinking and confused, Ben collapses atop her as much as he can permit, unwilling to pull away from her just yet. He hushes her, petting her hair, kissing her sweaty crown. “You’ve nothing to be sorry for.”

“But I,” she blushes, unable to look at him. “I let go on you…”

He shakes his head, turning her face to him. “You gave me your pleasure, Puella,” he skims her lips, voice husked, “in its purest form…”

Hesitantly welcoming his kiss, Rey wills herself to accept, seeing in the smug pull of his mouth that he truly means what he says. She lets herself bask in the wholeness of their coupling even as he untangles from her, the sticky glob painting their thighs.

“The blankets,” she groans sleepily. “We’ve ruined them.”

“Mm,” Ben hums, nuzzling her hair, easing them up to where the pillows lie waiting, crisp and untouched. He kisses her neck. “Don’t worry. We’ll match the rest tomorrow.”

Rey scoffs, too worn to chastise, too endeared not to nestle into his arms. The sheets fit cool around them, the sound of rain soothing as the oil lamps burn watchfully among them.

She yawns. “Ben?”

“Mm?” he hums again, looking down at her, his blood sated.

Her large eyes flit up to meet his, thumb raised to stroke his damp cheek. Her voice softens. “Even if you didn’t win today, I would have still been proud of you.”

Ben frowns. “Rey—”

“Just listen,” she urges, eyes searching his. “No matter what happens, I will always be yours. No matter what else we lose. Tell me you know that.”

Swallowing, he nods, closing his eyes. “I know.”

Rey’s caress ventures up, sliding back his soiled hair, savoring the warmth of him, pulling him close. “I love you,” she murmurs.

He falls into her embrace with a kiss, his heart beating with hers as they cleave to one another. One body, one soul, lying here, far and safe from the world.

“I know.”

Chapter End Notes

[The term "Panhellic Games" is a collective one, standing for all four varieties of the Ancient Greek olympian sports. They included the Olympic Games and Pythian Games (played every four years) and the Nemean Games and Isthmian Games (played
every two years). The word "Panhellenic" is used here as a general term, since Holdo's tradition is technically unorthodox and therefore not an official collection of sporting events

[While the Ancient Greeks prized nudity in their events and traditions, the Romans (especially the Roman Empire) for the most part did not. So since Capri is half-Roman (and because I would like to preserve our sanity) the players are playing clothed]

[Holdo's term "carrot" is famously from Plato, in reference to male genitalia]

[The Hellanodikai was the Ancient Greek equivalent to a referee, making sure that the rules were followed. He would carry a silver urn for contestants to draw lots with the Greek alphabet inscribed on them, and match them together. There could be numerous Hellanodikai at one time. This one is inspired by the Rogue One character, K-2SO]

[Shot-put actually wasn't made an Olympic event until the 19th century, but it's believed that the sport is inspired by the Ancient Celtic tradition of young soldiers throwing stones to divide the weak from the strong. (I'm sorry if this disappointed you history-buffs out there, but I warned you in the tags not everything will be accurate. I just wanted to see our boi throwing a ball topless ¯\_(ツ)_/¯)]

[Discus, however, was a very popular event in the pentathlon (collection of five track and field games). The goal is straightforward—to throw further than everyone else. However the style of throwing is reliant of specific foot placement. The wrong step could shatter a man's ankle!]

[Palé, wrestling, was the most popular of all the Greek sports. It was played in two phases—the first phase when the men fought on their feet, and the second phase when one was forced to the ground to try and fight his way back up. The player would be considered out if his back, shoulder, waist, or elbow touched the ground—or if they were locked in a submissive hold]

[The Pankration was considered the most deadly game in the Panhellenic Games, and was used to train soldiers in the Roman infantry. Similar to today's ultimate fighting, Pankration was a combination of boxing and Palé, where the players could fight as dirtily as they wanted. The only rules were no biting, eye/nose gouging, or aiming for the groin]

[Javelin throw, like Discus, was also a popular sport in the pentathlon. The javelin, also called an "akon," was as tall as a man and only a little thicker than his finger. Unlike other throwing sports, winning the javelin throw is reliant on moving forward]

[Temiri Blagg, the little boy, is best known as "Broom Boy" from TLJ. He is played by Temirlan Blaev, who was ten years old at the time]

[The island of Capri is divided in half—the higher half called Anacapri. While Anacapri hosts Monte Solaro, a mountain about 2,000 feet tall (~500m), Capri is host to Monte Tiberio, standing at about 1,000 feet (334m). This is not as far of a climb as it seems—since a mile's walk is about 5,000 feet. Since the island of Capri is four square miles, their trip to Villa Jovis would have taken less than an hour]

[The Villa Jovis (also called "Villa of Jupiter") was constructed by Emperor Tiberius in 27AD, who also named the mountain after himself. While popular rumor claims he would host racous parties and throw used-up lovers off the cliff, even more likely is
his use of the palace as an escape from assassination attempts in Rome. The difficult access to the palace itself, along with various guards and barricades, helped solidify this belief.

{I'm now on CuriousCat! Click here to ask me anything you want (´•﹏•´)}
Hey ya'll! I'm back!

Finally back from my Summer getaway. It was busy and full of stress—mostly growing pains, lol. But your homegirl is 21 and can finally write a realistic description of drinking wine. ^_^ Just kidding. But anyway, thank you all so much for your patience with me.

This chapter was originally twice as long, buuuut I decided to split it up. You guys are probably sick of overly long chapters anyway. From now on everything will be much more manageable.

Oh, and at risk of spoilers, I should warn you that there is a slightly upsetting scene regarding childbirth and conception in this chapter. And also some heavy-handed religious symbolism. But hey, it's a religious story in ancient antiquity, so it was bound to happen eventually.

Thanks again! See you soon!

She is dreaming again.

The water is warm under her feet, folding over her flesh, in and out of her skin. It winds around her, through her, gathering in her lungs until she cannot breathe. It is everywhere. Everything.

She sees without eyes, feels without touching, that she is not alone. He stands before her, head prostrate, his hand wrapped around the hilt of a sword.

She cannot stop her feet as they tear her forward, cannot pull her skin back together, only draw nearer, closer, her hand outstretched. Could she touch him—has she the freedom, the right—could she take him, wind his skin with hers, become nothing—together?

When he looks up his eyes are dark, his grip on the hilt tight—and the strike of his blade like a beat of a heart.

The rain doesn't stop until sunrise, the break of the storm sinking its heat into the sea until the waves shift, overhung by fog.

Ben stands braced against the stone banister on the terrace of the Villa Jovis, overlooking the clear blue waters. He breathes in the air, fresh from the Eastern wind, his mind adrift.

He thinks of Finn Freedman, waiting for them in the city of Naples. He thinks of Rey, of her promises—and his—to the Resistance brewing in Rome, and frowns. There are less than ten days remaining until the tournament begins. If they stand any hope of evading it, tonight must be their last night on Capri.
He sighs, bowing his head, the weight of it squared heavily on his shoulders. He loathes the very thought of returning to Rome. Had he his own way in this, had he made no promises at all, his wife would be safe, hidden alongside him, far from the empire and Snoke's wicked clutch. It corrupts the dream that surrounds them, now—turns the shy, dewey, blooming flowers of their garden to shadow. Like a nightmare, like the first sin.

His hard gaze holds fast across the ocean, back to the city of his rebirth.

There is a choice that must be made, now, but he does not know if he has the strength to make it. What he knows, what little he knows, is that he could take Rey now—fly them far and fast to the edge of the world—and steal from fate what it has stolen from them—the chance to be free, to find some semblance of peace, of happiness.

Of his choices he wishes he could make that chance their reality, forge it as an ironworker does steel, mold them both into whatever they choose to be. No longer bound to serve, no longer forced to bow. No longer damned to die.

But Rey… His precious, priceless Puella… She would never understand. Or even in her understanding, would sacrifice herself for the chains of her word. In all things she is loyal. To steal her from their promises to the Resistance would make a liar of her, would damn her very spirit. It would crush her. Could he, even he, dare risk her soul… for her life?

Ben closes his eyes, trying to summon his strategies, his plots, all turning red and bright, burning away like parchment, leaving nothing but cinders.

No, his mind scrambles, fingertips dusted in ash. No, they must go back. They have survived worse trials than this. There are still nine days before the Tournament of Champions begins. An even greater debt could be settled in far less a time. They will find a way.

They have to.

Restlessly appeased, for now, Ben looks at the horizon, the crisp morning light taking form from its blurry dawn shadows. Tomorrow. Tomorrow, they will begin their return to Rome. Once there he will ask Poe Dameron how best he can settle their debts—from down on his knees or by swordpoint, if need be. From then on it is simply the issue of escape. But Dameron’s ilk has smuggled citizens beyond the walls before, surely they could provide safe passage out of the territory before Snoke can discover them. Then… it will be finished. They will be free.

Ben brightens at the idea. Perhaps Rey could decide where they should flee to. Snoke will only live a few more years, at most. It’s no question that age and health are the man’s greatest detriment. And if senility takes him, then they could return to a Rome that doesn’t even remember them, if they chose to.

Or they could live their lives in foreign hermitage. Learn another language together. Without her status Rey could live as a woman, could share her gifts and her life with her neighbors, be seen by all as he sees her. Even without money, he could find a way to provide. They could finally settle comfortably, live in peace and, when the time is right... start a family.

The thought of it grips him, sears into his heart like a brand, and he dives into it, letting it burn. The vision almost hurts, picturing her, a dark-haired child cradled in her arms, and it aches, it screams, knowing there is still a chance to see it fulfilled. For an instant he dares imagine himself beside her, the proof of their love given flesh. For a second he dares to dream that the torment and fear will end, will be left behind them forever.
For a stolen moment here, on top of the very world, Ben Solo dares to hope.

Rey stirs, stretching out between the cool sheets. She frowns at the unfamiliar ceiling, at the foreign bedspread and ornate furniture dotting the chamber, until memory of the night before settles into her bones.

She sits up, brushing the hair from her mouth. The bed is empty, the sheets a Ben-sized rumple, and Rey’s cheeks burn as she stands and sets them to rights, silently hoping they haven’t desecrated the ancient palace beyond restoration. If anyone knew what they’d done…

Rey shivers, unable to keep from recounting the way his hands felt on her, the heat of their entwined bodies. In the sunlight streaming through the grated windows she can see them—small, finger-shaped bruises on her waist, on her wrists.

She traces them softly, these marks he left, these marks she’d craved. They make her smile, somehow, perhaps in how his touch lingers. Or, she thinks, how strong she is to welcome them—their edifices reconstructing her very body into a fortress for their passions.

As she dwells on this and scoops up the damp clothes from the floor, Rey recalls her dream, and stills.

Had she dreamed that Ben…?

She shakes her head from it, banishing those darkening thoughts. A dream is only that—a dream. She cannot let them pervade her mood as they so threaten to do, pressing their weight on her when she is meant to tread light.

Her mind walks ahead of her as she strides down the hall, venturing dumbly as she remembers more of these dreams, dreams she had somehow forgotten. Visions of her walking on water, her body turned into twirling ribbons of flesh and bone. She wonders what they could mean, if Ben, or even Ahsoka, might be able to tell her.

Letting them be, for now, Rey scavenge around the old servants’ storage rooms, digging past dusty jugs and brooms. The soggy clothes dampen her bare skin as she cradles them to her chest until, at last, she finds what she seeks.

“Aha,” she whispers, gleefully fishing out a long line. She drags it out onto the courtyard, stringing it over the grass by the pillars. One by one she hangs their garb, the soft morning winds pouring their summery scent into the linen, and when it’s done she steps back, admiring the garden.

The innkeeper had not been exaggerating. The courtyard garden has indeed been well-tended to, flowers bloomed and weeded in their beds, ivy clipped, curling like snakes around the pillars. Actually, the entire villa has been maintained remarkably.

Rey can’t help but admire Lady Holdo for her philanthropy, resolving to ask her how long it’s been since anyone lived here as she moves on, now in search of her husband.

As she investigates, Rey relaxes into her pursuit, idling through the illuminated halls. Oil burns in their lamps still, but the chambers maintain their Roman welcome of natural sunlight, baring everything to her curious gaze. She spies ancient tapestries and elegant furnishing, the preserved heads of boar and deer and mighty lizards, shelves and shrines adorned with trinkets of polished lapis and smooth jade.

At last, on the far side of the palace, Rey spots the open balcony doors. She slips through the sheer...
curtains, caught on the sharp edge of her husband’s frown as he stands against the banister, glaring out into the sea.

“Ben?”

He jumps, turning to face her, shock brushing away the distress there only moments ago.

Rey goes to him, their arms folding into one another as the waves overlap below. “What’s wrong?” she asks, reaching up to soothe away the hard muscle under his dark brow. “You weren’t in bed.”

He leans into her touch, fingers stroking her shoulder. “I didn’t want to wake you.”

She searches his eyes, finding in them a shadow of stony resolution. Worry threatens her—consumes him—and suddenly she realizes why Ben has secluded himself to this place. “Tell me,” she murmurs, holding his cheek, pressing the last of her morning warmth into his skin.

Ben sighs, chewing the inside of his cheek as his hand engulfs hers, pulling it away until they both lie enveloped in his grip. “I can’t bring you back to Rome. I want to keep you safe,” he says, squeezing gently.

Rey’s heart constricts, the threat of a tremble on his lip nearly inspiring one of her own. But she holds fast, considering her words before she moves closer, stroking her thumbs over his hands. “I know you do. But we have to go back—”

“I won’t put your life at risk,” Ben asserts, his eyes hard.

“I made promises, too,” Rey argues, meeting his fire with her own. “You aren’t going to face this alone. I told you that.”

Ben huffs, glaring down at their feet, shoulders falling. She can see the strength it takes for him to look at her again working under his skin, manifesting in his honey-morning eyes. “There’s something else.”

She pauses. There is a gleam of something in his gaze, the familiar flicker of hope catching fire in her own. “What do you propose?”

“What I said before. Run away.”

Rey sighs, and withdraws her hands. “Ben…”

“You misunderstand. Rey, Poe Dameron is a resourceful man,” he insists, letting her take the space she needs. He gestures out to the water as he continues. “When we return I will ask him what work there is to be done in the city before the tournament begins. Whatever it is, I will do it and secure safe passage for us out of Rome.”

It’s convincing. Rey studies him, wondering at how likely Poe Dameron would be to aid them so quickly once again. “Run from Snoke?”

He nods.

“And Ahsoka?” Rey asks, wrapping her arms around her middle.

“Ahsoka will come with us,” Ben replies, unable to stay away from her with her eyes so large and uncertain. He folds her into his body slowly, pressing his cheek to her temple. “Rey…” He bows to meet her gaze, breathing her in, holding her close. “I want to give you the life I promised, but
Snoke,” his tone bites, then reluctantly soothes, “the empire, will never stop trying to tear it apart.”

Rey sinks into his embrace, holding him in her arms. He smells like himself, like sleep and the sea. “So where do we go?” she murmurs. “To Athens?”

Ben scoffs, resting his chin on her head. “Greece is too weak to resist Roman forces. Besides, I know how the Greeks treat their women. I won’t to subject my wife to their laws.”

Rey chuckles. Then, struck by a sudden thought, she backs away, a surge of excitement thrumming through her. “We could go to Egypt,” she exclaims, eyes bright. “Ahsoka and I speak Coptic. We could teach you. We could travel so far south they would never catch us.”

Her cheerfulness infects him and he smiles, his hands falling to rest at her hips. “Yes,” he agrees, his voice growling as he imagines her sharing her language, her old world, with him. “I would like that very much, mea Puella.”

With sparkling eyes Rey stands on her toes, placing an exuberant kiss upon his cheek. Her hands linger on his collar as she sighs, “We could go to Cairo. Take a boat on the Nile…”

Ben smiles, touching her wrists lightly, caressing them to her elbows. “Anything you want.”

Anything you want. Rey’s heart could burst from the thought. Her gaze falls blankly ahead as fantasy plays out before her, of deep, cool wells and the familiar smell of livestock and sunlight, of sandstone walls…

But when the memory of sand collides with the vision of the green, endless countryside, her smiles falls. With a sweet, mourning murmur, she lays a hand over his heart. “It will never be like home, though.”

Ben knows what she means, but cannot bring himself to agree. He presses her hand where it lies, circling an arm around her waist. “We can bring it with us. Wherever we go. And, when the time is right…” he breathes in shakily, his pulse hammering as he slides his palm to her belly, “…we can make it grow.”

Rey’s breath hitches as his thumb slides over her navel, a memory of a blade striking there flashing through the night.

Ben frowns when she steps away, her face pale. “Rey?”

She opens her mouth, but no sound comes out.

Of course. Of course. How could she have forgotten; how could she have neglected to…

When the tears gather in her eyes Ben cannot bear knowing not how to staunch them. He takes her shoulders, thankful that she doesn’t abandon him again. His voice comes calm, low. “Rey. What is it?”

She can’t bring herself to meet his eyes. Her throat trembles as she tries to take back control of her tongue. She’s been a fool. A damned fool.

“There’s something I haven’t told you,” she whispers.

“What is it?” Ben murmurs, trying to catch her elusive gaze. He brushes a hand over her hair, down her neck. Her body is quivering, her joy clouded by grief. Gently, he urges, “Tell me now.”
Shining eyes meet his, their lashes dewy as a dawning field. She cannot help but think that he will hate her, that he will hate her for this, for letting love blind her to the future she could never have. She can’t tell him the truth now, cannot dash his dreams so callously when she was supposed to help them soar.

But somehow, she does it anyway.

“I’m barren.”

Ben stares wordlessly at her; Confusion strikes him like an arrow through the throat, until he finally understands.

“I’ve never,” Rey hitches, holding back a sob, everything pouring out from the floodgates of her lips, “I’ve never bled. That’s why Plutt never sold me.” Still Ben is silent, and she cannot bear it. The tears fall down her cheeks now, shame burning hot through her body. “I’m a barren womb,” she whimpering, looking down, covering her face. “I can’t give you what you want, Ben. All this time, I never could. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Ben, who had been standing dazed, surges forward, ripping her face into his hands. “Rey,” he growls, blood hot. “Look at me.”

Dread and hope, such terrible brothers, so wicked and unforgiving, force her to obey. When she looks at him, she sees anger and… tears.

Without warning he ducks his head, kissing her furiously, burying his fingers in her hair. Her lips stiffen before going soft as she whimpering into his mouth, letting him have her conflict for his own.

When she relinquishes herself to him Ben parts, holding her attentive eyes. “I wouldn’t die for your body, Rey. I would die for you. I didn’t make a vow to your womb. I made a vow to my family. And if you are all the family I ever have, then all I need is you.”

He crushes her to him again and she sobs, grasping onto him wherever she can hold as everything inside of her collapses. She can’t pull him close enough, cannot express, even with her hands, the relief and love that overwhelms her. Perhaps she never could.

Ben closes his eyes, burying his face in her neck, his anger finally fading. His hand cradles her head to his skin, soaking in every tear, withstanding every wrack of her juddering body. He cannot fathom the pain she must feel. How many nights had they lied entangled where he allowed himself to dream of more than he could take; how many nights will they do so again, only to remind her of this?

When her tears staunch he wipes them away tenderly, urging her to follow him deep into the villa. He doesn’t let go of her for a moment, speaking softly. “There is something I never told you, either,” he says, ducking into the chamber.

“What’s that?” Rey asks, rubbing her eyes. Her nose clogs her face, distracting as she surveys the room—a tiled floor with a tall ceiling, and an empty pool at its center.

“I discarded the Pennyroyal leaves.”

Rey gapes at him. That was another thing she had forgotten. “So you took it!”

“No, Ahsoka did,” he says, padding to survey a levered iron chute jutting from the wall. He lets go of her hand for a moment to squat down and study the bottom. “I burned it.”
Rey scoffs, looking away, wiping her nose. “Of course.”

“If you are barren,” Ben says carefully, seemingly satisfied with the odd lever as he turns back to her with lifted brow, “why did you keep it?”

“I wasn’t going to.” Rey toys with her fingers, glancing at the painted tile underfoot. “Maz gave it to me and… I panicked. But I never thought I would need it anyway, so I forgot about it.”

He blinks. “You were going to get rid of it?”

“Of course,” she frowns with her whole face, “even if I could have used it, I wouldn’t.”

That figures. Of all the people Ben would suspect to dispose of an unwanted child, he doubts Rey would ever be willing to even entertain the idea, much less be able to follow through with it. Knowing her history, her empathy for the rejected would be too steep an emotion to overcome, even for her own sake.

Relief floods him at the knowledge that they both had the same intentions for the Pennyroyal. But still curious, he asks, “Why?”

“Because I trusted you,” she smiles, a broken thing between them, for they know all-too well where her trust led them that night. Sensing the meaning her worlds hold over him, she lays a hand on his arm, squeezing gently. “I still do.”

He looks at her, letting his gaze sweep over her body. Smiling softly, allowing the pain to pass, he reaches behind him to pull the lever.

Rey jumps as water gushes from the iron gate embedded in the wall, clear rainwater spilling down into the empty pool. She supposes it must be from one of those reservoirs, likely constructed to keep the fresh water in and the stale water out. The excess runoff must slide down the cliffside and into the ocean below.

Ben watches the water level rise, gesturing back towards the way they came. “I think I saw a storage room…”

Understanding his meaning, Rey trots back, finding what he wordlessly predicted would live there. She pulls the perfumed oil into her arms, giving a curious sniff. It smells of potent flowers—locally grown, perhaps? Although a little old, its scent is sweet and cleansing, almost like a rose.

When she returns the water has risen high enough. She slips in, shuddering at the cold as Ben lowers the door and joins her.

Seeing him before her, surrounded to the waist by the water, reminds Rey of the dream again. But the feeling is not a foreboding one as he comes closer, touching his nose to nuzzle her cheek, meeting their lips in a warm, lingering kiss, effortlessly brushing her worries aside.

They bathe together in the Villa Jovis. Ben snags the oil before Rey has the chance, spilling it into his hand. The sweet perfume drips into the water, enveloping them as he soothes it over her skin. A few times his baser instincts throb with passionate intent, but they calm and peter into laughter, into touches, caresses, and stolen brushes of lips, nose, and fingertips.

At one point he massages her breast, lathering it with the emollient, their position having shifted to her floating in the weightless aether above his lap as he sits on his knees in the water.

Rey hums as he kisses her jaw, down her neck, just as he always has, as if nothing has changed.
Each press a quiet testament to something far greater than them both. Acceptance washes over her, his hands cleansing her of her once-secret shame—in body and in spirit.

“I love you,” she murmurs, playing with his wet hair, his damp ears unable to hide from her touch. She blinks away tears as she stares into the sunlit windows above, her throat thick with the impossible joy and relief and hope molding together in her heart.

“I love you, too,” he sighs, leaning into her, breathing in the smell of her shining skin. Never in his life had he risked even the vision of her, and with each word, every touch, he yearns beyond yearning that she knows how nothing, nothing—especially in the case of her womanhood—could ever tear that love away. “Always.”

She manages a smile, wrapping her hands over the globes of his shoulders. He seems persistent to keep his hold on her, ravishing the tender flesh of her neck, so she reclines, letting him have what he wants. “What are we going to do today?” she moans softly, closing her eyes.

“Hm? ‘Do?’” he asks, kissing lower.

Rey wraps her legs tighter around his waist, tugging him closer under the water. The scent of rose clings to him, and for a moment she entertains the thought of staying right here for the rest of the morning.

But this is their last day, and Rey will be damned not to enjoy this time to its fullest. And besides, carnal delights can wait until the evening—she lacks the strength to face them now.

Weaving her fingers into his hair, she pulls his face away and back, snaring him in a quick, invasive kiss. His soft, surprised gasp tickles her, and she separates from him, hopping out of the pool.

Ben lays his hands on the edge, watching her, his lips swollen and brow drawn. “What did you have in mind?”

Rey shrugs, the movement rolling drops down her arms. “Why not go to town for breakfast? I’m sure they have something nice.”

Ben nods, throwing his leg up to follow her out. Not bothering to find towels, they air-dry as they walk to the courtyard, where Rey hung their wet clothes. She reaches out to touch Ben’s dark tunic, pleased by the soft texture blown into the fabric from the ocean wind and island sunshine. But when she touches her own, white stola, she frowns.

“Something wrong?”

“It’s not dry,” Rey huffs.

“It will be before the feast,” Ben assures her, glancing around the beautiful palace garden. Seized by a sudden thought, he marches off, back towards the bedchambers.

“Ben?” Rey asks, padding after him. Her hair drips onto her ankles as it sways.

Ben ducks into one of the chambers they’d passed before, one with tapestries of flowers and small jars of perfumes standing sentinel on the rich-wooden dossier. The room had struck him as distinctly feminine, and for that he is thankful as he tugs open the drawers, finding cloth inside.

Rey gapes. “What..?”
“Well-maintenanced, indeed,” Ben grunts.

“She must have put these here for the winner’s family…” Rey muses, pulling free a soft linen tunica, dyed in the mild color of mint leaves. She pulls it to her nose, smelling deeply, not a whiff of dust to catch.

Ben finds he likes the hue as it contrasts her dark hair, his eyes gleaming. “Try it on.”

She doesn’t hesitate, too enthralled to waste time upsetting herself over these unexpected luxuries. As she steps into the tunica, she can tell the hemming was made for a woman of greater bust and hips than she. But the long sleeves hug her arms comfortably, her shoulders blissfully exposed to vent the heat of her skin, their ends loose and flowing over her wrists.

“It’ll do,” she grins, thumbing the soft skirt. “Wonderfully.”

Humming, Ben kisses the top of her head, laying a hand on her hip. “You look beautiful. But,” he smirks, tweaking her nipple through the tunica, making her jolt, “you may want to wear something underneath it, Puella. Otherwise I may not be able to help myself. And that wouldn’t do in public,” he murmurs huskily, caressing it again, “would it?”

Rey scoffs, brushing his hand away, and smacks his chest for good measure. “Fine. Go get dressed before you catch fire.”

“Too late,” he Huff, failing to conceal a gratified smile.

As he leaves she watches after him, the heat he leaves behind melting her against the wall.

Rey indeed found a fascia and clean subligaculum to wear under the tunica, and a simple cream shawl to wear over her hair. Ben, who dressed in his simple sandals and tunic, consented to return with her to the Villa Jovis before the feast so she could exchange it for her beloved yellow palla—the one Ahsoka gifted her after their wedding.

Now on the road to Capri’s only village, the trees flutter overhead. The paths are wet and muddy, forcing them to walk around large, sopping puddles and murky pits. Rey loses herself to staring at their surroundings, taken by how beautiful the forest looks in the daytime—far better than in the darkness and rain from the night before. Ben, in turn, preoccupies himself with murderous thoughts towards the tenacious pebble in his sandal.

They walk into a town abuzz, men and women of many ages conspiring to clear the square of all but the finest decorations. Oil lamps are hung from ropes, strung from roof to roof, and after a quick meal of unleavened bread and eggs—which their server had stirred and scrambled, creating a fluffy texture that had Rey moaning—they run into none other than the potter, Wexley.

“Hello, you two!” Wexley says, setting down a large box of merchandise, most of them dining-ware. “Glad to see you down here with us. And so early! I’d think you’d be up in the villa until nightfall.”

Ben grunts. Would he if he could.

“Oh, I have something for you,” Wexley grins, wagging a finger at Ben. He turns his back and leans into the box, pulling free a small kylix, and showing it off to them.

Rey covers her mouth, and laughs into her hand.
“Paint is still drying, but I can assure you it’s the first of many. The whole village is tizzied about the stranger from Rome who bested their champions. You won Lady Holdo a good many bets.”

Ben lifts a brow. “Let’s hope they’re discreet.”

“Bah, it’s a small island. New gossip comes in every day. You’ll be old news soon enough; It’s no threat to you and yours, if you don’t mind my saying so. Here,” he says, offering the decorated vase to Rey, “as thanks for the business.”

Rey takes it, folding her lips in a smile. “Thank you. I will treasure it forever.”

Ben politely restrains his scoff. Rey is obviously delighted by the comedy of her husband spawned into a crude representation on a kylix. Of course, he has been painted onto such things before—even made into a doll early in his career—but she needn’t know that.

“Anyway,” Wexley squints. “The denarii Lady Holdo placed won more for Capri than our vendors make in a fortnight. We will have more than enough to pay for tonight’s feast, thanks to you.”

Ben and Rey look to each other, though they shouldn’t be as surprised as they are to hear Lady Holdo do such a thing. She seems a woman of supreme confidence in all she says and does. Still, the notion is rather humbling.

It’s Rey who speaks first. “Where is she now?”

“Overseeing the cooking, I think. But if you want to speak with her, you’d best wait until the festivities. The woman is a menace during preparations.”

“Maybe we can help,” Rey offers. Ben nods beside her, ready and willing to do the same. The energy of the town has set a hellish itch for action into his hands, and if he isn’t distracted soon, he may take his frustrations out on Rey’s new attire.

“The more workers the better, far as I’m concerned. Missus Solo, I saw some of the lady-folk gathering flowers and firewood in that glen,” he points, hairy hand fixed towards the heart of the island. “But if it ain’t challenging enough—”

“It’s perfect,” Rey smiles, holding up a hand. Wexley need say no more; she will never refuse the opportunity to immerse herself in the rich greens and succulent aroma of flora, especially knowing that Egypt’s sands await in the near-future. The idea alone is enough to excite. She turns to Ben, squeezing his arm, handing the kylix to its muse. “Meet here three after noon?”

Ben agrees, his pouted lip making him seem more upset than he is. He watches her flounce off until she is out of sight, snapping out of his languid thoughts when Wexley claps his back, wearing a knowing smirk.

“Come with me. I think I know just the job for you, Master Solo.”

The women of Capri are of many ages, most older than Rey. Among them, she recognizes familiar faces from the Panhellenic Games. With some are small children, either plucking and crushing whatever they pull from the ground or sleeping on their mother’s backs.

They meet her with welcome smiles, though do not seem to know her for her ties to their local
champion. In this Rey discovers a taste of foreign independence from all ties to anything but her own name—and it is a strange flavor.

There is no particular gathering of flowers to pluck from—for that would be too simple, and nature is anything but. As such, Rey treks off separately, into the bright and baking sunlight, her eyes open for any sporting of color.

Moving inland she spots it—a bright touch of blushing pink within the grass. The soil underneath her is soft from rain, the scent of the sea lingering behind her like a shadow as she scales the soft valley slope, avoiding sharp rocks while long grasses hiss against her ankles.

She comes upon a small clump of cacti, their height up to her knees. Carefully, Rey lifts her skirt, sitting to her knees to allow better angle as she carefully pulls free the first flower.

She twirls the stem between her fingers, spinning it for her appraisal. It is a tender little thing, its petals the softest blend of crimson and pearl. It smells sweet, bearing the airy pungency all flowers do, its heaviness tightening behind her eyes, turning into tears.

When she was a young girl of ten, the slave women had told Rey the horrors that awaited her in womanhood. Blood would come from her without ceasing for many days, for many years, until age or death turned her body to stillness and pain. And between this blood, the men would come, would take her flesh and use it for pleasure—or to expand their line.

Naturally when Rey had learned this, she feared the bleeding. To her, blood was life, meant to remain on the inside, where it belonged. But as she grew and dreamed, watched from high windows as the husbands and wives walked alongside one another, she began to discover it. Something distinct called to her from within, a longing married to the dread...

Hope.

Then the blood of life began to mean something new. At the age of thirteen, whereby then most young women received their maidenly-visits, Rey expected it to arrive. Lateness did not mean infertility, she knew, but thirteen became fourteen, then fifteen… By this time Plutt had discovered it, and, in the starving shadows of twilight, before her fellow staff, pointed to her face and said, Barren.

Rey had not cried that night, nor did she any other of its like, where exhaustion and weariness and hunger dragged her alone into sleep’s dark, timeless abyss. But here, in the sunlight, loved, the cries come as soft sobs, the mourning of years stifling thoughts of motherhood, of family, rising to the surface in the lonely Caprician valley.

She clutches the stem in her fist, covering her mouth, and slouches where she sits, the heaviness too much. Thoughts clash inside of her, warring with one another.

She wishes Ben was here with her, here to chase away the despair, and yet she knows nothing he can do will ever take this away. In her rage a rebellious inkling to doubt his sincerity rears its head, fiery tongue condemning her for ensnaring her love into a childless marriage.

Her tears fall hot, flaming down her neck at the memory of his eyes when he had mentioned children. His touch had trembled, his gaze alight with hope and desire—happiness she had so quickly dashed. The voice grows louder, Plutt’s voice, the slave women’s, her own—each one echoing in chorus that she will never give him all he has given her, never see his depthless eyes passed onto a son, or his raven hair cascading down a daughter’s back.

“Abba,” she whimpers, trying to beat the voices down the only way she knows how. Eyes squeezed tightly shut, she holds the flower to her chest, the heart underneath thunderous, throbbing
with terrific, consuming blood. “Please. Please… if Your will must be done, then let this be Your will. I have nothing to give,” she sobs, “but You have given everything. When I need you, you come, so please,” she whispers, “come to me now. Tell me what to do. Please. Say there is a dream for us still…”

When her words fade the sobs lose their power, the hiccupping heave of her chest relaxed into heavy breaths. Her mind, once cloudy, clears. Tears cool and dry on her face, under her brow, her lids dew-heavy as they open, eyes fixing first upon the cactus bed.

A thought takes hold of her, filling her body like clear water. There is no voice, but a still, small feeling, a something brushing over her mind, pulling gossamer threads together into a woven pattern, unfinished and beautiful.

_The cactus grows in dry land, it says. But even barren land can bloom, in time. So trust in the rain, and wait._

Rey’s gaze falls amazed to the flower in her clutch, and a small, mad laugh bubbles out of her gut, the something leaking out of her, leaving an outrageous amity behind. She smells and kisses the soft, pink petals, content in the peace flooding her spirit. There is no doubt in her mind anymore, now that the voices have been pushed far into the shadowy recesses of her psyche, banished; He has answered. She asked, and He answered! Perhaps their dream is waiting for them, after all!

Before she can rise to go and tell Ben what just transpired, a shadow falls over her.

She turns to see the face of Temiri, the boy who led them to the Villa Jovis, his round face made soft by a stoic, thoughtful stare.

Rey relaxes, her voice rasped from the tread of tears. “Hello.”

Without a word, he points down to the flower in her hand.

Noticing a clutch of flowers in his fist, Rey smiles, offering it to him. “Here. You take it. You need it more than I do.”

He accepts it gingerly. While she expected him to add it to his own collection, Rey goes still as Temiri bends over, gently, with fingers small and precise, tucking the stem over her ear.

Rey cups her hand above where it rests beneath the cloth of her borrowed palla. Words fail her when he takes that hand, tugging her until she is on her feet, and leads her back towards the village.

In the town, Ben breathes out a mighty snort, setting down one of the tables. He wipes the sweat from his brow as two men set the next one just beside it, and even more benches to flank them.

By happenstance, his eyes haul upward, where the wind blows in sweet relief from the streets and sparse trees above. The hills and buildings encircle them in a marriage of nature and masonry, the windows lined with rivers of rich, purple flowers. They dance down to meet the crawling ivy, current against current, filling the air with their sweetness.

They make him think of Rey, and he misses her instantly. Perhaps he shouldn’t feel such an encompassing need to be by her side, but then again, why should he not? He is her husband; for too long they have stood, too close and still too far away. And now he knows her heart is out there, aching with lingering pain, much like his own.

Ben sighs. He hopes Rey understands that her infertility will not stop him from wanting her. On the contrary—it is somewhat of a relief. While he does desire a full life with her, to be not just husband
and protector, but entrusted father to her children, children with their faces and their love, the world would never be safe enough for them. At least this way, he will never lose her to childbirth. Or worse, lose her and their child to Snoke.

The very thought makes him nearly shudder. He must clear his thoughts of this. Motioning to the men, he walks back up the path, distracting himself with the work.

It is a peaceful place, moreso than he expected a retreat locale to be. The air is clean and the people are personable, though not invasive—well, excluding that Wexley. With Lady Holdo at the helm, he could almost see himself returning to Capri to purchase land, if and after Rome forgets his name.

As he approaches the border of the town, he sees Rey being led by the hand of that small servant boy. They do not seem to notice him, but he notices them, watching as his wife is taken into the Caprician wilds, towards the heart of the island.

He follows them with sure steps and uncertain dilemma, wondering where they could be going. Old paranoia settles in Ben’s chest like a stone as remembers stories of men using children to lower women’s defenses, to capture them in their vulnerable generosity.

It tightens his fists, priming him, marching him on faster.

Temiri leads Rey through the undergrowth, his path clear to him, but invisible to her. But her heart burns with warmth and surety, and she follows, beholden to its spell until a voice sounds from beyond.

“Come! All of you, come to the water!”

Rey and the child emerge from the treeline, looking down into a shallow ravine, shaped almost like a broken pot. The rain must have risen the water, its clear surface lapping and yet so still, shimmering in the sunlight.

In the swell stands none other than Chirrut Imwe, his smile bright and beckoning as the water at his waist. His clothes and hands wet and dripping, he holds his palms to her, as if seeing her, and a few other scattered listeners—many, Rey recognizes, from the ferry.

“In the water of the Spirit lies our salvation, brothers and sisters. But it is not this water around me, no, it is the love of He who rained it down upon us...”

At his words, a man wades into the water, the sloshing around his body signaling his presence to Chirrut Imwe.

His smile is welcoming, his hands cradling the man in fond embrace. “My friend. My brother. The weight of the world bears heavy on you.”

The man nods solemnly, whispering something.

Chirrut’s voice replies lower, more intimately. By now Rey has descended further, and strains her ears to hear more, to hear him say softly, “There is a god, my friend, One who created the stars, who breathed nothing into everything, who despises hate and evil, yet allows his children to choose, to have faith. And He wants you, my friend. He loves you.”

Suddenly, the man begins to weep, his broad shoulders wracking as fat tears drip into the water.
Ben at last steps through the trees, immediately spotting Rey at the shore of a shallow riverbed. As he does, he hears one of the men in the river calling out, “I tell you all now, as my teacher once told me, and his teacher before him, that those who confess with their mouths that Christ is lord, and baptize themselves with His Spirit, will receive everlasting life. My brother,” he says, holding the weeping man, “do you accept this as truth; take up this vow? When you come up from the water, will you release your fears unto Him?”

“Yes,” the man nods. “I do!”

“Then I baptize you,” Chirrut says, beginning to lower the man into the water, “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit...”

The man closes his eyes, sinking back into the water, only to surface again by the pull of Chirrut’s arms.

The onlookers clap while Ben finds Rey, laying hand on her shoulder. She turns, her eyes red-rimmed. When she recognizes him she throws her arms around his neck, kissing his cheek. He doesn’t ask what is happening—he knows all too well, for the Mandalorian church frowned upon it with fervor as a fruitlessly Gentile practice.

“I’m going to do it,” Rey says softly.

Ben blinks, meeting her eyes. She wants to be baptized? “Why?”

“I’ve never been. I wanted to, when I first believed, but I was alone. And I,” she looks over her shoulder to where Chirrut stands preaching, accepting a younger girl into his welcoming arms, “I feel like I need to. I can feel Him pulling me.”

Considering, Ben rubs a thumb over the soft skin of her arm, where he holds loosely, noticing for the first time the bright bloom nestled over her ear. He cannot say that he does not understand her need for completion of faith, nor can he blame her for her desire to give action to her long-suppressed belief.

Though something gnaws at his gut knowing that she will walk into her faith alone, leaving him behind.

But that is his own choice, and this must be hers. His faith died the day Luke Skywalker held a blade over his neck. The God he once loved showed him nothing but solitude and woe and anger and death, so much death, that He became a void, as distant as a dying star, no longer there, nor shining, if He ever had at all.

“Then... you should go,” he murmurs, releasing her arm.

Rey looks at his face, spotting traces of sadness there, and something even deeper. Taking his hand, she whispers, “Come with me.”

His voice replies heavily. “No.”

Rey folds her lips and nods. She had known before marrying him what the risks were, and that this was one of them; to love a man living in darkness. But still, hope lives on in her, for she has known—and seen in herself—than no one can ever truly belong to the light.

But maybe, someday, he will try to meet her there.

Taking his hand, she kisses his knuckles, turning and stepping—sandals, skirts, and all—into the
water. “Chirrut!” she calls.

His head turns, a pleasantly confused smile embedding craters in his cheeks. “Hello, my sister,” he welcomes, opening his arms to her. He waves his hands towards his body. “Have you come to proclaim your faith, or to renew it?”

“Renew, please,” Rey blushes, his warm and friendly touch resting on her shoulders.

“Ah,” he nods, sightless eyes just missing her own. “What is your name?”

“Rey.”

“Rey,” he closes his eyes, a look of serenity bathing over his face. “A name like the warmth of the sun. I can feel the Spirit surrounding you, sweet, beloved child. You have the soul of a fighter. Your Father delights in you.”

Tears sting in Rey’s eyes, and she sniffs, the words so warm and comforting her heart gasps, grasping onto each one. “I don’t deserve it,” she murmurs, throat closing.

“None of us do.”

She laughs, a short, pitiful scoff, wiping her tears away, but only leaving more water on her face.

“Sometimes love doesn’t need a reason,” Chirrut says soberly, his voice low, only for her, “and neither does God. Let go of your guilt and shame, young Rey. Give it to Him, and let him cleanse you here, today, so that you may go, and walk alone no more.”

Rey nods fervently, threading her fingers together, pressing it against her mouth as gratitude and relief builds up so tightly within her, winding like a coil. She thinks of her mistakes, ones of remorse and others she couldn’t regret—and lets go.

“Rey,” Chirrut calls. “Do you accept Christ as your Lord and savior, as the Son of the living God?”

She breathes in shakily, heart hammering. “I do.”

“Then I hereby baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

In a blink Rey is tipped back, bowed down into the water. Like the endless nothing of the Blue Grotto it engulfs her, swallowing her in cool, lapping arms. Behind closed eyes she feels something within her, neither soft nor hard, yet both. A tightening of will, a surge of strength, a feeling of fullness, raw and powerful.

And, beyond her senses, the flower is taken by the current.

When she surfaces again the crowd’s praise is distant, the sunlight blinding and beautiful. Soggy and dripping, Rey laughs, thanking Chirrut before she hikes out from the listless pull, feeling reborn when she sees Ben standing there, his patient smile sincere, loving arms waiting for her.

Chapter End Notes
[There are a wide variety of factors regarding the female reproductive system and any obstructions to its menstrual cycle. One of these is a lack of sufficient nutrients, which can prevent a woman's bleeding for years, in some cases]

[I honestly have no idea how the Villa Jovis would have filled a bathhouse, since no amount of research could help me find it. So the lever-reservoir system, to my knowledge, is a complete fabrication for the sake of bath smexitimes]

[The history of toys and action-figures dates back way before the invention of plastic. In Ancient Rome, popular sportsmen, especially gladiators, were replicated into stuffed dolls made of fabric, and even some out of terracotta and clay]

[The purple flowers growing on the walls of buildings are called Bougainvillea. The Bougainvillea are native to Capri and are popular for their bright design and abundance of small, coagulated blossoms]

[The pink flower found on the cactus by Rey is inspired by this flower native to Capri, which apparently has no name (at least according to Google)]

[Baptism has been a long-standing symbol for salvation in the church, for both Catholics and Christians. However, the interpretation of baptism is varied depending on which branch of Christianity you belong to. While some believe baptism is a requirement, others see it more as a symbolic vow to uphold religious values. But whatever they believe, the message stays the same in that Christ must be accepted into one's heart and spiritual life]
They return to the Villa Jovis by the time the festival preparations are complete.

Rey exchanges the hanging clothes, now arid, for the borrowed ones, suspending them to drip off the water from the baptism. She strips off her undergarments as well, but does not bother bathing again.

Sitting in the chamber before the generous vanity of rich, dark wood, Rey reclines in her intimate linens, heavy-lidded as her husband combs through her drying hair with lengthy, soothing strokes.

“It’s longer,” he notes, breaking the silence.

Rey can feel it, the slightest of differences, where the strands fall and tap her skin in new, ticklish places. She turns her head, speaking over her shoulder with a coyish lilt. “Because my Zuji feeds me well.”

“Mm,” he hums, a smile pulling to his lips as he presses them against her hair, her nape, a massive hand reaching to squeeze the soft, budding flesh of her rounded hip. His nose pokes her jaw as he rumbles contentedly against her throat. “I live to satisfy.”

Forgetting the combing, Rey turns in her seat to accept his kiss, breathing deeply. Her fingers brace his chin, leading him to her lips.

Ben sighs against her mouth, his hands beginning to wander. With each silent touch he feels something new inside of her, can see a fire in her eyes, smoldering in wait. Was it the water, he wonders, the tears she shed, or even himself?—perhaps it was all of them. But with her tender touch and reassuring kiss, he cannot think more deeply than relief that her despair has subsided. For now.

They dress for the festival, Ben still in his tunic, dawning the dark pallium cape Ahsoka insisted he bring. Rey, in turn, slips into her familiar stola and bright palla, and ties ribbon strips to fashion her hair above her head, leaving down the hood of her shawl to expose her slender neck.

When they reach the door, Ben kneels, stealing her ankle into his warm palm and slipping the sandalia onto her feet. Before she can forget, Rey races back into the bedchamber, returning with his laurel crown. While at first he regards it with disdain, he bows his head, allowing her to place it on his head. His reward is a smile and a kiss, and Rey clasps his hand, not letting go even as they return to the village, the sky clotted with bright, milky clouds.

The main square, now fully decorated, writhes with people, perhaps ten times as many as the workers, each one set on flitting socially about or claiming their seats among the long rows of tables. Ben, at a glance, guesses there to be two-hundred people, at least.
Three young children skirt by, a boy and two girls. Rey recognizes the boy and calls out to him. He hears her and waves, but does not stop, chasing the girls to the skirts of none other than Lady Holdo—the very woman responsible for this grandeur.

Rey tugs on Ben’s hand. “I’m going to say hello.”

Ben, whose gaze had fixated on the serving wine, nods to her. “Come find me when you’re done.”

She smiles and forges on without him, catching Holdo’s eyes. The woman grins, her expression kind yet lingering with that familiar shadow of weariness, hands folding expectantly as Temiri stands beside her. “Rey. So good to see you. How is the villa?”

“It’s perfect,” Rey grins, bowing her head. “I’ve never seen such a beautiful house. The gardens are lovely.”

“Thank you,” Lady Holdo gleams, her elegant hand stroking the boy’s dark hair. “Temiri and I worked that garden all Spring. He may not say it, but he loves flowers.”

A certain impishness threads their gaze as Rey and the boy lock eyes. “So do I.”

Temiri smirks, turning his attention to his feet.

“Is he your son?” Rey asks, meeting Holdo’s gaze once more. The boy is obviously close to her, and from Holdo’s background Rey might assume he very well could be her own—After all, it’s not uncommon for women to bear children and be forced to give them away, only to reclaim them as slaves shortly after.

“In a way,” Lady Holdo says. “I adopted him into my house from a horse-driver. The man was a fiend, beating him and those young girls, there.” She gestures to the ones Rey saw earlier, her voice saddened. “I couldn’t leave them.”

“Have you ever had children?” Rey asks, feeling brazen now.

Unoffended, Lady Holdo shakes her head. “I never got around to it. But,” she smiles, gently pinching Temiri’s ear, making him giggle and shrink, “that doesn’t mean I can’t love someone else’s. Wouldn't you agree?”

Rey nods, the light of late afternoon casting a halo around Lady Holdo’s crown of golden hair, capturing her eyes. “Of course.”

Someone calls Holdo’s name, turning her head. “Excuse me,” she bows, “it seems I’m needed elsewhere. You and Master Solo are to be seated at the head of the table. The feast begins at sundown. Come, Temiri…”

At her command the boy follows her away, trailing after her rich skirts. Rey’s eyes trail after her, her heart sinking into her stomach as she retreats.

A thought dawns in Rey’s mind as she orbits the bulk of the crowd, passing under the shaded rooftops of nearby shops. Flowers and ivy cascade around her, the fountains and reservoirs sparkling in the sun, the limestone roads illuminated—as though they were in some grand palace of ancient kings.

Her feet lead her aimlessly, eyes scouring for the tall shape of her husband, as the thought begins to grow, blooming within her, all of their stems leading back to Lady Holdo. The woman still remains a mysterious figure to Rey. Now, however, her suspicion has fallen substitute to particular intrigue,
one that spawns even more reaching roots and tendrils, connecting with everything else.

A catch of her eye betrays Ben to her, his back leaning against the walls of one of the buildings. His expression seems almost bored, his hands occupied with chalices.

Rey goes to him and, when he notices, Ben stands upright, offering one to her. She takes it mechanically, meeting his eyes with lips pressed firm. “You said Lady Holdo knew your mother.”

Ben might have been taken aback by this, but instead lifts a curious brow. “Yes.”

“And they used to correspond with letters.”

“Yes,” he says again, considering her. “Before she was exiled. That’s what she said.” Seeing something beginning to brew in Rey’s eyes, he leans closer to hear her over the chatter and laughter around them. “Why bring this up now?”

Rey wets her lip, the tender webs of ivy weeds fashioning together in her mind. “I’ve been thinking… What if your mother knew about the Resistance?”

Ben scowls. “Rey—”

“I mean it,” she presses, her voice dropping, pursuing every word in earnest as they spill from her mouth. “Holdo knew your mother, and told us that she traveled constantly, sending letters…”

He rises to full height, as if it will distance himself from her thoughts—or perhaps his own—running a hand through his hair. With folded cheek he measures Rey’s reasoning, the hard doubt in his mind beginning to crack like stone. But still, he says, “It doesn’t matter now. She could be dead.”

“Maybe not,” Rey urges, holding his arm, eyes boring into his. “There might be a way to find her.”

Ben’s dark gaze tosses between hers, lips tight and brow taut. “…How?”

“Poe Dameron.”

He scoffs, raising the chalice to his lips.

Now Rey frowns. “Lady Holdo knows him—what if your mother does, too? What if they all knew each other once, before the banishment? What if he knows where she is?”

Ben swallows his wine, shaking his head, his rising anger turning the drink red in the skin of his neck. “This isn’t his business.”

“You’re right,” Rey replies, holding him tighter, “but he is our business. We owe him a debt; and Finn said that we are Resistance, that there are ties between all of us, now. Surely he would tell us where she is if he knew.”

“If he knew.”

Rey scowls.

Ben’s shoulders fall. Pain knifes through his chest at the thought of his mother alive, of being with her again. Though his heart still weighs heavy from the loss of her, of all he left behind—and now with Rey, and knowing she could never bear them children of their own—there still lives a seedling of despicable hope in his chest that, maybe, he really could see her again, if only once more.
There is something else, too, in Rey’s eyes. A hope more fiery and fervent than his own. Could it be that she seeks to unite him with Leia again to make up for some ineptitude of her own chance at motherhood?

The mere thought of that would drive him to madness. But even so, he cannot deny the truth that she speaks.

“What makes you so sure?” he asks softly.

“That night, at the revelry,” Rey says, the memory playing before her, “when Poe Dameron approached me, he said your name. Your real name.”

Ben blinks, his frown dashed into a blank stare.

“It didn’t make sense to me at the time, but it’s what kept me from leaving you,” Rey murmurs, her hand sliding down to hold onto his fingers. “I don’t know how he knew your name, but he did. How can we call that a coincidence?”

He goes still, his mind whipping against every inch of his body, a dullness of senses washing over him as he finally understands. He takes Rey’s hand and squeezes, as if letting go would leave him scattered in the winds.

Ben Solo, then Kylo Ren, had always disdained Poe Dameron. The chariot racer who’d always looked at him with some secret knowing—violating, disrespecting his shallow privacy in ways he could never explain. But to hear this now, to know that the man may have not only known who he was, but that his mother lived, fuels him with a heady ferment of hate, regret, and relief, leaving him drunk and swaying on all that implies.

Rey’s hand against his chest steadies him again, and Ben’s eyes snap into focus once more, sharper than needles. The truth is clear to him, now, clearer than a moonlit sky in the darkness of his determined gaze. “She’s alive.”

Nodding, Rey murmurs, “So what do we do?”

Ben folds his lips, pausing for a moment, before he feels the strategy come back to him, dawning like the morning within his soul. “When we return, I’ll send for him with a message. If he knows where she is, we will send a letter before she can move again, telling her where we’re going. Then we run.”

Rey smiles, happiness seizing her to see her husband returned to his sense of certainty, the set of his jaw and shoulders enamoring. Faith spreads in her as she envisions a life where his mother has returned to him; she may never be able to provide him a family, but perhaps this could, in its way, lighten the burden on his soul.

Standing on her toes, she places a chaste kiss to his throat, not caring who sees. “Everything is going to be alright, Ben.”

He offers her the smallest smile and kisses the back of her hand, leading them back towards the square.

And dares to hope again.
The tables, organized into a swirling ring on the outer rim of the main square, circle a large pit of firewood. With the sun brandishing rust and rosey talons across the clouds, birthing shadows out of buildings, the tall, familiar form of the Hellanodikai marches forward, his voice booming throughout the plaza.

“A call to Capricians and all ashore!” he shouts. “Pray come and celebrate the annual feast in bountiful harvest!”

Rey and Ben, on the outskirts of the crowd, jump when thin fingers clutch their arms from behind.

“There you are,” Lady Holdo grins, pushing them forward as Hellanodikai continues his rabble. “Come on, it’s time for the victor to light the pyre.”

Both relent to her, their eyes scanning over the expectant and curious gazes of the crowd as Holdo excuses them through it, splitting aside everything in her path to make way. Hellanodikai accepts the ignited torch from a servant, extending it to Ben when at last the couple is brought before the pyre.

For once, the man’s voice is quiet, even gentle. “If you would.”

Ben considers the torch before taking it in hand, the flames dancing in his dark eyes, glinting off the shining leaves of the laurel crown upon his head. His gaze looks out upon the eager, impatient crowd, their eyes on him and the woman at his side, her expression betraying her slight embarrassment and blushing pride. With a nod from her he lifts high the torch, accepting their cheers as he turns, tossing the flame into the kindling.

It catches quickly, spiraling smoke and embers into the darkening sky as Hellanodikai lifts his hands. “Let the feasting begin!”

As civilians and visitors scramble to their seats, Lady Holdo takes Rey’s arm, tugging her to the head table. Rey does not resist her as they climb the slight steps onto the elevated platform. Once there, Ben is sat upon the middle, Rey at his right hand, and the lady at his left.

Noticing Rey’s rapid glance along the crowd, Ben reaches out and takes her hand, stoking it with his thumb. When she smiles back at him, his restless thoughts finally find a moment of quiet. Yes, this is what he desires—to have her by his side, head high and proud for all to see.

The food is indeed plentiful as the servants bring the first of many dishes to their table. Rey avoids the jealous glares from below in favor of taking a ripe quince for herself, and—only at Lady Holdo’s surety that there will be plenty to go around—a couple more.

Ben bites into the tough rind of a pear, practically starving. He doesn’t spare much in terms of grabbing the rough and gristled meat from the oncoming trays, helping himself to choice beef and venison. Rey, tempted by the salty scents, takes fish, and nothing else. Even when Ben offers her some of his own, the scent of meat is strangely off-putting tonight. She waves off his concern, blaming it on her frayed nerves.

Dessert eventually comes, breaking into the silent gorge of eating. Occasionally Rey taps Ben’s legs with her feet, managing to pull a small smile from him. He kicks her back gently, the two of them locked in quiet play until the final tray is brought before them.

Rey’s eyes widen into saucers as she rises, hovering to get a good look. A tray of cakes, small and plump like cheese, drizzled with honey and gleaming slices of peach, meet her hungry gaze. She takes one between her fingers and bites into it, eyes fluttering shut as sweet bliss coats her tongue,
enveloping her belly in warmth.

As the feasting begins to draw to a close, a man comes and whispers into Holdo’s ear. She nods and waves him off, and he disappears into a side street, unaware as Ben watches after him.

Rey blinks at her, studying the woman’s tightly-focused face, and nudges Ben. His mouth is full of dough and honey when he looks questioningly back at her, only to see her raise her brow and nod towards Lady Holdo, a baited gleam in her eye.

Ben swallows thickly, repressing a tired sigh as he regards Lady Holdo. “Madam,” he murmurs, the polite address intriguing his wife all the more. “You mentioned that you knew my mother.”

“Leia?” Holdo affirms, wiping her hands on her napkin. “Of course. We were neighbors when we were children. I’ve known her all my life.”

“And you wrote letters to her.”

“Yes. Often.”

Ben’s gaze turns to stone. “About the Resistance?”

Holdo pauses, napkin snared in her jeweled fingers. Then, carefully, “When the situation called for it.”

Rey and Ben exchange a hopeful glance, her hand bracing against his arm as she draws the woman’s gaze to her. “Lady Holdo… Do you think she knows Poe Dameron?”

“The chariot racer?” She scoffs, laughing as she tosses the cloth onto the table, reaching for her wine. “It’s possible. Our affairs introduced her to a lot of people, especially Resistance members. Why do you ask?”

As she drinks, Ben’s countenance darkens, strained with the encompassing need to know more—as much as possible. “We have business with him. He could help us find her.”

Lips stained red, Holdo trains her gaze on him.

Just then, the flight of a lyre’s strings begins to play, fast and strong with marching percussion and clamoring discs. A horn and flute join in as well, the sound of the instruments bouncing off the surrounding village walls. With them enters a line of men and women, their feet almost hovering off the ground as they circle the blazing pyre, laughing with arms interlocked. A woman trails at the end of the chain, waving a handkerchief.

The attention of the head table is torn onto them, ensnared by the flutter and stomp of feet against cobblestone, the chorus of synchronized clapping and whoops from the crowd as many begin to sing.

Ben recognizes the tune immediately—for it was one oft performed at the occasional gatherings his father brought him to in youth. Very few times since then has he heard music beyond the walls of Snoke’s palace.

The thought sinks like a stone in his gut.

Rey’s jaw parts in slight, awe bouncing along with the people below as they spin around the fire, broad smiles on their faces. Some of the people rise from their tables, breaking in to join the line, passing them step for step, never missing a beat.
She claps with the crowd, lightness gathering in her heart. “What are they doing?” she calls above the din.

Ben leans closer to her, his breath warm and oaky from lingering wine. “Ormos,” he answers. “A dance.”

As he replies, the men and women dance together before becoming a full line once more, the men stepping towards the fire, kicking their legs into the air while the women clap and twirl behind them.

Rey smiles coyly up at him. “Can you do that?”

He raises a brow, but does not answer.

Soon enough the song ends, the gathered crowds clapping and cheering for the dancers. It is then that a woman in fine silks and a modest crown of ivy steps forward, led by the Hellanodikai. He lifts the crown from her head and holds it up, showing it to the crowd, before tossing it into the fire.

“What is he doing?” Rey asks.

This time it is Lady Holdo who responds, speaking around Ben’s obstructive torso. “Every year we have a competition in the dances. Whoever kicks the longest in the Bibasis wins the crown.”

“That’s all?” Ben frowns.

Lady Holdo smiles. “That’s all.”

“I want to try,” Rey pipes up, turning their heads. Already she’s begun to gather her skirts, navigating her way down the steps. Ben watches inanely after her as she walks away, gazing back at him fondly with impish eyes. “You’re not the only one who can win crowns, Ben Solo!”

Ben chuckles, fixed on her swaying hips as she goes to join the line, an indescribable warmth burning in his chest.

“She’s very strong willed,” Holdo mentions idly, bringing the cup to her lips. “Tell me, how did the two of you meet? You don’t seem like the type to own slaves.”

He considers her for a moment, then, “It was an unfortunate circumstance.”

“Hm. And now?”

Scoffing, Ben turns his attention back to the small line of dancers. The Hellanodikai himself seems to be teaching Rey the necessary steps.

Still he feels Lady Holdo’s eyes on him, and pressed for answer, can find none. While Rey’s presence in his life has changed everything he thought he was, or would become, the looming threat of Snoke has never left them. First it was the status of their virtue, to partake or to die—but even when their choice had been taken from them, love had lain hidden in the ashes. Now, at least, one threat is over and done. Now it is their lives alone, every breath like the sift of sand through a shallow hourglass, time dragging them closer and closer to the end.

He toys with the slender stalk of his chalice, voice quiet. “She was a gift.”

“Again, I’ll ask you,” Holdo laughs, leaning onto his arm with a motherly pat, “‘And now…?”’
Perhaps her laughter is infectious—or perhaps it is merely the wine—but a rueful chuckle rises within him. “‘Now?’ She’s everything.”

Lady Holdo studies him, humming to herself, as though answering her own unspoken question. Her knowing eyes gleam in the dark, flickering with firelight as they scour his face.

“Ben,” she murmurs, squeezing his arm.

Her serious tone draws a worried lip over his chin. “Yes?”

“I don’t believe in much. But I do believe that you and your wife were brought to this island for a reason.” Her dark gaze hardens, obsidian in the dusk. Her voice begins to drown as the crowd claps, and music starts to play. “I want to help you. I want to believe that Leia is alive. And if she is, you should know that her spirit changed when you disappeared. She’s not the woman you once knew.”

“What do you mean?” he presses, glaring down at her.

But Holdo does not answer, her arm being taken by one of her servants as he hurries her off—bound to whatever chore might come next.

Ben huffs, now left alone at the table, tired of all of these pointless dramatics. But his mind is soon stolen away from the dark clouds of his thoughts by a familiar, slender form, cloaked in bright firelight.

Below, Rey hones her focus onto her feet, following the hearty rhythm of the drums as she taps her foot to the stone.

The need for balance spins her in circles, as it does for many of the others. Children screech and laugh and fall to the stone, dizzy and elated and bemused by loss. Men and women alike tease one another, pushing and playfully shoving, some drunk, some not. But none of them can distract her from her course as the Bibasis gains in speed. The toes of her sandalia kiss cobble again and again, each round only lengthening the ridiculous smile on her face.

Never before has she done anything like this—felt such lightness in her shoulders and boundless energy in her legs and feet—and before she can lose herself entirely to the feeling, a familiar voice cries out from behind.

“We have our winner!”

Rey stops and looks up, dismayed. Had she done something wrong?

The Hellanodikai steps forward, accepting a new ivy crown from a nearby servant. His pitch eyes lock with hers. “What was your name again, Miss?”

Her throat swallows her stomach, understanding seizing her fully. “Rey,” she stammers. “Rey Solo.”

Hellanodikai trades a look with the servant that could be considered suspicious, but otherwise holds the crown of leaves above her head. “It would seem we have a marriage of titans on our humble soil. Never matter—here is your prize.”

Rey bows into the crown, feeling the weight and gentle pricking of stems as the cheer of the crowd falls around her, transforming into the words, “dance, dance, dance!” She gazes at them, heat creeping from the soles of her feet to the tips of her ears.
“Go on, then!” Hellanodikai urges with a wave of his paw. “Dance!”

Rey can only look around, bewildered as hundreds, maybe thousands of eyes train onto her. They surround her like locusts, swarming her vision in a storm of drums and harps and reeds and clear black sky.

Until she sees him.

Rey’s eyes lock with Ben’s across the sea, the warmth of his gaze pinning her against the heat of the fire at her back. His expression is patient and observant, watching, waiting to see what she will do.

Strengthened by him, invigorated by something more, she takes a breath, and lifts her arms.

Achingly slow are her movements, the music pausing to match. From above, Ben leans forward in his seat, his humor melted away into rapture as she moves, her hands weaving tenderly through the air, hovering over her head, up, up, and down again.

Rey breathes out, balancing the music in her hands. The pitch of the reeds hums like the low desert sand in the shifting wind, the curl of tune like the coil of a serpent, the steady timbre of the drum like a spent lover’s heartbeat in the night. With closed eyes she lets the song carry her down, drowning in her ears like overlapping waves as the fire roars all around her, shrouding her in its fiery wings.

When she opens her eyes again the music is finished, the world only the two of them—parted, but never alone.

In a blink the music crashes back to life, the spell of the slowness at last dissipated. People crowd her now, touching her arms, her shoulders, praising and condemning her for her strange dancing. But soon enough they leave her alone, off spinning in their circles again.

“Congratulations,” a deep voice rumbles.

Rey turns, smiling up into the intense gaze of her husband. She smirks up at him, heat pooling deep in her belly at the broiling, and oh-so-familiar, look of darkness in his eyes, flitting from hers to the crown on her head.

“Thank you,” she bows.

When she rises Ben holds his hand upright, his fingers pressed tightly together, gaze never once leaving her face. She studies it for a moment before looking around, seeing other couples pressing their palms together and circling one another in a single direction, and then switching to the other.

Finally understanding, Rey offers him a cheeky grin, and presses her palm to his. It’s warm and solid against her hand as they begin to walk in a slow wheel, their steps measured and even with the people around them.

They all fade into blurs of shouting and laughter when he smiles, trading hands with her. Rey laughs, hopping with the bouncing jolt of the music, unable to help it. She had never thought herself capable of dancing—how much more of a shock to see that her stoic, lumbering wall of a husband had such light feet!

Before the song can end he captures her hand in his, pulling her flush against him, still swaying as his naked palm roams over her back, his lips tickling the sensitive flesh of her ear, voice low and sumptuous. “If there is a God, then you are definitely made in His image, mea Puella,” he growls.
Rey giggles, surrendering to his hold over her. A blush creeps across her cheeks under his
grandiose proclamations; he looks at her with such worship, as if he truly could think she were a
goddess. The notion alone makes her face heat all the more.

“Master Solo!”

Ben and Rey halt their unscripted dance, finding Wexley at the source of Ben’s call. He dodges the
weaving crowd to reach them, sweat on his brow.

“I heard you were leaving tomorrow,” he pants, extending his sweaty palm. “I just wanted to say
my farewell, in case I missed you.”

Rey smiles, holding onto Ben’s arm as he stretches forth the other, stiffly shaking the man’s hand.
“We’re grateful for your help.”

“We wouldn’t have found Lady Holdo without you,” Rey adds.

If Wexley’s face weren’t already red, then it would be now. He smiles sheepishly, glancing away
from them. “Ah, well. It’s nothing really. Just—don’t be a stranger. Either of you.” He nods to
them both, politely taking and kissing the back of Rey’s hand. “And if you’re ever looking to
decorate with some choice pieces, you know where to find me.”

“Of course,” Rey smirks, trading a knowing glance with Ben. Then, “Where’s Lady Holdo?”

“Oh, she went off to see Madam Mothma. Milady always oversees her nightlies. They should be
back at the villa, I think…”

Ben takes Rey’s hand and squeezes it, tugging her to follow. “Thank you.”

Rey waves back at Wexley before Ben leads her beyond the throng of dancing civilians, back onto
the town streets. The sound fades and quiet blankets them, crickets abuzz among the leafy shadows
as the buildings grow sparse and the stars plentiful.

With her eyes trained ahead, Rey’s voice bounces softly off the tree trunks. “Did she say anything
to you?”

Taking the inside of his cheek between his teeth, Ben eyes her askance. “She might know where
my mother is.”

“How can you be sure?”

He looks away, into the darkness. “…I’m not.”

The answer isn’t satisfying, but Rey doesn’t press, following him down the shaded path until Lady
Holdo’s villa comes into view. The servant answers and lets them in without pomp, his gaze weary
and shadowed. The dogs greet them with flat ears, their tails trembling between their legs, small
whines leaking from behind closed chops.

Rey glares down the darkened hall, hackles raising. “Something’s wrong.”

Ben walks close to her, his eyes sharp. In their time together, he has learned to trust her intuition, so
they follow the muted servant with measured steps until they are finally led into an impressive
bedchamber deep within.

Inside, Lady Holdo sits with head in her hands, the blind man, Chirrut Imwe, beside her.
And upon the bed—the stiff, wakeless form of Madam Mothma.

Rey holds a hand over her mouth, her tremulous whisper warm between her fingers. “Oh, no…”

Lady Holdo looks up, her eyes red-rimmed. “You two,” she says, wiping her nose and rising swiftly to her feet. “Please, I—”

“Amilyn,” Chirrut murmurs, reaching out, his hand cupping her arm. “Who’s there?”

“Forgive me,” Ben says, hushed and fast, his gaze falling upon the dead woman. “We didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“It’s alright, Ben,” Lady Holdo sighs—though it sounds like a whimper—walking around the bed and ushering them slowly out. Chirrut follows behind her, shutting the door. The woman seems to scramble desperately for her manners, for control. “What was it you needed?”

Rey presses a hand over her unsteady heart, eying Chirrut, who’s serene gaze speaks clearly to her exactly what his purpose in that room, in this house, must have been all along.

“Our ship departs tomorrow,” Ben reminds Holdo, breaking Rey’s trance. “I came to know what you’ve been hiding from us.”

“I’m not hiding anything,” the woman scowls, her voice harsh and quiet and filled with hurt. “I’ve told you the truth. I don’t know where Leia is, or if Poe Dameron knows her.”

Ben towers over her now, his gaze sharper than steel, voice low, dangerous. “But you know what happened to her.”

Lady Holdo withstands his pressure for several long moments, the throb of oil lanterns beating against her sallow skin. At last she sighs, looking down at her feet. “Your mother is a strong woman. But when she lost you both, she… lost her faith, as well. I couldn’t just stand by. I had to do something. Something to give her life purpose again.”

“You said she changed,” Ben fumes, his frustration with this woman simmering just beneath the surface of his skin. “How?”

“I recruited her,” Holdo admits at last, her worried lip trembling. “Alright? It wasn’t Han’s death that sent her roaming—it was me. After I was banished, I…” Tears gather on the rims of her eyes, anger swelling deep in her throat. “…I lost her. I have no idea where she is, or if she’s still alive. She could have been captured, killed... and it’s all my fault.”

Ben takes a step back from the weeping woman, glancing to Rey. “You were right,” he murmurs, nodding to her. “She knew about the SPQR. About the Resistance. About everything.”

Rey wishes she could manage a word of encouragement, but the dead woman lingers behind her eyes, rendering every syllable into cool cinders. “Now we just have to find her.”

“I wish I could help you more,” Holdo laments, shame pushing her shoulders down. “But now that Mon Mothma is gone, there is nothing I can do.”

“What do you mean?” Rey asks.

With a deep sadness in her eyes, Lady Holdo takes Rey’s hand, pressing firmly down upon it. “When the Rebellion began, she was always there. She started so much—her efforts would have set the very empire on fire.” She laughs, a distant, empty thing. “But the flame… will die on this
island with me. Unless you take it with you.”

Rey looks up, meeting the woman’s earnest gaze. “What do you mean?”

“You…” she pats Rey’s hand once, gently, turning her attention to Ben as well. “Both of you. You are the spark that will ignite the flame that will burn this empire down. I have to believe that.”

Ben frowns, his eyes flitting to the door, where an old legend lies dead. “You would be placing your faith in the wrong person,” he says, his voice rasping with a gentleness Rey recognizes, a tenderness normally reserved for Ahsoka. “I have no loyalty to the Resistance, or to Rome. Not anymore.”

“Is it your loyalty that you lean so heavily upon, Master Solo?” Chirrut asks, looking over Ben’s shoulder. “Or is it your fear?”

Ben draws a brow at the man, his fists clenched and chest swelling indignantly at the question. “Our business on Capri is finished,” he grunts, bowing his head to Lady Holdo. “I’m grateful for what you’ve done.”

Rey looks after him as he turns on his heel, gesturing for her to follow. She does at length, casting a mournful gaze over her shoulder. “Thank you both,” she murmurs, trailing Ben back through the tablinum. A heaviness burrows into her chest like worms knowing that it is unlikely they will ever cross paths again. Lady Holdo will be too busy with funeral preparations to concern herself with them; She wishes she had said goodbye to Temiri.

Just before she can pass through the curtain, Lady Holdo’s voice calls after her. “Rey?”

Rey stops, sensing Ben pause just beyond, waiting and listening for her. She turns and accepts Lady Holdo with open arms, clasping the woman tightly to her. When they part she notices something in the woman’s hands—the collection of scrolls she had seen only days before.

“Best to pass down what we know,” Holdo smiles, offering the bound parchment to her.

Speechless, Rey accepts the papers, managing a watery smile. “Thank you. Thank you for everything you’ve done for us.”

“Well,” Holdo grins, a contrite squint in her red eyes. The skin at their corners bunch, just like they had when first they met. The woman leans a little closer, her voice conspiratorial. “It wasn’t all selfless, you know.”

Rey laughs with her, unable to find the words, holding the scroll close.

Hesitantly, Lady Holdo reaches out and strokes Rey’s hair, the kindness in her touch only deepening the wide crevice in Rey’s heart. “You be careful out there,” the woman urges gently. “Make sure he doesn’t get into too much trouble.”

Rey nods, finding the strength to break away. “I will. I promise.”

The lady folds her hands in front of her, watching as the young woman goes, disappearing through the opaque curtain.

A few moments pass before Chirrut joins her, his hands wrapping firmly around his staff. “The strongest hearts are forged though fire,” he says. “‘As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.’”
Amilyn Holdo turns away, her feet heavy as they lead her back to the bedchamber of her oldest, dearest friend—the genesis of their purpose, silent forever more—and sighs:

“I hope you’re right.”

They nestle into each other beneath the stars, the cool wind breathing softly over their moonlit skin.

Ben had taken initiative to push together a few of the chaise seats out onto the terrace of the Villa Jovis—with Rey’s blessing. They lay upon it together, casting their crowns aside. The sky is beautiful tonight, the sound of the sea calm and soothing, and she wouldn’t dare miss a moment more of the peace it offers her.

Her husband, of course, doesn’t mind in the slightest, too preoccupied with holding her in his arms, savoring the silken thread of her hair between his fingers. It is the only thing pushing away the thoughts of what awaits them tomorrow, the doubts and fears swirling deep within him.

Rey turns to meet his eyes, countless stars reflected in the darkness, the light of the moon casting ambient shadows across his stern features. Quietly, with their secret gentleness, she leans into him, brushing a thumb over his lip as she whispers, “Make me forget.”

Determination sharpens his brow and he relents, bowing into her words with the softest kiss, probing her, his hand sliding down over her breast to her waist, moving aside the folds of her stola, wanting what lies beneath to make him forget, too.

Filled with sudden urgency Rey shifts, pitching her leg over his lap to straddle his hips, taking his face in her hands. She kisses him swiftly, thoroughly, invading him with single-minded purpose, excavating his desire with her own.

Ben moans weakly, giving in to the caress of her fingers in his hair, against his neck, his cheeks, his ears—such precious little touches, each one pulling him further and further from that which surrounds them. He returns the favor with drifting hands, inching them underneath her clothing to take her in his grasp, squeezing, moving her against his already hardening member.

Rey breaks from his lips, crossing her arms over her body to pull away her stola, removing the rest for his starving gaze. She hovers over him for only a moment, savoring the worship, the stars in his eyes, before descending once again, eager for more—always more—of him.

Sliding his palms up her naked back, Ben reclines, relaxing into her passion with a slow intensity. She tastes of fruits and spices and honey, ambrosia on her lips, nectar on the tip of her tongue, a feast for him and him alone.

Growing impatient, Rey parts, her face flushed in the darkness as her hands scramble into his skirt, pulling him out and stroking with tightly-clenched fingers.

Ben huffs, his head falling before he snaps it back, taking vengeance on the hot landica under his thumb, already so wet and swollen for him. At this Rey gasps, bucking into his hand, the pressure of the day and his tenderness already so very near to the surface.

The motion slips his finger inside of her and she whines into his neck, the warm, blushing flesh already beginning to sprout a fine layer of sweat and scent. Ben hums thoughtlessly, thrusting it into her before adding a second, the pulse of her walls and sounds of her wet flesh echoing in his
throbbing cock, calling to him.

With a slight twist of her hips Rey can feel the hard muscle of his body everywhere, senses beyond all rational thought that his hand has cupped behind her neck, cradling her closer to him as he robs her of all sense. The cool night is set on fire from his touch, and her hold on him falls loose as she goes to embrace him, arms winding around his shoulders, surrendering all to him.

His erection now trapped between them, Ben thrusts weekly against her stomach, her heat just within reach. He feels her begin to clench and rubs harder, as fast as he dares with this dwindling time between them. Rey whines softly, her release breaking within her, smoothing through her body like spilled wine. Shocks of it tremble her, make her pliant against him as he ducks, seeking her lips for a searing kiss.

Ben moans into her mouth, her love sticky on his fingers as he wipes them against his thigh, shuffling off the last of his clothes. Regaining her sense, Rey kisses him, molesting the sensitive tips of his lips with her tongue, making him shudder, his eyes flutter closed in rapture. “Rey…”

She caresses down the skin of his neck to his bare chest, past its peaks and further still, his flesh hot and tight under her palm, his breathing labored. Their eyes meet in the quiet darkness, glittering with scattered light and loud silence as she moves over him, guiding him into her.

He groans mutely, lips parting as the sheath of her engulfs him, surrounding him with thoughtless peace and overwhelming need. With fascination he watches the dancing pulse of her throat, the heavy swell of her modest breast bringing her perked nipples closer to his dark, ravenous eyes. They consume her as she begins to rock, to ride him with persistent, rolling hips, rendering him helpless to her every whim.

The moon halos her, illuminating her skin with ghostly light, casting shadows over her hands as they brace against his chest. He grasps her waist to balance her, to bring her wrath down upon him, to lose himself within her. They find rhythm this way, an even tempo of meeting skin and breathless gasps as pleasure begins to spike and gather in their blood.

“Mn, ah, Rey,” he gasps, twitching inside of her, madness on his tongue. He looks down between them, watching her swallow him, taking, giving, loving him. His voice scatters into whispers. “I’m close…”

Rey nods distractedly, closing her eyes to lose herself to the feeling of him within her, the pressure of his passion and weakened timbre of his wanting voice dragging her closer to the precipice. With determination she plants hands on his shoulders and arches into him, her head bowing back to ride him faster, every hard thrust knocking breath after breath from her throat.

Ben moans, falling into her, his hands engulfing her back as he takes a breast into his mouth, lapping and suckling the tender skin, rolling her under his tongue. Rey keens, her fingers transforming into claws as the pleasure wrings through her core, melting her bones. The sound of it, the feel of her shrouding him, is too much for Ben to bear. He grunts, hot breath slicing between her breasts as he comes, crushing her to him and burying his face into her supple skin.

The desperate clasp of his arms ends Rey, the heat and caress of his seed deep within her shattering all the pleasure they built together into crystalline shards of release, flooding her mind with its cool relief and sluggish exhaustion. Neither move as their breathing begins to settle, nor when his love begins to soften and drain from her. His fingers clutch onto the fatty wings of her shoulders, his lashes tickling the fine hairs nestled in the valley of her breasts, the last vestiges of his strength unwilling to let her go, even for a moment.
Rey sighs, relaxing onto his lap, caressing his soft raven hair. It has grown, too, its gentle waves and curls lush and thick, ends caressing the strong nape of his neck and shoulders. She strokes and combs it in the quiet of their breathing, skimming the sensitive skin of his ears, listening to the sea below and praying, with every ounce of hope within her, that a life will be there beyond it.

Chapter End Notes

[The cakes Rey and Ben eat are called "Savillum," a form of Ancient Roman cheesecake made from bread, cheese, honey, and fruit, and was often served at dinner parties]

["Ormos" was a traditional dance invented by the Spartans where a woman led males and females to dance in an open circle, all while waving a handkerchief. Today, the "Ormos" dance has been adapted into Greek culture, and is now a popular song and dance called "Kalamatianos." The song lyrics are:

My red apple, my scarlet pomegranate,
why have you made me wilted and bitter?
I come and go, but cannot find you
I try your door, and it's always locked.
Your windows are always lighted
I ask your door, "Where is your lady?"
"My lady is not here, she is at the wellspring
She's gone to bring water"

Here is a link to see how the dance is performed]

[The "Bibasis" is also an Ancient Spartan dance, where the dancer would hop on one leg for as long as they could, tapping the ground with their opposite foot. Here is a link to a Bibasis song performed by the Petros Tabouris Ensemble]

[Dancing for prizes was not uncommon in Ancient Greek religious festivals. While the laurel crown is a symbol of victory or triumph, the ivy crown is a symbol of eternity, fidelity, and affection]

[The Roman dances were different from Egyptian dances mainly in the orientation of movement. While the Ancient Romans focused more on enacting battle scenes or rapid foot movements, the Egyptians danced with their upper body—hence Rey’s “odd” dancing style]
Patience

Chapter Notes

This chapter is pure smut until like, the last paragraph. So. ^_^ Yay!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ben huffs, slouching over the tablinum table. Sweat beads along the back of his neck as the morning heat blankets the villa, the rhythmic shriek of crickets pounding in his skull from beyond the walls.

He’s spent the hours since dawn pouring over his old maps, memorizing the Roman territories and battlements. They aren’t fresh, however, having been drawn before the grand wall was completed three years ago. There’s no knowing how many bulwarks remain that could stand in the way of any Resistance movement now.

Still, he can’t think of anything better to do. Finn Freedman was infuriatingly cryptic when asked how best to aid the Resistance members… When they returned from the island, the man had insisted they wait until he hears orders from Poe Dameron himself. Now, with Finn’s business in Naples finished, all that’s left to do is be patient until the racer’s whims are delivered to them.

Sighing, Ben rubs his temple, resting his eyes for a moment. The return journey from Capri had been more draining than the initial venture. Rey blamed it on his stress; And it baffled him, the amount of calm she displayed. How tempered and even she seemed, knowing what dangers prowl around them here in Rome.

His wife had been quick to share their findings with Finn Freedman. As soon as they returned to the mainland, her eyes had transformed from their dazzling, innocent gleam into those of a woman possessed by glorious purpose. She’d taken control so fervently, discussing plots and plans and manners of settling deals, of escape.

They’d barely gotten a moment alone for Ben to truly… appreciate it.

However, it would appear his libido may be to blame for his restlessness and startling lack of motivation. Almost thirty years—a lifetime for some—seems to have transformed him into nothing more than a rutting beast. Perhaps it was for the best that Rey, and her body, had been given the time to rest.

Barring his arms against the table, Ben attempts to tear his mind away, glaring down at the mess of parchment maps sprawled out before him. Yet his mind wanders far off their edges. While he was once a commander of Rome, the greatest army to ever march, their old strategies cannot compare to this immense, crushing pressure he feels just by looking at them. It won’t be the same as commanding a legion of pawns. For him, and for Rey, the danger is insurmountable—even with Resistance aid.

This… this is new war. A war of him and her against everyone else.

Decidedly finished with this confounding project, stewing with wrathful powerlessness, he rises, gathering his things for when Finn eventually arrives. The notes on the territory maps and layout of
Snoke’s palatium—even some on the Colosseum and its hidden chambers—should be enough to appease Poe Dameron and his ilk. Meanwhile, he has some rest to catch up on, and a beautiful woman sleeping in his bed.

A beautiful woman who is now, apparently, very awake.

A slender hand pulls aside the heavy tablinum curtain, shining light into the room. Ben squints before his eyes widen, fixing on the presence of his wife as she strides into the confined chamber—wearing nothing but a wry smile.

She pauses for only a moment, her gaze glazing for as it slides over his bare chest, fixing on his skirt, and, eventually, slipping oh-so-innocently into his eyes. “It’s hot today, isn’t it?” she asks, moving past him towards the shelves of scrolls, generous hips swaying.

Ben turns to stare after her, swallowing thickly.

“I could do with some light reading, I think,” she sighs, slowly sliding a fingertip over her lower lip. “Something to keep me occupied…”

“Mm,” he grunts in absent agreement, gawking as she bends over and thumbs through the numerous scrolls at her disposal, her tight, silky heat peeking from between those soft, luscious thighs—still scattered with fading bruises in the shape of his fingerprints…

Ben wets his lip, advancing slowly as she wiggles her hips, as enticing as a roosting bird to a hungry lion. But before he can get his hands on her she straightens, holding up her choice with a shining smile. “Perfect,” she declares, avoiding his eyes and flouncing back through the curtain.

Undeterred, he follows her out into the gleaming courtyard. Late morning sunlight and the shadow of trees dapple her pearly skin, left tanned by the Capri sun, and Ben is suddenly very, very glad to have sent Ahsoka away for the day.

When at last he catches up to Rey she has stopped in the rear of the house, beneath the shade of the tall pillars, still somewhat untouched by the drenching heat. Apparently she had moved a chaise from the atrium without his notice, seeing as how she settles so comfortably upon the red, velvet finish, her long legs fluttering, bare breasts and stomach arching against the support.

Ben sticks to the shadows, his mouth watering. It has been two days too long since last they entangled—and apparently his Puella has rested long enough, seeing as her flagrant teasing and taunting has led him here, teetering once again on the edge of his control.

His mind blank, he watches hypnotized as Rey traces her fingertip along the edge of the parchment, her chest rising and falling with controlled focus, while her eyes so obviously neglect to read so much as a line.

An invitation if ever he saw one.

Wordlessly, in a shuffle of cloth, Ben unravels his skirt, letting it fall as he watches her eyes. They flicker, but do not look up. Easily, tactfully, he leans back against the pillar, his gaze fixing upon her waiting body as he takes his shaft in hand, pumping himself with an aching slowness.

Now Rey looks up, her cheeks a lovely flush, visible even in the daylight shade. “What are you doing?” she asks quietly, her lips felled.

“‘What am I doing?’” he echoes hoarsely, his gaze black fire, wide and settled fiercely upon her. Without even the barest touch of humor, he squeezes himself and grunts, “Imagining that cunt
wrapped around my cock.”

For many long moments Rey simply watches him stroke himself, her eyes held raptly in the rhythm of his hand as her blush spreads down her neck, the heat of her skin glistening as she squeezes her thighs together. And then, with a cloudy gaze and outstretched hand, she murmurs, “You don’t have to imagine it.”

Ben moans, her beckoning crashing a wave of pleasure through his body. With baited lip he tosses his damp hair from his face, rooted in place as he begins to pump faster. “Touch yourself,” he growls.

Rey sucks in a breath, absently setting the scroll aside. “Why?” she murmurs, the hint of a victorious smile blooming in the corners of her mouth.

Leaning his head back against the pillar, Ben rubs the drop of arousal from the head of his member, a shiver crackling between his shoulders. On a rasping breath, he replies, “I want to watch.”

With fluttering lashes Rey nods, the want in his eyes, the need in his voice, bending her to his will. Slowly, savoring how deeply he peers into her, she parts her legs, sliding her middlemost fingers over her womanhood.

When she sighs Ben groans, sweat rolling from his brow as she traces rapid circles around her crest. Her patterns are sloppy in form but consistent—and for a blissful moment they share the same pace, their hooded eyes locked in silent battle.

But when she squirms, when she whimpers his name, he can stay apart from her no longer. With hard strokes he lumbers closer, leaning his knee between hers upon the chaise, bracing his hand along it base to support himself as he hovers over her, devouring the sight of her left senseless with desire.

Rey doesn’t stop; she presses harder, fingers slick and fast as she pleases herself for him. Moans burst from the bottom of her lungs, uninhibited, unabashedly calling for him from behind closed eyes.

Ben’s gaze bores relentlessly into her, a shudder of need rippling through the tightening muscles of his arm as he thrusts into his fist. Her breasts heaving beneath him, her nipples flushed and begging for his mouth, the jumping pulse in her throat… he can’t resist. He descends on her with a snarl, hands snaring her hips and dragging her down to the edge of the lounge.

“Yes,” Rey gasps, throwing her arms around his neck when he pulls them flush together, the hard heat of his cock spreading through her belly, spilling into her blood like fire. He splits her open effortlessly, the span of his hand ushering her onto him in a single, fluid movement.

They cry out as one, the sound muted by the weight of their heavy breaths. Rey trembles as he lunges into her, her legs unbalanced and hovering over the stone, wrapping around his hips, leaving her floating in mindless, prolonged ecstasy.

Ben grits his teeth, unable to find stable rhythm with his long stance forced low. With a grunt he sweeps her against his broad chest, fusing his mouth to hers in an invasive kiss as he turns and settles onto the chaise, fixing her on top of him.

Rey pants when his kiss finally relents, focusing her efforts on grinding herself against him. The rhythm is easier here, defined by the percussion of her flesh against his, the shared beat of every shallow breath creating an acquainted refrain. Up and down his body she rubs her palms, nails
scraping the shining skin of his arms. She lays trapped as he takes control, his feet braced against the stone as he drives himself almost violently into her, each stroke pushing her further into the flames.

A warning shudder ripples through her. “Zuji…” she whimpers, every syllable punctuated by his force, droplets of pleasure gathering, weightless within her. With closed eyes she buries her nose into his neck, the salt of his sweat on her lips, her desire beginning to surrender helplessly to release.

“Oh, fuck,” Ben gasps, holding her more tightly against him. “Fuck, yes, Rey—” He kisses her cheek, her ear. His voice deepens to a dangerous rumble. “Come to me. Amor tauntum mihi, mea Puella, mea omnia…”

Wrought with pleasure, Rey cries out, curling her nails into the globes of his shoulders as he claims her again, again, again—even as her body shivers and gives out, her climax overflowing within her with its silvery, sparkling streams.

Triumphant and spent, Ben grunts, squeezing her ass, her breast—clinging to her as he allows himself full devotion to the tight sheath of her hearth. His cock answers to her seize, twisting a final, mangled bark from the depths of his chest as he plummets Rey over him, scattering himself inside of her.

“Oh! Ah…” he huffs, his head falling back onto the chaise.

Rey, summoning her energy, lays over him. With a satisfied smile she sweeps away the hair plastered to Ben’s forehead, cooing, “Always working so hard.”

He chuffs a lazy smile and opens his eyes, returning the gesture. “I’m not used to mixing business with pleasure.”

“A fast learner, then,” Rey giggles. Quickly, she dismounts him, quivering as she leaps into the grass.

Ben leans on his arm with a grunt, exhausted. “What are you doing?” he asks after her.

“I don’t want to get it on the tile!” she calls back, wiping her hand between her thighs.

With a soft chuckle Ben forces himself to stand, and in moments returns with a towel. Before she can stop him he kneels, catching the remnants of them from her ankles to her cleft, tenderly cleaning it away.

The heat in Rey’s cheeks swarms behind her eyes, love swelling in her chest. She cups his cheek, the raw consecration in his gaze, the way he looks at her, as overwhelming as it had been the night she knew he loved her—before their secrets truly became their menace. And even then, when the end could have fallen upon them at any moment. And still can.

“Ben, I—”

The loud whinny of a horse breaks over the hillside, making Ben stand straight. He passes Rey the towel and moves toward the sound, his expression set in stone.

Rey wraps the cloth around her body, concealing herself as fully as possible. “Could it be Finn? Already?”

Ben doubts it, but doesn’t say so. Together they round the front of the villa, just in time to see a
familiar mouse of a man leap down from an imperial stallion.

“Mitaka.”

Mitaka turns, his eyes bulging for only a moment to discover his master in his state of undress. Rey, concealed behind the wall, listens as he speaks.

“I have a message from a man in Rome, Master.” Mitaka informs, bowing his head and pointedly avoiding Ben’s… *accompaniment.* He pulls forth a folded note. The edge is sloppily sealed. “He says he knows you.”

Ben frowns. Could this message truly be from Poe Dameron? If so, how could he have been so reckless to send *Mitaka,* and not one of his own servants? It doesn’t make sense.

“I’m not interested in fan letters,” he groused, waving Mitaka off. Hopefully this letter is truly nothing—if Mitaka were to know about their affairs… he would have to silence him before he could get back to Snoke. His very presence now puts them all at risk.

If he took this letter; if something happened…


Ben and Mitaka turn to find Rey in the doorway, clothed in her stola, her eyes a curious paint. At once Ben’s eyes flash—a quiet warning—but Rey already advances on them, her expression placid.

Mitaka straightens, his cheeks as red as wine when she comes closer. “N-No.”

Rey at last meets Ben’s eye, and at once he understands. Fixing his face into nonchalance, he gestures rudely at the letter in Mitaka’s hand before turning on his heel and stalking into the house. “It’s nothing. If it’s not from Ematt or Snoke, I’ve no need of it.”

Mitaka blinks after him, mouth opening and closing like a beached carp. “My apologies, Master… I-I suppose I had forgotten…”

Her lashes flickering to the young man, Rey holds out her hand, her voice a soft, secretive lilt for him—as a sister might speak to a close brother. “I can dispose of it for you, if you wish. Master Ren will forget about it eventually.”

Mitaka nods, relieved, and hands it over to her. “Right.”

With her bait taken, Rey tears the letter apart in front of him. “He’s been in one of his moods, lately,” she shares conspiratorially, trying to maintain respectable Latin. Though Ben has taught her much, the language continues to evade her, at times. “Best to keep away for a while, if you can.”

The man’s gaze flits nervously to the empty doorway before he nods, murmuring something almost like a ‘thank you’ to Rey before mounting his horse, careening back down the Roman countryside.

Rey walks with as casual an air as possible before she is certain she is out of sight, then races into the tablinum.

Ben, his skirt dawned once more, waits for her there. Seeing the torn letter in her hands, he sighs, grabbing her shoulders and kissing her mouth. “Perfect.”

“I couldn’t let you do it alone,” Rey murmurs, pride blooming in her chest. Tenderly, she places the tattered parchment onto the table, letting Ben help her piece it back together. “Besides, the less
he knows, the better.”

The sadness in Rey’s voice stills him for a moment, but before he can fathom why, the letter is complete. His gaze sweeps over it, and at once the earth sways beneath his feet, his bones rendered hollow by the words written there.

Rey gasps and backs away, her eyes wide. “It can’t be.”

Ben’s grip tightens on the table’s edges, his arms too weak to support him now. Words fail him, until the heat in his throat becomes too much to bear. “It can,” he groused.

He looks at her over his shoulder, meeting her mortified eyes, trying to find some trace of hope in them still, even as he speaks the truth aloud.

“Poe Dameron is dead.”

· END ACT II ·
Hewwo! uwu Thank you for coming back! This chapter is gonna feel kinda convoluted. As I'm sure you smart cookies could tell, we're about to dive headfirst into drama. So, yay!

In other news, an amazing fan, noël—aka @eyreheights on Twitter—has created a Spotify playlist for Glory's Fray. It's amazing and over four hours long. I love listening to it while I write. noël—you are so amazing. Thank you so much. I don't deserve you. <3 Here is a link to listen to it yourself. A permanent link will also be embedded into the final end note, right next to the original playlist. (ﾉ◕ヮ◕)ﾉ*:・゜

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will you make a shipwreck of your honest name; And let the world be witness of the same? Behave yourself, or play the puritan; And I shall think you chaste, do what you can. Do what you do; Just say it wasn't done; In public, too, discretion never shun.

There is a place demands a naughty game; Fill it with fun, fill it and feel no shame. But when you're up and dressed, be staid and grave; And in bed leave all the faults you have.

Yes, be not ashamed to strip you, being there; And mingle thighs, yours ever mine to bear. There in your rosy lips my tongue entomb; Practise a thousand love-games when you come. There words of loving warmth don't fail to speak; And with your pastime let the bedstead creak!

But with your dress put on an honest face; And blush and seem as you were full of grace. Cheat all, cheat me, so long as I don't see; Let me enjoy my crass credulity.

Why see I lines so oft received and giv'n? This bed and that by tumbling made uneven? Your hair that more than sleep has disarrayed; And on your neck the bites of love displayed? Grant this, that what you do I may not see; If you weight not ill speeches, yet weigh me.

—Ovid, Amores III

··· ACT III ···

“How can that be…?” Rey murmurs, staring incredulously down upon the tattered remains of the note. “How could he be dead?”
Ben retreats from the table, running his hand over his mouth. Thoughts swarm like gnats between his ears, turning everything into a mindless drone.

His pacing goes on for some time, Rey watching him, needing an answer—even when she knows there is nothing he can give her. Quietly, she asks, “What do we do?”

Finally, Ben stops, his heart pounding, blood cold and gathering in his gut, and meets her eyes. Their urgency plunges through him like a lance, stirring him back into motion—and into a restless anger. With sharp movements he swipes his notes from the table, gathering them to his chest as he stands before her, his gaze rekindled embers.

“We go to Rome.”

They ride together in soft whispers, Rey’s breath seeping warmth into the cloth of his tunic as she pours out her questions, her hopes. Ben can barely find the strength to reply to them, already too lost in his own battles, but eventually they come to the same conclusion.

Whoever sent the note, that person must have known they were sending Mitaka—which, the more Ben thought, made sense, since few other messengers know where to find him. That, and it would leave fewer traces back to themselves. The message itself could have been more explicit, or had an addressee—but no. Just five simple words. Enough to sound like any person telling one sportsman that another has perished. Enough to warrant an expedient anonymity.

Whoever sent them the message has experience with secrecy.

“What if they got Finn, too?” Rey worries, her arms tightening their hold on her husband. “What if they’re all dead?”

Ben’s first inclination is to tell her that they may be better off without a Resistance to owe, but the sorrow in her voice makes him think otherwise. Instead, he rubs a warm hand over hers. “It will be alright. Someone had to have known. It’s not just a coincidence.”

Rey nods and closes her eyes. If she could cling to words, she would, but since she cannot, she clings to him even more.

The chariot racers of Rome are known for their proficiency to escape death. For a man—an athlete—like Gaius Poe Dameron, escaping death was as simple as breathing. As a heartbeat, as a flick of the wrist, as a pull of the reins. And for two years, Poe Dameron was the sovereign of the dusty tracks of the Circus Maximus. For two years, he held the heart of Rome in his hand, even as he held a dagger in the other.

And now, that man is dead.

Finn wets his lip, the afternoon sun baking into his flesh. His eyes flit across the gathered crowd below him, their eyes hungry, eager to devour the remnants of an old king.

He stands before them as the butcher, passing out bits and baubles in exchange for coins. A denarius for an old loincloth, an aurei for a pair of battered sandals. One by one, vase by vase and statue by glorious, worthless statue, the Dameron estate is emptied out.

The empire took its master from them. And now, its people will take the rest.

That is how Ben and Rey find him, when at last they reach the estate. The crowd is too full, to
rampant, to see them thread among them. As Rey walks without her palla, her woman’s head bare, people don’t bother to look at her, dismissive of a slave’s crown. Ben, in turn, is gawked at and avoided, his aura a black plume of decay as they settle upon Finn Freedman, who stands upon the stage.

“Thank you all for your consideration at this grievous time,” he calls, his eyes hollow, the skin beneath them sagging. “All items of value besides those belonging to ancestors have been sold. My ancilla will now bring out the horses for bidding.”

At his gesture, a young woman—Tallie—steps forth, the two black Arabians held firmly in her hands. The crowd immediately begins to sway, men in robes holding up their hands as Finn’s numbers climb higher.

Rey looks up at Ben, who feigns to ignore her as she speaks. “Why sell everything?”

With a purse of his lips, Ben shakes his head. “I don’t know.” He has heard of these auctions before—however, that was typically when the household was desperate for funds after a chariot racer’s death in the Circus. Could it be that Poe Dameron had finally perished in a death sport, after all this time? At this time?

Unless…

The horses are sold in a pair, and a few others follow. And then Finn holds up his hand, his robes swaying. “We have come to the last animal for auction. The bidding will start at five aurei.”

As he speaks, Tallie brings out a painted horse, its full body splotched with white and rust, its long mane floating loosely in the wind as it trots, head held obediently low.

Rey grabs Ben’s wrist. Softly, she rasps, “Bambino.”

“This horse, trained by Gaius Poe Dameron himself, has been raised from a colt to fight in competition,” Finn announces, his lips drawn down by their corners. “His agility, stamina, and strength makes him fully capable of withstanding any challenge. Do I have any bidders?”

The numbers fly up after he’s finished, and Rey’s hold on Ben’s wrist slackens. “He looked so little when I saw him…” she murmurs.

Ben allows himself to look at her, his eyes roving over her cheeks, her red eyes. He remembers when she had enjoyed the horse in the gardens of the Circus Maximus. Indeed, it seems that Dameron had trained the burgeoning stallion well. And… seeing as Rey may need a horse of her own soon…

Ben raises his hand. “Thirty!”

A few onlookers gasp, looking at him. Rey fights not to turn and gawk—Hell, she struggles not to quack. No one bids any higher than thirty aurei, seemingly too surprised to find Kylo Ren in their midst, and even more surprised that he would purchase a competitor’s horse.

They part for him like the sea as he steps forward to claim the animal, his eyes meeting Finn’s as he accepts the reins from Tallie.

Rey comes forward as the crowd begins to disperse, her jaw slack. When she’s certain no one is listening, she looks from the horse to her husband, a question sharp in her brow. “What are you doing?”
Ben looks down at her, the most somber of smiles reflecting in his eyes as he turns his palm over, offering her the reins. “I never gave you a wedding gift.”

Her lips fall apart, an unladylike snort puffing from someplace deep in her lungs, full of disbelief as she takes the reins even when her eyes want to cry. She takes them, then Bambino’s face in her hands, her lips folding into a watery grin as she savors the warmth of the beast’s short fur. “Thank you.”

A brief twitch flickers on the edge of his mouth.

“With an outburst like that, people will begin to talk about you, Solo,” Finn calls to them, disengaging himself from the podium. With a grim determination, he looks to Rey, to Bambino, and to Ben. “I assume you got my message.”

“So it was you,” Rey says, stroking Bambino’s cheek.

Finn nods once, his eyes scouring the front courtyard of the estate. Although it appears empty save for them, Tallie, and a few scattered servants, he turns on his heel, motioning for them to follow. “Come with me. There’s a lot you need to know.”

Their steps echo off the halls as Finn leads them past the barren courtyard, the water still trickling, shimmering in the sunlight. He holds the curtain for them as they step into the chamber, the hole in the ceiling shining down upon a table of tabulas, a woman they’ve never seen looming over them.

“This is Jannah,” Finn discloses, his voice quieted as he rounds the table, standing across from Ben and Rey. “She’s a friend.”

The woman, Jannah, looks up, her dark eyes like liquid amber amidst the floating rays. Her gaze scans over Rey and Ben from beneath a loose brow. “So this is them? The gladiator and his apprentice?”


A slow breath sighs from the woman’s nose as she straightens herself, dark shadows passing over her features. “You two shouldn’t have come back here. It’s dangerous.”

“What happened while we were gone?” Ben asks, his accusatory glare marching between the Resistance members. “Where’s Dameron?”

Finn groans softly, rubbing a hand over taut lips, back to catch the sweat gathering at his nape. “He was captured. By Roman soldiers.”

Ben’s heart constricts, blazing into fire as his feet carry him to the man, his hands snagging him by the cloth of his tunic. He hears Rey’s burst of protest, but cannot heed it. Rage coils at his lip and he snarls, tugging the man closer. “What… happened?”

Before Finn can answer, the tip of a blade pokes against Ben’s side. He looks down into the face of Jannah, whose icy gaze pierces into the flames of his wrath.

“Let him go,” she growls. “Or you die too.”

Ben pauses for a moment, remembering his hands, finding them wound into the fabric of Finn’s robes. He glances at Rey to find her frowning at him, her familiar eyes slowing the pound of his heart. In a blink he releases Finn, stepping back into her grasp. “Have we been compromised?”
“No.” Finn shakes his head, ignoring the wrinkles in his clothes. “If we had, General Hux would have killed all of us by now.”


Bracing his fingertips against the table, Finn looks away from her, the sadness in his eyes, in his voice, inciting her to tremble. “When I came back he was already gone,” he relays at last, glaring down into the symbols scrawled out before them. “Someone in Snoke’s court found out about Valentine. He was executed. When they searched his home, they found evidence of Poe’s involvement,” his voice grates. “Enough to convict him of treason.”

Rey’s knees shiver, forcing her to lean against Ben. Images of Valentine’s face flash before her eyes, the thought of it lifeless… impossible.

Ben covers her hand in his, bearing her weight, and even more as thoughts and questions fall upon him. He lets one spill from his lips, lacking the energy to do anything else. “What will you do now?”

“I’m not sure,” Finn glances up. “Poe was the leader of these people. He had the cover, and the money to get things done. But with his conviction—”

“The emperor ‘reclaimed’ it all,” Jannah spits. “Now we have nothing but a house.”

“—We have fewer resources,” Finn finishes. He taps the papers and tablets. “Everyone is scattered. Some just abandoned us. I’ve sent away most everyone else. We have to regroup if we want to stand a chance. Survive now and come up with a new plan later.”

“What about Kaydel?” Rey asks. “Where’s she?”

“We don’t know,” Finn sighs. “She disappeared after Poe was captured. She could be anywhere in the city by now.”

“So why are you still here?” Ben queries, shoulders raised. “Why not run?”

Jannah steps closer to Finn, rubbing a hand up and down his back. “The general has been hunting us ruthlessly. Any sudden movements would only draw more suspicion. We’ve already risked so much moving out the people we have.”

“And my wife,” Finn murmurs, his fingertips pressing harder against the table. His throat bobs as he speaks. “She’s still in Snoke’s palace. She was working there as a slave when it happened. I got our son out, but…”

Ben frowns, a different light casting itself over Finn’s face. He thinks of this man’s wife, thinks of Rey, and finds himself in agony. At once he understands Finn Freedman, and sees now that his impression had been wrong.

As he looks down at her, sees that same sorrow echoed in her face, it reminds him of why they’re here, what they have to do.

What he has to do.

“Our deal,” Ben grunts, wrestling the collection of scrolls and maps from within his tunic and tossing it onto the table, “is finished.”
Finn blinks, drawing the parchment closer to him. He unravels the sinew to scour them, his expression lightening with the faintest flickers of hope. He passes his hand over their surfaces, as if he could feel the limestone walls, his voice soft. “Thank you.”

Ben grasps Rey’s hand, tugging her toward the curtain. But she resists, rooted in place, staring after him as his face and body stand cloaked in the shadows. “Ben,” she nearly hisses, fear shining in her eyes. “We can’t leave—We’re not done yet.”

“I won’t risk it,” he huffs, leaning closer, his grip on her only growing tighter. “What’s done is done. There’s nothing left for us here.”

“But what about the plan?” Rey chances, watching helplessly as rationale fades from his eyes. “What about Leia?”

Jannah’s head snaps up. “What did you say?”

Together, Ben and Rey look to Jannah, whose stony gaze melts into wonder as she walks closer. Rey swallows, deciding to trust the gnawing in her stomach and ignore the clench of Ben’s fingers. “Leia. Leia Organa. We thought that Poe might know where she is.”

Finn glares at the woman. “Jannah, do you know her?”

Jannah nods, almost frantically. “Yes! Poe had me send letters to her, after Korr Sella was killed in that Hosnian raid. She… she was a friend of my father’s, before he died in Seres. That’s why she trusted me.”

Seres, Ben notes, his stomach slipping to his heels. As he takes a closer look at Jannah, he sees features all-too familiar, shapes like soft lights in the back of his mind. From the smooth, rich ebony of her skin to the corners of her eyes, the full lip and crown of dark, thick hair, the carry of her shoulders bespeaking a hardened traveler…

“Lando Calrissian.”

Rey looks up at her husband, finding his face pale, haunted. “Ben?”

Jannah steps forward, searching his face with a suspicious frown. “Yes. He was my father. Did you know him?”

Ben’s expression hardens, the iron blade of his glare piercing into Finn’s wary stare. The guilt inside says everything he needs to know. “You planned this.”

Finn rises, crossing his arms. “You wanted safe passage out of the city, and a way to find Leia. I didn’t plan this meeting today, but,” he shrugs, “better now than later, I guess.”

Rey glowers at him. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I just did,” Finn counters, his frustration beginning to mount. “But it won’t do you any good.”

“Why not?”

“We have to think about this rationally,” he huffs, jabbing a finger down upon a map of the Roman streets. “There are guards and spies everywhere. If we send a letter to her now, it will probably get everyone involved caught and captured and killed. I won’t be responsible for that when I have lives to save.”
Rey leans against the table, meeting his impertinent stare with her own. “This could be our only chance to find her. If we want to leave before the tournament, then we have to do something now.”

“There are still four days left before the tournament begins,” Jannah pipes, jabbing a thumb at Ben. “From what Finn has told me, we have until then to evacuate the two of you before this one is thrown back into the arena. Even if we did try, there’s no guarantee that the message will even be delivered in time.”

Helplessly, Rey looks to her, to Finn, and back. “So, what… you won’t help us…?”

Finn sighs, coming around to lay a warm hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry. To both of you. I wish there was another way, but we can’t afford the risk.”

Rey looks down and steps back, closer to Ben. His presence offers her that slim comfort only his can, shielding her from the whirlwind of her thoughts.

“We can evacuate ourselves. Our score is settled with this,” Ben huffs, gesturing to his maps. “There’s nothing left for us to offer you.”

Jannah glares, her white canines flashing. “Are you serious? After all our people have been through to help you?”

“I’m not responsible for your shortcomings,” he retorts, brow drawn. “If you can’t protect your own people, then you can’t protect mine.” He steps back, a possessive hand wrapping around Rey’s shoulder. “I’m taking my wife and my servant out of the territories, just like I should have long ago.”

“And what happens when Snoke sends his people after you?” Jannah challenges. “I’ve been out there, with the Roman people. Everyone knows who you are.” Her eyes fall to Rey, staring wide-eyed from his arms. “Who you both are.”

Rey closes her parted lips, looking to Finn, whose curious gaze meets hers in that silvery shine of knowing. She remembers, then, what he’d told her—how the Romans knew about what she’d done for Ben that day in the arena.

Ben holds her tighter. “Explain.”

“It happened when she ran in to save you,” Finn pipes at last. “The people started to talk. Said you were ‘warrior lovers.’ But then you both just vanished.” Sighing, he scratches his ear, avoiding Ben’s probing stare. “While you were in recovery, you just became more famous. If that was even possible.”

“Snoke will be keeping his eye on you,” Jannah grunts. “We managed to distract him and his ginger menace while you were on Capri. And the fiasco with Poe only cinched it.” Her sad eyes fall to Rey. “You got lucky. But you won’t survive without us. We know people who can keep you hidden until your outside of the territory. So if you try to leave, fine. But don’t expect us to host your funeral.”

Ben stiffens, looking down to meet Rey’s worried gaze. A single thought passes between them, back and forth like an echo in the deep chasm of their chests.

Jannah is right. They have never, never, been safe from Snoke. The emperor’s hold on Ben will never relent—he won’t stop until he has him fettered and chained to his throne like a dog. Even if they tried to escape on their own, it would only be a matter of time until they were discovered. They would have nowhere to run.
Looking into her desperate eyes, Ben’s lip trembles. It’s his fault that Rey is in this position. If only he’d told her how he’d felt sooner, if only he’d been strong enough to sever his ties with the man who bought his soul, they could have left this place long ago.

But they’re here. The fire and flames of Rome surround them, closer now than ever. And he knows, looking into her eyes, that they will burn together.

Unless.

“How long do we have?” he whispers.

“Two days,” Finn says, planting his hands on his hips. His shoulders hang heavy, his head lolling slow on his neck, as if unable to bear any more thoughts. “I’ve got a full caravan to sneak out tonight, so it will have to be tomorrow.”

“When?”

“Midnight?” he suggests, meeting Ben’s eye. “I can send someone to your house.”

Ben shakes his head. “No. I don’t want to chance that.”

“Would you rather come here?” Jannah offers.

Glowering, Ben runs a hand through his hair, cheek caught between his teeth. “No.” He can’t chance that either—if they’re caught together in the walls, escape will be impossible. They would all be arrested and crucified for collusion. Unable to think of anything else, he scours the map, his eyes landing southeast, and points to the outline of the steppes. “Here. My servant, Ahsoka Tano, lives on this hill a mile south of our house. Meet us there at midnight tomorrow.”

Finn sighs, rubbing the back of his neck as Jannah snatches one of their pens and makes an unassuming mark where Ben’s finger had been.

Rey frowns as she watches the three conspire, hot wrath coiling, expanding within her until she can’t take it anymore. Huffing, she turns on her heel and storms out, back into the warm light of the courtyard.

Nothing makes sense to her. After all they’ve been through, here in Rome and out on Capri, how could Ben be so quick to abandon the last hope they have of finding his mother? Of course he’s trying to do the right thing, trying to keep them safe, but his flagrant disregard of even knowing where she is, of trying to find a way… Slowly, everything she’s hoped for, dreamed of, is crumbling away again—and he doesn’t care.

As she stew, a soft hand takes her arm. Rey turns to see Jannah, only a head or so shorter than herself without consideration for her hair, her sculpted, intelligent eyes peering deep into her. Without explanation she tugs Rey down until her lips brush her ear, her lilted voice whispering, “Burnam, Illyria. That’s where she is.”

Illyria.

When the woman lets go Rey looks into her eyes, the tight clench around her throat becoming a rapid pound of cold blood in her chest as she realizes what Jannah Calrissian has given her.

But before she can thank her, Ben and Finn swipe out of the tablinum curtain. Ben’s eyes find Rey’s immediately, but she looks away, unwilling to reconcile with him just yet. Instead she goes to Finn, her voice soft. “Thank you for your help. I don’t think we could ever repay you.”
Finn only shrugs, too tired, too worn. “You’re welcome.”

Rey glances furtively at Ben’s feet, his hands, then back to Finn. Hard resolution turns her bones to bedrock. She won’t let his kindness go unpaid. She can think of nothing to give.

Nothing, except…

“I want you to keep Bambino,” she murmurs, offering the man a smile. “As a gift from me.”

Finn’s eyes widen, a once dim light shining like twin flames. He briefly looks to Ben, as if afraid her offer will be redacted—but Ben does not object. Finn doesn’t bother fighting her, his eyes welling with tears as he springs forward, wrapping her in a tight embrace.

“Thank you,” he snivels, burying his watery grin into her shoulder.

Rey holds him in return, offering what little comfort she can. “Of course,” she murmurs, patting his back. She can’t imagine the pain he must be enduring now, having lost such a dear friend… She knows immediately that she’s made the right choice, meeting Ben’s weary stare with her own. “We owe it to each other.”

Ben frowns, but says nothing. When all is done he withdraws the sum—or at least half of it—from his purse, handing it over to Finn. He takes her hand after that, pulling her along behind him as she takes one last look at Jannah, waving back at her in quiet gratitude.

When they reach Silencer, Ben lays his hand on the horse’s neck, deep in deliberation. Rey looks at him, but can’t read his thoughts. “What is it?”

Sighing gently through his nose, he toys with Silencer’s reins, adjusting what’s already in place. “Ematt,” he murmurs at last. “I should say goodbye.”

Rey considers him. Then, softly, “Will he be in danger, too?”

“No more than he already is,” he mutters, meeting her eyes.

The twinge of his irises reminds Rey of a young child, belligerent of their duties, yearning for escape. It consumes Rey with dread to think about venturing deeper into the city, just as she knows the same feelings are coursing through her husband.

But she hops up onto Silencer alone, lifting his chord and settling it over her body, fixing Ben a firm look. “You’re still here. He deserves an explanation.”

Ben nods and closes his eyes, silent as he cups her calf in his warm hand, pressing his nose to her thigh and breathing deeply. Eventually he comes to himself, mounting Silencer and urging them on, away from the Dameron estate.

Finn Freedman wasn’t lying when he said the city was crawling with guards.

While Ben had grown used to the occasional march, especially during his time campaigning with the infantry, he has never seen anything quite like this. Roman soldiers stand post at every main road, their eyes vigilant and piercing. He and Rey only travel half the distance to the apartments where Ematt dwells before they are forced to leave Silencer at a stable to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

Snoke was wise to have his soldiers move now. The tang of tournament fervor lingers like a
pestilence in the air, the Roman people reeking of social affair and desperation for event. Vendors sell parasols and containers of water, small boxes of snacking foods and trinkets. There are people everywhere—and the more dense the people, the greater risk they will collide.

Ben raps his knuckles against the door, unprepared for Ematt to answer so soon. Upon seeing them the man ushers them quickly inside, the modest atrium lit by a simple hearth.

“I heard you went to Capri,” he says, handing them each a chalice of wine. He smiles at them, though the twinge in his lip betrays his unease. “Did you enjoy your trip?”

Rey nods, seating herself upon his chaise. “Yes. It was beautiful. I won a Biabish dance.”

“Bibasis,” Ben grunts, sipping his wine.

Ematt chuckles. “Why am I not surprised? You are quite the energetic woman. I trust the sex was nice too, eh?”

Ben chokes, wine burning in his nose. But Rey only smiles, her blush wrapping around her cheeks and neck like a veil. “Yes, thank you.”

“I’m glad to hear it!” he laughs, patting her knee with fatherly approval. The false smile suddenly seems more genuine to Rey, the yellows of his teeth shining bright even in the dim of his house. “Bad sex leads to bad marriage, you know. Unless you’re not the type, like your Ahsoka. Good for you.”

Ben frowns. “Caluan.”

Ematt turns to him, smile lingering. “Eh?”

“We’re leaving Rome.” His shoulders droop, his stern features shadowed by the flickering hearth. Licks of flame crackle and pop in the quiet around them. “We won’t be back again.”

“Oh,” the man says, rubbing his hands over his thighs. “When?”

“Two days.”

Ematt’s brows pinch, the silver bushels casting shades over the hollows of his eyes. “Ah. That may be a problem.”

Ben scowls, the cross of his arms shooting sympathetic pain through Rey’s chest. “And why is that?” he asks darkly.

His manager shakes his head, rising to go to a table standing by his small atrium pool. He scoops up a letter from its surface, walking back to Ben. “This was delivered to me this morning, at dawn. I was going to deliver it to you myself, before the curfew.”

Hesitantly, Ben takes it, recognizing the familiar script.

“It’s from the palace,” Ematt frowns. “Snoke wants you to perform a ceremony to celebrate the grand opening of the Tournament of Champions.”

Rey rises, her heart plummeting to the tiles. “When?”

Ematt offers her a tender gaze, though it offers little comfort. Softly, he rasps, “Two days from now.”
“No,” Rey breathes, her eyes stinging as she meets Ben’s doleful gaze. “No.”

“Rey—”

She races over to him, pounding a loose fist against his chest. It doesn’t budge him in the slightest. “No!” she cries, helpless rage peeling back her lips, snarling furiously at the fate between them. “You can’t go!”

Ben catches her wrists, pulling her to him. She doesn’t struggle, succumbing to his hold as she tries to stifle her sobs in his chest. His heart pounds beneath her, its master cradling her close, as if his arms of flesh and bone could shield her from the truth.

“I don’t know what the emperor has planned for you, but I swear, I’ll do everything I can to make sure you return,” Ematt promises, his voice strained by withheld tears of his own.

Rey glances at him through her veil of tears, nodding silently into Ben’s chest, unable to move or speak—only to pray.

Ahsoka folds Rey into her embrace, nearly smothering her against her breast. “I missed you, Nunu.”

“I missed you too, Ahsoka,” she sighs.

They don’t waste time, moving to the atrium and filling Ahsoka’s mind with their schemes. With a solemn expression and wary gaze, she listens without uttering so much as a word. Until she murmurs, “This is a thin line you’re walking, you two.”

“There’s nothing else we can do,” Ben frowns. With the position they’re all in, they may as well choose between the lions of Rome or the blade of the arena.

“We’ve come too far to give up now,” Rey agrees, nodding to her husband. “Ben has earned his freedom, and I would rather be dead than live as a slave again.”

Ahsoka smiles softly, running a hand over Rey’s hair. “If it ever came to that, Rey, I’d want that for you, too.”

Rey folds her lips, curbing a smile. To speak grimly goes against the hope she clings to, but she’s missed Ahsoka’s voice too much to mind.

“I suppose that means we’ll need to pack,” Ahsoka sighs, looking around. “A shame. I just bought all these damn pillows. Is there anymore business the two of you need to finish?”

“No,” Ben says, shaking his head. “Nothing.”

“Actually,” Rey murmurs, searching Ahsoka’s bright eyes. “We have an opportunity to find Leia. Ben’s mother.”

Ahsoka’s eyes widen. “What…? Truly?”

Ben shifts on his feet. “Rey…”

“Ben, please.” She takes his hand in hers, holding tightly, soothing the skin of his knuckles under her fingers. She looks pleadingly into his face, raking his features for any crack of resolve. “We have a chance for a new life. We should try to keep your… our family together however we can.”
He shakes his head, frowning at his wife. “My answer hasn’t changed. There’s no point.”

“We still have time to try,” she asserts, her eyes tight at their edges.

“It’s not worth it,” he growls, jaw tense. Why must she insist on this so? Can’t she see that reaching out to anyone would only put them at greater risk? “It’s time to let old things die. So forget about her.”

“‘Forget about her?!’ This could be your only chance to get her back, Ben!” Rey cries. “How could you give up on your family like this?! You can’t leave her behind—”

Something within him snaps, the tightly coiled string of the day’s events unleashing a flood of heat down his throat, filling his pounding heart. “No—no, you’re still holding on! Let go!” Ben roars with a wide sweep of his arm, fury fracturing in the vein of his neck. “The only reason why you care so much is because your parents abandoned you like you were nothing!”

Rey clamps her jaw shut, and immediately Ben’s rage dissipates. But it’s too late. With a tremble in her chin, Rey turns her back on him, striding down the hall and into what was once her slave’s chambers, slamming the door behind her.

Ben exhales, burrying his fingers into his hair and sinking down into the chaise. He covers his face, the shivers in his arms unrelenting.

He was a fool. Maybe he was a fool to ever think they stood a chance. But to say something so cruel to Rey… the only one who ever truly understood him, who looked into his life and saw something other than darkness and despair…

The sound of Ahsoka’s retreat fades from his ears, the silence entrenching him. He stares down into the glimmering waters of the atrium pool, slowing his breathing, finding calm in the waves.

He can’t risk reaching out to his mother now. As much as he yearns to see her again, to feel that same love from her he always felt, he has a duty to protect Rey, now. He took a vow, and he can’t risk her life for such slim odds.

He knows he won’t be able to make her see that. There are too many thoughts in her head, more than he can fathom trying to understand. But with only two days left, there’s no room for understanding or thoughts. Only action. And he hopes she will grow to accept what must be done.

He almost prays he can, too.

Chapter End Notes

[Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso) was a Latin poet famous for his romantic and oftentimes erotic poetry. He is most notable for his epic contributions Ars Amatoria and Metamorphoses]

[Chariot racers were the only athletes in Rome more popular than the gladiators. This is probably because a chariot racer was more likely to die than a gladiator, and thus more exciting for viewers. The more races they one, the more wealthy they became]

["Jannah" is the name of the new character in the upcoming Star Wars film, The Rise of Skywalker, played by Naomi Ackie. Popular fan-theories have posed that she may...
be the daughter of the legendary Lando Calrissian. As such, I figured I would make some space for her :)

[Illyria was the Greek name for the Roman territory of Dalmatia. Burnum was more of a small military outpost town, isolated from the larger townships of Dalmatia]

[Nunu is an ancient Coptic term, meaning "little" or small]
Debauchery

Chapter Notes

Hewwo~ :3 It's good to see you. Thank you so much to everyone who's stuck with me this far. I know it's a long and daunting story, but when so many readers dropped off a long time ago it was difficult to keep up morale. Your feedback and kindness has really helped boost my confidence in writing. Normally I would have given up on this so much sooner. Please take this chapter as a shameless thank you for being so wonderful. I love you <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“...you only care so much because your parents abandoned you like you were nothing!”

Rey’s throat constricts as the snarl hurls from his lips, the words stinging nettles in the back of her eyes. His anger settles into his face—a sharp blush bleeding down his neck, a wild look shrouding his once warm gaze—and she turns from him before he can see her own, racing down the hall to the last place she can feel safe.

Slamming the door behind her, Rey lets the tears fall, hot and fat as they race down her neck. She wipes them sternly against the back of her hand after she crawls into the bed, pulling her knees to her chest.

Anger and fear swarm within her now, relentlessly battering against the walls of her skin. Closing her eyes, she tries to level her breathing, forcing herself to reach out into the storm of her heart and listen for that still, small voice.

But her thoughts are too strong to quiet. All at once she has been transported to that tiny room in the dark, her throat always dry, belly always empty. How many nights had she fallen asleep with her silent tears, hating herself and the circumstances that surrounded her? How many dreams, how many nightmares—of a nameless mother, a faceless father—did she endure?

She wishes that Ben understood the weight of the choice he’s made. She’s not a fool—she knows that the chances of survival are growing slimmer and slimmer, that every day they spend in Rome only careens them further into the arms of the enemy. But for him to abandon the last hope of finding his mother...

Rey shivers, sighing into the damp cloth of her stola. She’d wanted to meet her. Leia. After hearing Ben recant how close the two of them had been, and the tragedy of their separation after his uncle’s betrayal, she had always wondered what the woman would have been like. And now, as the wife of her son, she wonders even more. Wonders if she would approve.

A tremble quakes in Rey’s lips as the thought morphs into visions. She had hoped so much that finding Ben’s mother would have been the miracle their marriage needed. Knowing that she can’t bear any children for him, Rey had wanted to give him something to hold onto. Something worthwhile; something more. Because even with all of his sweet words and gestures, she had seen the sorrow crack like a fissure in the depths of his eyes when she finally told him the truth.

Meeting Holdo had felt like destiny. Painful and cruel, but frighteningly astute—as if there were
some scheme behind it all, some plan. How could she not have seen it as some greater will that
Ben’s mother had been placed within their grasp, yet just beyond their reach?

Rey sighs again, resting her eyes. This day has waged a terrible war on her. Now, with the smoke
and fire cooled into cinders, she dreads facing him again—facing the hard truth of him.

“Show me the way to go,” she murmurs, clenching her fingers into the skin of her arms. “Please,
keep us together.”

As her soft words dwindle into quiet, restless thoughts—and in those thoughts louder prayers—a
gentle rapping sounds at her door.

“Rey? It’s me. May I come in?”

Rey sits up, her heart heavy in her breast. “Yes.”

Ahsoka opens the chamber door and slips inside, her intelligent eyes softened with something not
quite pity. When the latch closes behind her she floats to Rey’s side, wrapping her in a firm
embrace.

Sighing into her mentor’s shoulder, Rey allows the sense of Ahsoka’s peace to wash over her.
Although she had fled from them, the loneliness has already begun to staunch the very air she
breathes.

“Your husband is an ass,” Ahsoka says, petting Rey’s hair. “Though I’m sure you knew that.”

Rey laughs once, pulling away to wipe her nose. “I know. He gets like that when he’s afraid…”
Staring down at the hands in her lap, she tries not to remember the words he’d spoken, or the
lingering sting. “I just wish I could change his mind.”

“While normally I would offer a way to help you do that, I’m afraid I have to give,” Ahsoka
resigns, watching Rey carefully. “He seems very committed; as stubborn and bull-headed as his
grandfather. Sweet words won’t sway him, even from you.”

“I understand why he’s trying to do the right thing,” Rey murmurs. “I also want us to be safe.
But… I want him to be happy, too.”

Ahsoka cocks her head, narrowing her eyes. “Why wouldn’t he be happy? He has you.”

“I know that, but I…” she looks away, anywhere but where Ahsoka can see the heat broiling inside
of her again. “…I wanted to give him more.”

Frowning, Ahsoka lets his gaze rake over Rey’s face. It’s a familiar expression she wears, one too
much like a choice she once made, a long, long time ago.

Whatever Rey is going through cannot be solved in words. There is a pain inside of her, one that
has always been there since the second Ahsoka learned her name, from the instant she understood
what had grown between her and the young master—and every moment since. There is a hole in
Rey’s heart, a yearning for something greater than herself that won’t be filled by running away.

Gently, Ahsoka places her hand over Rey’s, stroking the youthful, vibrant skin. “Maybe there is
something I can do.”

Rey looks up, light flickering in her chest. “There is?”
Ahsoka nods, clasping Rey’s trembling fingers. Warmth passes between them, alight and pulsing and suddenly subdued. “But if we do this, it will be without his knowledge. You will be going against his wishes.”

Rey pauses, glancing at the door, her heart in her ears. Could she make this deal with Ahsoka, mere steps away from the man she married?

Although she has kept her share of secrets from him in the past, she cannot remember ever lying to him. If he were to inquire the truth from her, she knows that she would not be able to answer him without incurring wrath or worry.

But… if she and Ahsoka could do this… if they could find Leia and bring her to him without his knowledge… wouldn’t his joy outweigh his anger, in the end?

Wetting her lip, Rey steels her heart and her gaze, covering her and Ahsoka’s woven hands. “Yes,” she whispers, trusting in that voice in her soul screaming that this is the right path—even as her heart aches.

Searching Rey’s eyes, Ahsoka’s countenance darkens. Her tone switches from the harsh Greek to a grounding Coptic, the tongue hooking Rey’s ear as she speaks. “If it’s a message you’re going to send, then the only one who can has to be someone we know. Naturally I wouldn’t have you or Ben send anything through Mitaka, so I will pretend the letter is from me. I will summon him to my home and claim it is for an old friend. As he is bound to our master, so too will he be bound to my will.”

Rey nods, letting the words sink into her. While she can’t be certain that Mitaka would remain loyal to Ben, the thought of the young man traveling away from the city reassures her. The further he is when she and Ben escape, the less likely he may be to incur Snoke’s inevitable wrath.

“But what will you say?” Rey asks. “When will you send it?”

“I’ll leave that up to you,” Ahsoka replies, rising to her feet. “Write down a letter and where it is to be addressed—and don’t forget to tell her where we are going. I’ll seal it and take it with me late tonight, and send it in the morning. I trust you can keep the young master distracted?”

“I can,” Rey nods, clutching the sheets underneath her.

With a soft smile, Ahsoka stoops, taking Rey’s face and placing a tender kiss to the crown of her hair. “Hide the letter in the furnace. If it seems like he will find it, you can burn it. Just keep him away from my house until high noon tomorrow. Mitaka will be gone by then. Understood?”

“Understood. Thank you, Ahsoka,” Rey sighs, rising and wrapping her in a tight embrace, praying that this feeling within her is one she can trust. One that will keep them safe.

Flat footfalls slap off the marble pillars as Ben paces the atrium floor, restless as a caged beast.

*Your parents abandoned you like you were nothing.* How could he have been so careless to speak so unkindly to her? While not the most controlled of men, he’d thought himself more patient, more gentle, since being with Rey. How could he have spoken in such a manner to her, knowingly reaching into her hurt to reopen an old wound?

Sighing, Ben rubs his mouth. He should go to her now. Hell, he should have stopped her then. And yet terror grips him to wonder what damage he might have caused, rooting him to the spot. *He* is the one to blame for this—not Snoke, not the Resistance, not even his mother. *Him.*
Fucking coward, a voice within Ben berates, closing his eyes. You’re no different from your father.

The sound of soft footfalls echoes and Ben looks up, his shoulders falling when the woman before him crosses her arms, her bright blue eyes dim with disdain.

Ben swallows. “How is she?”

“She’ll be fine,” Ahsoka grunts, moving to pass him. The contempt in her gaze could solder him to the floor. “But you’ve got a lot of making up to do.”

Pouting, Ben nods his agreement to his feet. He already figured that much.

“What’s your plan for tomorrow?”

His eyes trail distractedly to the flowing curtains, the sun already beginning its decent, churning rich amber waves into their milky surface. “We’ll pack what we can. I’ll take Rey to your house and leave her with you. I’ll remain here, in case something happens.”

“And after that?”

“The day after I will be in Rome. That night, after the fight, I’ll come to you. Then we go.”

“Alright.” Ahsoka places her hand over his arm, squeezing gently. “Just be careful.”

Ben meets her gaze, wishing he could tell her he will be. But they both know that two days is enough for anything to happen. Silently, he is thankful she understands what’s at stake.

His voice is haggard and soft in the silence as he envelops her hand in his, keeping her close to him. “Thank you, Ahsoka.”

Rey slips into their bedroom, her ears trained on the quiet. She doesn’t know how long she has until her husband comes in—oh, how her heart pounds at the idea of being caught!

But she has to do this now, while she still can. Quickly, she searches through the cupboard of his nightstand, finding what she’d suspected. With trembling fingers she pulls out a slip of parchment, leftover from their lessons while he’d been bedridden. There is pen and ink for her as well, which nearly smears over her hand in her haste.

Perhaps it is shame, or some faulty sense of memory, that leads her to write in Latin. It’s crude and sloppy, but it’s what Ben has taught her. Maybe, in this way, the deed could honor him.

The note is only just penned when her senses quiver, the sound of shaking foundation underfoot betraying a coming presence to her. Whether Ahsoka or Ben, she won’t take the risk. She shuts the letter away in the drawer, rising quickly to sit upon the bed, allowing the morose of her mood to shroud her secret.

Her instinct had been correct.

He comes closer, his shadow falling over her, its shade pinning her against the dusk and sunny streams bleeding through the open terrace. The silence pounds between them, the heat of bodies so familiar all at once turned to strangers.

Before Rey can summon the courage to look at his face, Ben moves. Without a word he sinks to his knees before her, his hands slow, hesitant, and yet twisted with something not unlike desperation as they skid over her thighs, leading his arms to embrace her waist, his head pressed
into the warmth of her lap.

Rey stills, her arms held away from him, unsure what else to do as the sorrow and anger in her heart begins to dissipate, leaving her with nothing at all.

“Forgive me. Please,” he murmurs, holding her closer, the gentle stroke of his trembling fingers along her spine only weakening her resolve. “Forgive me.”

His words undo her—and though the sting of them remain, she cannot hold herself from the love thrumming through her at his touch, the earnest apology in his voice. She lowers her arms onto his back, threading fingers through the rich ebony waves of his hair. “I do.”

Ben shivers as her caress slips down his body, and he sighs against her stomach. “I just want to protect you.”

“I know,” she says softly, tilting his face to meet her eyes. The red lines in the white of his sclera resound a tremble in her lips, and she stoops down to still them against his, sealing away the hurt they’d wrought. When it is done his gaze sags with relief, intent on her as she strokes his supple cheek. “I’m sorry, too. You’ve done everything for me. Everything you can… and I want you to know that I am grateful.”

Tears prick in his eyes at the tenderness of her touch, at the sweetness of grace washing over him. Though he cannot accept her gratitude—perhaps he never could—he rises to sit beside her, pulling her into his arms.

He kisses her, soft and slow, pressing into her the weight of his fading hopes, stealing the light from her if only to keep them shining just a little longer.

They pack their belongings in a long silence, mechanical and somber. They don’t have much in the way of storage other than cloth sacks, but thankfully Ben—in his hermitage—has little to store. Leaving the cloaks and sandals behind is easy. Replaceable.

While Ben sorts through the scrolls and text, selecting what they could keep—or sell, should they need to—Rey slips into the culina unnoticed, hiding the letter in the furnace with a quiet prayer. When she returns to their room to root through the chest in the corner, her legs trembling and heavy with secret, he is none the wiser.

There isn’t much inside, other than a few broken knick-knacks and old garbs. But near the back she finds something familiar.

Pulling it into her hands, Rey looks down at the scrap of silk, smoothing it under her thumb. She’d thought it was gone that night she dropped it to touch him… the night they first kissed. It was not so long ago, and yet so much has happened since…

“Rey.”

Rey turns from where she kneels, offering the piece for him to see. “Did you keep this again?”

Ben frowns, coming near to take it, the same sentimental warmth burning in his gaze as he runs his fingers over the cloth. “No.”

“Must have been Ahsoka,” Rey murmurs, returning to rifle through the chest.

Ben watches her as she does, his heart and memories entwining between his fingers. For a moment
his love for her overwhelms him, constricting in his throat, and he forces himself to etch the image of her in his mind, to commit every fleeting moment from hereon to memory.

When she reaches deep, Rey’s knuckles brush cool steel. Intrigued, if not somewhat alarmed by the familiarity, she pulls out a long chain of shackles and holds them in her hands, staring down at them.

Ben’s neck flushes, torn violently from his reverie. “I—”

“You saved this?” Rey murmurs, her eyes glazing back and forth over the chains—the same that had bound her. Her eyes meet his helpless gaze, dancing with a running, furious flame.

He stammers, lips dry. “No, not for that, I…” His fists clench around the cloth. “I intended to forget about them.”

Rey nods, almost to herself, watching her thumb run across the same ridge that left marks in her skin that have long since faded. After a long silence, she mutters, “Do you… do you still have the key?”

Ben frowns, unsure. He answers by kneeling beside her, shifting around to produce a small set of iron plugs and key from the container once left on his mantlepiece, showing them to her.

Something happens on her mouth when she sees them, like a jolt of a leaf in rain. Brief. It ripples in her cheeks before fading into her skin, betraying a mischief—dark and sincere—in the honey fields of her eyes. It is a look he has only caught glimpses of before—a look the same as she had the night she waited on her palms for him, or in the morning light upon the chaise.

Sunset gleams between them when Ben realizes what such a look intends, watching her with wide eyes as she takes the key, rising to her feet.

At last she smiles standing over him, the shadows illuminating the sweet slopes of her face, the halo of light framing the devilish quirk of her lips before it fades. “Ben?”

His eyes scour her face, expectation boiling in his blood, tightening the veins in his hands. “Yes?”

She looks from him to the chains, thoughtful. “If this was our last night… Would it be wrong, to make it last?”

Sorrow grips Ben’s heart. He wishes she wouldn’t speak like that, but he knows he is no better. The threat is real, and their lives so fragile, so quickly smothered. And for that he whispers, “Never.”

The thoughtfulness of Rey’s face does not ebb when she looks at him, only sharpen into curiosity. Desire. Her hands close firm around the chains. “And if I wanted to take something for myself… would that be wrong?”

The promise, the threat behind her voice elicits a shiver along his spine, memories of her on her back, crying Master, Master, echoing in his mind, throbbing pulses between his legs. On his knees he straightens, as though to meet the wall of her intent, to surrender to it, and again says, “Never.”

Rey sucks in a breath, her lungs hammered by the burning longing in his eyes. He knows what she wants. Perhaps he has always known, even before she knew herself. Before she knew what it was like to thirst for living flesh, to crave the warmth of loving touch, to feel the power of throbbing need. To see him now, beneath her, wanting her and the chains she bears—perhaps it was what they were always coming to.
I trust you can keep the young master distracted?

“Strip.”

Obediently, Ben makes to rise, until Rey’s hand braces against his shoulder, halting him. He glances up, questioning.

“On your knees,” she whispers.

Ben returns to his place on the floor, unflinchingly meeting her eyes. With slow, purposeful movements, he undoes the leather belt from his waist. The tunic falls loose around him before he peels it over his head, revealing more of his muscular frame. Small scars catch in the musky sunset gleaming in from the terrace doors, the light burning lustful defiance in his eyes as he discards his sandals and, at last, bares himself fully to her.

Rey’s head swims at the vision before her, the submission of his will to hers, the weight of the chains in her hands. His manhood has already excited some, twitching, lounging lazily against his thigh. The exposure invites her eyes, stokes the fire within her—the desire to please, to possess.

Falling into it, she allows herself the freedom to approach him, discarding with each step the memories of slavery and wifehood. Suddenly, with every touch of her feet upon the floor, every beat of her heart, she is no longer Rey, but woman—no longer servant, but mistress.

Slowly, predatorily, she circles him as he remains motionless on the floor, bared and helpless for her perusal. His strong posture and proud scowl hold firm, ready to be broken. When she stands before him once more she cups his chin, turning his face to her. “You are mine now,” she says, tempering the tremble in her throat. “You will do as I command, and I will use you as I see fit.”

The dark lustre in her eyes stirs the want within Ben’s body, the demand of her touch swelling within his manhood. So different is she now, even as her eyes contain the lingering trace of her tears. And oh, how he yearns to repent for what he has done, how desperate this urge to sate has become.

Yes—yes, let her have all of him. Every breath, every drop.

“Yes, Mistress,” he rumbles from behind swollen lips, eyes black as pitch. His long lashes flutter with compliance, his mind already winding around twisted fantasies. “I am yours.”

Exhaling an uneven breath, Rey releases him. She tosses the chains upon the bed for him to see before fussing with her stola, stripping away the layers of dress and fascia. Her breasts kiss cold air, inviting his quiet, hungry gaze, before she steps closer, her final layer almost level with his nose.

Ben’s eyes fall between her legs, the warmth of her body washing over him. His arms twitch, yearning to touch, but he refrains, for he has not been commanded. “What will you have of me, my lady?” he probes, devouring the length of her creamy thighs.

Wetting her lip, Rey tugs at the folds of her subligaculum, one after the other. “Keep your hands behind your back,” she orders, now standing naked before him. “I want my slave to put his mouth to better use.”

A low groan builds in his throat, his cock full, his legs tense. “As you wish,” he murmurs, leaning obediently into her, burying his face between her legs.

Rey gasps, her hands twining into his hair as the force of his kiss pushes her onto her toes,
spreading her thighs apart. Pleasure bursts behind her eyes as he feeds from her, moaning his soft, deep moans and breathing hot breath against her sensitive wings. The wet flick of his tongue kisses the shell of her ear, the needy, willing slurp of his every suck, the intrusion of his strong tongue within her—it’s almost too much, and yet not enough.

The wave comes quickly and Rey rides into it, gripping his hair and moving over him with gritted teeth. He bobs his head with her, following in her wake until her legs crumble and mindless pleasure claws out her throat from the pit of her lungs, echoing off the walls of their chamber.

Slowly, Rey sinks down into his lap, breathing heavily with him as she braces her hands against the hard muscle of his chest. His cock stirs against her stomach as she does, hot and straining for relief, but he does not move to take her.

Catching her breath, Rey regains her composure, taking his face in her hands. With mock sympathy she wipes the sweat from his brow, the release from his lips, pushing her thumb into his mouth. He moans and sucks, dragging with the desperation of a babe to a breast.

“Well done,” Rey praises softly, removing her hand. “You have earned your reward. Rise, and lay down upon the bed.”

With hands dutifully remaining behind his back, Ben rises with her, his eyes never leaving the shadow of her frame as he kneels onto their bed. Her taste lingers on his tongue, the sight of her surrendered to her desire for control still throbbing, dripping down his cock as he lays prone on his back. Her gaze falls on him, his rod patiently upright, loyal, enslaved by her every whim.

The clank of chains sounds before she takes his wrist in hand, stretching first one arm to the bedpost, then the other, each one linked, bound above his head. Her fingers caress his palm with her gentleness, intertwining with his briefly before moving on. Unable to resist, he tests his chains, finding himself unable to move anything but his legs and head.

He cranes his neck to watch her crawl over him, the sweet fall of her hair so familiar, the darkness in her eyes so deliciously foreign and frightening. He groans with need when she sits upon his stomach, the hot juices of her release sinking into his flesh.

“Tell me what you want,” Rey murmurs, caressing down the muscles of his arms.

Ben swallows, his chest already beginning to heave with the effort of not being inside of her. “I want,” he pants, “I want to please you, Mistress.”

Her lithe fingers trail down his sternum, teasing over his nipples and making him squirm. “That’s not all you want, is it, Ben?” Down further they travel, over the thin path of hair leading between his legs. She scales down as he watches helplessly, desperately, unable to resist as she caresses the tender inlet of his thighs, her soft breath ghosting the pillar of his cock as she speaks. “Didn’t you want this to last?”

Always. He has always wanted it to last—to become one with her, to lose himself in the intoxicating pleasure of her body, to rest forever in the warmth of her skin, feel the steady pulse of her heart… All of it, all of this, always.

The feeling of her palm smoothing over his leg, so close to the apex of him, and away, so close, makes him whine, and he cries out softly when her warm fingers close around him, pumping his shaft. Never before has he felt such desperation, such yearning, coil within him, shattering him from within.
The pitch of his voice thumps between her legs, and Rey shivers to feel the cold air against her bare arousal. Slowing her work on him, she wets her lips, grazing the tips of her breasts against his legs. “What else do you want, Ben?”

Perspiration gathers on his forehead as his neck gives way, forcing his eyes closed as he begs, writhing into her hand. “Fuck me. Please, Mistress,” he moans, twitching, straining against his chains at the thought of her sinking down upon him, enveloping him in her bliss. “Fuck me.”

His pitiful state must give way to some kind of mercy within her, for no sooner than he can continue to plead does she rise, sliding her soaked lips up and down against the length of his cock, making him wet. He watches her as she moves, her hands braced against his chest—watches the tip of him emerge and retreat into her folds. He has to force himself to look away, to close his eyes before the sight and pressure finishes him.

“No.” Rey shakes her head, stilling her movements and grabbing his shaft, positioning herself over it. “You have to earn it.”

Her body closing over him makes Ben cry out, thick and heavy and burning with need. Digging his feet into the sheets, he thrusts deeply into her, desperate for every inch of ecstasy they can take. She braces onto him tighter, rakes her nails against his chest, meeting him almost violently. At one moment her hands close softly around his throat, entangling in their gaze as neither looks away.

Ben moans into her touch, welcoming it, savoring it, and bucks again. “Harder,” he growls under his breath, snapping his hips.

Rey leans down against his body, taking the offering of him at a new angle until each of their thrusts finds rhythm against her crest, striking her with pleasure. She tightens her hold on his neck slightly, teasing him with the bite of her nails. She feels him twitch inside of her in response, the long moan from his mouth making her clench. “Oh God, Ben—”

“Want you to come,” he babbles, half crazed. The wooden bedposts creak from the pull of his wrists. His hips snap faster, rolling into her, throwing off her balance and challenging her control. A new wrath bathes his eyes in hellfire when they meet hers, scathing and relentless in need. “Want— ah! Mn—to make you come.”

Rey’s eyes roll as he strikes a point within her, and she knows it would only take a few more to finish her again. But she knows him—if she gave in, it would all be over.

Unable to stand that, Rey pulls off him. A strangled noise bursts from Ben’s throat and he falls, whimpering and writhing, his cock red and angry.

Lip quivering and wet, he levels his betrayed gaze upon her. “Why did you stop?”

“A slave would question his mistress?” Rey coos, admiring the deep flush on his neck. “I thought you wanted this to last.”

Ben folds his lips, swallowing thickly.

His impertinence amuses Rey. To have him so utterly at her mercy, teetering on the edge of madness. She cannot help but enjoy every moment watching him sprawled out before her. Almost like a feast…

With a wry smile, Rey leaps from the bed. “Just a moment,” she says, stealing one last look before
slipping out into the hall.

Huffing, Ben lays his head back, trying to ignore the pain beginning to swelter in his sack. He’d been so close to release—he is almost certain she’d done this intentionally.

Very well. If that is the game she wants to play, then he will simply have to endure. The thought gives him solace, knowing that victory will come to him when she does. And when it happens, it will be well deserved.

As her husband lies prone and impatient in the other room, Rey races down the halls and into the culina, hopping down into the storeroom. With hot hands she takes the remaining vessel of honey, smiling to herself. They won’t be taking this with them—might as well put it to good use.

Rey ascends from the stores and pauses, her heart leaping into her throat when a person appears at the doorway. She almost makes to flee, but relaxes—as much as she is able when naked—in the presence of Ahsoka.

The older woman’s eyes widen, raking down Rey’s body. The blue shimmers into humor above a knowing smirk. “I see you’re keeping him busy. Where’s the letter?”

“In the furnace,” Rey blushes, holding the honey container over her arousal.

Ahsoka nods, stooping down and taking the letter from the soot. She dusts it off, quirking a brow. “I doubt I’ll be caught, then?”

Rey shakes her head. “You have time. He’s a little… tied up, at the moment.”

“Fine,” Ahsoka says, seemingly ignoring her odd statement. Or perhaps misunderstanding. She makes for the rear entrance, shooting Rey a reassuring smile. “Don’t stay up too late. I’ll see you at noon tomorrow.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Rey says, ducking her head and hurrying back down the hall. She tampers down her mortification, reminding herself of the naked man lying beyond the door, whining and desperate for her.

When she enters Ben looks up, his gaze immediately falling to the container in her hands. He smirks, the pain faded enough now, the twinge of his lips teasing the endearing blunt of his teeth. “No water basin, this time?”

Rey wrinkles her nose at him, carefully maneuvering over his body with the object cradled in her hands. “I think you’ll like this better.”

He almost doubts it. Their wedding night had been more than he’d ever dreamed. More than he ever deserved…

Rey frowns. His mood has darkened again, his cock beginning to wilt. Yearning to chase it away she smiles, leaning down to cup his cheek, teasing her lips and tongue against his.

Ben stirs in answer, craning his neck for more of her mouth. His wrists pull at the chains and he groans, wanting to touch, to squeeze, to feel.

She pulls away, her eyes gleaming as she stirs a finger into the honey, smearing it against her lip. With an aching slowness she descends again, smiling into another kiss. Ben moans, melting into taste of her.
His cock twitches against her thigh and she brushes against him, reawakening the desires they'd rested. When she parts he licks his lips, his eyes liquid pools of black as they trail hungrily down her body.

“Do you want me to unchain you?” Rey asks, caressing the strong joint of his neck.

Ben tugs against the shackles. “Yes.”

Folding her lips into a smile, Rey kisses the tip of his nose. “Alright, I will—after.”

Ben frowns, almost disappointed, but relents, captured as she dips her fingers into the ampule, smearing a glob of honey against his throat, and another down his chest, across his nipple. Realizing what she intends, he shudders, gasping softly as her lips close around the sensitive skin of his neck, lapping and sucking.

Her slender hands hold him as she scales down his body, feeding from him with delicious slowness. Her every breath brushes against his hot flesh, the flick of her tongue against his nipple making his back arch. She spreads more of the honey onto the hard plain of his stomach and—

“Rey,” he moans, lightheaded. The touch of her sliding fingers and heavy heat of the spread coating his shaft reminds his body of hers, taunting him with her absence. “Please.”

“Would you deny your mistress her meal?” Rey challenges, hovering over him. “Perhaps you deserve to be punished.”

Oh, but now he feels punishment of an evil sort! To sacrifice the ecstasy of her body for the pleasure of her touch, her teasing… And yet, he can feel himself giving in to the patience. The sweet agony of burning alive.

He shakes his head. “No, Mistress,” he pants, lids heavy as she sinks down, licking the sticky residue from his surging abdomen. “I would deny you nothing.”

Rey hums, swirling her tongue around the warm patches of his skin, further down. She meets his eyes, so desperate, so carnal, that she can deny him nothing, either. With practiced ease she licks up from the base of his cock, lapping and sucking every inch she can reach. She revels in the broken grunts and stuttered, rasping gasps elicited from his throat. The sweet taste of honey draws forth the bitterness of his taste, bringing forth a powerful wave of satisfaction within her.

When he is sweating and moaning and writhing again, bucking weakly into her mouth, Rey sucks hard on his tip before releasing him, wet and sloppy and thick against his stomach. As promised, she takes the key from the nightstand, unlatching first one wrist, then the other.

With impossible speed, Ben’s hands lunge upon her, grabbing her and rolling her onto her back. With a ruthless grunt he plants himself atop her, forcing his tongue between her lips, his hands grasping and clutching at every inch of her skin.

When his kiss ends Rey gasps for breath, her heart pounding between her legs as Ben pulls them around his waist, barring his arms beside her head. His eyes bore into hers with unbridled lust; the eyes of a creature freed from more than her chains alone.

He doesn’t look away as he fits inside of her, his expression tightening with the white heat of budding rhapsody. But he does not meet her with the frenzy of desire coalesced within him as she might have expected—instead, he rolls himself into her, the tempered wrath of his restraint driving him powerfully into her very core.
Against Rey’s instinct to relinquish herself to the power, to the heat and hardness of him, she too keeps her eyes open, locked with his. He holds her in trance as his movements pick up speed, now inciting her to moan and writhe, to crave more.

Ben’s spine shivers, the pleasure beginning to gather within him, more powerfully than he’s ever felt before. The denial of his release fixes between them like a blazing pyre, sucking him down into flames until he cries out, gulping and gasping her name and his love as ropes of his seed spill within her without end.

Rey rides him as he offers the last of his hardness to her, shuddering as the pressure of his waist upon her crest releases her to the warm spread of comfort and bliss. The empty container falls onto the floor as they turn to their sides, arms and legs entwined, sweat cooling and hearts beginning to slow.

The inky black of the night surrounds them, insects singing beyond the open doors. Her feet dance over his, tangling in the darkness as his hands hold her, stroke her everywhere. Soft words float halos between their lips as exhaustion begins to creep within their bed.

It is Ben who sleeps first. Rey watches the moonlight bathe over his pale face, traces over the lines of his cheek and jaw, the smatter of moles and hairs with her eyes. He looks more relaxed when he is asleep. Less burdened by the world that always sought to harm him. To take.

*I’m no different*, Rey sighs, her gaze falling to his lips. She’s taken everything from him. Everything he could give. And tonight, she has taken even more. She’s stolen his trust, now. Played him and his body, manipulated him to her whim… whispering words of love while hiding yet another secret.

But she knows it’s too late now. Tomorrow, things will be set in motion that will be beyond either of their control. And as she stays up through the night, praying fervently against it while lying in the arms of her husband, she cannot help but fear that this may be the last time she ever has the chance.

**Chapter End Notes**

[No notes today~]
Some leagues south of the Skywalker estate, nestled into the green steppes of the Roman countryside, a small house of stone and thatch waits in the early morning fog.

A woman, proud and firm, groans from her bed, pulling on her robes with stiff limbs. She sits for a long moment, before reaching behind her back and working braids into her length of silver hair, staring fixedly on the white sunspot glowing on the floor.

When the work is finished she turns to her corner table, lighting the oil lamp. Her slender finger trails over a graph of dates and glyphs, stopping halfway between the Epip—to the Romans, the ides of July—and sighs, marking the large tabula with her stylus.

*Tomorrow.*

She pads barefoot over the wet, trodden grass, bag of dead grasses and pear cores in hand. She tuts and the dappled mare comes forth from the nearby hut, huffing impatiently at the end of her ties. The woman dumps the feed to the basin embedded in the ground, and the horse stoops to munch, ears flicking beneath the woman’s caress.

The whinny of another horse sounds from above, and she looks up, locking eyes with a red-cheeked young man. He rides his imperial stallion down into the valley—no matter how many times he does it, he always seems uneasy.

It makes her smile. “You’re late, Dopheld.”

“Apologies, Ma’am,” he bows, dismounting, ducking into her open arms.

They embrace briefly, his lean shoulders stiff under her touch. The young man is only slightly taller than herself and she looks up into his face, cupping his cheeks. “Dopheld… you have hair!”

He smiles shyly, but does not reply, stooping down to snatch the pail from the wall of the stable-hut and walking towards the well.

They work together in the morning to complete the usual chores until the sunlight crests from over the hill, carving its summer heat into the steppes. Her hands tremble, the pour of the bucket slow and scattered over the flowers and crops before his warm hands cover hers, holding them still.

Ahsoka relinquishes it to him, closing a hand over her fingers. “Thank you, Dopheld.”

“No trouble, Ma’am,” he murmurs, dumping the rest of the water into Lux’s basin.

She glances at his earnest expression, the dark circles under his eyes. The poor boy has probably been run ragged by the emperor—or any number of other masters he may serve beside Ben Solo.
“Come inside,” she says above the lazy choir of crickets, gesturing to the house bathed in warm sunlight. “I’ll fix something for you.”

Dopheld Mitaka knows better than to argue with her, following her into the house. He sits upon her well-worn chaise, watching her light a fire upon the hearth. She settles the cauldron over the licking flames, reheating stew made for herself the night before.

They break bread and eat in silence, Dopheld’s skittish gaze flitting now and then to the swords displayed over the mantlepiece. But he has never asked, and never will.

“There is something I need you to do for me, Dopheld,” Ahsoka murmurs, dabbing the lapcloth against her lip. Her bright eyes mingle with his over the lampfire. “Something I can’t ask of anyone else.”

He nods, leaning closer.

Setting aside her cloth, she rises to pull an enclosed letter from the mantle, caressing the parchment in her hands. “I have a friend in Illyria. A woman I used to know. I would deliver it myself, but…”

“Illyria is east across the sea,” Mitaka nods thoughtfully. “It may be weeks before she receives it.”

“That’s alright. I’m in no hurry, other than this,” she smiles, dismissively holding up her hand. With a groan she settles into the seat astride him. “I won’t be of much use to the young master much longer.”

The boy shrugs noncommittally, looking about the table with pear in hand. "Have you a knife? I don't enjoy the peels."

"Oh, no, I have none," Ahsoka sighs. "I gave mine to Rey long ago."

Frowning, Mitaka sets the fruit aside and lets their conversation fall to silence, stirring the empty remains of his bowl. “That girl. Ren likes her?”

“He tolerates her more than I might have expected,” Ahsoka muses, studying him. “But yes. I believe she will make a fine replacement for me.”

Nodding, Mitaka grasps her withered hand, cupping it gently. “I could take you there. We could go together. I would care for you.”

“No, Dopheld,” Ahsoka murmurs, withdrawing from his fingers. Softly, she extends the letter to him, urging him to take it. “I must stay here with him. It is my purpose. Yours is to be my messenger. Please—will you deliver this to Illyria for me?”

He pauses for only a moment before he stands from the table and bows deeply, accepting the envelope from her hands. “Of course, Ma’am.”

Ahsoka leads him back to his horse, sending him off with bread and cheese folded in cloth and a kiss upon his stubbled cheek. He leaves her then with a reassuring smile, unaware that when he returns, she will be gone.

Even after he has left her behind, Ahsoka stands beneath the Roman sky, her face turned to the clouds, breathing in the rich scent of Summer and life. It makes her forget the pain that has spread to every crevice of her—the aches and pains in her back, her knees, her hands…

The heavy trod of hooves approaches from the North, and she turns to watch them approach, every
belonging they have left strapped to Silencer’s saddle.

Ben slips off before helping Rey down, leading her by the hand to the front of the house. Ahsoka waits there for them, taking their hands in hers. Her eyes meet Rey’s, their interlocked gaze shining with knowledge that the deed has been done.

“Into the house,” she urges, hefting one of their bags into her arms. “I won’t be responsible for these if it rains.”

“Yes, Ahsoka,” husband and wife acquiesce, taking what they can carry and following her inside.

Rey’s eyes widen when they enter Ahsoka’s home, the shape and frame unfamiliar to her. It reminds her of the Latin “ah,” or one of the Egyptian pyramids, tall and pointed and proud, like its owner. A fire burns within the hearth, sweeping up the slanted wattle and daub walls.

“Did you build this place?” Rey asks, setting her things down beside the tall wardrobe and humble bed.

“I did,” the woman nods. “A long time ago. My master, Ben’s grandfather, helped me.”

Rey admires the masonry of the entrance, tracing her fingers along the outcropping. Her mind floats to future possibilities. Even with the heat of noon beating down beyond, the darkness within stays cool and dark. When they get to Egypt, Ahsoka’s knowledge could help them build a home—if ever things came to that.

“And the gladii?” Ben probes, his eyes fixated on the swords mounted over the fire.

“A gift. Also from your grandfather.” Ahsoka reclines upon her chaise, resting her eyes for a moment. “Every morsel the swordsman you’ve become, but only half the man...”

Ben’s gaze casts down into the fire, igniting something like grief within his eyes. It doesn’t escape Rey’s notice.

A soft snore erupts from Ahsoka’s parted lips, her brief respite quickly fading into a deep slumber.

He and Rey exchange a glance and file outside, letting her alone. They walk together in the sunlight, fingers intertwined as they make for the shade of one of the trees rooted deep within the steppe.

“Do you have your knife?” Ben asks.

Rey nods, producing it from the folds of her stola. She traces her thumb over the engravings of Ahsoka’s initials.

“Good,” he murmurs, caressing her cheek. The back of his hand brushes against the soft cloth of her palla, stirring him. That morning they had taken and given of each other, restlessly, without hope for satiation, and he can only hope his body will be able to withstand the separation of a day. Resentfully, he steps back. “There are some things you should learn before we go. I won’t take any risks.”

“Teach me,” she insists.

A rueful smile tugs at his lips and he steps behind her, gently nudging her legs with his. “Bend your knees, shoulder-width apart. Don’t stop until you find balance.”
Rey obeys, letting him help her into position. She reminds herself to breathe, to steady her heart and her mind, to commit his advice to memory.

She has fought before, in the brief time she’d been on the streets of Cairo. Even against the other slaves in Unkar Plutt’s house. But never with a blade. Now Ben takes her right hand, closing her fist over the handle of the knife until the tip points upright.

“Always hold the blade in this position, striking forward,” he instructs, miming the movements with her. “Pierce the stomach, then push up, into the heart, like this.”

When Ben lets go, Rey goes through the movements again. Forward, in, and up. He moves to stand in front of her, meeting her eyes and pointing to his face, then his neck. “If a man comes close and you have no choice but to strike, aim for the nose to stun. Strike with the heel of your palm, or your elbow, if you can. Don’t hold back.”

Rey wets her lip, moving her knife to her left hand, simulating the hard drive of her opposite palm into the bottom ridge of his nose.

Ben smiles. “Very good. How would you stab me?”

Quickly Rey tosses the knife back into her right hand, jabbing slightly, nowhere near his body. “I go in and up to pierce the heart.”

“Remember that. You might be tempted to aim downward, but the way I taught you is better. Try it, here,” he offers, tapping the point over his breast.

Rey obliges, turning the knifepoint and lifting her fist as one may when offering sacrifice. As she slashes down his hand flies up, catching her arm and freezing her in place.

“Unless you’re striking him from behind, you will be stopped, disarmed, and killed. If you have to fight, always hold your blade like this,” he says, gently returning her grip to her original form. “Understand?”

“I understand,” she replies, tightening her hold on the handle, as if feeling it could give her strength.

His gaze falls to her hands and he swallows, cupping her elbows. “One last thing.”

Rey looks up, meeting the speckled amber light of his eyes as the leaves of the tree dance overhead, watching them. “What is it, Ben?”

“Promise me,” he murmurs, “if something happens, you’ll run.” He takes her arms in a desperate grip, pressing his head to hers and breathing deeply. “Run as far as you can, and keep running.”

Her throat clogs, unwilling to let her speak. She nods, sniffing and casting the knife aside to throw her arms around his neck, pulling him close to her as a sob bursts from the deepest pit of her chest. His arms pull her impossibly close, the force of his embrace knocking down the hood of her palla.

“Please don’t go,” she whimpers, threading her fingers into his hair, her lungs trembling. “I don’t know what I’d do without you. I’d feel so alone…”

Ben buries his nose into her neck, inhaling the scent of her and forcing the sting of tears back into his body. “You’re not alone.” He pulls away, enough to look into her eyes as he touches her face, clinging onto only truth he may ever know. “I love you, Rey. Nothing will ever keep me from you. Not Rome, not death… nothing.”
Tears slip down her cheeks and he catches them, her lips brushing against his thumbs. “I love you, too, Ben. I’ll never stop. I’ll never forget. Just come back to me.” Standing on her toes, she pulls his lips to hers, sealing every vow with a kiss. “Come home.”

He collapses into her arms, sweeping her against his chest in a fervent kiss, pouring every drop of his passion into her, surrendering the last of these moments to the mercy of her love.

When at last they part, they breathe as one, swelling, deflating, lost, until Ahsoka emerges from the house and approaches them.

“We’ll be waiting for you here tomorrow night,” Ahsoka reminds, offering a serene smile.

The sight of it soothes Rey as Ben moves to embrace the older woman, bowing his head to her as a young man might his mother. “Thank you, Ahsoka.” He offers her a kind smile, squeezing her hands. “As if I weren’t indebted to you enough.”

“I’m sure you’ll find some way to pay me back, Ben Solo,” she smirks, impishly smacking the back of his hand. “My pride in you can only go so far. Just try not to get yourself killed.”

He scoffs ruefully, turning back to Rey. When their eyes meet a new somberness comes over her, a yearning to cling to him again, but she knows that once she does, there will be no letting go.

So she holds out her hand, smiling through the blur in her eyes.

Ben’s heart rends in his chest at the sight of her, her skin painted gold by the bright sunlight, the strays of her hair illuminated, dancing against the slender grace of her neck, shining in the endless fields of her eyes. He cannot resist her, heaven made flesh, Elysium incarnate—and takes her outstretched hand, letting her touch, her love, fill him with glorious purpose.

Rey gasps softly when he lets go, the burning resolve in his eyes only weakening her already crumbling resolve. But she holds fast, leaning into Ahsoka as he approaches Silencer, keeping his eyes as long as she is able, memorizing the shape of him—the high set of his cheeks, the aquiline frame of his nose, the strong set of his shoulders. Drowns her love and hope in the determined set of his lips, and his eyes—always his eyes—and the pledges they hold.

And with a hard crack Ben snaps the reins, riding back towards the home they’ve abandoned, leaving her behind with prayers and pleas on her lips, everything but the word goodbye.

Chapter End Notes

[The "Epip" is a frame of time from the Alexandrian Calendar, also known as the Ancient Coptic Calendar. The Epip spans between the Roman Calendar's June 25th and July 24th]

[Ahsoka's house is based on the Ancient Celtic A-frame huts, normally made of stone and thatch. The homes were typically large, but only housed about two rooms]
Waves of shadow and sun march across the green, open hills, clouds gathering and growling, etching their weary voice in the quiet. A scar of grey rips thunder across the sky, scattered droplets of rain falling in his hair, making slick the bare slopes of his shoulders.

Breathing out, Ben opens his eyes, lowering the gladius in his clenched fists. The trunk of the tree becomes the torso of a man as he readies his stance, urging every sinew and vein to remember their purpose.

When thunder rolls he advances, loosening his wrists with a twirl of the sword along either side of his body before the strike. The blade effortlessly wedges into the tree, leaving a deep gash.

Sighing, Ben yanks the gladius out of the trunk, stepping back into position. He breathes in deeply, rolling his shoulders, stretching his arms over his chest.

He used to train diligently, either here, in the sparse forest North of the villa, or on slow days with Ematt's locale. But that was before. Looking down, he can see that his stomach has lost its stony hardness, leaving behind the firm, thick lining of lingering muscle. His arms remain large, defined when flexed, but otherwise under his typical standard. He could almost laugh at himself—the Kylo Ren he once was would have thought him soft.

Tightening his hold on the rain-soaked handle, Ben returns his gaze to his 'enemy.' He cannot let himself be soft now. Cannot indulge the languid bliss he'd pushed away for so many years... If they are to withstand this, he will have to be strong. Stronger now than he has ever been.

Again he attacks the tree, rehearsing the old forms of his training, relaxing into the steps. He circles the trunk, stepping over the roots slowly, then quickly, stripping the bark chip by chip with right hand, then left, then right, then both, again, again, again—

*When I found you, I saw what all masters live to see...*

Sweet mingles with the rain as he strikes, harder and harder, the blurring vision transforming the tree into a body. Forms strange, forms familiar.

*...raw, untamed power...*

Wrath burns into him from the ground below, flames of Hell hot under his heels. His master's voice echoes in his mind, taunting him, reminding him of the vengeance he will never be able to take. The power surges in his arms, turns the knuckles of his hands to ashen white, and his calculated assault becomes a flurry of pounding slashes; the running water into blood.

*...and beyond that, something truly special—*

"No!" Ben roars, lodging the gladius deep into Snoke's body, watching with heaving satisfaction as
The life drains from his cold, ruthless eyes.

A crack from above startles Ben from his vision, morphing the corpse into the severed body of a tree, beginning to fall toward him.

Ben rushes out of the tree's path before it can land on him, watching it fall with a mighty crash. He struggles to catch his breath, his fingers trembling and cold, gazing at the stump left behind from his vigorous slashes.

Closing his eyes, he drops the gladius to his side, letting the rain wash over him, the silence louder than the fall.

The sharp edge of the novicilla glides down his cheek, sliding over the ridge of his jaw, down his neck. The quiet of the house surrounds him, glaring with alabaster emptiness.

Ben rinses off his face, looking into the mirror as he takes the shears, clipping the ends until they no longer brush his shoulders. Perhaps he shouldn't bother with sweeping up the fallen remnants, but he does. When it starts he can't seem to stop, walking around the house and setting things to rights, even when nothing had been wrong.

As much as he longs for a new life with Rey, far from Rome's influence, he would only lie to himself to think he'd not grown accustomed to the home of his grandfather. For years it was his refuge from the arena, a quiet, peaceful place for him to find strength. It was where he found Ahsoka, unearthed these hidden links to his past. It was the birthplace of his bond to Rey, the womb, the hearth of their love…

Ben sits down upon the stone bench in the courtyard, alone, remembering. He can almost see her again, dressed in white and slippers and veil, can almost feel the weight of her hands in his, the warmth of the morning sun on her lips. It takes his heart in its grasp and he holds it there, drawing it into him, becoming one with the memories until darkness and exhaustion forces him to retire.

Sleepily, Ben trudges into the tablinum. There's no hope for him if he tries to sleep in their bed—he wouldn't be able to rest there without her. He wonders how she is, if she's eaten, if she's missing him as much as he misses her, if her faith is keeping her strong.

Before allowing himself to recline, he ignites the ceiling lamps, passing the remaining scrolls and approaches the small curtain, pulling it aside to reveal the death mask of Anakin Skywalker. He'd decided the night before to let this shrine remain. It had felt wrong to remove it, this last piece of his family history.

Tenderly, Ben withdraws the hardened wax template, smoothing his thumbs over the cheeks. Over the years he had looked upon this face. Studied it. Spoken to it. This man he had never met, had never known, lived within him.

Glancing up at the preserved etchings of his grandfather and his wife, his grandmother, emotion swells in Ben's chest. Uncertainty presses down upon him, suffocating in the loneliness. Anakin had failed to protect the woman he'd loved—what if Ahsoka was right? What if he will be no different?

I am with you.

A cold shiver races down Ben's back, freezing him in place. A voice—someone is in his house. He looks behind him, reaching for the gladius strapped to his waist, but there is no one there. Only the soft summer wind stirring the heavy red curtains and flickering vignette of shadows.
Swallowing, he returns the mask to its place, putting it to rest with a close of the small curtain. Putting out the lamps, he does the same to himself, falling into a deep, dreamless sleep.

When the morning comes he dons his pressed black tunic, reaffixing the gladius to his belt before exiting to the stable. Silencer waits for him there, patient and proud and hungry.

Ben unlatches the gate and leads the stallion to the bed of hay, stroking the great beast's neck. Straw by straw the bed he and his wife had made there is erased from the world, leaving nothing but dust.

He doesn't leave until Silencer, the glutton, is satisfied, mounting and steering him away from the villa. Before they descend the hill he pulls him to a stop, letting his eyes sweep one final time over the home of his ancestors.

Perhaps, someday, descendants of his own might return to it. But he cannot afford to wonder now, as Rome calls to him again.

So he rides, urging Silencer on, closing his eyes to breathe against the mighty winds. The familiar sense of ease sinks into him as it always does when he flies, pushing away the most painful thoughts and making room for something not unlike elation.

It makes his journey through the streets easier, at the very least. It is still early in the morning when he arrives at the Colosseum, but the crowds have already begun to trickle in, writhing with eagerness.

Ben stables Silencer before finding Ematt, the man in the midst of tallying bets.

"Master Solo," Ematt greets solemnly, his tired eyes searching Ben's face. He drops his voice to a low whisper. "How fares the missus?"

"Safe," Ben murmurs, glancing around as servants mill about, unaware of the traitors in their midst. "Hidden."

"Good," he grunts, hand stiff as it continues the work. "There's a foul scent to the air today."

"What do you mean, Caluan?"

Ematt shakes his head, meeting Ben's eye. He sees a gleam of fear in them beneath the pinch of his silvery brow. "I've received no word from the organizers. The emperor has forbidden any knowledge on today's proceedings."

Ben scowls. "It's only the first day of the tournament. Some theatrics are expected."

"Expected, yes, but usually planned for," Ematt grumbles, leaning back and stroking his beard with quick, repeated movements. "It may be difficult to sneak you away without knowing the proper window of opportunity."

"After the first match, then," Ben murmurs low. "Whoever follows will be distraction enough."

"For your sake, Master Solo, one can only hope."

Ben nods stoically. It would appear that, recently, hope is all he can truly afford.

Which reminds him; "Has the trust been set?"
Ematt sighs, rubbing his eye. "Yes. I've hidden your winnings under an alias— *Solum Filius*. You need only say that and my name. The treasury will handle the rest."

Filled with relief, Ben claps Ematt on the shoulder, resisting the urge to embrace the man; before he and Rey had left his home, they schemed to store funds in Rome, in the event that they return for need of it. To know that his wealth has been secured for them is beyond words of gratitude.

Understanding this, Ematt brushes the man's hand away. "Go into the retirement room. You should eat and drink before you fight—may need your strength."

Ben nods, unwilling to argue. With long strides he ascends the steps of the side chamber of the Colosseum, drifting into the tent-like structure overlooking the arena. Upon the table waits a variety of breads and vegetables, whereupon other warriors—some new, some familiar—have already gathered to eat. A few gawk at him as he passes by, taking several slices of unleavened bread, and leans against the banister, absentmindedly watching people trickle into the stands.

"Ah, Master Ren. So good to finally see you again."

Hairs prickle on the back of Ben's neck, but he does not humor them with a reaction. "General."

Armitage Hux comes to stand beside Ben, his back straight and proud, red hair blazing in the rising sunlight. "I must say this is quite an exciting affair. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Have you come to make conversation, or do you not have somewhere else to be?" Ben grunts, tearing at the hardening bread.

"I come for the complimentary wine," Hux croons, lifting the chalice to his smirk. "And to wish good luck to an old friend."

Now Ben glares at him, this man who stands so contemptuously smug, so certain of his standing. He doesn't doubt that Hux has heard what Snoke intends for him at this tournament's end—that his rival will become a Praetorian pet to the emperor.

Ben rises to stand over Hux, casting shadows upon him even as the smaller man remains undaunted. "Then I suggest you go find him."

Hux takes another sip, as though to stifle a laugh. But when he swallows, his bright eyes shimmer with mirth, as though privy to some private joke. "Indeed. See you on the battlefield, *Solo*."

Ben watches the man as he saunters away—undersized in his excessive white toga, with it's bloody-red trim—fuming even after he is out of sight. While normally unperturbed by the meeker general, there was an aura surrounding him, a dark cloud that haunts Ben's thoughts until the event draws near its exposition.

The crust in his hand crumbles to dust on the limestone floor, left behind when at last he is summoned down into the waiting area. The iron cross of the gates trace shadowy cages over his face and he looks into the sunlight, thinking of her, finding her there in the spaces between.

The people of Rome swarm en mass into the stands, the dull roar of their excitement mounting into rhythmic chanting, demanding a start. When the sun reaches its apex the announcer steps forth, quieting them all with no more than a mere gesture.

"Welcome, citizens of Rome, to the Tournament of Champions!"

The crowd cheers, some of the gladiators behind Ben striking their armor in respect. His eyes dart
up through the grates, finding Snoke sat upon his boxed throne, Hux and a few other courtiers seated around him.

"On this, the Ides of Iulius," the announcer continues, "your generous emperor has decreed that Romans, man and woman, will be given all delights the Colosseum has to offer until the tournament has reached its victor. On this day, we begin with the first of blessings and honor to our sovereign—hail, Lucius Snoke, Supreme Leader, chosen son of Jupiter, Restorer of the World!"

Again the crowd roars, chanting and pulsing with eagerness.

When at last it calms, it is General Armitage Hux who rises, saluting the crowd with triumphant gaze. "Bring forth," he calls, "the warrior Kylo Ren!"

Ben pauses, looking over his shoulder to Ematt, whose face bleeds pale. Taking the shield but refusing the helm offered to him, he steps out onto the familiar silt, showered with fevered cries.

As he enters the arena, Roman soldiers enter from the opposite gate, a man with a bag over his face caught and dragged between their arms. His bare and bloody feet leave tracks in the dust behind him.

"Loyal citizens of Rome," Hux calls, his arms raised with palms out, as though in supplication. "The gods have smiled upon me in battle and war—I have brought you servants for your houses and slaves for your fields, and from my labor bring to you justice! Today, I gift to you a spectacle never seen before: a battle sacrifice worthy of Jupiter's blessing—the execution of traitor Gaius Poe Dameron!"

As he speaks, the guards rip the bag from the man's head revealing the bloodied face of Poe Dameron.

Ben's stomach convulses within him, rooting him still, his eyes wide. Poe Dameron… taken by the Romans… had lived for execution.

But looking down upon the broken man's face, Ben realizes with thick, slurring clarity that death is not all fate intended for him.

He stands motionless at Poe meets his eyes, not allowing himself even the slightest betrayal of remorse as one of the guards throws a sword and shield upon the ground between them, kicking the once-chariot racer onto his knees.

The stands erupt with drawls of disdain, rocks and rotten fruit landing in the arena—although missing by a wide margin. Above them Hux raises his hand again, his smile a thin, victorious stretch as he exclaims, "However! Rome is powerful, as it is merciful. The traitor will be given an opportunity to redeem himself! If he can kill the undefeated Kylo Ren, he shall walk free, and the gods will be appeased!"

Ben glares up into the eyes of General Hux, at last understanding. This must have been his plan—to be rid of him without dirtying his own hands.

Poe grunts in pain as the soldiers release him violently onto the sand, and Ben watches as the man reaches for the gladius and shield upon the ground between them, kicking the once-chariot racer onto his knees.

Darkness and despair swell from the pit of Ben's chest, rising up in him as he brandishes his gladius. Of all the men he would be forced to kill, could fate have been so cruel to make it the very man who offered safety to his beloved—the man to whom he owed his very life?
He is given no time to mourn what must be done, lifting his shield as Dameron unleashes a powerful onslaught. His energy and desperation cloud his judgement, however, and Ben takes the opportunity to rush him, knocking him to the ground with the broad steel of the scutum.

The crowd laughs and festers when Dameron falls, struggling to get back up. "Let me win, Solo!" he spits, blood in his teeth. "You owe me!"

Ben does not reply, only waits, his face long and somber.

Poe walks closer, not striking. Ben does not defend, has no need to. When at last they stand before one another, their wills clashing in the depths of their eyes, the truth is laid bare. Poe Dameron will not forfeit his own life—and neither will Ben Solo.

But even more than that—Gaius Poe Dameron had broken.

Seeing the panicked eyes and tension rise in Poe's shoulders, Ben once again blocks the man's attack, this time with the sword. Fueled with furious anger he knocks back, hard enough to nearly force the gladius from the racer's hand, leaving him stumbling.

Ben advances, his heart pounding, eyes pools of liquid fire. "What have you done?" he grounds, slashing, at the man's lifted shield. "What have you done?!"

Poe does not answer, lashing desperately at Ben's face, only to be effortlessly knocked aside.

Red clouds Ben's vision as he lunges forward, a tempest of wrath in armor and flesh, striking blow after merciless blow against Poe's shield until the metal of it begins to dent. Visions spill out before Ben's eyes as he realizes what the man must have resorted to, to live this long—what truths and tortures have been wrong from his body at the hands of General Hux...

...truths that would deliver Rey into the enemy's hands.

It happens beyond his control. He overtakes Poe Dameron in a mindless rush, abandoning sword and shield to wrestle the man to the ground. It feels like nothing to pin him down, to wrench the blade from his hands and hold it over his neck.

Breathing heavily, Ben leans down, leaving the desperate eyes of Poe Dameron nowhere to escape. Sweat drips from his brow onto his, man and man, executioner and traitor.

"It was you," Ben snarls lowly, pressing the gladius against Poe's throat. "You betrayed them."

Tears gather in Poe's eyes, his bloody lips folding, chin quivering. "They tortured me. I couldn't—"

"Tell me what they know," Ben commands, searching his eyes. "Tell me what they know about us."

The tears spill down Poe's face, dripping onto the sand as his voice quavers softly, the defeat in his eyes like shattered stone. "...Everything."

Ben jumps away from Poe Dameron as though burned, overwhelmed with rage and fear so potent that he feels the veins in his neck and hands seize and tremble violently.

He looks up into the emperor's eyes, finding them cold and distant, and very much incensed.

The general beside him, meanwhile, gleams with pride, and Ben realizes how foolish he'd been to come here—for he has walked right into their trap.
A movement at the corner of Ben's eye alerts him and he dives down, narrowly escaping the swipe of Poe's blade. In his hands are both gladii, and Ben scrambles to his feet, keeping his stance light as they circle one another.

"I'm sorry, Ben," Poe says, tightening his grip. "I really am."

"I'm sure you are," Ben spits, his peripheral trained on the shields passing Poe underfoot.

"You still owe me a favor, Solo. I can still get out of this—I can protect her. Just give up."

Ben circles even more, hackles primed, ready for anything. "You know I can't do that."

Poe sighs, his shoulders sagging, guilt and weariness swarming in his eyes. "I know."

As soon as his weakness shows, Ben strides forward, closing the distance between them and pummeling his fist into Poe Dameron's nose. Even with two swords the man is no dual-wielder, and Ben grabs the dented shield from the silt, slamming it against his temple and sending him crashing to the ground.

The crowd erupts into vigorous applause as Ben advances, casting his shadow over the groaning, defeated prisoner. Mercy abandons him as he plucks his gladius from the sand, pulling the crawling Poe Dameron onto his knees by his wet, inky curls.

Kneeling down, Ben looks into the man's eyes, their once-lively obsidian shine lost of all luster. Weakly, Poe coughs, shutting them and laying a hand on Ben's thigh. "Keep them alive for me, would you?" he rasps, quickly fading from consciousness.

Ben scowls, placing his gladius to the man's throat. A small voice in the back of his mind tells him that Rey would be ashamed—but another voice, louder than thunder, demands that he do what must be done to protect her, to return to her alive.

And with a decisive stroke, he drags the blade across Poe Dameron's neck, slitting his throat.

He stands and lets the body drop to the ground, watching the man's blood flow for only a moment before turning away from the carnage, hurried strides making for the gate. The other gladiators step aside—Ematt racing forward and grabbing Ben by the arm, leading him down a side corridor just as the metal clash of armor draws near.

"The tunnels," Ematt urges, pushing Ben down into the darkness. "Go!"

Ben nods, wasting no time in racing down the steps. Light streams in from the windows above, the crowd still in uproar as he winds through the labyrinth of tunnels and cages beneath the arena. Lions and tigers roar at him from their cages, prisoners of war and criminals and innocent crying out, reaching for him.

When at last he reemerges into the sunlight he scours his surroundings, panting. Soldiers spot him and advance and he quickly bolts to the stable, closing and latching the heavy door behind him.

Fists pound from the outside, rattling the hinges as Ben flies to the stall where he left Silencer. But Silencer is not there.

Or, is no longer.

Ben staggers, leaning against the nearest pole as the world falls open beneath him. Inside the stall lies his black stallion, eyes open and lifeless, throat severed and crusted with drying blood.
A shout sounds from behind him and Ben turns, acting on instinct, and plunges his gladius into the stomach of a soldier. The man groans and falls at his feet; a trap waiting for him unsnared. Trembling with rage, Ben impales the dying man once more, twisting the blade into his stomach for what he had done to Silencer, until at last he coughs, shivers, and goes still.

Again the doors budge, beginning to open, and Ben looks desperately around him. Above he sees a loft with a small window and doesn't stop to think. Quickly he passes over Silencer's body, taking the black saddle blanket and scaling the wooden beams.

He slips out undetected, the soldiers distracted by their efforts as he drops down into the alley. Sheathing his gladius, Ben races down the limestone, covering his head with the blanket and weaving into the shadows.

Chapter End Notes

[This wonderful tribute to Silencer was done by my generous irl friend and coworker, who wants to remain anonymous for now. Links will be posted to her art page when she feels more comfortable with it. She knew all about Silencer, and what a good boy he was. He will be missed]

["Solum Filius" translates from Latin to "Son Alone," another way of saying "Ben Solo"]

["Ides of Iulius" means "fifteenth of July"]

[Beneath the Colosseum existed a large, two-floored basement called the Hypogeum. This was where animals would be kept to be released above for fights and hunting shows, and where some prisoners could be kept before facing public execution. The Hypogeum was also home to a series of tunnels leading into and out of the Colosseum]
Leper

Chapter Notes

I wrote this chapter on mobile while waiting at the DMV. For those who don't know what that is, it makes this chapter twice as evil. ■_■

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When he's certain he's lost them, Ben wedges himself into the darkness behind a building, unaware of his surroundings, and closes his trembling hands into fists, trying unsuccessfully to slow the pounding of his heart. He leans heavily into the wall for support, sweat pouring down his neck, unwilling to truly rest. The sound of marching infantry and clanging armor scuttles down the next road, passing him like death over lamb's blood, a storm swelling and deepening into silence.

Tamping down his heavy breaths, Ben risks a glance over the corner of the wall, wide eyes scanning. The street looks empty—as empty as a Roman street could—and he doesn't give it time to change. Quickly, he skirts the homes and shops and taverns and temples, weaving his way towards the Circus Maximus.

As he runs, Ben desperately searches his mind for answers, finding nothing. He's already spotted guards standing at the gates of the city; there will likely be more, at every turn. If Snoke wants him, he has spared no risk.

But, Ben reasons, passing through the garden of some farmer, if he could escape beneath the ground of the arena unencumbered, perhaps he could do the same with the wall.

Within the span of an hour the Circus Maximus is no longer a monument on the horizon, standing proud, quiet, and just within reach. It almost startles him how abandoned it's become, and thinking it may be another trap, Ben takes no risks, circling back around.

As time passes his steps grow more desperate, less calculated. With every lost moment separated from Rey he can only grow more restless.

The only notion to bring him at least some semblance of relief is knowing their plan had been hatched while Poe Dameron had been held in custody. If Snoke truly knew everything, about him and Rey, their ties to the Resistance, and whatever else to do with his virtus, at least he had no reason to know of their scheme to flee in the night from Ahsoka's house—or even know where they were.

For now, Rey is safe. Ahsoka is safe. That, and getting to them, is all that matters.

At last Ben reaches the Dameron estate, circling the perimeter with the careful steps of a leopard, his eyes prowling, finding no hint of movement. Only when he can wait no longer does he slip into the courtyard entryway with slow progress, his bloody gladius unsheathed.

Stepping into the house, broken shards of clay crunch beneath the flat of his sandal. Destruction, silent and still, spans before him, filth and debris and dried blood strewn across the floor, the scent of rot lingering like low morning fog.
The dead bodies are few in number. Ben counts no more than ten as he follows their trail deeper into the house. Water from the fountain falls from the ceiling, the choir of afternoon bugs blissfully unaware of those to whom they no longer sing.

He does not find Finn among them, nor that woman, Jannah, or Kaydel, who had likely been taken by soldiers as well. But he does see that one woman—the one who looks like Rey—collapsed and motionless on the floor.

Sorrow threatens him, dips the fraying ends of his anger in its black dye, but he moves on. Wandering. Tired.

His feet carry him back to the chamber where he and Rey once slept. Exhaustion overwhelms him and he collapses upon it, his mind trapped and racing. He thinks he could surrender, now. Could give in to the doubts and pain and weariness spreading like poison in his body. Could he sleep, now, in this empty tomb, and dream of her?

"I'm sorry," he sighs into the pillow, tears stinging behind his closed eyes. He doesn't know why he apologizes, or to whom. To the dead people in this place... to Rey... to himself...?

To someone else?

Rise.

Ben resists the pull, the dark chamber encompassing him like a grave. Let midnight come. Let her be free. Free from him. He was a fool to promise her a life beyond these walls. These walls made of bone clay and bloody mortar.

Rise, my child...

Memories swirl and storm within him, deadly and bright, flickering like a dying star. What heavenly light she was, soft as sand slipping through his fingers, always lost to him, no matter how tightly he held. Always with him. Always.

Come back, Ben. Come home.

Rise, my child—and go to her!

Ben sits up, pushed to his feet as a man possessed, tearing away from the darkness of his thoughts. How much time has passed? How long has he slept, awake now at last?

When he looks outside the sky has rusted orange, clouds amassed in rich lavender streams. He sighs, carding a nervous hand through his hair, frustratedly gnawing his cheek—there's no time, no answers, nothing.

Again he searches the house. He takes from chambers, dressing himself in clean clothes. Linens of egg white and bronze hang from his shoulders, high at the ankles, but otherwise suitable. He tucks his gladius into the folds of his robes, taking also a knife and stale bread from the kitchens.

Pulled by instinct, he goes to the stables. Within there are no traces of skirmish—the horses missing, the stall doors closed and latched.

Odd, Ben notes, lifting the latch, opening and closing the door. Roman soldiers would not have closed these after taking horses, especially not during a raid. And Ben knows Finn had one of his own, and the young stallion, Bambino.
No. These horses had been taken out by their owners.

Relieved, somewhat, Ben backs away. Finn Freedman must have left before any of this happened. He may not even know.

Looking around, Ben continues to search the stable for any hints as to where he could have gone. It's quite possible that Poe had betrayed Finn, as well, that they have all merely been taken in for torture, questioning, or another public execution.

His hand still quakes at the memory. Never before had he been forced to kill a man he owed, nay, almost respected. It crippled his thoughts and tainted them, even though he'd warned Poe Dameron of the consequences long ago. It was no longer war, acts of justice, or even mercy.

It was murder.

Sighing exasperatedly, Ben shakes his head. He cannot stay in this house any more. He's lucky no soldiers have come back already. Perhaps he could find help some other way, bribe a soldier—maybe that Denari Julian Finn once cited.

As he walks, a sharp pain juts against his toe, splitting a sudden, fiery pain up his leg. He swears, glaring down at the offending raise in the floor, and stops.

Poking up from the stone ground, covered in loose hay and dirt, rests a wooden door.

Ben squats, brushing away the smut and unveiling a hatch in the ground. He grunts, lifting it up, and immediately the cool wind of a deep, dark tunnel brushes over his face, stirring his hair.

He almost laughs, delirious madness cresting over him. He drops the door and returns in minutes with an oil lamp in hand, slipping down into the black.

When the door closes only the light of the lamp surrounds him. He walks quickly but carefully, following the gentle stir of the flame into the slight breeze.

This must have been one of Dameron's escape routes—a tunnel leading out of the city. Ben smirks to himself. His original strategy had proven correct. For the timeless span of his journey beneath the ground, he is stopped by no one. He does find traces of travel—scraps of food gnawed by flies and worms, articles of clothing shed in haste, even a small wooden horse.

Eventually, the ground tapers upward, a small hill of loose dirt. Ben climbs it, testing the ceiling with his fingers and pushing against hard wood until it rises, flushing fresh air into the tunnel.

He climbs out from a nest of brambles and thickets, the hard grass scratching at his hands, arms, face, neck, and feet, until he emerges into the forest border beyond the wall.

Rising, Ben plunges forward. Sunlight continues to fade, the rich cream rust of lingering day fading into a dying scarlet. To his right, less than a league away, waits the road. To his left, a glimmering cluster of tents and fires—a colony of lepers.

It would be foolish to take the road—but it would be the fastest route. If Finn truly did escape from the Romans, then Ben only has until midnight to get to them. Even if he ran...

He rests his hand on his gladius, marching in the sparse cover between the colony and the road. He will have to steal a horse. Hopefully, whoever he stops won't give him too much trouble. He'd prefer not to kill anyone else tonight.
Coming to the first fork, Ben stops. The strong, hefty march of infantry soldiers echoes beyond and behind—parolling the roads, coming closer to his hiding place.

He could make a run for it. He has the energy now. But their horses would be faster, their swords at his back, their numbers overwhelming.

Deciding against it, Ben falls back, letting the marching soldiers drive him back against the walls, closer and closer to the lepers. He pulls the black blanket over his head, fashioning it into a hood and hunching down, slipping into the colony.

The smell of smoke and sound of murmuring surrounds him, the territory rife with wanderers, excited by the commotion on the road. Ben hunches down, concealing his face, avoiding any contact—of body or eyes—as he pushes south. If he's fortunate, he could escape from the other side, and then take what he needs. But for now, all he can do is walk. Walk, and hope his steps lead back to her.

_I'm coming, Puella. I'm coming…_

As he moves through the colony, the smell of meat and stews bleed into him, tempting him to study his surroundings. He sees the faces of the lepers in passing, the deep shadows of sunset cast over their somber, swollen faces. For a moment he nearly stops, an older man with cavernous cheeks reminding him, for only an instant, of Lucious Snoke.

Just then, a chorus of voices sounds, spreading further and further inward. Men, women, moaning, pleading.

_Unclean, unclean!_

With them, the clamor of armor, the drone of orders, echoes through the warnings. Roman soldiers thread through the tents, searching the people, eyes blazing opals in the firelight.

Ben ducks into a group of lepers surrounding a fire pit, the lot of them already on their feet. He exaggerates his hunch, turning his walk to a hobble, and while the people are distracted takes ash and dust, smearing it over his face.

"All of you, in a line!" a soldier barks, gesturing to the space in front of them. "Now!"

"Unclean," an old woman murmurs, shambling ahead. When she almost stumbles Ben catches her by the elbow, moving her forward, standing hunched over her.

One of the soldiers approaches, his hand braced on the hilt of his gladius. He stoops and looks at the man next to the woman, then the woman, and then Ben.

His face turned down, Ben avoids looking the soldier in the eye. "Unclean," he rasps.

Disgusted, the soldier moves on, traveling down the line, until it's finished. "As you were!" their leader calls, motioning for the soldiers to follow.

When they leave, Ben abandons the group, his head over his shoulder, scanning for more of the Romans. His heart pounds in his chest, the darkness dizzying.

There are too many of them. It could be hours before they leave the colony. Hux must have sent all his legions after him… Every step only makes him more grateful that his home lies abandoned.

"Wait."
Ben halts when a slender hand wraps around his arm. He reaches for his gladius on instinct, turning to see a young woman, her full lips chapped, her dark eyes wide, her once-youthful skin withered. But it doesn't hide her completely. He knows this woman… has seen her before.

_Bazine Netal._

"It's you," she whispers. "You're the one they're searching for. Aren't you?"

Ben rips himself out of her grasp. He has no time for this—will not share this wretched woman any more seconds than what belongs to Rey. How she became a leper, he does not care.

As he moves on, content to put distance between them, she falls in step behind him. "Wait—Master Ren, please, I want to help!"

Ben stops, wheeling and jutting a finger down at her face. "You stay away from me," he hisses lowly. "I'll kill you, if I have to. So fuck off."

Bazine frowns, deep shadows etching into the creases of her chin. Her voice is soft in the darkness. "I'm dying anyway."

That gives Ben pause. Looking her over, his scowl only deepens. The woman has become frail, her proud shoulders shrunken, elegant robes and gowns traded for filthy rags. He almost wonders what she's done to become this—or, perhaps, what she hasn't done.

"Why," he grounds.

"Because you're good," she murmurs, lowering her hood to reveal spots of missing hair, baring her thin arms, wrapped in linens. Sorrowfully, she rasps, "I am unclean. I have no one… I… I want to be good…"

He considers her, then glances up, the galeas of soldiers bobbing between tents, approaching them. He thinks of Rey, of the moon rising in the distance, of the time he's losing.

Frustrated, Ben folds his lips. This Bazine woman had released him in the past. In her own way, unwittingly as it might have been, _she_ had pushed him back to Rey. Gave him the will to say what had to be said. If she means what she says, if she could help him get to Rey, then she could be his best hope.

Whether or not that's reason enough to trust her, it may be all he has.

"I need a horse," he murmurs.

Bazine nods. "Follow me."

He does, weaving with her, back the way he'd come, towards the wall. Unease falls over his shoulders, but he resists the urge to run, keeping his character until they dodge the soldiers.

"Tell me where we're going," Ben says darkly, his fingers twitching for his sword.

Bazine steps carefully around a group of sleeping old men. "There was a man come into the colony a few days ago. On horseback. He was kind. A praying sort. Odd name, though."

"And what name was that?" Ben asks, ducking under a clothesline after her.

Ben freezes, his blood running cold. An image of a knife in the dark flashes before his eyes, the bright, blue gaze of his teacher piercing into the roiling depths of his soul.

His uncle was here.

Bazine turns, her eyes roving over his pale face as blankets and tunics wave around them, dusk falling onto her dappled cheeks. "What is it? Unwilling to take a horse from a Pharisee?"

"No," Ben murmurs, shaking his head. He clenches his hands into fists at his sides, but still they tremble. He juts his chin ahead of him. "Lead on."

She narrows her eyes at him, but acquiesces with a slight bow, and guides him deeper.

As she does, his thoughts spiral out, his hand reaching into his robe and pulling out the knife taken from Dameron's house. His breathing grows short with every step they take, anger, wrath, thirst, rising steadily inside of him at the thought of plunging it deep into his uncle's chest, watching the life drain from his traitorous eyes…

For six years he has waited. Dreamed for an opportunity such as this—to exact vengeance on the man who destroyed his life, who stole his mother from him, who drove him into the hands of the Romans. Of the emperor. It fills his steps with new vigor, his lungs with cold breaths and hands with hot blood.

This could be the end of it. Of everything. How easy it will be, to follow this woman, this serpent, into the den of his curse. To be rid of Rome and his past in one night, and to create a new one the next day?

At last, at last, the past could finally die. And he would be free. Free from everything.

Bazine stops outside of a large tent—the square frame and wide slope like that of a battle infirmary. She glances up at Ben, gesturing toward it. "He's in there," she murmurs.

His hand tightens over the knife at his side. He nods to her in brief thanks, offering her nothing else as he pulls down his hood and stands before the entrance.

Come back, Ben...

Candlelight bleeds onto his cheeks, and he stills his breaths, holding his knife at the ready.

...come home.

With a mighty swipe of his arm, Ben lunges into the tent, taking the first man he sees and plunging the knife into his stomach.

But the eyes are not Luke Skywalker's.

A soldier falls to his feet, blood gurgling in his lips as a other takes his place, aiming his gladius at Ben's throat. Ben acts on impulse, striking up and hitting the man's brandished hand, severing some of his fingers.

He screams in agony as Ben backs away, his body flaring with rage. Another trap—the damn woman had lead him into another trap!

And he'd been foolish enough to let her.

More arms than he can ward away surround him, wrestling him to the ground before he can pull
his own gladius free. They pin him down, hammering a fist into his face, blurring his vision as a soldier steps forward.

A young man with a round face and rounder eyes steps forward, his thin lips pressed taut in a contemptuous smirk. "Looks like you weren't as clever as you thought."

When he speaks, Ben recognizes him. This was the boy Hux had brought with him to the small revelry, all those weeks ago. The one who found him in the cemetery. Thanisson.

"My Centurion," a soldier addresses, pressing a fist to his breastplate and bowing deeply. "What are your orders?"

Thanisson circles Ben, reaching onto a table and plucking a hefty sack. It jingles as he passes it to a thin hand, wrapped in linen bandages. "Prepare to escort him to the palace. I believe General Hux will want an audience with him… promptly. I trust this amount is satisfactory, Lady Netal?"

At the name, Ben struggles, glaring up at the face of Bazine, whose expression falls in guilty pleasure. She holds the coins to her chest and bows. "Anything to serve my emperor, your worship."

"Very good," Thanisson smiles, turning his stony gaze onto Ben's struggling limbs. "Chain him up! Tight and proper! The emperor wants him intact."

No.

Ben grunts, fighting against the soldiers as they heave him to his feet and force his arms behind his back.

No—I have to go to her!

They clamp irons around his wrists and ankles, tying a gag around his mouth.

Rey...

Sweat pours down his face as he closes his eyes, willing this nightmare away, the firelight the last thing he sees before the bag slides over his head, thrusting him into darkness.

...I'm sorry.

Chapter End Notes

[Leprosy, known today as Hansen's Disease, is a chronic disease causing skin lesions and nerve damage. It primarily affects the nerves, skin, eyes, and lining of the nose, but if left untreated can cause blindness and crippling in hands, feet. It is curable—spread primarily through mucus or meshing of bodily fluids (hint hint)]

[The idea of having hospitals in tents on the battlefield was proposed during the reign of Julius Ceasar. They varied in sizes and defenses; called "valetudinarium"]

[A legion of soldiers at full strength would have been about 6,000 men, each one equipped with armor and weapons. The Centurion was one of the legionary commanders, whose duty was to oversee a century (about one-hundred soldiers plus
change) of their own]
Chains

Chapter Notes

Small chapter, big suffering. Apologies in advance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darkness.

The reek of metal and sweat, the heat of his own breath—skidding, burning feet. Clamor of armor and cold chains around wrists, ankles. Scattered orders and whispers. The twisting gnarl of failure in his lungs, in the tattered vestiges of his soul.

He feels when they pull him onto the slopes of Palatine Hill, the dewy night and sweat beading on his arms, between his clenched fingers. He goes limp in their grasp, too weary to stumble after them anymore, his consciousness on the brink of collapse.

Marching steps echo off familiar marble and stone walls before he is thrown to his knees, the bag ripped off his head. He squints as the soldiers restrain him by the shoulders, grasping him by the slick strands of his hair and forcing him to look up upon the stage of the emperor’s throne.

Snoke leans against the arm of his chaise, his robes draped loosely around him. A sharp sneer curls upon his lip, dark oil in the firelight. “Ben Solo.”

Ben swallows, his apple thick against his strained neck. “Master.”

“I’ve heard,” Snoke drones, sitting up, “a disturbing rumor. We have invited you here to… confirm, some truths for us.”

Hissing as a soldier tugs, Ben glances at the tall, carved ceiling. “‘We?’”

From the corner of Ben’s eye, a man in white and red robes strides to Snoke’s side, a proud, snide voice ringing clear through the hall. The man bows deeply. “My lord.”

Rage fills Ben’s body in a flash of fire, and he pulls his head down, meeting the bright, leering gaze of Armitage Hux.

Snoke waves a hand towards Hux. “The general has been most thorough in his investigations. According to him, the traitor Poe Dameron claims you as a conspirator for the Resistance.”

Ben tries to slow his racing heart, keeping his voice low, civil. “He is a traitor. You would trust him?”


“Gladly,” Hux smirks, descending from the stage. He comes to stand over Ben, as a courtly man might in trial, condemning a criminal.

As he does, Ben realizes that a crowd of soldiers and officials, servants and slaves, have gathered in
the great red hall. He looks up into Hux’s rodent-like face, forcing himself into quiet submission—innocence, if he can feign it, would be all that can save him now.

Hux turns on his sandaled heel, looking small in his toga as he holds a worshipful hand open to the emperor. “Gaius Poe Dameron was a traitor and a coward to the end. With the devotion of soldiers guided under my hand, we discovered the location of every Resistance hovel and loyalist. They have either been imprisoned, executed, or driven beyond the gates of the city.”

Ben clenches his hands behind his back. He remembers the dead bodies in Dameron’s house—the tunnel left open. Had Hux known that he would find it? Nay, had he counted on it?

“Indeed, Dameron’s list was explicit. And now that he is dead, justice has come closer to fruition. Only one issue remains to be settled,” Hux growls, leveling a sharp claw behind him. “The illegitimate wife of your precious Kylo Ren.”

Ben’s heart shoots into his throat. He glares at Hux, wide-eyed, struck into silence.

Rey.

Snoke himself seems almost surprised by this, displeasure like obsidian in his dark gaze. His skeletal fingers curl over the arm of his chaise. “Oh?”

“It would seem that your gladiator has married his slave girl with the help of the deceased Saint Valentine. Isn’t that right,” Hux croons, victory shimmering over his skin. “Solo?”

Ben’s eye twitches, silence reigning over the room. “She has nothing to do with this,” he murmurs, trembling. He spears a hard look into Hux, the tip of it glancing off some invisible armor. “She was mine to do with as I saw fit. What would it matter if I took her as a wife?”

“You betrayed your master in doing so!” Hux snarls, swinging the back of his hand against Ben’s cheek, hard enough to turn his neck. The veins in the general’s face grow red and taut. “Aiding the whims of the enemy just to bind yourself to a dog!”

Blood gathers behind Ben’s lips as he turns his burning ire back onto Hux—and promptly spits on his face.

“General!” Snoke roars, rising to his feet. The soldiers and servants fall quiet, Hux the stillest of all. The emperor sooths wrinkled paws against his robes, retaining an air of refinement as flames crackle all around them. “General. Your claims against my champion are, in fact, serious. I will not deny that I’ve known of his feelings for the slave girl for some time. But without evidence of betrayal, I will not convict.”

Ben glances at the emperor, his breast hollowed by the beat of an unsteady rhythm. Why would Snoke bother defending him, now—if this even was defense? To preserve him as his prospective praetorian, his rabid pet? Was it, dare he suspect, care?

Or something more sinister?

“I do have evidence, my lord,” Hux says, pulling a cloth from his robes and wiping Ben’s blood from his face, his expression wrinkled in disgust. “As you know,” he tucks his rag away, “I have spared no force of the empire’s might to track down the enemy. As such I thought it wise to oversee any… suspicious communications.”

“Speak plain, General,” Snoke growls.
The hand within Hux’s robes goes stiff, before moving, pulling free a small, folded letter of parchment. “I received this from one of his staff. It appears a message had been sent from the slave girl, herself.”

Ben’s brow furrows and he pulls against the soldiers restraining him, his gaze fixed on the letter in Hux’s hand. He cannot see the words written there. Lies, lies! Rey would never—

—unless…

Hux unfurls the letter, clearing his throat. “’To Leia Organa—My name is Rey. I am the wife of your son. We know who you are, and that you are a friend. We will await you in Cairo.’” He holds the letter up, showing it to the emperor. “Whose sloppy penmanship could this be but a slave’s, who spoke none of the Latin script before taught by a doting, irresponsible master? What else a friend could this Leia Organa be, but a friend to the loathsome Resistance?”

Outcry breaks upon the people like a wave, stirring in rippled disturbances. Ben’s mind swims as people call for his death, for his release, for her.

He closes his eyes. Rey... so she had gone behind his back, and written to his mother. But still, he thinks, struggling to collect himself, the letter alone will not betray her location to them now. She is safe with Ahsoka. Hux will not find her there.

It all silences with a raise of Snoke’s hand. Ben opens his eyes, watching as the old man sits slowly upon his chaise. Darkness swirls around his shoulders, a deep frown etching into his shadowed face. “General Hux. From where did you get this information?”

Hux smiles, almost bashfully, wrinkles gathering above his cheeks, before he sober, gesturing to a break in the crowd. “Come forward, boy.”

Ben looks over to the gap, and he who emerges sets his mind into a flurry. Rage consumes him at the sight of Dopheld Mitaka, and he pulls against the soldiers hard enough to break through, his chains rattling as a snarl rips from his lips when he realizes what has been done. “No!”

A swift blow to the stomach sends him to the ground, something sharp prodding into the back of his neck. He coughs on his anger, trapped in red Hell—with his dutiful messenger's face in the flame.

Hux doesn’t spare him a second glance. “This young man delivered the message to us with due faith,” he submits, patting the servant on the shoulder. Mitaka looks down, avoiding every eye in the room, his own rimmed with black. “Apparently the girl was not found at the Skywalker Estate. I have reason to believe that she hides within the dwelling of another servant—waiting for Resistance aid. He has given us directions to the home in the countryside.”

“I see,” Snoke hums thoughtfully, tapping the arm of his seat. “And you intend to intercept them?”

The general’s snakelike grin leaks with shadow. “Yes, my Lord. And retrieve the girl, of course. I believe she will be quite useful.”

“No!” Ben writhes against the force at his back, feeling the blade cut into his skin. But he doesn’t care. Blood from his lip, smut from the journey, smears the floor, tangles him in dirty white robes and the hands of Rome. “Don’t hurt her! Don’t you fucking touch her!”

Snoke frowns as he watches his prized fighter struggle upon the ground—a pathetic mass of flesh, begging as much as he threatens. Like an animal.
“Go,” the emperor orders. “Find the girl, and bring her to me.”

Ben flails and breaks loose for only a moment, but it is enough. Even with his hands chained behind his back, he scrambles to his feet and lunges for Hux, tackling him to the ground. The general squeals in a moment of terror before Ben brings his head down upon his face, shattering Hux’s nose.

By the time soldiers peel him away, the courtesans and servants have erupted into fits of screaming, Hux a volley of curses, and Mitaka standing wide-eyed as his master is dragged away, kicking, spewing vulgarities like a madman.

Ben doesn’t stop fighting—even as he is forced onto the ground, hard boot-tips lodging into his back, his stomach, his groin, immobilizing him. Heat, unbearable heat, surrounds him, until a hard crack to his skull sends him careening into the black.

Chapter End Notes

[No notes today!]
Honor

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took six months to finish... I'm sure you can imagine a few reasons why it was hard to write. But I want you to know how thankful I am for those of you who have come back, and especially those who never stopped reading. Please DM me or say something so I can thank you personally.

And, during this time between updates, a friend passed away, and I was so distracted by my own problems that I didn't know until much later. So this chapter, and all the other chapters before and to come, are for Hal. Her art is and will always be an inspiration to me and a blessing to the Reylo fandom. She made a piece for a scene in Glory's Fray that she will never get to read, but it was made for you, and you deserve to see it, because she worked so hard on it.

I love you, Hal. This is for you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rey exhales, staring into the flames of the little hearth. Her fingers shuffle over her chilled knuckles, softer than they’ve ever been. They feel empty, restless, without his laced between them.

“Keep making those noises, child, and I’ll push you into that fire myself.”

She backs away from the splintering wood, the light flickering faint warmth against her stricken face. “Ben should be here. It’s only hours left before midnight.”

Ahsoka, wrapping the last of their meals for the journey, shakes her head. The silver crown of hair frays around her shoulders loosely, as though pulling for freedom against their tightly-corded binds. “You won’t help him by worrying.”

“I’m not worrying, I’m praying,” she lies. She approaches the table with trembling hands. “The Resistance is coming. I don’t care what Ben says; I won’t leave without him. What if he’s been taken? What if he’s already—”

“I will not tolerate that talk!” Ahsoka barks, making Rey jump. Silence falls between them as her bright eyes fix upon Rey’s, shining in the darkness. “Not in my house.”

Rey folds her lips, staring down at her empty grasp as heaviness gathers deep in her bones. “I want to have hope, Ahsoka. It’s all I’ve ever held onto. But it’s slipping.” Her throat constricts. “I don’t know what to do.”

Ahsoka’s stiffened shoulders fall, her fierce grip on their packings going slack. She would never admit her own fear to Rey now, not when they’ve already come so far. Because what she says is true—Ben could very well be trapped within Snoke’s palace, made into a captive for the blood and sport to come with the tournament. Or worse.

But telling her so would do nothing to change it.

“Stay there,” Ahsoka orders, stepping around the table. She goes to a nearby chest, pulling free a
fold of burlap and returns to her place before Rey, laying it down upon the wood. “This is for you. It wasn’t finished when you were married, but it is finished now.”

Gratitude fills Rey’s heart even before she has revealed what Ahsoka has given her. Welcoming the distraction, she pulls the folds closer, unraveling to reveal a lump of rich cloth the color of lilacs.

“Ahsoka, this…” Rey marvels, smoothing her hand over the seamless design. “You made this?”

She grunts, sitting heavily upon the opposite bench. “Yes. Your palla, the light one, belonged to Ben’s grandmother. I wanted you to have one to truly call your own.”

Rey pulls the palla against her, tongue thick in her throat. The smell of fresh flowers fills her nose, its softness easing her nervous hands. “Ben’s grandmother. How did you know her? What was she like?”

“She was kind and sure of many things that would never prove true,” Ahsoka murmurs, sorting aside their belongings, avoiding Rey’s eyes. “I only knew her a year, but I could never completely detail her as she deserves.”

“We have some time,” Rey contends, offering a small, uneasy smile. “I’d like to hear about her. About you.”

Ahsoka glances at her.

Realizing that she may have crossed a boundary, Rey schools herself. "If you wouldn't mind."

Ahsoka says nothing until the table sits empty. The tall hut slants over them as an eavesdropper, leaning eagerly into the woman’s air, dark, impatient. “I suppose there is nothing the past can do to harm me, now...” Her long finger stirs distantly against the grain of the wood. She holds fast to Rey’s curious gaze, her voice tempered. “No one, not even the young master, knows all of it.”

Rey nods, matching Ahsoka's seriousness as the weight of the woman's gaze falls upon her. "I'd be honored to know more about his home—more even than him—before we leave it behind us. That includes you."

Ahsoka scoffs, unsurprised by Rey's persistence, but cannot deny the small smile encroaching beneath her weary eyes. Perhaps a distraction is what they need. “Very well then. I suppose it is time you knew me.” She sighs as she speaks, reaching to untwist the ties holding her twin braids in form. The loosen into wisps, ghosts of curls, around her lush face. “I was brought to Rome when I was very young...”

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*They took her by night, to the temple with the flame at its heart.*

*His hand was large and cold around hers, yet sweat built between them, sticking them to the chilly evening air. Lamps ignited in the darkness and her eyes widened, taking the lights within her—not understanding what they meant.*

*She was five years old when the man left her at the Temple of Vesta. Five years old when she alone walked into the massive chamber, her small feet and worn sandals shuffling over the limestone tiles, echoing in her ears as she laid eyes upon a flame that had burned for eternity. It was too hot; it burned her eyes, scorched her cold skin, but she did not look away, and the memory of that heat stayed with her, even when all else that transpired that night did not.*
“Come on, child,” a woman, clothed in white, whispered, offering her slender hand. “Don’t dawdle. It’s time for you to be questioned by the high priest.”

The girl nodded, accepting the woman’s touch. It was warm and firm. Her nails were blunt and cragged, her skin somewhat sickly, almost green.

But this did not deter Ahsoka, who walked dutifully alongside her.

They came before a large chamber, where a man in pristine robes and cloaking shawl awaited them. The woman ushered the girl forward before she could comment on how womanly he looked; how pale and gaunt and tired and old.

“Tell me your name,” he said, his voice deep and withered.

She almost forgot it, until her tongue moved on its own. “Ahsoka Tano.”

He scrutinized her, as if her small voice had offended him. His hand rested under his chest, fingers poised, as if to reach for something in his robes. Ahsoka only noticed how they twitched, barely hearing him as he spoke. “You have been under the care of this temple for a year. Tell me, what have you learned of our customs?”

Ahsoka avoided looking at him. It was hard to look into the eyes of someone taller and angrier than her and still be able to talk at the same time. “If I want to stay, I should pray and not ever get married.”

The priest stepped closer, his voice lilting with sudden humor. “Is that an issue for you, little one?”

She frowned, thinking, because she had never thought about marriage for herself before, and shook her head. “No. I don’t like boys.”

A chuckle echoed through the room. “Well said.” He gestured to the woman who’d led her inside. “Hera. If you would.”

The woman, Hera, bowed. “Yes, my lord. Ahsoka, come this way.”

Ahsoka obeyed. The three of them advanced to a smaller chamber within the grand temple, where another fire lay burning.

“You will make two of the same vow,” Hera said, kneeling down before Ahsoka. She took her small hands in her firm ones, squeezing gently. “On this day, to live with us, you must promise to serve the goddess Vesta with your life and body. You must always pray, must always keep the flame, and must always remain pure. Are you prepared to take this sacred promise, Ahsoka Tano?”

Saliva gathered quickly in Ahsoka’s mouth and she fidgeted, before nodding slowly.

Hera smiled, but Ahsoka felt no comfort, seeing in one moment that the woman’s eyes were fettered to some deeper.

Smoothly, she took a tool from a display beside the fire, and used it to retrieve a burning coal from the flames. She held it aloft, praying so quickly that Ahsoka could not understand—for it was the language of the Romans, which she was still learning—and while Hera prayed, she swept the long hair away from Ahsoka’s nape. A cold chill raced along Ahsoka’s spine, forcing her to remain still, even as the searing pain broke into the skin of her thin neck.
Bitter tears and whimpers leaked from her, but she did not sob nor beg, too grateful, too embarrassed, to cry.

At six years of age, Ahsoka Tano became the youngest denizen to live among the sixteen vestal virgins.

She had committed two ceremonies. The first, between herself and the head priestess, Hera—a woman only twenty years her senior. The second, before the virgin priestesses themselves, where she knelt to proclaim the sacred prayer aloud, and bare her brand to them and their goddess.

Her goddess.

They did not take her into the fold of their practices completely, for, as Ahsoka realized, there was much training to be done. But, even as she wandered the facility, watching from the gardens as the Romans passed through the busy forum, or playing alone in the grass and ivy-walled shadows, she felt nothing less than belonging.

She was not the only girl to live in the house of the vestals and yet not be one—like her, the others were orphaned. Chosen to train to fill the sacred role should one of the priestesses break her vow. It was a task without fear or fret. An easy life, waiting in the rearmost ranks of spiritual warfare.

Until the flame went out.

Ahsoka had been thirteen when the flame of Vesta was mysteriously extinguished.

Overnight the temple and streets of Rome were thrust into rampant chaos. Sacrifices were made, tears of mothers wept, wails of fear and despair shuttering the faithful out from the grounds. The girls she roomed with cried and tittered for their fates, knowing one of them would be chosen to fill the void to come.

But Ahsoka felt nothing.

Hera approached her with great sadness in her eyes, her bosom and shoulders sunken, almost hollow. It was obvious to Ahsoka that she had not slept.

“What happened? What did the priests say?” Ahsoka whispered, her gentle voice skirting along the wide, empty marble halls.


“It happened on your watch, didn’t it,” Ahsoka said, her hands coming together, wringing in nervous non-prayers. “But it wasn’t your fault. Vesta wouldn’t let you die. Someone else broke their vow. Isn’t that so?”

“It must be,” Hera replied, a scratching softness in her voice. She stepped away, her gentle hand smoothing once through Ahsoka’s hair—as the woman always did when giving her farewell. “I must rest now. Continue your studies, verily. I will awaken at dawn. You may need to serve beside me.”

Ahsoka bowed. Duty, now, came to her with comfort in the offering. She could not deny its call to obey—did not want to flee from the calm, the familiar, in this uncertainty crumbling the impenetrable fortress they’d built.
“Yes, my sister.”

They lifted their hands in praise, Ahsoka’s eyes, bright as the skies above her, sliding closed with reverence. She sent her thanks above her, feeling within her heart for the devotion to lay bare before the burning flames. The roar of the fire burned hot on her skin, and she forgot all but its heat and the gratitude for its singe—for the eternal hum of life in the Roman city she’d never seen.

Her shoulders were sore beneath Hera’s hand when the woman touched them. “You did very well.”

“Thank you, my sister,” Ahsoka murmured behind a pleased smile as the two left the warmth of the temple. “It is my honor to serve my goddess.”

It was when they returned to the dining hall that the scar on Ahsoka’s neck began to itch, and her ears rang with silence different from the typical reverence of the temple workers. And when Hera brought her into the large triclinium, she quickly discovered why.

The women and girls had been lined up in a row by two high priests, all fifteen of the virgins who were not the priestess, and girls like Ahsoka, who were not in their time.

Ahsoka flinched when the fiery wrath of Hera trickled out of the woman’s very skin, as if the air around them had been ignited, before quickly falling tepid. Then Hera, suddenly cool and confident, interlinked her fingers and approached them, speaking firmly. “My lords. To what is this caused? Do thine eyes not see these women are innocent? Have thine ears not heard the testament of the physician himself? We have no culprit tonight, so please, dine with us. Let us eat.”

One of the priests turned to her, his robes of equal status to she, but his countenance betraying opposite inclination to heed it. “Have you forgotten your duties to the goddess? Our city has been cursed by someone in this room, and you intend to forget and eat?” He sneered. “Your gluttony has become your god, Hera?”

“No. I invited you to remain with us, to shelter and be fed, as Vesta would have us do. To say I am gluttonous for that is to call our Vesta gluttonous.” She lifted a brow. “Wouldn’t you agree, Thrawn?”

Thrawn paled. “We are here to find the guilty party.”

“Of which there still remains to be discovered. That is the duty of the Grand Inquisitor. You have no authority over this beyond the territories of the court.” She fixed him a cold glare. “Unless they sent you here?”

He and his priest exchanged a glance, but when he opened his mouth to speak, Hera opened hers faster.

“In that case, I suggest you either join us for a meal, or cease this inquisition and leave the temple grounds at once—before you assuage our gods into displeasure against you.”

The men seemed to exhale as one, all the fight drained from their taut expressions, before Thrawn smoothed old hands, veiny and near-blue with age, down the cloth of his tunic. Like a ruffled bird he flew from the room, leaving the women and girls to Hera.

Hera moved to stand before the young women, and spoke softly. “I know you must be frightened. But do not fear. You all have been deemed innocent.” She lay a hand over her heart. “When the time comes, if there truly is no guilty party among us, then it is I who will take the blame.”
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But Ahsoka did not listen. “This isn’t fair—no one here broke their vow. Did you?!” she asked, looking to her fellow templefolk, who all suddenly found their plates more interesting. “Vesta must have been in error. We—”

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She walked out into the night to breathe the crisp air, her spirit in turmoil. She closed her eyes and attempted to summon Vesta to her, but could not feel the contentment she once had. The name itself grew tainted in her mind and she wondered, dared question, how Vesta could have betrayed her followers, her dutiful virgins, so.

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Curiosity becoming her, she followed the garlands with gentle steps, slowly easing her hand to peel away a clump of hedgework. Beyond, she saw the familiar robes of Hera, and with her the tall frame of a man she unfortunately knew to be the physician.

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The physician took Hera’s arm in his hand, his voice raised in a secretive pitch, eyes wide with earnestly. “You cannot offer yourself to them. We did nothing wrong.”

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“You already worship a lie, woman!” Kanan pressed, eyes crazed as Hera began to back away from him. “There is no Vesta if there is no flame—can’t you see? They have turned your body into their own sacrament! The gods have cursed the Vestals! You cannot stay with them!”

“You already worship a lie, woman!” Kanan pressed, eyes crazed as Hera began to back away from him. “There is no Vesta if there is no flame—can’t you see? They have turned your body into their own sacrament! The gods have cursed the Vestals! You cannot stay with them!”
Hera closed her eyes and Ahsoka shifted, concealing herself further. She was quiet for a long time, until, “In ten years I will be released of my duty here. Only then will I be free to use my body as I see fit... and give it to you. But that is not the future to be. I have betrayed the vow in my heart, Kanan. In my heart my body was yours, and because of that, I must pay the price. I am sorry to have taken your hope from you. Truly... I am.”

Ahsoka dropped to the ground and scurried further into the shadows, listening as Hera fled past her and ascended the steps to the house. Kanan issued a curse before his heavy steps led him back towards the Forum, leaving Ahsoka in the cold and dirty silence, heart pounding in her ears.

It was two days after when the sixteen virgins were lined in a row outside the steps of the temple for all of the Roman Forum to see, their heads held high, chins trembling, knees quivering beneath their silken, smoke-tainted tunicas.

The High Inquisitor himself stepped forward, accompanied by the priests, and lifted his hand for the public attention. “The days of trial have passed. The time for judgement has come. High Priestess Hera Syndulla, step forth.”

Hera walked forward, her stony gaze resolute.

“Who do you deem worthy to receive just punishment for the crime against Rome?”

“T'was my responsibility, my lord.” She bowed her head. “The flame of Vesta went out on my watch. As such, I will accept the punishment.”

“An honorable effort,” the inquisitor noted, his dark brow furrowing, “but a mistaken one. If you will not confess the true culprit, then we shall admit her for you.” He leveled his gaze on the women, pointing to a golden-haired girl of fifteen, her bright eyes blown wide. “The physician has finally discovered the true miscarriage of justice—this virgin is no virgin at all. She will be the one to give due penance!”

Ahsoka’s ears rang in the ensuing chaos, the sight of Hera’s terror washed away in the agonized screams and denial of the young girl as she was dragged away, the crowd following with venomous gazes and harsh bellows. Roman soldiers ushered them all to the burial site, where the girl was bound and forced to the dirt, her mouth pried open for the molten iron.

Ahsoka watched them force the burning metal down her throat, red splotches eating into her once lively face, until she realized she couldn’t remember the girl’s name.

It was then that Ahsoka closed her eyes, unwilling to watch any more as the people cried out for their justice, the beat of the drum dimming, their applause like the endless crackling of flames.

She found Hera sitting before the flame that night, as was her shift, and hatred coiled within her, too strong to defy.

“It was him,” Ahsoka growled, hands clenching at her sides. “That man you love. He killed her.”

Hera looked up at Ahsoka, tears dry on her cheeks, eyes red and puffy. “I couldn’t stop him. No one would listen... He was trying to protect me.”

“By killing someone else, you mean.”

Hera looked away, into the fire. “It’s too late to change that now. The best I can do, all I can do, is
try not to let it happen again.”

“And what will happen when you are gone?” Ahsoka pressed. “We all sit and stare into a fire or die? If it can be put out, then it is not an eternal flame. The physician was right—there’s nothing here at all!”

“If you truly believe that,” Hera whispered, “then I pity you, Ahsoka. I pity anyone who thinks there to be so little purpose in life. Whether in here, with the fire, or out there, with the people… what difference does it make, so long as you are alive?”

Ahsoka’s heart hammered in her chest, her thoughts spiraling out from underneath her. The stone went soft, her skin hot and itchy, as though bugs had begun to crawl underneath.

What life could truly be lived within these walls? A limestone prison run by men who kill in the name of their gods, filled by women who pray and model for the Roman people to watch and mock and make a show of. To be filled with either obedience or iron.

Hera rose to stand, turning and laying firm hand on Ahsoka’s shoulder. “There is no fair life, Ahsoka. The sooner you learn that, the better you will fulfil your duties to this city.”

Ahsoka said nothing when she turned away from Hera, her shoulders drawn as she walked away, wishing more than anything that she’d never learned the truth.

She told herself to sleep for her morning lessons, but worms burrowed into her ears at the thought of the ceremony to come. As she stood, she was the eldest of the girls, the most qualified, the most practiced.

And oh, if they chose her… how long before she would be killed for them? Or for some man who slaked his lust for Vestal flesh? How close to death would she be when she was finally free to leave the walls behind?

The thoughts were unbearable, and seized her with sudden terror, dark urges pressing her to disappear from the world of her own will. But she would not take her own life, even if her thoughts drifted to that extreme. Instead, in the dead of night, she wound her wrists in ivy—the vines scratching her hands until they bled as she climbed over the south wall—and stole a horse from the nearest stable, riding blind into the endless night.

“But… if you left Rome to flee from the Vestals… why come back from Egypt?” Rey asks softly, wrapping her hands around a warm mug of tea and pulling it to her lips. “What changed?”

Ahsoka moves to the fireplace with slow steps, fixing the creaky pot back onto the hook above the flames. “I was captured by traders,” she sighs. “Women-folk who leased girls into housework for profit. I was young, but old enough to stay out of the way. I didn’t know what fate had in store for me. That it would lead me back to Rome.”

“And Ben’s grandmother? Was that how you met her?”

“Oh, no,” Ahsoka shakes her head, loose white curls flowing over her fine, tanned shoulders. “It was how I met his grandfather.”

The sun and sand of Egypt was in her blood. The language was strikingly different from the Latin she’d grown up with, but a piece of her recalled it, and if anyone from her old life had discovered her newfound tongue, they would have called her a heretic for how religiously she studied it.
But that didn’t matter. She was already a defilement to her past, a shirk to her holy responsibilities—but all of it was gone. She couldn’t see the temple from this place. Could not touch its pearly stone, smell its grass, or see its sky. All had become sand and soil and dirt, earth and hot winds to cleanse and polish her like a gem waiting to be set within a royal ring.

Ahsoka sighed, wiping the sweat from her face. A smile cracked between her lively cheeks as she surveyed her hard work, the polishing of the estate finished.

“Done already, Ahsoka?” called another servant girl, offering a cup of water. “Surely you could have taken your time.”

Ahsoka took it, thanking her in the heavy language of the Egyptians. “I don’t accommodate for anything, especially time. Where is the master of the house? I’ll need his approval before returning to my mistresses.”

“He arrived only minutes ago. Surprised the man went out at all, the hermit. Come, let me introduce you…”

She led Ahsoka to the darkened atrium space. It was unlike most estates Ahsoka had ever cleaned in Egypt—the blocky surface exchanged for a round, almost shack-like appearance. Partly underground, the home was cool yet spacious, and a man in brown robes stood at its center, speaking with a young, brooding fellow.

“Master,” the servant girl bowed. “Forgive the interruption, but the cleaning has been finished.”

The man in brown robes turned, his bright eyes fixing immediately upon Ahsoka’s. “Hello there.” He smiled, striding forward with an outstretched hand. “I am Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

His friendliness startled Ahsoka, and she inched back, surveying him. Was he one of the lunatics driven mad by the sun? He didn’t seem burned by it, pale as he was… Still, he waited for her, so she hesitantly placed her hand in his. “Ahsoka Tano.”

He shook it enthusiastically before releasing her, gesturing to his home. “The place is spotless, more fair than when I first purchased it. You are very gifted.”

“It’s only cleaning,” Ahsoka said, suddenly shy of work she’d been proud of only moments ago. Why was this man making such fuss over a simple polish? And with a peculiar accent, as well. He was certainly not Egyptian. Britannian, perhaps. “All I did was sweep the dust and sand away.”

“I hate sand,” the brooding fellow piped up. He glanced at Ahsoka, disdain a hard mask on his sharp features. “It’s coarse and rough and irritating... and it gets everywhere.”

“Forgive my apprentice,” the man, Kenobi, chuckled. “We have journeyed long and far together, and his travels have brought him back with me. Why don’t you join us for a meal? As my thanks for returning my home to its former glory.”

It was in that moment Ahsoka knew she would like this man. He was as eccentric as he was handsome and lively, his respectful manner reminding her of the kinder memories she’d left behind in the house of the Vestals. Like the large, warm hand that held her in her earliest memories. It drew her to him—as did the curious, almost challenging glare of his apprentice.

Ahsoka lent Kenobi a smile, her stomach already grumbling. “It would be my pleasure, my lord.”

“They purchased me,” Ahsoka murmurs, stirring her tea with a stalk of honey. “Or, rather, Obi-
Wan gave me as an apprentice to his own.”

“You were that skillful?” Rey asks, surprised.

“Only in the ways of learning.” Her fine knuckles tremble as she lifts the mug to her lips, her breath stirring the hot steam. Ghosts slip past her eyes in a hazy film. “Obi-Wan was a generous man. But Anakin… he was the one I grew closest to.”

With a raise of his staff he spun, his pressed tunic shifting loudly in the silent fall of snow. The dusting fell lightly around their feet as they parried with slow, easy movements, foggy afternoon sun heavy on her eyes as her shoulders combatted his forms with little more than reflex.

“Very good,” praised Anakin, taking the rod from her defensive stance. “At this rate you could take down two men at once. If you’re lucky.”

“I’d aim for more,” Ahsoka huffed, steam puffing from her chapped lips. “When will I be given a sword?”

He shrugged. “In time. You might pick one for yourself when we get into Seres. I hear they have quite the odd collection there.”

She shivered, cold and eager with his answer, and followed him into the slight hovel they and his master had rented. The aroma of thickening stew made her chilled nose run. She rested the staff by the door, seating herself at the feet of Obi-Wan Kenobi.

“Remind me again what our mission is?” she asked, taking the bowl from him.

“There was a small boy kidnapped from a wealthy family in a Seres state. Ruled by the Qin Dynasty, I believe. We are to infiltrate the home of his kidnapper and retrieve him.”

“And who is this kidnapper?”

“We have reason to believe that he is none other than a general for an enemy house—General Grievous, I believe he is called.”

Anakin looked up. “Interesting. One would think the royals would have snuffed him out by now.”

“He’s of great value to the country,” Kenobi sighed, folding his sleeves. “Apparently his illness barred him from execution. It seems the people are content to let nature claim him.”

“How much are they offering for the boy?” Ahsoka piped.

Kenobi chuckled. “Enough to line our purses for a good while.” He leaned back in his seat, stroking his trim beard as his stew cooled. “How goes the training, then?”

Anakin resumed his slurping. “She’s almost ready to fight, if need be.”

“You should be training her with a knife,” Kenobi replied with a pinch in his brow. He glanced at Ahsoka worriedly. “If we are to use you for infiltration, you will require more stealth training.”

“Hand-to-hand would be best under normal circumstances, but you forget, she is a woman,” Anakin warned. “I won’t have her fighting someone eighty times her strength without the advantage of a stronger weapon.”

“I’m strong enough,” Ahsoka grumbled. “And most of these Seres men are shorter than me. Who’s
to say I can’t try?"

Kenobi sighed. “He’s right. I’ve seen what happens to women when they fight against a man. Terrible, horrible things that I regret letting alone.” He stared mournfully into his meal. “If we are putting you at risk, in our business, it’s best to ensure you are properly armed. And cautious.”

“She wants a sword,” Anakin piped, shooting Ahsoka one of his encouraging smiles. “We should get her a sword.”

She smiled back, warmed to the bones as they both looked to Obi-Wan, who held up his bowl in toast.

“A sword it shall be, then.”

They rode into a quiet Seres settlement without issue beyond the focused stares of its citizens. Ahsoka stared right in return, awed by the alien appearance of these people and their eyes of darkened stars. The innkeeper was tall and withered in cheeks, his facial hair long and slim-white. With a hospitable smile he offered them a room to stay, tea to drink, and his hand to dorn with hush-money.

From the window of their small accommodations, Kenobi took Ahsoka’s shoulder and gestured to the snow-crusted trees. “That way North, that’s where the estate of the general lies. We’ll waste no time and go three hours before dawn. They’ll expect nothing.”

Ahsoka nodded, glancing back at Anakin, who refused to disrobe for bed in light of the cold. “And what happens if I’m seen?”

“You don’t get your share.” Anakin smirked, reclining on the grounded cot. The pillows here were odd, almost square-shaped and altogether uncomfortable, but he leaned on them anyway.

“The construction of the homes in this area are primarily of weak wood, so light steps will help keep them from hearing.” Kenobi sighed, scratching the hair on his cheek. “And the young child will likely trust a woman more than another man. Because of that, you will be at the head of this mission, Ahsoka.”

She nodded, fussing with the sleeve of her robe. The clothing in Seres was silky, light and billowy, reminding her somewhat of the togas worn by her old masters. She didn’t sleep while they rested, opting instead to watch the door, to spot each flake as it fell beyond the quiet windowsill, before waking the men to follow North.

The house of the general was tall and ornate, its roof sloped into a point so startling that Ahsoka wondered how it could remain upstanding. The lights within were out, but the trio stuck to the shadows of trees beyond the courtyard, snow crunching beneath their linen boots.

“How many are inside, do you think?”

“The client mentioned an entourage,” Kenobi whispered, eyes scanning the glowing walls. “He only knows of ten. But they might not all be held here...”

“Well I can’t go breaking through a solid wall,” Ahsoka huffed, the cold burrowing into her scrawny knees. A shiver clacked between her teeth. “Do these houses have a servant-entrance?”

“Unlikely,” Anakin pouted, a hand clenched around his staff as he passed it on to Ahsoka. “Sneak around and test the doors.”
“What?” she hissed.

“You got a better idea?!” he hissed right back.

“Easy, children,” Kenobi chided. Then, “Ahsoka, sneak around and test the doors.”

“Fine,” she groused, snatching the staff from Anakin and smacking his shoulder. “Ass.”

“Snippy w——”

“We’ll be right behind you on the outskirts. Even the slightest sign of skirmish, and we’ll come running,” Kenobi said, taking her wrist and squeezing. It was the most serious she’d seen his bright eyes, but it wasn’t enough to frighten her. “Just keep calm. Understand?”

Ahsoka nodded, stepping out into the courtyard. Her eyes searched the closed, dark windows. Any bowmen would have a difficult time shooting her while they remained shuttered—it aided in her confidence as she skulked through the brush and flanked the walls, her ears perked for the slightest sound, and heard nothing.

She wondered if the house might be empty by the time she found the gate to the rear garden. It was a difficult climb with the robes in the way; she dropped to the other side and ascended the stone steps to a door made of squares and parchment, and pulled.

It was bolted shut. Slowly, she pierced the paper window with her finger, her heart hammering as she eased her arm within, feeling for the mechanism. It was a wooden beam, easily lifted, and she didn’t release it, using her arm to slip the door open. Holding her breath, she hugged the door before releasing the beam, and gasped when she caught the plank on the other side, just before it hit the floor. She finally found the way to breathe again when she sat everything back into place, her gaze sweeping across the room.

It was an open space, the floors made of polished wood and reed-mats. In the silvery moonlight gaping through the closing door, Ahsoka rode the beams with soft footfalls, her eyes acclimating to the darkness, of which she saw no shape. But she found, to her pleasure, a small kitchen, and stole a knife to her shivering-numb fingers.

She slid across the floor in her wool footings, listening for any sound, hearing nothing. A long hall awaited her in the darkness, moonlight leaking through the barest trace of more paper-doors. With staff in hand, she paused at the mouth of the hallway, a soft chorus of snores fanning from behind.

Swallowing thickly, Ahsoka took the staff into her left and the knife to her right, sliding open the door, waiting only until she heard more snoring before pushing further. She looked within and saw a man sleeping, a sword at his side—long and slim and not very frightening—but no children.

She fought not to sneak within and cut his throat, although fear indeed made her feel inclined to do so. But Kenobi had ordered stealth, and the risk of being caught was too great. Should he cry out, or wrestle her down, or even be found before the mission was complete… No, she would be wise to let him sleep.

So she closed the door and repeated thusly for each one down the long and lengthy hall, finding no boy. She was in the last of the rooms when footsteps approached, a flickering light becoming a roaring blaze as it cast over the windows, the sound of rasping coughs bursting in her ears.

Hitching a breath, Ahsoka closed the door, sealing herself inside the room with the sleeping man, eyes flitting between him and the shadow as it passed. There were two she could spot, one tall, the other very, very short.
Like a child.

Opportunity wrung dire hands around her throat as her legs pushed her to move. She slipped out of the room and followed with quiet, sliding steps, putting the knife away to better grip her staff. Her heart froze when the man saw the broken door—but beat again when he ignored it, nudging the child outside.

She remained out of sight, watching as the two stepped down into the gardens. The man folded his arms, continuing to cough into his fist, and she saw the swords crossed at his back—sharp, curved, wicked things—as the little boy moved his robes to relieve himself in the snow.

Deciding not to wait any longer, Ahsoka stepped out, slipping the door closed, and snuck behind the man. The little boy had only just turned back when her staff cracked down upon the kidnapper’s head, sending him stumbling back with a pained grunt.

Ahsoka stared—the man hadn’t fainted! He turned to fix her with eyes of fury, his mouth spouting something she could not understand as he reached for his swords. Quickly, she took his opening and jammed the staff between his legs, then against his nose, before dropping it to snatch the shaken child into her arms.

And she ran.

Anakin crashed from the brush, sword and staff drawn, waving them forward. Her spirit soared when she saw him, heart on fire, and she pushed the small boy into his grasp—only to plummet when a harsh tug at her robes sent her reeling back.

“Ahsoka!”

Snow pierced its cold nettles into her arms as she was forced to the ground, the heavy weight of the man above her driving her deeper into fear so hot it was numb, frozen in her veins. She kicked and hit solid flesh as the man coughed and spewed a slew of words down upon her, almost seeming to chastise her.

He noticed Kenobi before he could advance, and it was only when Ahsoka was dragged by her hair to shield the man, a curved sword pressed to her neck, that she realized the man was likely the very general who owned the estate.

Kenobi held his hand aloft, fear smoothed over by dark calm in the width of his eyes. Ahsoka began to heave, her stomach falling to the ground as she realized the depth of her failure. She winced as the man pulled viciously at her tresses, maneuvering her like a doll, and reached into her sleeve.

Before she could convince herself it was a foolish idea, she thrust the knife into the stomach of General Grievous. She wouldn’t let this man kill her as some helpless captive—no, by the fires of Vesta she would take him with her!

Kenobi lunged forward as the man cried out in agony, and ripped the man’s arm away from Ahsoka. She stumbled forward blindly until the warm grip of Anakin wrapped around her, turning to watch as Grievous took the second sword into a bloodied hand, advancing on their mentor.

She swallowed, holding the knife tighter. She wanted to cry out, to dive in with him—but in a moment it was over, and Grievous collapsed, coughing blood into the snow, shivering uselessly.

Kenobi stepped back, his heavy breaths puffing steam into the night air, before thrusting his sword into the general’s heart. Five times he did this before he waved Ahsoka over. And she obeyed, following his gesture to take the crossed swords from his fallen, bleeding body.
They were heavy in her hand as she crossed them over his neck, the weight of vengeance thick in her throat as she brought them together.

Rey rubs a hand over her throat, staring at the swords displayed over the mantle.

Ahsoka leans back in her seat, watching Rey closely. “We had committed smaller crimes before that night in the name of duty, and many more after. But there was none so monumental to me than that one moment, when I shed the blood of a human being for the first time.”

Rey’s hand falls, her understanding of Ahsoka beginning to flicker. “‘The first time?’”

She nods.

“Do you…” Rey exhales, head swimming. “Do you regret it?”

Lines etch around the woman’s face, casting her deeper into shadow, as her hands stiffen upon her thighs. “No.”

At Rey's silence, Ahsoka leans closer.

"Killing a person is easy. Living with yourself afterwards is excusable. But regret will *consume* you, if you allow it." She searches Rey's eyes. "I refuse to be consumed by anything. Even myself."

The harshness of Ahsoka presses against Rey, the barrier erected in her gaze betraying something more that she cannot see—a terrible knowledge, or a horrible secret.

At last Rey is forced to wonder, to realize, what fury the woman before her has wrought. "I couldn't." She blinks. "I could never withstand that."

"Is that so?"

Rey strokes the palla with her thumbs, seeking refuge in the softness. "From what I know of my God, He is righteous and just to forgive. If I took a life, even to protect myself, I would betray Him if I felt no remorse at all."

Ahsoka studies Rey in the quiet. "Rarely would any god I know show such sympathy to the undeserving."

"Then maybe you don't truly know a god at all." Rey takes in a short breath. "But my God loves me as much as any life I could ever take. I must love them as He does, deserving or not."

"You rehearse scriptural rite as I once did." Ahsoka scowls. "But my beliefs did not save me from the pain I endured."

"Belief doesn't excuse anyone from pain," Rey agrees, offering herself in gentleness. "Even when I believed, when I had my faith, I was still in chains. I still am. But God has freed me in better ways."

Discomforted by Rey’s accusations, Ahsoka shakes her head, suddenly put off her tea. "If you knew what I've done, Rey, you would know that faith is fruitless in a world with dry soil."

Rey quiets herself, leaning into the woman she loves, pouring into her reserves for the chance to know her more. What crime could this woman commit to bring such hatred upon herself? "You won't change my mind."
Ahsoka gazes into the fire, pensive and thoughtful for several long seconds, lost in a memory. "Maybe I won't." She scoffs, a small, pained smile on her face. "I couldn't change Anakin's, either."

Rey considers her mentor, wishing, dreading, to know who that smile is for. "What happened to him after Seres?"

"We were summoned by a Grecian messenger on behalf of a senate hopeful." Her voice darkens. "I was forced to join them in Rome."

“Rome?”

Obi-Wan grunted, smoothing the novicilla down his neck, carefully evading the hairs on his jaw. “Yes. There’s a senator from Greece who needs protection.”

“Protection? From mercenaries?” Ahsoka challenged, crossing her thin arms. “Working for politicians is asking for attention. Guarding them is asking for trouble. Why should we care about someone corrupt like that?”

“Because food is food, no matter who grows it,” Anakin berated, fixing a frown upon her.

“It’s just until the circuit is complete. We only need protect the client until the position has been filled. Then we can leave Rome to do as we wish elsewhere.”

Ahsoka shot Anakin a pleading look. He and Kenobi both knew where she came from—at sixteen, it was all she could do to trust them with her past in the House of the Vestals of Rome. They never offered her pity or solace, just companionship.

How she’d let herself think it would give her amnesty from returning to the city, she would never bother learn. The ride to Rome from their base in Alexandria across the sea had taken a few days, the rocking waves sick in her stomach. She nearly kissed the dry land as soon as her sandals touched Roman dirt.

It was busier than she remembered. The people varied in skin colors and sizes more than anywhere else the three of them had ventured in the past years. But, of course, she’d never been disposed enough to truly learn the city in her childhood.

She could have almost argued on behalf of its beauty—if not for the horror living on in her memory. For many days, as they awaited the arrival of the Grecian senator, she couldn’t keep from looking behind her shoulder, terrified that she would be recognized and tried as a traitor. But, to her astonishment, no one seemed to notice her. Or, if they did, they showed no concern for her true identity.

Anakin carried her swords for her—an armed woman tended to worry people in a place like this. But she held the kitchen knife, carved with her initials, close to her always. She almost considered undoing her braids to hide the scar on the back of her neck, but decided to let her palla shield her, instead.

The cauponae reeked of stale hay and horse dung, making her nose wrinkle as soon as they approached the painted entrance hall. “We’re meeting him here?”

Anakin smirked. “Easy, Snips. We’ve stayed in worse.”

She tugged her palla closer to her cheek, scratching the fabric as it brushed her skin. “Still.”
“A hive of scum and villainy like this is somewhere a senator can stay hidden,” Kenobi assured, glancing back at the two of them. “It was the instruction we were given. Ahsoka, you’ll stay with me.” He grinned. “Or perhaps I should call you ‘daughter?’”

She frowned, but by then it was the end of it. They purchased their rooms and waited, wasting away for two days before, in the dead of night, a servant came to Kenobi’s door.

Anakin waited in the hall, lamplight playing off his pale face when Ahsoka filed in beside him. The familiarity of him made her want to reach out, to take hold of him somehow, as the fright and despair of Roman memories came for her in the dark.

But she didn’t, and many steps later, they were led into a private room where a table, round and made of stone, waited at its center. A woman waited there, nearly concealed, a man waiting beside her with gladius sheathed.

Obi-Wan bowed, ushering his apprentices to follow suit, his eyes meeting the woman’s with cool warmth. “Senator Amidala, I presume.”

“General Kenobi,” she nodded. “Or is it just Obi-Wan, now?”

“I’m comfortable with any name a client prefers to bestow, so long as they keep to our codes,” he replied simply, opening his empty hands. “I assume you know our price.”

The senator paused a moment before waving her hand to her guard. He withdrew a sack from his belt and tossed it onto the table, the sound of coins clacking throughout the empty room.

Ahsoka’s eyes fell to it before snapping back to her mentor as he lowered his hands, his voice firm in the way he allowed only when doing business. “Name your terms.”

Amidala rose from the table, her palla shifting to reveal bright, round eyes and long lashes. Her gentle face almost shocked Ahsoka, that a woman of such fine appearance would be allowed to hold high place in the house of Greeks rather than the house of a husband.

Her smooth and controlled voice sent shivers of trust and fear through Ahsoka as she replied, “I seek protection as I petition the Romans to allow me place in court. I’m sure you hold the abilities to guard my life and my safety, after all I’ve heard about you.”

“They’d never allow it,” Anakin interrupted. Ahsoka looked at him, seeing a strange source of anger there unlike anything witnessed in him before. Perhaps it was the way in which he stared at the senator that emitted such prickled tension. “Rome may be more accommodating to women than Greece, but that doesn’t make power easy to obtain. They will resent you.”

“And try to kill me.” A light gleamed in the shadow of her eyes. “Attempts have been made on my life before. Are you suddenly concerned you will be unable to fulfil your duties?”

Anakin stepped forward; the woman’s man flinched. “I know the laws of Greece. They have no senate at all—they are ruled and governed by the mob and the wealthy who bribe them. You are no senator.”

Amidala fixed him a sorrowful glare. “No.” She pulled down the hood of her palla, revealing a wild mane of dark curls. “I am the blood of the ancient kings of Greece. Kings who gave birth to tyrants who were overthrown. I am the last of a pure line—a valuable asset to the Romans who seek to govern it. At least,” she smiled, “that’s what they will listen to.”

“And what use to them are you?” Ahsoka asked softly. “Why should we protect you?”
The woman broke the lock of Anakin’s gaze to consider Ahsoka. “The Grecians yearn for democracy. Rome needs to prevent rebellion. Why not enlist Greek blood to handle Greek affairs?”

“Because Greeks don’t let women share their own homes, much less their public offices,” Ahsoka frowned. “Greece is a horrible place. Why would you even want to help them?”

“Because I, too, value democracy. I would rather be humiliated for my hope than abandon the home of my ancestors.”

Ahsoka looked down. She could understand the sentiment, and yet, could not share it. For three years she has traveled the territories, seen terrible things and heard tales of even worse. She could never even fathom loyalty to a place eager for her own death.

“As long as your money is good, our efforts can pertain to whatever you wish.” Kenobi stepped forward, sweeping the payment into his hands. “You will enlist Ahsoka as your ancilla. She will be your caretaker in public view and your guard in privacy. As for myself and Anakin, we shall join the ranks of your,” he smirked at the man standing behind the senator, “current employ.”

Amidala squinted, the low light of the chamber pulsing against her back as she walked around the stone table. Her attention fell upon Anakin from his head to his feet to his mouth to his eyes, her voice like honey. “And I can trust you? You, prideful mercenaries you are?”

Anakin looked upon her, his usually smooth brow furrowed, eyes wound with thoughts Ahsoka couldn’t decipher. “Sometimes we must let go of our pride, and do what is requested of us.” He bowed his head, his voice low, gentle, as he offered a knife from his belt. “If your ladyship finds doubt, I urge you to kill me yourself.”

Ahsoka went still as Padme Amidala met the handle of Anakin’s dagger with her fingertips, listening to the soft hitch of a breath catch throughout the chamber. But she did not take it, her fine fingers curling back against her breast. “It is peace I fight for,” she murmured, “not death. But for now, I trust you.” She turned her jeweled eyes onto Ahsoka. “Come with me tonight. Let’s not waste time.”

Ahsoka hesitated. There was something in this woman that compelled her to give pause, to weigh the cost of service—for many would most certainly want her dead, just for her womanhood alone.

By the look on Obi-Wan’s face, and Anakin’s as well, she knew she was not by herself in this idea. And yet she bowed and fell into step at the woman’s side, following her and her escort out of the inn and into the dark Roman streets.

The sun beat down upon the courtyard, flora bursting with the life of summer, gnats racing their dizzy circles across the yellow blades of long grass.

Ahsoka marched along the outskirts, her eyes scanning the grounds. Once again Padme had evaded her. The woman was as slippery as an midday’s fish when she wanted to be, and ever since she and Anakin returned from their liaison in the Naboo sect of the region, well…

A giggle chimed across the courtyard, and Ahsoka paused, remaining in the shadows as she caught sight of them resting together in the grass. The fountains gurgled and spat around them, flowers tucked into Padme’s array of curls at Anakin’s gentle bidding.

Ahsoka rolled her eyes, trekking back into the house. The two of them were anything but subtle.

But at least she knew Padme was safe with them. Ahsoka trusted Anakin. Loved him like a brother.
If it weren’t for her repulsion at the sight of their insufferable happiness, and, of course, the dangers of her friend falling in love with a client, she might have just kicked him in the skirt and told him to marry the poor woman.

Wishing them well did her no harm, however. If anything, Anakin seemed to be the balm to Padme’s open wounds whenever their meetings with the Roman senate inevitably ended in disaster. The tour nearly over, it felt as though doom was already beginning to roost in her hopes of returning to Greece as a political power.

Ahsoka knew it was likely folly. But it mattered to Padme. And Padme deserved happiness. She was kind and gentle and friendly to Ahsoka—she was wise, more wise than Hera had ever been, and looked at her like a woman more than a trusted servant.

Working for senator Amidala had been, without fail, the most boring and invigorating task of her life.

When evening fell Padme returned rumpled and smiling to her chambers, where Ahsoka was already waiting with the water drawn for her nightly wash. Ahsoka took the potions to Padme’s back, not missing the way the woman seemed so distant of mind.

“I trust you had a good day, my lady?”

Padme blinked. “Hm? Oh, yes. Very good. And you?”

“Uneventful.” Ahsoka rinsed her hands with a cloth. “Just ready to meet the emperor in the morning.”

“As am I. Will be nice,” she smirked, “to meet the one responsible for such atrocious policies in the flesh.”

They snickered together and Ahsoka went to bring Padme her nightclothes, trying to ignore her nerves. Thankfully—or perhaps not—Padme broke the silence.

“Ani has offered to join us tomorrow, when we go. I thought it would be a good idea.”

Ahsoka quirked a brow. “You aren’t worried about them finding out he is a mercenary? It might ruin your reputation, my lady.”

“Nonsense,” she waved her off, settling into her plush bed of furs. She groaned, stretching her arms over her damp, silky locks. “I am a woman running for senate. What more can he do to my reputation that the people haven’t already?”

Ahsoka swallowed thickly as they approached the palatium of the emperor, her heart hammering in her chest.

Years ago, when she was only a girl, these were the steps she would have walked. The emperor himself would have passed his hand over her, would have made her into a woman of the state—a carrier of the flame.

Now, as she knelt and tried to avoid looking into his sunken, calculative eyes, she wondered at fate, and how it had brought her here anyway.

“To what, Princess Amidala, do I owe this pleasure?” Emperor Palpatine droned, his voice ripe and raspy as it clawed over the marble. “Have you decided that the word of the Assembly was not
“Yes, my lord.” Padme folded her hands pleasantly, angelic in her smile as she beseeched the man held aloft on his stage. “It is my understanding that Roman law prohibits a woman to vote, even more to hold office in the Roman courts.” She opened her arms. “But I come to you as a loyal servant, eager to see the spread of your democracy among my people. I seek your pardon, and ask humbly for an edict that will allow me to assume leadership in the name of my ancestors.”

Palpatine’s thin lip stretched in the barest of smiles. “Prettily spoken, my dear. But as I’m sure you know, a leader must command respect from his followers. I fear, even for you, the people will not obey. Nay,” his brow creased, “they will rebel against me, for appointing you would be a slight to the wars fought amongst themselves. My answer is no.”

Ahsoka sensed the anger in Padme, the swirl of despair tightening as they began to meet the end of its swirling path. “What can I do to change it, my lord? Must I cut my hair and assume the visage of a man, instead? Remove my own breast? How must I change to keep my people from destroying themselves?”

The court bristled at her outspokenness, and Ahsoka traded a worried glance with Anakin, who seemed tempted to comfort the aspiring senator.

But the emperor remained unfazed, stroking his chin. “Perhaps, if you were to marry a man of high standing, I could appoint him with you in mind. He would hold the title, of course. This would be your best hope.”

Anakin’s eyes glimmered.

Padme’s eyes, however, dimmed, as her gaze fell. She closed them in defeat, ducking her head and body in a deep bow. “Thank you, my lord,” she murmured, turning to follow the Praetorian escorts out from the hall.

Ahsoka rested a calming hand on her mistress’s back, admiring how well she managed to withhold her tears. It was only moments before Ahsoka realized that Anakin had not followed.

When he finally returned to the villa, she was waiting at the door for him. “Tell me you didn’t.”

He frowned. “Didn’t what?”

Anger ripped through her to her stomach and tightened her grip on his arm as she dragged him around the outside of the building, away from any other ears. “You stayed to see if you could marry her, didn’t you?”

“And if I did?” He bristled, tugging free of her hold. “I saw a way to help her. It was just an investigation into prospects.”

“What prospects?” Ahsoka scoffed. “Becoming the dog of the Roman emperor? Have you lost your senses?”

“No, Ahsoka, I’ve gained them.” He snagged her hands, the look of hope and certainty bathing his expression so entirely that she felt winded just looking at him. “I am in love with Padme. If I marry her, she and I could both live happily. She will trust me to do what must be done.”

The world hollowed beneath Ahsoka then, when she realized the intention behind his words. Her mind retreated into herself as she was assaulted with visions of a world without him in it, without adventure and purpose as his apprentice. Just then, all at once, she felt a helplessness so raw and
powerful surge through her that she gave into it numbly, and let herself hope with him, for she loved him too much to deny him the joy the senator made him feel.

“What can I do?” she murmured.

“Nothing, now.” Anakin smiled. “The deal has already been made.”

She eyed him warily. “Deal?”

“The emperor is in need of a skilled swordsman to fill the place of one of his imperial gladiators. I’ve agreed to prove my loyalty and earn his approval by fighting in the arena.”

Ahsoka paled, horror bathing her in a cold swath. “You can’t be serious! Master, that’s suicide!”

“Nonsense.” He settled a hand over her head. “It’s only temporary. And you know I can handle myself in a fight. What’s a few battles when there is a greater war to win?”

“But the Colosseum is a place of massacre.” At least, that is what she had been told by all who they encountered in their travels—a rumor she knew Anakin had heard as well. Was he truly so desperate for Padme’s love to risk his life in such a way?

He shrugged. “Maybe. What’s the worst they could do to me? I would not want to live in a world where she could never be mine.” He withdrew from Ahsoka, leaning towards the door, his steps already eager to lead him back to her. “I’m sorry. The choice has been made.”

Ahsoka stood, stunned arms held uselessly at her sides, as he left her in the shade, the sound of bugs and running water licking at her ears, growing louder and louder.

“So he became a gladiator for the emperor,” Rey murmurs, covering her mouth. She thinks back on when Ben first confessed his past to her, how Snoke held his grandfather in such high esteem. It makes sense to her now, how eager Emperor Snoke had been to retain the legacy in Ben’s blood.

Ahsoka sighs. “He became a gladiator for Padme. And I, fool that I was, did nothing to stop him.”

“You did what you could.” Rey reaches out, squeezing Ahsoka’s fingers as a great passion takes hold of her. “It’s hard to change a mind that’s already been set.”

Guilt flashes through her chest. She would know such obstinacy—only hours ago she had betrayed Ben’s wishes and sent a letter to Leia. And from what she knows, and is coming to know, Anakin Skywalker may have been more stubborn and singularly-focused than his grandson. A terrifying concept, when rage is involved. The thought of it makes her blood run cold, remembering that her husband is still out there, far from the safety of her arms.

Ahsoka’s gentle grasp does nothing to ease the trembling in her gut, the abysmal chill thrumming and alive in her. “Oh, Nunu,” Ahsoka sighs, bright eyes milky in the firelight. “If only that hadn’t been true of me, too.”

“But you did nothing wrong,” Rey presses. But her attempt to ease seems to go unheard. Ahsoka’s shoulders sink, her fine hair falling over her cheeks as Rey leans closer, as intimately as she is able. “I would have done the same as you—I would have tried to make him see, even if he refused. But you told me it was his choice to die. Why should you feel remorse for what you couldn’t control?”

Ahsoka’s throat quivers. “I told you I feel no remorse.”
"But that was when you killed people. You didn't kill Anakin."

Silence falls between them.

Rey blinks, the unthinkable ghosting past her lips before she can think to quell it. "Did you?"

Tears water in Ahsoka's eyes, their sclera blooming red as she firms her jaw.

"Ahsoka," Rey whispers, her body hollow and cold. "Did… you kill Ben's grandfather?"

At last the tears fall, fast and angry as Ahsoka glares at Rey. "He was my master. I loved him like a brother."

Rey gapes, horror shaking her to the marrow of her bones. Never before has she seen Ahsoka so angry, so tremulous, like a lone leaf on a dying tree. "Ahsoka—"

"You don't know, child, you didn't see what he became when that emperor took him," Ahsoka cries, thrusting her hand against her chest. "He turned himself into a monster. And I did nothing!"

Rey stands, moving to Ahsoka’s side, trying to take her hand, to touch her, to calm her. "So when you told me Anakin killed himself, that was a lie?"

Ahsoka wipes her nose, sniffling like a child as she lets Rey lay a hand against her back. She collapses onto the bench, as though robbed of all energy, her voice rasped and quiet. Ashamed. “The master I loved died with Padme. But I destroyed what he left behind.”

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"Pregnant?"

Padme nodded, taking Anakin’s hands and kissing them. “Yes. Ani, you’re going to be a father!”

“You’re sure of it? You’re absolutely sure?"

Ahsoka scoffed. “She only vomited every morning for the past three days. She has no fever—nay, her skin is clearer than the moon. What, are you going to wait for a physician to come tell you the obvious? Or are you going to shut up and listen to your wife?”

Anakin’s muted pallor drew away as he searched Padme’s eyes, releasing him to a wide smile. He swept her in his arms and spun them around the atrium floor, her stola swaying as she cried out, leaving Ahsoka alone with her terse smile.

Almost two years had passed since their nuptials. It had been a beautiful ceremony, taken upon a cliffside overlooking the mighty sea that separated them from their old home. Before that, Ahsoka had wondered if their wedding would happen at all, but the emperor had nothing to say when his shining master gladiator took his bride. And to her despair, Padme never asked why.

But Anakin never forgot Ahsoka. And Ahsoka never forgot her mistress. The three of them worked as one, every day passing with blood hidden from their view as Anakin grew wealthier and wealthier.

He built a house for Padme. Far enough from the city and yet close enough for necessity. A beautiful villa with several rooms and a well in its courtyard garden, a stable and horses overlooking the endless Roman hillside. It was a place where Padme need not fear the hate of the people, and where, on the eve of every seventh day, Anakin trained Ahsoka in the ways of battle.

“Obi-Wan will be here any moment. He wanted to celebrate with us.” Padme kissed his cheek,
reorienting herself.

“You told him already?”

“You weren’t here yesterday when he came.” Ahsoka gestured to the breeze ghosting the soft curtains along the floor. “Which reminds me. What did the emperor say when you asked him?”

Anakin grinned. “He has approved my second year and renewed his promise. In just twelve month’s time, Padme will rule by my side as the newest queen of Greece, and democracy will once again be returned to the people.”

“Greece has no kings or queens anymore, Ani.”

“And you’ll leave this house to me.” Ahsoka lifted a brow. “Right?”

Sauntering toward her with Padme on his arm, Anakin pouted at Ahsoka, tugging on one of her braids. “What’s wrong, Snips? Is the house I built for you not good enough?”

Ahsoka blushed, and batted his hand away. “Of course. But no one has ever complained about having two houses.”

“It will be good to show you my home, Ahsoka,” Padme said in her gentle timbre. “I know you don’t like its customs, but the land is beautiful. It wouldn’t be a family without you.”

She searched her eyes, trying to avoid the sting welling up in her own. A wry smirk pulled to her lip. “You just want a babysitter so you two can go frolic in the vineyards somewhere.”

“No—”

“That, too.”

Anakin and Ahsoka only laughed when Padme hit his arm, and Ahsoka left them to prepare for the arrival of Obi-Wan.

They ate well that night. They ate without care or woe or worry.

Like ignorant fools.

Her screams echoed through the house, piercing like cold winter, and Ahsoka was pulled back to that night where blood soaked through the snow, where the chill of death ached in her ears.

Ahsoka stood with the midwife, removing bloody linens, coated with the sweat of a summer night. But she still felt cold.

“Watch where you’re going, girl!” The midwife whirled on her, her lips stretched thin as Padme whined and screamed. “Fetch more water!”

“Water.” Ahsoka swallowed, parched, and turned from the room, rushing quickly through the atrium.

Anakin stood, pulling free from Obi-Wan as she did. She almost didn’t see him until he was
blocking her path. “How is she?”

Ahsoka stepped around him. “I have to get water—”

He grabbed her shoulders, shaking hard. “How is she?!”

At last she met his eyes. Her lip trembled as his gaze burned into her. “I don’t know.”

Obi-Wan laid his hand on Anakin’s shoulder, bidding him still. His bright eyes fell wearily to Ahsoka. “Go on.”

Ahsoka fled to retrieve water from the well, her heart pounding with every hurried step. Water sloshed and dribbled onto the floor as she followed the sound of screams back to the bedchamber, where the midwives bustled around one another.

Padme’s eyes opened from their pained squint to catch Ahsoka. She whimpered, reaching out for her, and Ahsoka obeyed, replacing the midwife’s hand with her own. “Padme…”

“Ahsoka, I, aah—!” she sobbed, arching, sweat rolling past her temple. “I can’t.”

“Can’t what?” Ahsoka squeezed her hand back, the deadly vise cutting off all feeling in her body.

“I see the head!” One of the midwives cried. “Push, woman, push!”

Padme panted, her eyes glazed as they burned into the ceiling, before she grit her teeth and screamed. It was long and hollow, her white teeth parting as a scream of pain became a battle cry, and it was miraculous when she, suddenly, was no longer the only one.

“It’s a boy!”

Falling back onto her pillow, Padme’s harsh breaths didn’t stop. The midwife wrapped him and took him to his mother’s breast, laying him down as he squirmed and coughed his pathetic mewls.

Ahsoka released Padme’s hand so that she could hold her newborn child, but when Padme’s hand didn’t move, a harsh chill snaked around her throat, burrowing cold claws into her stomach.

“Padme…?”

“There’s another,” a midwife disclosed to her companion, her gaze stricken. “A twin.”

“Madam Skywalker.” The second came to Padme’s side, shaking her shoulder as her erratic breaths began to slow. “You must stay awake. There is another child inside—you must keep fighting!”

Her distant eyes slid closed, so heavy that they couldn’t open. But still she arched, her son nearly falling from her body before Ahsoka rested a hand on his soft, sticky back. And Padme cried out, soft, staccato cries that grew weaker and weaker with every breath, until at last the second child was delivered squealing into the world.

“A girl. Both healthy.” The midwife wrapped the youngest twin in wool and held her toward Ahsoka. “Here, take her, we must see to the afters.”

Ahsoka accepted the daughter into her arms, her breathing finally slowing as she returned to Padme, who’s eyes fluttered open.

“Padme, look.” Ahsoka smiled, moving to show her the red faces of their children. Her heart leapt when she remembered Anakin, when she thought of how happy they would be. Together. A family.
But Padme did not move, her soft breath fanning the blond hairs on her son’s head. “Luke.”


“I say Luke.” Padme smiled weakly, her cold hand shuddering as it hovered for only a moment over the mattress. “And Leia.”

Smiling, Ahsoka wiped the sweat from Padme’s brow. “Oh. Well, I—”

“She won’t stop bleeding,” the midwife shouted. She called for her assistant, and it was then that Ahsoka saw the blood, black and red, dripping and pooling on the floor. Saw how pale Padme had become, that her child had stopped rising and falling with her breath.

“She’s not breathing...” Ahsoka backed away, making room for them to help her. “She’s not moving!”

Silence fell through the room.

Ahsoka turned her eyes onto the women, who watched her with sullen faces. She clutched the daughter closer, wrath a storm in her hands, her feet. “Help her!”

One of the women, the youngest, turned away, wiping her eyes on her arm as the midwife rose to her feet, testing the side of Padme’s throat. When she did, she looked away.

The ground shifted under Ahsoka, the burning heat from the open terrace doors pouring the sweat over her burning eyes as she stood there, looking down on her mistress’s body.

“Cassia.” The midwife wiped her hands before taking the boy from Padme’s still breast. “Take her clothes and prepare them for the Temple of Artemis.”

“Yes, mistress.”

“As for you,” she said to Ahsoka, ignoring her trembling legs as she fitted the son into her opposite arm. “Tell the husband the children are alive.”

Ahsoka’s lips dried, the weight in her arms, so fragile, so unaware, so silent, heavier than millstones. “And Padme...?”

The midwife sighed, laying a gentle hand on Ahsoka’s shoulder. “She has died the most honorable death our kind is allowed. She will be welcomed as a hero in Elysium.”

Ahsoka nodded, but still didn’t move.

“You should be proud.” Her voice was far from Ahsoka, muddled underwater. “The time for grief will come later. For now, you must tell your master.”

The woman, Cassia, began the disrobement of Padme, and it was only then that Ahsoka turned away, letting her feet carry her through the halls of their home.

It was wrong, the emptiness she felt. Should she not be weeping? Should she not crumble to the ground, cry out to the gods? Why now, when Padme was gone, did she think of a woman buried in the earth over an extinguished flame?

When she entered the atrium Anakin’s back was to her. But Obi-Wan saw, saw more than what Ahsoka held in her arms, and perhaps it was that look which transformed Ahsoka’s hesitance and emptiness into something writhing and alive.
“Master.”

He was before her in an instant, his eyes wide and consuming the children in her arms. His hands rose, but did not touch them, as the surprise and hope in his gaze began to harden. “Padme...?”

Ahsoka’s lips flattened as she looked down. She couldn’t bear to look in those eyes anymore—watching the life drain from one person she loved was already more than she could withstand.

“No.” He shook his head, his voice strangled and wet. “No!”

Obi-Wan called out his name, wrangling him before he could burst, but it was too late. He sobbed, covering his face as his legs gave out beneath him, and his mentor fell with him.

“I can’t live without her,” he wept. “Gods, Padme... not Padme!”

“She died a heroic death,” Ahsoka regurgitated, the words like sand in her mouth. “She is in Elysium, now.”

Anakin only wept harder. It was the most pathetic she’d ever seen him, the only time she’d ever seen him so distant from his control. He became a child before her eyes, angry and outraged, and as the days passed he ignored her and his children, never speaking, haunting the halls of his own home like a ghost.

Obi-Wan remained, taking up the duties with Ahsoka. He found a wetnurse to visit the house, to work under Ahsoka’s instruction.

He was a witness when Ahsoka decided to offer the rites to Anakin. Although he had lost his wife, he was still their Roman father. It was his duty to give them their names, to look upon them and accept them.

Like a statue he stood in the atrium when Ahsoka and the wetnurse laid the children at his feet. His gaze fell to them with a slow lull, his face etched of stone. He stared at them for many long moments before, at last, he turned away from his children, leaving them on the cold marble.

Ahsoka’s fear broiled into rage as she rose from her bow. She followed him and pushed him with all of her might, forcing him off-balance into the nearest pillar.

“You monster,” she spat, her chin trembling. “You would let those children die? Would that satisfy your lust for vengeance? Would that be what Padme would have wanted?!”

“My wife is dead.” His empty eyes abandoned her as he turned his back, his voice hollow and rasped. “Be grateful I haven’t shed their blood with my own hands.”

He left them alone, watching after him as he disappeared into the house, and when he was gone she closed her eyes, cursing at her feet.

Obi-Wan interwove his fingers, leaning on his knees as he watched her scoop the daughter into her arms. “He won’t see reason, Ahsoka.”

“Then what do you suggest I do?” She frowned, letting the girl take hold of her finger and squeeze. The touch helped bury her fear, and yet expound it tenfold as she looked into her innocent little eyes. “He might kill them if they stay here. But I can’t leave them to die in the city.”

“There are always the temples,” Obi-Wan suggested.
Ahsoka kept the girl’s gaze, looking over her fat cheeks, pale and smooth and perfect, her little mouth and wisps of thin, dark hair. She tried to imagine her grown, with Padme’s face and spirit, forced to tend to a fire as the Romans held her upon their pedestals, dangled her over their pits.

“No. You must take them somewhere else.” Ahsoka’s gaze scorched him. “You must take them far from here, where he can never hurt them.”

“Ahsoka—”

“Please.” She stepped closer, staring at him when he rose to meet her. She held the child in offering to him, trying to cut the snare in her own throat. But the tears came anyway. “Please take them.”

He frowned, tracing a finger against the girl’s cheek. She turned to him and tried to capture him in her mouth, but he was too swift. “You’re certain?” he murmured, meeting Ahsoka’s watery eyes. She nodded, passing her into his arms. She didn’t wipe the tears from her cheeks—in its way, she had been waiting years for them. “You’re the only hope they have, now.”

Cradling the daughter close to his chest, Obi-Wan freed a hand to cup Ahsoka’s hair, pressing a kiss to her head. “Very well. I will take the children with me.” His grasp fell to her shoulder. “What will you do?”

Ahsoka rubbed her arm, staring at the baby. “I made an oath to protect my master.”

“Then this is goodbye.” Obi-Wan bowed his head. “Until we meet again.”

She didn’t reply, watching dejectedly as he took the boy from the wetnurse, summoning his servants to help take the caravan. It was doubtful Anakin would miss it. She followed them out of the stables, tucking the children safely into beds of hay and linen.

They looked up at her in the shaded daylight, sleepy and unaware as she knelt to kiss their faces. When she found the strength to leave them, Obi-Wan was waiting.

“I have many associates from here to Macedonia who would take in these children. They may become slaves, but at least they would have a home.”

Ahsoka nodded, resting her hand on the caravan and she admired the endless hills, bathed in orange sunlight. “She called them Luke and Leia.” She squinted up at Obi-Wan. “She gave them names. In the end, she never did what the Romans wanted.”

“Padme was a woman of her own mind, and yet a servant to the people.” Obi-Wan folded his arms, stroking his short beard. “She was a good client.”

“She was more than that.” Ahsoka hesitated, but threw herself into Obi-Wan’s arms, squeezing him tightly. He didn’t speak, wrapping his arms around her as the years spindled out between them, unraveling into memories that she would never touch again.

Anakin’s rage only grew.

Ahsoka knew what he was becoming. The house was empty of him, and yet the word of a new gladiator filled the market streets.

Vader.
She barely made it a year before she pounded on the doors to the Ludus Magnus, demanding they let her fight alongside him. If he would not return to her home, then she would go to his. The emperor did not prevent a woman from joining the battles, from becoming an apprentice of Roman sport. From painting her face in white marks and shedding blood side by side with the last tether she had to this world.

Fulcrum.

So much time passed in darkness.

He was no longer human. He was a sword. A pawn for the emperor.

Every day, every night, she couldn’t bring herself to pray for Anakin back. She knew he was lost. But she couldn’t bring herself to leave his side. Not until he died in the arena.

But Vader was unstoppable. He maimed and slaughtered without distinction, and the people loved him for it. He donned a mask and pallium cloak and concealed himself from anyone who sought to know him, until it became clear to Ahsoka that he would not die in battle, but because of the emperor’s hold over him.

It would not be a blade that killed him.

It would be love.

Ahsoka gazed into the flames as she fanned them higher, watching their golden tails dance under the iron cauldron. When the water boiled she looked over her shoulder, finding the culina dark and empty, before withdrawing the ground herbs from their hidden place.

The night fell and the insects began their droning song. Evening breezes swept into the atrium, stirring the hair at her nape, and she set his evening meal beside the pool where he sat staring at the wall.

She bowed. “You should eat, Master.”

He didn’t look at her. She nearly left him, but before she could move, he spoke to her for the first time in weeks. “Why are you here, Ahsoka?”

“Because I am where I am meant to be.” She searched his face, but all she found there was anger, marring his expression like a scar. “By your side.”

“Even now, you hold onto sentiment.” At last he looked upon her, meeting her eyes in the moonlight rippling off the waters. “Why can’t you just let the past die?”

“I will when you do.” She smiled a small smile for him. “Eat.”

He watched her as she took her own meal before him. Though still his servant, she never ate in a separate chamber. She lifted the tea to her lips and he did the same, the air choked with blaring silence.

He downed the entire mug, setting it aside as he picked at his stewed pork, never taking his eyes off her. It might have been disconcerting, but she was accustomed to his erratic behavior. If anything, she was… glad, to have this time with him.
“I should have killed you,” he murmured. “I should have spared you the pain of staying by my side, when I had the chance.”

Ahsoka’s brow rose, only in slight. “You might have a difficult time trying that now.”

“Indeed.”

They both looked at the pool together in something almost like companionship. But Ahsoka knew better. After the quiet stretched on, she stared into her mug of cold tea. “Do you miss it?”

The shell of Anakin closed his eyes. “No.”

“Then,” she whispered, rising and smoothing her tunica, “I suppose there is nothing left to say. But I am sorry as well.” She cast a mournful gaze on him beneath her, wishing she could see the man she knew in his eyes, if only for an instant. “Sorry... that I couldn’t kill you with my own hands.”

He scowled at her, his hand twitching as he tried to stand, but as soon as he was on his feet, his knees buckled. He wheezed as she stepped back, and didn’t take her eyes from him when he coughed and vomited blood into the water, trying in vain to crawl toward her, to curse her name.

When at last he could move no more, his breathing shallow, strangled on his own hate, she crouched and laid hand on his head, petting as she might to soothe a frightened child.

“Goodbye,” she whispered. “Master.”

Sitting beside her, Rey lets her touch linger on Ahsoka, the warmth of her bleeding into her palm.

Covering her mouth, Ahsoka closes her eyes. “I betrayed him, Rey. And yet, I feel no remorse.”

Rey nods, letting her thoughts linger on the image of Ben’s grandfather. She knows Ahsoka must have never told him this, that she was responsible for his death, and yet remained a sentinel to all he left behind. What a miracle it must have been, for them to have met at all.

“I think I understand.” Rey stands once more, drifting to the swords displayed over the mantle.

“What are you doing, child?”

Rey hefts them down slowly, reverently. “They’re your past, Ahsoka. But no matter how much pain it brings, the past should stay with you.” She turns, holding them out in offering. “It’s not too late to move on.”

Ahsoka smiles a rueful smile and rises, taking the swords and laying them on the table. “My future,” she murmurs, wrapping her arms around Rey, “is right here.”

She accepts her embrace as tightly as she dares, warmth blooming in her chest. “Thank you, Ahsoka.” She squeezes. “Thank you for trusting me.”

Ahsoka closes her eyes, refusing to let herself cry. She wants to believe there will be no more tears. She wants to believe that Ben is safe. But neither of those are so simple to touch, to have faith in, than the young woman wrapped in her arms.

She smooths a hand over the rich cloth of Rey’s palla, love rising in her throat, drowning the pride she had captured within her for so long. And the way they held each other gave her the faintest flicker of wonder, of memory, and she was no longer in the temple or the villa, in Egypt or in
Rome, but *home*.

Chapter End Notes

[A purple palla was typically reserved for noblewomen]

[One of the various types of inns, a caupona was known as a less-than-fanciful, stable-based inn where travelers could keep their horses]

[Ancient Greece underwent a variety of government styles, including being ruled as a kingdom, then a dictatorship, then a democracy, before the Roman empire took over]

[According to Greek custom, husbands and wives had to live and sleep in separate sides of the house. Young boys would stay with the mother before they were old enough to move over]

[Labor in the ancient world was a giant risk when it came to complications. Even for the wealthy, the chances of dying from blood loss or Cardiomyopathy (weak heartbeat) was almost a 1/3 chance. In order to reduce pain, some religious customs dictated that the mother drink the finklematter of pigs]

[While some midwives could actually be men, most midwives were women specifically trained in the different herbal methods and spiritual customs typical of Roman mythology. They could have several assistants and were typically freed slaves. Most people preferred midwives with long fingers and short nails and a firm disposition]

[One of the spiritual customs after a mother in Rome gave birth was to make an offering to the Temple of Artemis. The Romans believed that Artemis (although a virgin goddess) was the goddess responsible for successful birth. If the mother lived, they were to make a sacrifice of gratitude, and if the mother died, her clothes were taken to the temple in tribute]

[The name "Cassia" is the feminine form of "Cassius," meaning "empty"]

[Babies were not allowed to be given names by anyone but the father, and they could only be named ten days after birth to ensure that they were strong enough to survive]

[The Ludus Magnus was the largest gladiator academy/prison in Rome, where the conscripted or enslaved gladiators would be housed, trained, and fed]

[Poison Hemlock, one of the more popular methods of poison in antiquity, would be blended with honey and induce paralysis, nausea, vomiting, coma, and a variety of other symptoms ultimately ending in death]
The night bugs sing for them as they wait in the shadows.

Only the slightest of rustling betrays her, before the sound of an owl coos from her familiar lips. They emerge to receive her, to draw her into the dim moonlight with them.

“Jannah,” Finn sighs, folding her in his arms.

She pats his back, separating herself to face him. “I saw him. They threw him into the Colosseum.” Her throat constricts. “Solo was there. Solo killed him.”

Finn covers his mouth as one of his men turns away. His heart rends within his chest, but he must not mourn, now. “And Kaydel?”

“She wasn’t in any of the other hiding places.” Jannah bows her head, studying her feet in the dark. “All I found was blood, and…” She swallows. “Bodies.”

Finn sucks in a harsh breath, planting his hands on his hips and paces away from her, unsteady steps disturbing the forest floor, back, forth, and back again, until he finally speaks. “Rose is still out there. I can’t just leave without her.”

“Oi,” she stops him with a hand to his chest. “You can’t just abandon us. Besides, she’s probably the safest she can be in Snoke’s palace. What matters now is getting everyone to safety.”

He glances up at the moon. It shines from the whites of his eyes, so wide and worn in the dark. “It’s almost midnight. Those three will be waiting for us.”

Jannah scowls, her brows drawn. “You still intend to help him? After he murdered Poe?”

“He might be my friend, but I’m not a fool.” Finn points a finger towards where the city lies, leagues away. “Solo can pay for what he’s done later. But I know Rey and Ahsoka Tano had no say in it. We made a deal with them.” The finger digs into his chest, puncturing his heart. “And I’m going to keep it.”

She searches his eyes for a long moment, drawing in a deep breath before finally relenting. “And what will you have me do?”

“Take what you can to the safe place.” Finn retreats, he and a few of his men following after to mount their horses. He winds the reins around his hands and tugs westward, in the direction of the steppes. “And tell Leia everything.”

Rey tugs on her new palla, sorting a small satchel over her shoulders, her movements rushed and stiff. “I can’t wait here anymore.”
“You really think you’re going out there? Alone?” Ahsoka rises, taking Rey’s shoulders. “I can’t allow it. You know the young master would have both our heads.”

“I don’t care how angry he is,” Rey contests, backing away from her. She grabs her knife from the table, glancing at Ahsoka’s initials engraved into the wood before stowing it away. “I’ll find Ematt, and he can help me. I’ll stay hidden until we can escape together.”

“Your fears will put you in more danger than it’s worth,” Ahsoka growls, snagging one of her dual blades from the table and pointing it at Rey. The younger woman pauses, her rapid movements halted by the sudden fear shot through her at Ahsoka’s challenge. “You are not leaving this house unless it is to flee from Rome. Is that understood?”

Rey studies Ahsoka’s sword in the dim light of the fire. The edge quivers in the flickering firelight, and she looks into Ahsoka’s eyes, clutching her hand around the strap of her belongings. “You wouldn’t hurt me.”

“I have only ever hurt the people I love, Nunu.” Her hold firms. “If I must do it is in this house rather than sending you to their torture chambers, then so be it.”

Rey backs away, not afraid, but frustrated by the anger and fear cycloning within her chest.

She sinks down on the bed, her shoulders falling. She cannot win, here. She knows that Ahsoka would prevent her from risking her life, that Ben might never forgive her for such recklessness.

But in that same thought, her husband is strong and resourceful. In the end, the Resistance was their best option—but not their last. If it is God’s will for them to meet again, then it would have to be another way.

So she closes her eyes, surrendering through a long breath. “He knows where we are going. If he can’t get here in time, then he will find another way to Egypt.”

Ahsoka’s extended arm finally relaxes, letting the sword drop to her side. “Good.”

As she speaks, the harsh, heart-beaten silence shatters when the door is softly knocked.

Rey bolts to her feet, all the heat of her body in her face. “Ben—”

“Sh,” Ahsoka hisses, holding up a hand. It’s then that Rey notices how stricken Ahsoka’s expression has become, the gathering storm of suspicion darkening her eyes. To Rey’s hesitation, Ahsoka waves her away without a sound, gesturing towards the storage nook shrouded by a hanging curtain.

The trembling in her hands goes unnoticed. “Ahsoka?”

Another knock, more urgent, like a fist, resounds through the room. In the space of a moment Rey is pushed through the part in the curtain, and the door is booming until she, from the darkness of the veil, hears it open.

Ahsoka hardens her expression, firming her hold on the door as she angles herself to hide the sword behind her thigh. The night is cool when it gusts on her, wedging between her and the cluster of Roman soldiers.

General Hux opens his empty fist, his smile like a string of pearls. “Ahsoka Tano. Good evening.”

She eyes him. Though surrounded by guards, he wears only a toga. Senator’s robes. She bows,
only as far as she needs. “General. Is there something I can help you with?”

“Actually, there is.” He brushes past her, two guards in his wake. The men huddle together in the small space, surveying the room as their master let’s the door fall shut. His pride preoccupies him as he surveys the first sword on the table, unaware as Ahsoka settles herself in the corner, the second hidden in the shadows. “Your master has sent me with a message.”

Rey knows that voice. Venom courses through her and she dares peek through the sliver of the curtain, seeing nothing but the slight glint of a soldier’s armor.

Ahsoka forces herself into a posture of supplication. “I would think the greatest general in Rome would have more important duties than playing the role of a messenger.”

“Even the gods must do the duties of their lessers, from time to time.” At last he looks at her, turning his back to where Rey hides. “Your master decided to remain under the Emperor’s protection. You see, he came forward with very useful information about the Resistance. He has traded it for security for all three of you.”

Rey covers her mouth, her veins beginning to quiver with rage. He lies, she thinks. Ben would never…

She pauses. How many times had Ben admitted his willingness to betray the Resistance? How oft had, even with his strength of will, been fearful and submissive to the Emperor’s will?

How could she know how far he would go to protect them?

Ahsoka frowns. “Three?”

Hux leans forward, his certainty cracking over his pale face. “She is with you, is she not? The slave he married under a false god.”

“I see,” Ahsoka murmurs. “Unfortunately, General, the girl was sold to Gaius Poe Dameron about a fortnight ago. She is not here. I wouldn’t be surprised if my master has hidden her somewhere else.”

“You’re denying any knowledge of this?”

“I am only telling you what I know.” She shrugs. “I know where my loyalties lie. My master was taken with the girl, but ultimately decided she was a liability. At least that is all he mentioned to me.”

“‘A liability,’” Hux muses, glancing around the room, his nose wrinkled with distaste. He inevitably takes Ahsoka’s sword from the table, smoothing his fingers along the flat ridge. “Indeed. In the end, all slaves are. Tools who think they warrant any personhood, especially. No matter.” He smiles at her. “You will return to the city with us to join your master. For your protection.”

“I refuse.” Ahsoka bows. “You are generous, my lord, but I have no allegiance to the Resistance and can defend myself well enough.”

At once, the general’s countenance darkens. As he speaks, the two guards move to take her arms. “That wasn’t an offer for negotiation.”

But their gentle approach is foolish.
She lashes her arm towards the closest soldier to connect the hard side of her hand with his throat, stunning him for the precious moment to reveal her second sword. She dances away from the other man and pierces the point between his armor plates, driving the tip deep into his shoulder.

It happens so quickly, Rey nearly throws herself through the curtain, the urge to run nipping at her ankles. And yet she dares not move, forced to listen as the sound of swords clash and orders are barked. As something clatters to the floor and the thud of footsteps tumbles back, parting the curtain to expose her.

The general is faster than her.

His face contorts into a rabid snarl and he lunges forward, falling himself upon her. He shakes her by the throat, and when she reaches to gouge his eyes, he restrains her.

“Found you.”

She jerks her knees, striking him as hard as she can manage, but he doesn’t falter. “Ahsoka!”

“Little ancilla,” he grunts, blood quivering on his lip. The weight of his body against her stirs her to resistance, the harsh scent of his perfume an assault upon her heightened senses as his hands scramble to pin her arms. “I’m sure you understand me now, don’t you?”

Rey lurches, connecting her head to his nose.

“Fuck!” He doesn’t release her arms, his legs wedging to pin her into the storage space as his blood drips onto her clothes. “You and he are truly cut from the same, sodden cloth!”

He slams her against the wall as he speaks, knocking stars behind her eyes, their breathing labored and wet in the darkness. Rey forces herself not to cry. “What do you want?”

“To take what belongs to me,” Hux replies, almost pleased with himself even as anger burns deep in his eyes. “To skin you alive while Solo watches, and put every last nothing like you in your rightful place.”

To her horror, his hand abandons her wrist to reach for her skirt. And yet as she trembles beyond the strength to stand, her fingers worm into her satchel, finding the handle of the knife.

He’s too close to evade her.

With a harsh cry she plunges the blade into the stomach of General Hux, her wrist stiff as the blade meets a slim resistance. Ahsoka’s knife slips through him in a way that steals from Rey’s pulse, renders her still for only a moment as their eyes meet, both so wide with astonishment—and she plunges deeper, forcing the blade up into the man’s heart.

His teeth chatter as he steps back, taking her knife with her. His anger melts into confusion, fear, his lips blubbering like a child, and yet he makes no sound.

And then, the general falls.

Rey sucks in a harsh breath that sounds like a sob when it returns to her from the walls, and she turns away, scanning the floor of dead Roman soldiers. She steps over them like a ghost, stumbling into the quiet night. It spins below her as her mind searches for a reason, a purpose to any of this.

“Ahsoka!”
There are more soldiers strewn along the grass, leading toward the stable, and she follows them, trying to see in the darkness, until a voice calls.

“Rey…”

Inside the stable. Rey pushes through, and finds the final soldier collapsed on the ground, and Ahsoka leaning against the wall, her breathing short and rasped.

Rey crouches before her, throwing her arms around her shoulders, relief and fear fighting for control of her hands. “Thank God you’re alright.”

Ahsoka breathes in. “Where’s Hux?”

“I ki—” she sniffs, finding the impossible words. “I killed him. He found me, and I…”

“You had no choice. You did well.” A cold hand touches Rey’s cheek. “And now it’s time for you to go.”

“I know,” Rey agrees soundly, pushing away the memory of the general’s flesh giving way against her hand. “More might be coming. We can’t wait anymore. Let’s take what we can carry and go, now.”

“Rey,” Ahsoka murmurs.

Her eyes finally adjusting to the low moonlight, she at last notices the slump of Ahsoka’s shoulders, and the unnatural stillness of her arm as it falls over her stomach.

“You’re wounded.” Rey makes to stand. “I’ll get the water, the bandages—”

“It’s too late for that, child—”

“No, that’s not true.” But despite her words, Rey doesn’t stand. Tears come to her eyes at last, her jaw heavy as iron. “If God can heal Ben, He can heal you—”

“Maybe your god can heal,” Ahsoka sighs, “but there is no use, now.” She lays her head back against the wall, enough for Rey to see her eyes, so bright, so unafraid, finding her in the black. Her eyes squint, as if to smile. “I knew a long time ago that I would die in battle, Rey. This is where I must stay. But you have to go.”

“Ahsoka…” Rey’s voice falters, her thoughts undone. Of all she knew from the very beginning, Ahsoka was always there. Aiding her, teaching her, guiding her—a memory of waiting in the rain assaults Rey, of walking along the haunted ivy of temple walls, and she bows as it hits her in the stomach, knowing that Ahsoka is right.

What has begun will not be stopped, that no mercy, no future, will exist for them at all.

“It’s not fair,” Rey wails, “It’s not fair! You can’t let them take you! Please, Abba…!”

Ahsoka waits until Rey is reduced to quiet tears before her soft voice finds her, speaking in the language they both knew together, curling around them like the sweetest incense. “Rome will never take me, Nunu. I will die as my master did, but I will die knowing that it was a love freely given.”

Rey steals Ahsoka’s hand, ignoring the hot slick of blood. “I love you,” she sobs. “I love you,
Ahsoka… I don’t know what to do. I’m not powerful like you, like Ben… Please… tell me what to do…”

Her blue eyes close, her voice the softest its been, or ever will be. “And I you. Rey…” She squeezes her hand. “You don’t have to carry a sword to be powerful. Some leaders’ strength is inspiring greatness in others.”

Nothing.

Ahsoka’s grip falls from Rey’s hand and she can’t breathe, scrambling for something to grasp and keep when all she can do is breathe and breathe and choke from the burning dry depths of her stomach and she heaves, curling on her side on the cold hay-strewn ground, letting the sorrow inside of her.

Until she knows she will not survive if she stays. Wiping her face, Rey abandons the packings left in Ahsoka’s house, taking Lux from her stall and saddling her with rapid, hollow movements.

She leads the mare towards the glen when she looks back, and a voice, soft and clear and familiar, whispers.

Burn it.

Swallowing, she obeys, storming into the house to steal fire from the embers. With all of her fury and grief she throws it into the hay and watches it spread for only a moment, until she can spare no more. She takes Lux and rides.

It’s the only thing left she can do.

The part of her still alive, even when her heart no longer beats, sees the flames. Flames she nurtured, flames that killed, that consumed.

That controlled.

Fire was within her, raised her, and was her weapon. At the end of it all, she would be returned to it, bloody with the treasures of war. The fire was their god, and she was the fire.

No, Rome never took her.

But it would burn with her.

She pierces through the night on Lux’s back, the fits of tears sporadically blurring the world into darkness. The smell of blood and night drowns as she tries to breathe through the wind.

The time to mourn cannot come now. Ahsoka promised Rey a future—a future she can still take. She has to believe, to cling to the hope that the years of loneliness meant something more.

That Ben is still waiting for her, somewhere still within her reach.

She follows the road south, down towards where the ports will take her across the sea. She tries not to think of the Cairo she knew—the Cairo of lonely streets and starving, cold nights, a place where she thought she’d escaped—but to remember the horror of Rome crawling after her with claws of beauty and poison.

To remember that the general is a liar, that Ben will come for her, will stay alive.
She wishes she had the courage to scream. She wishes she could risk the world knowing she is still breathing, that her heart, slave and servant and woman and wife and murderer, is still beating.

In the low moonlight the forms of a line grows from the near horizon, barring the road, their hands adorned with torches and bodies draped in starlit armor.

Rey pulls the reins, forcing Lux into a harsh stop that makes her head swim. The light races closer, brighter, the sound of galloping horses thundering and the path barred by nothing but open fields and yet, she knows, that the lights would only follow her there, too.

Surrender.

Rey trembles, her grip on the reins tight. This compulsion she has felt before, this voice too familiar, and yet the knowledge of what it will do makes her motionless with the fear of it.

The peace of it.

On instinct Rey turns Lux around, determined to flee, but hesitates. She searches the air with empty eyes as the peace blooms and spreads its soft petals within her chest, consuming her with mindless will even as she scrambles for an excuse to ignore it.

Ben’s hands wrap around her arms, his eyes pleading, clasping onto her. Promise me, he murmurs, if something happens, you’ll run.

She closes her eyes, and yet her hands will not move. “Lord…”

Run as far as you can, and keep running.

Her leg throws itself off the back of the horse and she drops to the hard ground. Windblown grass welcomes her by the ankles, grasping like hands as she unfolds the palla from her head, wrapping it squarely around Lux’s neck. With a firm hit the mare runs, leaving Rey alone as the infantry falls upon her.

She turns to accept them, holding her chin high, and faith close.

“…I trust You.”

Chapter End Notes

["You don't have to carry a sword to be powerful. Some leaders' strength is inspiring greatness in others" is an Ahsoka quote from the Clone Wars episode "Gungan Attack." She says it to Prince Lee-Char, encouraging him that, alive or dead, he can be a symbol of hope]
Half drowning in darkness, murky and blind, they knew who she was and dragged her by the hair, the wrists, in chains, in their wake.

It feels like dawn may never come when they pass through the quiet gate of the city, and yet the sky lights slowly, the high walls and columns of the Colosseum towering over her.

She knows now that she was right—that there is no sanctuary waiting for her, here.

They lead her down through winding tunnels. The reek of stale rainwater and animal dung squirms into her nose and stays there, the silence of earliest morning crushed beneath the weight of marching boots. Torches smolder in the darkness, the light hidden above the ground, but she knows it is a cell she is being thrust into so hard that she stumbles face-first into the dust and straw.

When she looks up there are people flanking the walls, huddled together, watching her.

She swallows dryly, crawling back to take a place beside the door, the weariness in her every muscle pushing her into almost-sleep. Silence and thoughtlessness passes through her like air, the blood dry and cracked and itchy on her hands.

She wipes and scratches it away, the time falling from her consciousness, until a skittering shuffle of feet and groans sound from the dark hall.

Wary, she peers out, making out a shape in the darkness. Small and feminine, and in the lowest light, hair the color of straw.

“Kaydel?” Rey whispers, voice hoarse.

Whoever it is pauses, following Rey’s voice in the dark until she finds the door to the cell, peering in. And Rey knows she isn’t mistaken.

“Kaydel!”

The woman’s round eyes widen, searching over Rey’s face before recognition ignites inside of them. “Gods, Rey… what happened to you?”

She rises and wraps her hands around the bars, all that is holding herself up. “The Roman soldiers. They found out where we were hiding.” A hot sting pricks her eyes. “They killed Ahsoka.”

A loud clang resounds throughout the tunnel, snatching their attention for the briefest moment
before Kaydel pulls something from her bag, slipping them into the bars with swift hands and swifter words. “Finn’s wife is still trapped in Snoke’s palace. Everyone is dead. Kylo Ren…” she swallows, “your husband executed Poe.”

Rey’s mind spins as she takes them from her—soft and yet firm, undoubtedly bread—considering her words. Wasn’t Poe Dameron already dead? No… he must have been hidden, offered as an example to die in the arena. By Ben’s own hand.

Even as her heart breaks for Poe and the Resistance he once led, the threat of knowing the bars holding her now once held him sufuses her in cold dread. It makes sense to her now, stunning her with chilling clarity. Why the emperor wanted Ben, why he never came back. Someone must have discovered the truth. Betrayed him. Betrayed them all.

And now the Romans are going to make examples of them, too.

“Thank you,” Rey whispers, already retreating to disperse the bread amongst the others. “For what little it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

Kaydel fixes her sash more firmly around her cheeks, her eyes endless in that way only those who feel true pity can shine. “Me too.”

Rey can’t bear to watch her leave, plunging herself back into the small cluster of prisoners. Some take the bread with greedy fingers, and others must be guided and shown to eat, blinded in their listless haze.

“No point,” one murmurs, ignoring Rey’s offered hand.

“Come on.” She holds his piece out for him once more. “You have to eat.”

He glares at her with cold eyes. “Noxi come to the arena to die. Why bother?”

Noxi. Rey is almost familiar with the word. It was a word like the ones used when travelers spoke of gladiator spectacles—sacrifices.

But she already figured as much. If Kaydel knew to come here, then these people must have been members of the Resistance. She offers the bread again. “At least it will be less painful if you aren’t starving.”

That seems to convince him. He nods to her, chews it slowly.

When the guards come a few of the women cry out, or sob in silence. The smell of piss fills the air and Rey is pressed between the line of bodies, herded through the tunnel to a slight incline with a sword to their backs, until the incline becomes a series of stone steps, leading up into blinding daylight.

Abba…

Her breathing judders, and yet, as her heart races, there is trust in her. Peace. Purpose.

Be with me…

There’s a light in his eyes, a chorus of horns blaring, long-gone voices strangling.

His ears ring when they slip open, adjusting to the mindless blur as his body awakens to the pain. Over his brow to the base of his skull, throbbing in his arms.
He tries to move his hand to touch his face, but they won't come to him. Evening his breath fails, his questions and memories flowing into him in the shape of fire and the general's cruel smile, and when his eyes manage to wedge open fully, his heart falls through his stomach.

Chains dig into his wrists, pinning them to the arms of a seat of finely-crafted wood. A cover flaps in the slight wind overhead, the bright light and harsh scent of sand and stone and blurry visions of people finally coming into focus.

"So. You are still competent."

Ben jerks against the restraints, finding his ankles bound, as well. Yet his head is free to turn and look up upon the emperor as he reclines, servants attending him as the summer heat bleeds through the shade draped above the Colosseum stands.

Snoke frowns, gesturing to Ben. "I knew you would awaken here. The body tends to sense when it has come home."

Breathing out, Ben rests his head back against the seat, wetting his parched, broken lip. The bruise on his cheek screams with protest. "This is not my home." His eyes burn with heat and hatred, unabashed. "I won’t fight for you."

“Fight for me?” Snoke scoffs, though the humor in it rattles Ben’s bones. “I don’t expect you to fight for me today, Master Ren. I expect you to watch.”

Cold drips into his stomach as his neck gives out, and his eyes fall onto the sand as the announcer speaks his droll, praising the emperor, the tournament to come, and the sacrifice—

Sacrifice.

Ben swallows, drowning out the rites as they are spoken, jeered, and will not allow himself to look upon the gates as they rise, as the slaves and traitors are pushed out into the arena. This must be what Snoke wants—for Ben to watch those he conspired with fall to their tortuous deaths, their beastly execution. To be reminded of the shame, the hurt and brokenness Rey must be feeling now, torn apart from him.

It is as he stares down at the stone that he remembers being forced to the marble floor. Of a letter intercepted, and an order given.

Ben’s head snaps up when the gates roll shut, crashing louder than thunder, his wrists straining, his eyes sweeping over the prisoners gathered below, searching for her as his heart pounds with horrible dread that suddenly becomes an inescapable truth.

A woman stands on the sand, her skin sun-kissed and legs long and graceful from beneath a cream-colored stola—a form he knows so well, has worshipped and lusted, and vowed to protect—and his stern and unbreakable expression melts with terror, terror that wrings him from his very soul, when at last his mind and body awakens to the purpose behind the chains wrapped around him.

He pulls at them in vain, rocking forward, straining again and again and every push forcing breath to shudder from him, each one more desperate, more ineffective than the last.

“Fuck,” he whimpers, so low none can hear, and he may have not even spoken at all, his lips trembling too fiercely, his teeth clenched hard enough to shatter, his nails biting into his palms as he pulls, pulls, in vain.

Snoke, in his boyish desire, laughs down upon him, derisive and cruel and dripping with hot
malice. “Let this be a lesson to you, my boy. When you spurn my generosity, expect me to repay in kind!”

The audience roars when the center of the arena shifts, the sand spilling aside as the door is lifted, as the drums pound in his ears.

Ben refuses to take his eyes off of her, the sting of heat behind his eyes much stronger than the pain in his bones, and the dark has already surrounded him, blurring everything in sight with the helpless yearning to go to her.

And from the bottom of his soul he cries out, his voice lost in their din.

The gate rolls down behind them like a predator’s jaws, clanging with finality, lurching them forward yet back as if caught in an intangible tide.

Rey looks up into the stands. She remembers this place. Remembers the sun burning down on her as she ran through the silt, throwing herself between Ben and the behemoth's ax. It seems so much larger, now. The people don’t seem to remember her, and yet still they cheer for her bloodshed, dizzying her with their numbers until the world spins under their ruthless attention and lust for her death.

From the center of the field the sand separates, shifting to reveal an opening trap door. A sleek animal emerges from within, its powerful body flexing as it prowls out into the sunlight, full, dark bright mane like a plume of grand robes and pallium cloaks.

A lion.

The Noxi cry out in panic, clustering together, drawing the attention of the beast. It seems practiced as it draws closer, interested, hungry, and Rey is thrust back into the memory of him—when Ben was struck, and death a certainty.

She didn’t think then, and the Lord was on her side.

And she can’t afford to think, now.

With a shallow breath, Rey breaks from the group, allowing her instinct to guide her foolishly forward. They fan out to follow suit, scrambling, some screaming. Rey hears the terror, the wails of pain and cheers from above, and runs from them, following her instinct to the underground, where the chains begin.

She fumbles to her knees and slips down the small ramp, meeting the eyes of a surprised slave, safe behind the bars of the beast’s cage.

His mistake was lingering too close. She reaches her slim wrist through the bars and pulls him forward with an inhuman strength, fueled by fear and not much else, again and again until his resistance slumps and she can wrap her fingers around the spear still in his hand.

It’s enough. She rattles at the cage, but the other slaves have noticed her, already flocking toward the bars. With her heart in her ears she claws her way back up the ramp, the chain swaying and catching at her ankle, tripping her.

Ben freezes, his thoughts grinding to a halt as he watches Rey rise, her hands gripping tightly onto a spear.
Snoke rises to his feet. “What?!“

The lion continues to give chase as the people scramble, gathering on the other side of the arena, all others who dared to part from the herd lying shredded and bloody in the sand.

Rey’s legs won’t move, her pulse shivering everything within her body, from her fingertips to her bowels. But the stillness does not leave her, and she allows it to take control, closing her eyes.

Ben watches from the stands, his heart pulling towards her, the fear within him that roiled so tumultuously at once offered a chance to be silent.

The world fades in that secret place and Rey pushes deeper, letting her hope soak into her spirit as all time and worry becomes nothing, only a hand reaching out from within her, and a voice calling back.

He knows what she’s doing. Had abandoned it years ago, when all he thought was true betrayed him, and when he chose to flee.

And yet.

Ben surrenders to the pull, the offer, the chance, deciding her worth the risk. He watches her, takes her in before he closes his eyes—and prays.

Rey steps forward, consumed by the heat in her stomach and the sweat on her palms. A sudden urge grips her and she looks up, past the lion and the Noxi, up where the emperor himself watches her with an expression that could melt iron.

And her husband seated beside him.

The sight of him alive nearly sends her weeping with relief, and when his eyes meet hers across the field, her love for him and faith in the spear within her grasp only deepens. In her mind his lips are on her neck, his arms wrapped around her, voice silk against her ear as the dark wilderness, freedom, shelters them under its roof of polished stars.

Don’t turn your back on a starving lion.

Time has run out. Rey rushes forward, her eyes blazing with fury, her every stride unrepentant, and drives the tip of the spear into the lion’s back.

An uproar erupts along the stands as the lion turns, his rich and dusty mane shivering as he bears his teeth in a furious yowl, rounding on her. She backs away as his paw swipes, his claws dangerously close to her leg.

She assumes the lion is trained, the way it stalks after her, giving her a wide berth, his yellow eyes wide and focused. She doesn’t turn her back on him, but shows all of her teeth, thrusting the spear at his face and roaring from the deepest pits of her lungs.

They dance this way, forward and back, and Ben dares not let his thoughts wander. By some miracle he can feel something, his throat trembling as his spirit calls, begs for her to live.

God, his fists clench, do whatever You want with me, but please... help her!

The lion growls, bounding to try to catch her from the side, to corner her against one of the pillars—but Rey is faster. She bolts to evade him and he stalks her, shortening the length of his own chains, giving her an idea. She continues to round the circle, falling into an easy and predictable
rhythm with the beast, ready to do so until he will be unable to move.

But her plan is quickly snuffed. With a gnash of yellow fangs, the lion’s ability to predict catches her, as he races around the opposite direction. Rey trots back, her slipper catching on the chain, making her stumble. The gasp of the crowd serenades her as she falls to her knees—the lion’s paws already extended towards her.

Spit flies from Ben’s lips as his scream echoes across the sand. “No!”

The force of the earth helps her fall, and Rey musters all her strength to roll over the chains. A sharp sting cuts across her arm and she yelps, rolling and clinging on to the spear until she can find her feet beneath her and run.

Something catches on her stola and tugs, the sharp tear of unstrung thread pricking her ears. She turns and thrusts blindly at her attacker, gratified when the tip meets solid skull, freeing her from the lion’s jaws.

He doesn’t back down, charging her—but its chain pulls taut around his neck, forcing him onto his rear paws as he roars, blood leaking over eyes full of hunger and animal hate.

Rey doesn’t hesitate. In one movement, with one cry, she forces the spear powerfully forward, into the heart of the lion.

The stands fall into an unearthly silence when the beast falls ungracefully to his paws, then to his side, whining and expelling its last, bellowing breath.

Rey stands above it, meeting Ben’s dumbfounded gaze with her own before she looks to her fellow prisoners, their eyes alight with fear and wonder, and then, at last, to the emperor.

His contempt burns through her as the crowd applauds, realizing at last that the performance has ended, and Rey allows the passion to flow through her. She takes reign over her trembling hand, reaching down to pull the spear from the lion, and holds it high above her head as the Romans rise to their feet, unleashed, abandoned to their thrill.

Snoke sinks down into his throne, his fingers curling over the arm of the chaise. He summons a guard with a finger. “Arrest that girl. Execute the others.”

“Yes, Emperor.”

Another guard comes to see to Ben’s chains, but he barely registers, too awestruck to move. Rey… survived. Remarkably, impossibly, she had been delivered from the mouth of the lion.

His prayer… had been answered.

“It seems that slave was taught many things, thanks to you,” Snoke drones, casting his miserable glare upon Ben, who is forced to his knees as the binds are fastened tight behind his back. “It seems I will have to find a new way to punish you.”

Ben’s chest tightens, consternation heavy as he bows his head. He trembles with relief, and yet he knows what horrors lie beneath his master’s feet, what capacity for torment he can unleash upon her. It takes him by the throat, making his voice come strangled. “Don’t hurt her.” He quakes, closing his eyes to abstain the tears of love and hate emerging from that weak place inside of him. That powerlessness that makes him sag and bow to the stone. “She’s not the one who betrayed you. I am. It’s my life you should take, not hers.”
Snoke pauses. “Take your life?” He scoffs, his cold hand bracing under Ben’s chin, forcing their gazes to meet. “Foolish child. Why would I take something that already belongs to me?”

Heart careening down his legs, Ben is forced to his feet, dragged away from the stands, his head pushed down while the guards enter the field, restraining Rey as the Noxi’s screams are raised.

And all at once, silenced.

Chapter End Notes

[While some sources deny the idea of Christians being fed to lions due to "lack of specific evidence," it still stands that enemies of Rome, mostly criminals, traitors, prisoners of war, and yes, religious "deviants" (like Christians), were sentenced to death by lions or other big cats in the Colosseum dating back to times as early as 200 B.C.]

[The term "Noxi" (or "Noxii") is actually in reference to a type of gladiator that was not expected to win, and was usually sent out in the "Beastiarii" matches (the ones where gladiators fought the animals). Most were criminals condemned to death. Sometimes they would be expected to fight one another to the death while blindfolded]

[There are technically two different types of Beastiarii games. The first was called "Damnatio ad Bestias," where the gladiator was specially trained to fight the animal, and the "Objicère Bestiis," where one or more people would be sent out sans defense in order to be devoured]

[Animals (especially big cats like lions, tigers, and leopards) and some Noxi gladiators were kept underneath the Colosseum in the hypogeum, and would be released through the wooden floor hiding underneath the sand. While I couldn't find much research on exactly how the animals were restrained, my research suggests that the animals' handlers would work from a safe spot under Colosseum and use the chains to bring it back underground]
He doesn’t fight them.

The guards hold him with rough and frightened hands, the tips of their swords sharpened, their postures firm and resolute even as he towers over them. Perhaps, with the proper willpower, he could escape them.

But there would be nowhere to run.

From the running tunnel underneath the Colosseum they transport him down a familiar path, through the layers of guarded gates and into the underground of another place he knows very well. He marches up the stairs, nearly stumbling from the dizzy pain still throbbing in his skull, turning up his head to look through the open courtyard ceiling of the Ludus Magnus.

On the second floor they coerce him into the chambers—a block of cells—and when a guard opens a gate to one of the rooms Ben shrugs them off, offering little more than a simmering glare as he steps within, the iron gate latched shut, but not locked, behind him.

“I’d hoped to never see you again.”

Ben watches until the soldiers leave, perhaps to report to Snoke, rubbing out the lingering sting of chains in his wrist. “Yeah, me too.”

“What were you thinking?” Ematt rises from the small bed nestled beneath the thin window, the bright light of day catching dust in their rays, in his beard. “Killing a soldier in the leper colony? You should have just run the five leagues into the wilds!”

“I was told my uncle was among them,” Ben murmurs, flexing his sore fingers into fists, the anger, the regret, rising within him like smoke. “But it was a lie.”

Ematt pauses. When motion returns to his body, he sighs, approaching the younger man. “I know what that man has done to you. To your heart, your mind most of all.” Ematt lays hand on Ben’s shoulder. “Were I given a chance to avenge myself, with your age, power, and ambition, I might have made the same mistake.”

“I was a fool,” Ben growls, his clenched fist banging uselessly against the door of his cell. Once, then twice. He wishes there was more to destroy in this place, more to tear apart than himself. “I should have run to her.”

“Is she...?”

“No.” He cards a hand through his hair, struggling to right his thoughts, his feet already pacing.
“She’s alive.”

“She’s alive?” Ematt’s dark eyes gleam, his brow high with confusion, surprise. “How can that be? The Noxi are fed to the lions.”

“She killed the lion.” Ben’s heart warms as much as it races at the memory. Oh, if only he could hold her now, how prideful he would show her he’s become. “She found a way.”

Ematt scoffs, standing dazed, his eyes somewhere else. “That little woman and her miracles. I may look into this God of hers.”

Ben rounds on Ematt, holding the man’s shoulders, looking intently down into his eyes. “Snoke had her taken. She’s not dead, but she may be imprisoned somewhere. Do you think you can find her?”

“Of course.” He nods. “Nothing happens around here without me hearing about it. Aside from your wife killing a lion, apparently.”

Ben could almost smile at that, if he weren’t so wracked with distress. Rey has been captured, she could even be tortured right now, and he has no way of knowing. And Ahsoka… if she wasn’t among the Noxi, then where was she being kept?

He has to find a way to speak with Rey. He would give anything to hold her, to watch her eyes gleam when she says his name. To apologize for not abiding her wishes.

His shoulders heavy, his neck bows under the weight of it, almost sending him tumbling upon his mentor’s body. But Ematt supports him. If he weren’t so tired, so worn, he may have begun to weep. “Snoke wants her dead… to punish me.” He shakes his head. “As long as I’m alive, she’s in danger.”

“Nonsense! My boy, as long as you are alive, you both still have a chance.” He pats his back, the gesture comforting, reminding him of someone long dead. “If it is you that the emperor wants to torment, then your strength will sustain her. You must stay strong.”

Ben’s grip tightens on Ematt’s shoulders. Strong. How many years had he transformed his body, forged his mind through fire, in the name of strength? How many people had he killed for his blind dedication to the emptiness, how deeply had he violated his only beloved, all for the purpose of being strong?

No, a small voice reminds him. That was a different strength. The force of will to do what needed to be done. Even when it wounded himself, when it tore him apart.

And now he’s been given the chance to do it again.

Ben’s hold folds over Ematt. Becoming a tight embrace. And when it is returned, he feels he may be able to stand on his feet, after all. “Thank you, Ematt.”

“You’re welcome.” Ematt politely pushes away after a long moment has passed, clearing his throat. “You stink.”

“I’ll be sure to visit the bathhouse,” Ben assures, surveying his accommodations. Nothing but a bed and a table, a long oil lamp held by the ceiling. He peels at his tunic, ridding himself of the dirt and sweat clinging to him from the fabric.

Ematt watches him, his feet ready to leave, when he hesitates. “About the girl…”
Ben pauses.

“Her bravery in the arena is unlike anything this city has seen. Once they learn who she is, it could be of use to us.”

Holding onto the tunic rumpled in his hands, Ben wonders at this. It hadn’t been a surprise that so many found her act of saving him to be… titillating. Those who came for entertainment were certainly entertained.

And Ben realizes Ematt’s meaning. If Snoke had let her actions pass once, then perhaps he would be tempted to do so again.

“I know that the Resistance has been planning a coup,” Ematt murmurs, coming closer, leaning in. “I know some have even infiltrated the palace. And the Ludus Magnus.”

So, they aren’t all dead. Ben blinks. “And you haven’t reported them?”

“Why should I? I hate this emperor as much as they do.”

“And yet you work for him.”

“So do you.”

Ben scoffs.

“Look here,” Ematt takes Ben’s arm, squeezing once. Hard. “Snoke is dying. He has no heir. When the time comes for Rome to be ruled, the supporters of the senate, the Resistance, will need a firm foot in the door, no?”

“What are you insinuating?” Ben asks, hushed, searching the man’s intense gaze.

“The emperor feared you would become an imperator once, did he not? Who’s to say you could not win them over again, with a fearsome lioness by your side?”

Ben exhales, considering this. In his mind an image of a chaise throne conjures, languid and contented, two forms intermingled, tied into an unbreakable chord forged in power and fire, untouchable, her neck and wrists adorned with jewels, her heart and body in want of nothing.

Your Puella, the empress of Rome.

Gripped by this sudden, fierce desire, Ben returns his eyes to Ematt’s. “Find her. Make sure she’s safe. If it is as you say, then tell the Resistance that they will have their imperator. But only if she lives.”

“I am sure you will earn many friends, Master Solo,” Ematt says behind a growing smile. “Now all’s left to do is survive long enough to keep them.”

When the iron door shuts Rey turns to watch the guards abandon her, leaving her alone in the darkness.

They’d taken her underground, somewhere, to a place that smells of steam and stone, before they took her here, along a passage that fell in and out of day, far too long after the screams of the people had finally faded from her ears. Fires burn lowly, her eyes still too stained from the bright sunlight to see much else.
Her eyes adjust eventually, and she sees a small bed—an actual bed—nestled into the corner, resting beside a pitcher. She grabs it and sighs to find it heavy and sloshing, bringing the water to her lips and swallowing enough to spill over her ruined stola.

“Drink your fill, Noxi scum.”

A voice, husky, yet unmistakably feminine, sounds close by. Rey looks up and realizes she was not alone as she’d thought, for a woman, her long, pale body clad only in fascia and subligaculum, reclining on a bed in the opposite corner.

Rey swallows. “Where am I?”

“The Ludus Magnus.” The woman shifts, rising to her feet, stalking closer. Her hair reminds Rey of the tips of long grains of wheat, cut short, close to her head. As she comes near Rey nearly shrinks—she could rival Ben in height, or even surpass him—unmoving while this woman boldly surveys her. “A guard came through squawking about you. Interrupted my napping.”

“Well I’m sorry he disturbed you.” The woman circles behind her, and Rey stiffens. “What is the Ludus Magnus, exactly?”

The woman grunts, making Rey jump as she feels her pull at a rip in her stola. “The school of the gladiators, of course.”

Rey turns, meeting the woman’s unwavering gaze. In the dark, her eyes are deep, as dangerous and patient as a sea trench beneath a ship. “I am not a gladiator.”

“No?” The woman crosses her arms. “Then why bring you here?”

A good question. One that Rey has no answer for. So she doesn’t answer, staring down into the water within the pitcher, now nearly empty. “My husband is a gladiator,” she murmurs, feeling like answers may lie within the pot as she speaks. “He might be here, too.”

“Even if he was, he probably won’t be for long.” the woman grumbles, snatching the pitcher from Rey’s hands. “And neither will you. You’re already a fool for fighting your fate. You’d be even more foolish to think you’ll win the tournament.”

Rey watches the woman drink. She is obviously an amazon—one of the legends she’d heard of long ago. And given her swagger and stature, this woman would be a terrible foe to be matched against.

Tournament. So all of these matches… had they been preliminary? It would make sense to offer some form of preamble. And if Ben had been forced to participate in an event yesterday and not have been enrolled, then it could very well mean Finn was mistaken.

That the tournament was only just beginning.

Before she can ask this woman more, or even try to learn her name, the squeak of the cell door pries open, drawing her gaze.

Her heart melts to the soles of her feet, her eyes watering. “Ematt…!”

Ematt eyes the woman with a dark, wary gaze, waving Rey to him. “Come, child. I must speak with you in private.”

She doesn’t hesitate. Even with her thoughts screaming that he could be the traitor, or that even
Kaydel, who’d somehow found her way beneath the Colosseum, was the one who betrayed them to the emperor’s men. It’s just too good to be in the presence of a familiar face again, and she doesn’t know if she will ever have the chance again.

He leads her down to an abandoned corridor, and she throws her arms around his neck, squeezing tight. “Oh, Ematt... I don’t know what’s going on... It all happened so fast—”

“Yes, yes, Ben told me you killed a lion—”

“You’ve seen him?” Rey parts, snagging Ematt’s hands, her heart so full she could kiss them. “Where is he? Is he alright?”

“He’s fine,” Ematt bows, relief sagging the corner of his mouth into an uneasy semblance of a smile. “He’s here, being held in the Ludus Magnus.”

Tears spring to her eyes and she feels her knees grow heavy, the weight of the very air bearing down on her. “Oh, thank God,” she whimpers, her chin trembling as joy and grief overflow within her. “Can I see him?”

“You could, but,” he hesitates.

Rey blinks, her hopes once again beginning to dwindle. “But what?”

He sighs, turning his hands until they are holding hers. Smaller, much smaller, than Ben’s but more calloused and warm. He keeps his voice soft, slow. “I have been given direct orders from the emperor himself. After I found your husband, I was told that your status as a slave has been legally... altered.”

“He didn’t set me free,” Rey murmurs, the space between her brows wrinkling. “He couldn’t have.”

“No.” Ematt squeezes. “You are still a slave, unfortunately. But now there may still be a chance for you to earn your freedom.”

“Tell me,” she insists. Perhaps, if she can go free, it would be easier to help Ben escape. She knows that Snoke couldn’t truly want her—only use her in an effort to hurt Ben. But if Ematt believes there is a way, then she would be damned not to try. She could never leave without him, not when he is so close. “Whatever I have to do, I’ll do it.”

His strong thumbs press down, bringing her hands together. “You must win the Tournament of Champions.”

All at once Rey’s bravado blanches. “What?”

“Missus Solo, the emperor has signed you as his personal gladiatrix. If you win the yearly tournament, you will receive riches, honor, and... your freedom.”

Rey withdraws her hands, stepping back as shock plummets through her. *Her? A gladiator?* It was impossible, and yet, she believed it.

She takes her wrist in hand, feeling at the bruises there, her frayed thoughts like cobwebs in soft summer wind, connecting, falling, stringing together. Of course. She remembers what Finn told her, that the people of Rome still spoke of her, that they wanted her. Perhaps this was Snoke’s method of punishment—to corale her and Ben within the same slaughtering-pasture. To inevitably force him to either watch her die on the battlefield, or kill her himself.
She closes her eyes. *Trust,* the voice had said.

“What else must I do?”

Ematt takes her shoulder, stroking reassuringly, grounding her. “Tomorrow night there will be a feast in Snoke’s palatium, to celebrate the battle royale. It will be the true beginning of the tournament.” He squeezes her gently. “Ben will be there. The emperor will allow each fighter one request. You can see him, then. But for now, he would want you to rest.”

Rey sighs, and nods, swallowing her acceptance. Ematt is right. She is exhausted, and if she doesn’t sleep… she will be of no use to Ben. “Alright.” She meets his eyes. “If you see him again, will you tell him…”

He smiles. “That he is an imbecile?”

She chuckles, though she feels more like crying. “Perfect. Tell him that.”

Ematt hums, a soft, humble thing, and folds her into a light embrace. “You know he won’t let them get to you, Missus Solo. Love like yours doesn’t leave room for him to share.”

Rey smiles into his shoulder, allowing herself a moment to praise the fortune her Lord has brought on her through him. And when they part, and she settles into bed, not even the stony, curious glare of the Amazon can deter her.

She will see Ben again soon. Even if it is for the last time, she will see him again—and that is more of a future than she can hope for, in a place like this.

And when she falls asleep, the dream is deep, a woman’s hands taking hers, bright blue eyes shining with hope.

Chapter End Notes

[The Ludus Magnus was the largest gladiator school (of which there were many) in the Roman Empire, and it was located right next door to the Colosseum, connected by an underground tunnel. It was a fortress, part prison and part hotel, complete with a bathhouse, training grounds, and two floors of cozy cells. The gladiators there were mostly given a diet of—surprise!—fresh veggies and very little meat]

[Ematt’s role in the Ludus Magnus is called a “lanista”: a manager who can purchase and train slaves to become gladiators. Many lanistas were actually owners of their own gladiator school. In this instance, Emmat is one of several acting lanistas in the Ludus Magnus, and thus holds a lot of power and influence over the players, games, and gambling lots/ winning distribution]

["Gladiatrix" is the feminine form of "Gladiator"]
Savagery

Chapter Notes

[insert evil laughter here]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Someone’s voice rouses her, the phantom feeling of arms wrapped around her, legs braced with her, warm breath on her skin, fading into emptiness.

A soft hand shakes Rey by the shoulder, startling her. She sniffs and sits up, blinking into the darkness, where only the slightest light shines from the oil lamps hung beyond the cell doors.

“It’s Rey, isn’t it?”

Rey blinks, the world coming into focus. Before her lingers a woman, her skin beautiful and smooth, round and set with intriguing eyes that Rey could swear she has seen before. “I’m sorry, I don’t…” Her head pounds, her chest burning. How long had she been asleep. “Where have we met?”

The woman smiles, shining bright in the dark. “I knew it was you. It’s me,” she pats her chest, “Rose, from the bathhouse? You came when it was open to the public for Vestalia.”

Rey sits up further. “That’s right.” She starts to peel the blanket away, only a bit sheepish to still be in her ruined stola. “But what are you doing here?” Surely she couldn’t have become a gladiator, too!

“Caluan Ematt sent me. We don’t have much time to get you prepared for the revelry in the emperor’s palace, tonight.” She squints her face, but not in an altogether unfriendly way, her voice conspiratorial. “You slept in.”

*Ematt. That’s right... the feast.* Rey nods, and stands, the burning in her chest sinking down into her gut. It’s made worse when she sees that the Amazon from the day before is no longer in the cell with her.

She ignores it, offering a polite smile. “Please, lead on.”

Rose escorts Rey through the long halls, and up a small set of stairs. They emerge into a brilliant courtyard, the kept grass clear and green, surrounding a small amphitheatre fitted as a battle stage. She cannot help but gaze up along the walls, where a few guards stand post and strange men linger on the balconies, peering down at them as they pass by.

“The bathhouse is just through here,” Rose encourages, letting Rey move ahead of her.

As soon as she passes through the entry tunnel, the smell of water and steam returns. But as soon as she breathes it in, her body shudders, her stomach twisting, and in a blink her leg goes weak, forcing her to lean against a wall.

Rose is by her side in an instant, an unfortunate witness as Rey coughs, emptying the slight contents of her stomach onto the stone floor.
Rey trembles, the burning in her throat and natural inclination to avoid retching roiling disgust within her. Could it be that the fear and stress of the day’s events had finally caught up with her, plaguing her body before consuming her mind?

“I’m sorry,” she murmurs, covering her mouth behind her hand.

“It’s alright,” Rose offers, her voice soft and understanding as she takes Rey’s arms, encouraging her along. “Let’s just get you cleaned up.”

Nodding, Rey sucks in a breath, fighting through her nausea to let Rose guide her into the facility. Like the palace bathhouse, this one also seems to be divided by gender, partially underground. Rey spots a few men—gladiators, most likely—filing into their side while the small tepidarium the two women enter is starkly empty.

Rose waits for Rey to remove her stola with a pair of bathing sandals, and sits with her as the warm air begins to impact her, making her sweat as she sits upon the bench, thinking. The woman has seen her nude before—it’s hard to be embarrassed by that so much as being seen vomiting on the ground like a dog.

It is in this silence that she catches Rose staring at her.

“What’s the matter?” she asks softly. Had she done something wrong?

“Is it true that you fought a lion?”

Rey blinks. She could hardly believe it herself, but, “Yes.”

“And you fought with Kylo Ren?”

“Not… exactly,” Rey murmurs. Really, she doesn’t remember very much about that incident, other than stopping a blow after watching her master suffer a crushing injury. Rose’s intrigued gaze almost makes her proud as much as it flusters. “He’s my husband.”

Rose’s near-smile falls into something like realization. “So I was right. You’re the girl Kaydel told me about. The one who got him to join the Resistance.”

Resistance? Rey rounds on her, searching this woman’s eyes. “You’re with the Resistance?”

“I am,” Rose nods, the excitement filling her again. “My husband is one of their leaders—”

“Wait,” Rey gawks, “you’re Finn’s wife?!”

Rose smiles, her dark hair bobbing. “It’s amazing how small Rome can be when you know the right people, isn’t it? Tell me, how is he? I haven’t seen him for so long...”

Rey leans back on the bench against the wall. Of course Ematt would send this Rose to her. Perhaps this is what he intended—to surround her by as many allies as possible. She will have to thank him later. But for now, she shakes her head. “I don’t know. All I know is that Poe Dameron is dead.”

The smile on Rose’s face fades into a tight line of sorrow. “I know. Word like that travels quickly in a bathhouse.” She toys with the hem of her tunica. “I guess I’d hoped you knew more.”

“Finn was supposed to sneak my husband and,” her breath catches, “our friend out of the territory, but the soldiers found us before he could.”
Rose’s shoulders fall.

But Rey is quick to reach out for her, laying a comforting hand on her shoulder. “I didn’t see him with the Noxi. And when I saw him, he said your son was safe. I’m sure he’s just biding time, planning something.”

Exhaling stiffly, Rose nods, her throat bobbing as she holds back tears. “Yes. That’s probably it.” She wipes her face. “So, you and Kylo Ren… how long have you been married?”

Relieved to change the topic, Rey slouches. “Almost a fortnight, now. I think. It hasn’t been long.”

“I see,” Rose nods thoughtfully. “And how long have you been with child?”

Rey pauses. “What?”

“Are you not with child? Your face,” Rose gestures, her hand passing over Rey’s body, making her run cold. “Your sickness, your palor, even your breasts, if you don’t mind my saying so—”

Rising to her feet, Rey towers over this woman, her mind blinking into darkness. “You think I’m… You think I’m pregnant?”

Rose, unfiltered and unshaken by Rey’s sudden countenance, allows a look of solemnity to don her gentle face. Her voice is hushed. “My apologies. I didn’t mean to speak out of turn. But I’ve seen these symptoms many times before.”

Rey almost doesn’t hear her, but the words tumble through her anyway. She holds her hand to her head, meeting a sheen of sweat before they both bury into her hair, clawing into the roots as her nausea mingles with her heaving breaths.

No.

It can’t be.

Rose stands, reaching out for her. “Rey—”

She cannot be with child. Not now, not after years of being barren, after months of knowing love and feeling with such certainty that she would have to wait.

Trust in the rain, and wait.

“That’s not possible,” she gasps, only feeling Rose’s hand on her back for a moment before she papaces ses away from it, away from everything. “I’ve never…”

Never what? Made love? She could almost scoff at such a thought, for she’s had plenty of experience opposite. And what of the stories of barren wombs that came before? What of Sarah, what of Rebekah, and all the women who came before who, like her, prayed and waited yet thought it impossible?

Women like her who fought it, even when they knew the truth?

Rey freezes, turning to look upon Rose, and a fierce power grips her as she takes the woman’s arms, squeezing tight in the sunlit-darkness streaming through the high, steam-clod windows. “You can’t tell anyone about this. Please, promise me.”

Rose searches Rey’s eyes, and the bond of a woman passes between them when Rose bows her head. “You have my word.”
Ben sighs, craning his head back, soaking in the sunlight as he lets the cool water of the bath soothe his tired muscles, seep and slip over the dark bruises and cuts marring his skin.

His arms stretched along the rim of the massive bath helps open his lungs, at last letting him breathe. The sight of himself in the mirror was not a handsome one—the cut in his lip and on his cheek are still red and scabbing. He looks down at himself in the water, studying the pink scar forever etched into his side.

He sighs, the soft din of fighters chattering and chuckling somewhere distant. Normally they would attempt to socialize with him, but he’s sure the reputation and rumors of his new status has preceded him.

His personage has been stolen even further. Where Snoke once allowed him some elective freedoms, he is no fool to his new place in the line. In one night, he has been transformed from revered volunteer to another common slave.

Such a blow will be damaging, if he intends to fulfill Ematt’s plans for him. Ben wonders if Ematt knows more than he is letting on—if the man has his hand dipped in more pots that he has ever bothered enough to consider. Though he considers him a close acquaintance, there is still much about him he does not know.

As he lets the water remove the filth from his body, his mind wanders. He thinks of Rey and allows himself to relax, for Ematt had found him in the night and informed him she was here, in the Ludus Magnus. That Snoke had decided to add her to his bloodthirsty campaign.

Every inch of him detests it. From the pits of his soul, a rage unlike anything he’s ever felt rises, knowing that his master has now become hers, and that rather than keeping her locked in a dungeon of iron, she has been thrust into a prison of the sword—her life now at risk every moment, all to torture him.

However, Ben must admit there is some semblance of mercy in it. If Snoke wished it, he could just as easily chain Ben to a post with his eyelids removed, forced to watch her slaughtered in front of his eyes.

But Snoke is a tactical man, once the commander of legions, and has always preferred the torment of the mind. A torment that, thanks to his years of cruelty, Ben has learned to cope with.

Still, knowing that Rey’s life is being dangled in front of him will only make every move more difficult. He will have to find a way to push her beyond Snoke’s grasp.

Even if it costs him his life, he is prepared to pay that price. His love for her washes through him, assuring him with purpose, for any sacrifice made for her is one he could never regret.

And tonight, he has the chance to see her, to touch her again. It’s enough to send his heavy heart soaring, if only for a moment.

The time is coming soon when he will have to prepare, to join his fellow fighters in their march to the palatium for the revelry. Scrubbing the last of himself, he rises from the water, accepting a drying linen from a servant.

As he wipes himself down, he looks up, spotting a small group of men he’s never seen gathered close to the servant’s entrance. They seem young, fresh into their second decade, young enough to be smiling and confident in a situation such as this.
Ben is ready to write them off as children of some high-ranking official until they look around, slipping into the door.

In the direction of the women’s bathing chamber.

His hackles prime, the anger already so close to the surface swirling as he realizes what these boys must be doing. He has seen such looks on the faces of soldiers before, soldiers who thought themselves entitled to the “spoils” of war, to the impulse of their desires.

*Rey*… his thoughts snarl. If she is there, if they lay eyes on her, nay, even try what their sinister eyes foretell, they will die long before setting foot into the arena.

He strides forward, catching the door before it closes, and slips into the darkness after them.

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Rey fiddles absently at her hair, stepping into the large bathing area. Her eyes trace the high arches of the windows, dancing light across the ripple of still water reflected from the mirrors lining the back wall. Other slaves like Rose peter about, some cleaning, some talking amongst themselves, and some surrounding the woman who shared Rey’s cell.

Rose helps Rey into the bath, taking her own seat on a cushion as Rey speaks. “What’s her name?”

“Who? The Amazon?” Rose offers Rey a jar of scented oils, pooling it into her wet palms. “Don’t know her real name, but the fighters call her *Phasma.*”

Rey takes this in, meeting this Phasma woman’s eyes across the room for only a moment before attending to her own needs, slathering the oil over her skin. Her knees still tingle from Rose’s strigil, her legs and womanhood stripped of their hair, as ordained by their superiors.

And yet those strange feelings don’t compare to the swirling miasma of her own thoughts as she wades in the water, adrift in a sea of her own musings and indecision.

If she is truly with child as Rose says, and as her own heart has been convinced, then there is only one person besides herself that this concerns.

*Ben.*

Oh, what would he think, if she found a way to tell him? Dare she even try? The more she thinks and weighs her options, as the future suddenly presents itself with the smoking mouth of a hellbeast, the less she knows about herself.

She stares at her body, warped and bare below the water. Memories of nights and mornings assault her—the pressure of him bearing within her, the insistence of each kiss and every thrust, actions from which have created *life.*

If they were not in this place, she knows she wouldn’t hesitate. Were she to see him, her joy would not have been contained. Were things different, the way they were supposed to be, they would be together on a ship sailing for Egypt, taking them far from this place. Instead of a stranger, it would be Ahsoka delivering such news.

Rey closes her eyes.

She can’t tell him. If Snoke were to find out, to sacrifice her… If she is to die, inevitably, then Ben would have lost two, not one.
She could never do that to him, if he was to survive this. If he were to carry on without her, then this was another secret she could keep, if only to spare him the pain.

Although the thought of hiding even more from him lances through her, she ignores it. The answers are not certain yet. She won’t risk hurting him if it can be prevented.

She doesn’t see them enter the chamber.

A woman cries out and she opens her eyes, flinching as three men burst into the room, one of them grabbing a slave girl, two more approaching Rose.

Terror grips her for half an instant before Rey manages to hoist herself from the bath, moving to pull Rose away. She hears the sound of flesh meeting flesh and a grunt of pain, stealing her attention, and she spots Phasma, her height and power pummeling into a man’s face through her fist.

Rose gasps and Rey is brought back, moving to push the other woman behind her. She jumps when the stranger beside them lurches—

—and is forced against the wall.

Ben’s hands move on their own, his teeth clenched behind parted lips as he takes the man by the hair, ramming him into the mirror. A woman screams as it shatters, over and over again, blood and hair wedging between the cracks as he lets the fire within his body take control, willing to batter him until nothing remains.

_You won’t touch her._

Another set of arms wrap around his torso and Ben lets the body fall limp to the tiles, rounding and pushing down on the offender’s shoulders, pushing until they crash into the pool. The man scrambles uselessly, wrestling with him beneath the water as it closes over them. A fist connects with his nose, but it is dulled by the resistance, and Ben releases him, breaching the surface.

The man comes second, gasping, but Ben lunges forward, shoving him back below the water. His arm strains as he watches the bubbles rise and burst upon breaking the surface, reminded of a river and a war, his breathing harsh and force unrelenting.

“Ben!”

Ben pauses, looking up, and she is there.

She steps forward. The sun shines over her from the windows above, her body strong, unbroken, gleaming with light, her gaze on him, full, so full of love.

And sorrow.

“Have mercy,” she whispers, her lips so full, her voice beckoning.

He swallows, swallows his hate, the anger dissipating. He releases the man and lets him choke, hears the distant cry of the servants when he pulls himself from the water to stand before her, his flesh hard and unashamed.

Their eyes join, and even though the distance between them is short, it feels wide, encompassing, and enclosed with the link of their breath.
His gaze sweeps over her, gluttonous, allowing himself the moment to ensure she is unharmed, before he stoops, taking the first man by the ankle, then the other by the hair, dragging them both out of the chamber.

Phasma watches him go before she turns a cold gaze upon Rey, but Rey does not feel it, too lost in her own trembling to be aware of anything but the blood floating in the water.

Chapter End Notes

[Rose is a type of slave called a "Capsarii," slaves who were specialized for serving in bathhouses. They were stereotyped and often renowned for a certain level of dishonesty, because bathhouses were so often frequented and some items would tend to go "missing." And, of course, were privy to all the latest gossip]

[The names Sarah and Rebekah are in reference to famous women of the Bible who were thought to have been barren, both aided by God. Sarah was the wife of Abraham, and her miracle was giving birth in her old age. Rebekah (also spelled "Rebecca") was the barren wife of Issac, who eventually gave birth to the twins Esau and Jacob]

[Morning sickness, despite its name, does not always occur in the morning. It can be a state of occasional to even constant nausea, often resulting in a vomiting session. This usually occurs within the first nine weeks of a woman's pregnancy. A woman in this stage may also experience sensitive breasts or a dark line around the areola, or her skin might seem to glow]
“The emperor has selected this for you.”

Rey runs her thumb over the linen of the unfamiliar band wrapped around her breasts, feeling her clean skin, scrubbed soft and shining, as her eyes linger on the long expanse of cloth cradled in Rose’s arms. Its creamy color, so like her beloved stola, breaks under a fine line of scarlet wound like chains.

Never has she seen anything so fine.

“I don’t see why the emperor would care about what I wear,” Rey murmurs, meeting Rose’s eyes through the mirror before letting them drop, lingering over her own stomach.

She turned to lay the cloth tenderly along the shelf. “You are his first gladiatrix, I think. Not many women in this profession.”

Rey turns on her seat over the small bathing chamber, her eyes following the beams of gleaming light through the ceiling. Her thoughts feel as though they have flown out from her, somewhere up there, abandoning this small, lonely chamber of the bathhouse. “And the Amazon? Phasma?”

“Also new. Brought here from Thracia, I’m told. But I’ve heard her speak the Gaul’s language a few times.”

“Her name is Greek,” Rey offers passively, watching Rose withdraw a box from the wall. “What’s that?”

“I haven’t ever had the chance to use these before.” She walks over to the rim of the bath, sitting on the wall beside Rey to show her the contents of the small container. “No man in that room will dare to challenge you wearing this.”

As Rose produces a small stylus from within, Rey leans forward. She feels foolish for not recognizing it sooner, recalling how many of the women, and even men, of Egypt never went outside without it.

She closes her eyes to let Rose do her work, listening as the paddle mixes water with the powdered kohl. It’s cold when it touches her skin. “Thank you,” she whispers, her voice too loud in the small chamber, “for being with me.”

“I wish I didn’t have to be,” Rose sighs, taking the stick and blowing on Rey’s face until her eyes are dry enough to open. She smiles, her almond eyes still gleaming. “And I mean that in the best way.”

Rey scoffs, the closest thing to a laugh she thinks herself capable. At Rose’s urgence she turns her back, feeling her short fingers weave through neatly combed hair, managing it into a loose nest she
has to slap Rey’s hand away from disturbing—more than once.

“Finished,” she declares, barely bothering to hide her pride. She sweeps up her tools, flocking to the wall, leaving Rey to observe herself in the mirror.

She touches her fingers to her cheek, the woman she finds inside unfamiliar. So different from the gaunt and scrappy girl from Egypt, even the well-fed woman of the Skywalker villa. This woman is hardened, as sharp as she is soft, cloaked by a servant in a fine garment of plush wool in royal colors.

*This* woman looks like she has killed lions.

They leave the bathhouse side by side, in time for twilight to begin its curling plumes of fire and violet in the sky. Men have been gathered by soldiers in the courtyard, the gathering too thick for Rey to see through.

The march of armor approaches them, a small cluster of soldiers surveying them. One of them gestures to Rey, but speaks to Rose. “Is this the gladiatrix?”

Rose lowers her head, obedient. “Yes, Sir. I was just about to leave her to be escorted with the other gladiators.”

“No need. The emperor has requested her presence.” At last he regards Rey, the firm set of his lips leaving no room for argument. “This way.”

A cold froth flows down the skin beneath Rey’s neck, churning in her gut. But she relents to it, following the soldiers into the tunnel leading to the gate, her hands clenched at her sides in a prayer for will.

They march her to Palatine hill, the massive path teeming with guards and torch fire, their smoke hazy in the low sky. The walk, though only lasting minutes, takes a lifetime.

The guards do not touch her more than is necessary. She avoids looking at them, yet feels their gazes upon her as she recalls that day that transpired seemingly so long ago. Back when she hated her husband, when daylight made the cream and alabaster marble shine with polished decadence, unadorned by the grasping shadows and flame.

They escort her to an open chamber of flowing gossamer. Impressive busts, likenesses of emperors passed, watch her as she stands in the open atrium hall, tile and marble dizzying beneath her sandalia.

“Ah… At last we meet, my lioness.”

Rey looks up, steeling herself. She had never noticed how towering the emperor was. Was never close enough to him to be forced to think of it. But as he comes closer, his golden robes swaying around his body, she fights to keep her chin and gaze level with his deformed chest.

He stalks around her. She suppresses the shiver running down her back to worm between her toes, reminding herself who she is, that this man is only a threat to her if she gives him reason to be.

“I can see why Solo was taken by you. You can be a fetching creature, when you put forth the effort. It seems I am quite talented at giving gifts.”

Rey doesn’t fall into his taunt, daring a glance at his face. “Thank you, your imperial majesty.”
Snoke stills, a crooked smile peeling into his cheek as he reaches up to touch her. “And well-mannered.”

She holds her breath when the back of his shriveled claw grazes her cheek, her nerves joining threads in her knees.

Thankfully, he does not linger, the disgust in his gaze outweighing any temporary amorousness. His deep voice dregs with the heaviness of it. “I trust Ematt has delivered my message.”

“Yes, your imperial majesty.”

“And you have nothing to say about this?”

“What could I say?” Her voice comes soft, her eyes meeting his large in the near-darkness, as the black finds its way into his face. She will not plead with him—that would only be giving him what he wants. “One does not have much choice when being made into a gladiator.”

“Indeed, one does not,” Snoke gestures widely to her, the long sleeve of his golden toga and adornments swaying with him, “although being a slave has not prevented your treachery before. I have given you an opportunity to speak.” His smile falls. “So speak.”

At last Rey’s anger breaks through to her mouth, her eyes burning as she tilts her chin, looking him in his cold eyes. “Why are you doing this? Why not just kill me?”

“Come now, you cannot be so foolish to not have guessed it,” he chuckles mirthlessly. “‘Tis simple retribution. Nothing more.”

“Then why summon me here?” Her hackles rise, her teeth already beginning to bear themselves, but she relents. “I doubt you would tell me in person what could be told through any servant.”

“How insightful of you.” Snoke turns away from her, fiddling with a mound of rings displayed on a table, fitting them one by one upon his fingers. “I have specific instructions that I did not want to risk embellishing. And because I am your master now, I take it upon myself to ensure you are properly welcomed into the fold.”

“What instructions?” she murmurs, dreading his reply, only because she might know the answer already.

“Simply put,” he fixes his hateful gaze on her, “I want you to live.”

Rey blinks. That couldn’t be possible. She reins back her hopes. “For how long?”

He exhales, a wet, deep, shuddering sound that makes her joints ache. It makes her remember how old he is, how near to his own end he must be, until he speaks. “Young Solo is a passionate creature. A powerful warrior. It is why I allowed him to keep his virtue, until it no longer suited me. It would seem his devotion to the arena has therefore transferred to you.”

As his shadow falls over her, the pride torn silk in his voice, a cool evening wind breezes over her feet, a whispered word of inkling that pushes her foolish heart to their soles. I strikes her then, strangling her with barely-withheld rage. “You expect me to kill him.”

Snoke opens his arms to her, radiant and cold. “That would be the simplest way, would it not? But no,” he cocks his head, stooping until his thin lips hover over the hair at her ear, “I expect him to protect you. To fight until he can fight no longer, and struggle on still.” His hand claws behind her neck, thrumming through her with cold dread as she turns away. “And when the dust settles, and
only you remain, I expect you to be the one who falls.”

Rey closes her eyes. So, it is false hope, then. “And if I refuse?”

Snoke chuckles, maneuvering her with a sudden violence until she has no choice but to meet his gaze, to suffer under the stale brush of his breath fanning across her face. “I have been generous enough to extend your time in this world, and still you entertain such fantasies in the presence of your benefactor?”

She folds her lips.

“Very well,” he grouses, his hold tightening, making her wince. “If you refuse me, breach the line by a mere hair, I will keep you both in my prison. I will wait until you are with child, and on the night of its birth, I will rip it from you as he watches—tear limb from limb while you scream—and when it is done it will be his mercy that ends your life.” He sneers, his jaw clenched. “That is what I will do, if you refuse.”

When he releases her she steps back, willing her heart to slow, her face not to betray any emotion beyond the reasonable fear. There is no way he could know about her pregnancy—no, perhaps an educated guess, or the type of threat made to a woman to force her into obedience.

And yet, he is right. He has given her something precious—time. And as the image of his threat takes graphic hold within her mind, she is forced to confront that which she already knows. Even if only one victor could remain, and even if, somehow, it is her. And even then, if it earns her her freedom as Ematt speculates, the chances of dying in childbirth are still so damning.

Her thoughts drift to a Grecian woman who wanted a place in the senate, who’s last word became another mother’s name.

“And he will go free?”

“I doubt he would survive for long if he did, but yes,” Snoke grunts, as though the idea upsets him. “As a victor of the tournament, I will hold to its guidelines. He will merely be banished.”

Something in his gaze softens, though Rey knows it is not for her. “Though I once wished better for him.”

You tried to humiliate him, Rey almost spits, but holds her tongue. Knowing that she has a chance to set him free, to save him, one last time… she is not willing to turn it down. Not when she knows that death would be almost certain for her in the end.

All that she can do now is trust. If accepting the emperor’s order means at least one of them could make it out alive, then her next step has been made clear.

“I am at your service,” she bows, “Master.”

It is as it was that night.

The grand triclinium writhes with contestants, dressed in their regal garb. He doesn’t recognize many of them, but the air is too familiar, the arrangement of pillows and drinks and soft trill of instruments taking him back to the moments before he knew her.

Ematt returns to his side as he scans the crowd. “She’s not here. But one of our allies says she had been escorted to the emperor’s chambers.”
Ben’s eyes widen, his mind already at the worst, his hands prepared to snap every neck that stands between him and his master’s rooms and his feet already leading him to do so, when the crowd silences, parting for a lone woman as she emerges from between the mighty columns, into the courtyard.

Rey stands motionless on the steps, surprised by all of the eyes cast on her. She only lets herself feel it for a moment, trying to recall the look of the woman in the mirror, to become her.

A man she doesn’t know steps closer as she descends, the people already resuming their revelry, and he holds out his hand for her to take. “Ave, Leaena,” he hums, stealing the hand she doesn’t offer and pecking her fingertips. “Come, dance and have a drink with me.”

Rey pulls her hand away, letting her anger flare. “I—”

“She is already spoken for.”

That voice. Oh, God, how she’s missed it.

The man looks up with challenge in his eyes before the realization, then the fear, settles in. He flees from them with calm steps, blending back into the crowd, already forgotten when all she can see is him.

Rey swallows, tightening her hands into the dress at her sides, when every instinct screams for her to throw her arms around his naked shoulders. But with all of the guards, all of these people, and the fact that he hasn’t touched her yet, tips her into the notion that such desires will need to be put on hold. So, instead, she lets her eyes drink him in, love to have him near and lust to see him with only a long skirt and himation sash coiling low in her body. When her gaze finds his face again the heat only compounds, his familiar look of hunger searing through her gown and into the skin beneath, as if he’s already stripped her.

“Thank you,” she manages to croak out, letting the din of the revelry nearly drown her. “For earlier.”

“You’re welcome.”

Feeling safe for the first time since last she was with him, she chances a look into the thrawl. “It seems they already have a name for me, doesn’t it.”

“Indeed,” he folds his cheek in that way of his. “A fitting name, for a powerful woman.”

“I’m not powerful,” she fiddles with the cloth, lowering her eyes. “Just fortunate.”

“You are powerful.” He steps forward, tilting her chin until she meets his gaze before it falls to her lips, his hair framed by the burning light of the hanging lamps. “And beautiful.”

“I much prefer ‘Puella’ to ‘Lioness,’” she murmurs, her heart stilting, cheeks warm. “Your hair looks different.”

His finger just grazes her throat and his lip quirks the barest inch, sending a delightful, calming shiver down her sternum to her toes. A beat of silence passes and she remembers that, between those places, a child lies sleeping, and what was a shiver of pleasure becomes one of dread.

He doesn’t seem to notice, skimming her arm and letting his touch fall away, beckoning for her to follow him.
While some recline on the many provided kline that flank the courtyard garden, layered with tiles and surrounded by tall statues of women holding massive burning lamps, others move their feet to the rhythm of the drums and horns and pipes. As Rey scours the massive space, spotting some women among the men, she wonders if such a feast has been opened to the wealthy as much as the slaves they are prepared to watch die.

He takes her to the food and allows herself to give in to the hunger, avoiding anything that makes her stomach churn. Ben, once again, seems not too notice, too dedicated to keeping her in his sight to bother with what that sight is of.

Or perhaps she is overthinking things.

Ben glances at the stairs, a nervous twinge in his neck. The night will end before they know it—and tomorrow… he doesn’t want to think about tomorrow. All he wants to think about is keeping Rey close.

“Dance with me.”

Rey looks at him, her large eyes shrouded in that dark powder, making him itch for her. “You’re sure?”

“Last we were here, I asked you to touch me to show these people who you belonged to,” he rumbles, tempted to close that distance now. He holds out his hand. “Now, I am asking you to show them who I belong to.”

Rey looks down at his hand. It feels like people are watching her, like her demons are watching her too, but she ignores them, slipping her small fingers in his, his touch comforting, like a small flame in the darkness.

The music softens while he leads her to the space where the dancers sway, the attendees writhe. His palm touches hers, his warmth gentle and familiar, swaying her into him, and with the wall hiding them inside, he pulls her close, finally able to breathe.

Rey’s eyes sting as she looks up at him, her hand finding rest on his shoulder, drinking in all the heat her body will allow. His touch is so gentle, his gaze laced with that thinly-veiled agony she has seen too many times before, and they dance—to forget, to hold, and to remember when they’d danced with hope in their eyes, instead.

“Ben,” she whimpers, feeling her resolve begin to crumble.

He catches her, squeezing her hand, dipping his head enough for her. “Not here. Not yet,” he murmurs.

Rey nods, holding herself back, letting him support her. And oh, damn him and his mouth, urging her to throw away her inhibitions and kiss him, claim him.

“When they ask for your request,” he intones, “ask to be released into the arena after me.”

Recalling that the next day will bring about her first real battle, Rey trembles with a sudden fear, remembering how the emperor claimed Ben would fight for her. She wishes she could say she will not see it, be forced to watch Ben shed more blood, but to think such things would only be a vain effort to fool herself.

“Alright. But what will you ask for?”
The music ends and the trumpets begin to crescendo, the familiar clatter of the Praetorian guard filing out into the courtyard. Ben steals the moment of distraction to caress her cheek, the slightest of smiles on his lips. “Isn’t it obvious?”

She barely has time to blush when a soldier herds her into a separate line, parting her from Ben, who doesn’t take his eyes from her for a moment. She is pushed with Phasma—who stands tall, glorious, and imposing in her formal layers, her skin even paler in the open night air.

The announcer steps forward as Snoke is lowered onto a chaise staged about the steps, his golden robes gleaming in the low lights. His voice booms throughout the ringing silence. “His imperial majesty, Restorer Orbitis, Lucius Aurelian Snoke, shall now commence a tradition of the Tournament of Champions. On this night, thanks to his great generosity, even the requests of the slaves shall be heeded, within legal bounds.” He holds up his hand. “None may request for reprieve from the Tournament unless under direct command from their masters. We shall begin with the imperial gladiatrix, known henceforth as Leaena.”

A guard snags a stunned Rey by the arm, leading her out to stand before the makeshift throne. Snoke’s countenance bears over her as she stares upon him, the announcer’s voice dull in her ears.

“Make your request.”

Folding her lips, Rey lifts her chin. “I request to be released into the arena after Kylo Ren.”

The name sounds disgusting on her tongue, but Snoke cocks his head, his eyes gleaming with a lecher’s mirth. Of course, was this not what he wanted?

No. She cannot think like that—she must think more of what Ben wants. She must trust him.

Like he trusts you?

The announcer looks to the emperor for acceptance, and is gratified with a wave of the hand. “Granted.”

“The first request has been made,” the announcer calls, waving towards the gathering of men. “We shall continue next with the imperial gladiator, Kylo Ren, and further down the ranks to suit.”

A hush breaks out among the people still flocking the pillars, and Rey realizes from the relative safety of being passed over that the pool of fighters was not as large as she might have feared. Still, it does not stop her heart from pounding as Ben steps forward, glaring passively, carefully, upon his master.

“Make your request,” the announcer says.

His response is near instantaneous, his voice loud and strong. “I request the night with the Lioness.”

Rey inhales, the air a crisp and heavy taste as she glances to the emperor, who is deathly still until a cruel grin wedges between his sullen cheeks, a hoarse chorus of laughter snaking across the courtyard floor as he lifts his hand.

“Granted.”
[This stunning work of art was a commission from me to haloren1st, also known as Hal. Hal was an amazing, inspired, sweet, and talented artist that the world is worse off without, and it's become one of my deepest regrets that I never got to show her the chapter she was so excited to read. Please, if you are ever feeling so weighed down by the world that you don't know if you can keep standing, there is help and hope. Please talk to your family, your friends, and your medical professionals. Please remember that no one worth a damn will shame you for it, and that life can be long, and worth living]

[Rey's dress is inspired by the Greek Chiton-Peplos combination, and Ben's wear is inspired by the "Himation." While the Chiton and Peplos were adornments meant to symbolize a woman of high stature, the Himation was a common garment only meant to cover the necessities, often worn by farmers and shepherds. Men who wore the Himation were expected to wear the cloth over their left shoulder, as any male who left his left shoulder exposed was considered barbaric, even labeled by some as "monstrous"]

[The smaller bathhouse Rey and Rose are in is the same chamber from Chapter Two, and is actually inspired by the dressing room at the Arab Baths in Cueta, Spain]

["Phasma" is actually a Greek term, meaning "apparition" or "phantom"]

[Thracia was a territory during imperialist Rome, between Greece and the Black Sea, in modern-day Bulgaria]

[Kohl was not only an ancient cosmetic, but had many uses. A mix of ash/soot and saffron (for the smell), the applicant would dip small, paddle-like stick made from ivory or bone and wet it with oil or water to help smear it on the skin. Women and]
children and some men of Egypt would wear kohl as a type of protection from the harsh sunlight]

["Ave" is an Ancient Roman term that basically means "Hi" and was usually only used for someone a person was familiar or intimate with]
["Leaena" is Latin for "Lioness"]
They are escorted to a room in the palace, large, ornate, unoccupied, and are shut in alone.

As soon as she turns around his hands are on her face, pulling her breathlessly to his lips. She scrambles to take hold of him anywhere she can, eventually resting in his hair until the fear and relief at last take the form of tears.

When they part she sags against his chest and he clutches her, his eyes sightless past her shoulder as he trembles in this one beam of solace, burying his lips in her skin. “I’m sorry, Puella,” he murmurs, squeezing tight. “I’ve been such a fool.”

“No… It’s my fault,” she sniffs, shaking her head, guilt sweeping heavily through her. Her breath is hot when it bounces off of his flesh. “You were right. I should have listened to you back on Capri. We could have just left everything—”

“You won’t blame yourself,” he almost growls, pulling back to look in her eyes. He traces his thumbs over her cheeks, brushing away the soot running down her skin. “You stayed true to your word when I was going to break it. You thought of others, and Ahsoka.”

Tears bead anew in her wide eyes, and the way she closes her mouth runs a hot iron across his breast.

“Where is Ahsoka?”

A swell builds from her chest to her throat, her expression shattering, melting, and it’s answer enough.

No, his heart screams, down into the now empty void of his body. Left with nothing but a rising fury, he paces away from Rey, steering her away from the torrent as his eyes search the room, his hands finding the nearest thing it can—a marble bust—and thrusting it to the ground with a guttural curse.

Rey covers her face, sinking down upon the grand bed as Ben crashes down the room, trailing destruction in his wake with heaving shoulders, letting the sorrow consume her even as the dust finally settles, his hands winding through his hair, crushing his palms to his eyes and crashing to his knees.

He barely feels Rey’s arms wrap around him, too lost in his grief to feel anything but the warmth of summer, the touch of another woman’s hand on his face, a voice confessing her pride in him.

Ahsoka. He sobs once, finally returning Rey’s embrace, taking her as she takes him, broken and torn. His lips curl, his voice thick and strained by the tightness in his throat, his hands. “How?”

“She saved me,” Rey says softly, smoothing a hand down his hair as he begins to regain his
bearings. “Soldiers came and found us, and she... she killed all of them.”

“I was there,” he grunts, his hands wringing into her gown, unable to get close enough. “Snoke gave the order to take you, right in front of me.” Still angry, he doesn’t dare meet her eyes, afraid of hurting her. Nor can he bring himself to mention the letter she'd written. It would only throw her under her guilt even more, and this moment is too dear, too ruined already, for him to ruin further. Instead he recalls the general, and with his absence, suspicion. “So she killed Hux?”

“No.” Her fingers fall, a deft touch on his thigh. “I did.”

His gaze turns sharply upon her, hard and awash with fascination. “You did.”

She nods, unable to look up. She hadn’t wanted to kill the general. No… that was false. She had wanted to hurt him. But the part of her that didn’t want to shed blood had her shackles wrapped around her wrists as the other part, the one that wanted to live, was free.

Ben, sensing her guilt, covers her hand with his. He remembers his first kill. There was no honor, no glory in the act. He hadn’t even known the man’s name. Yet he cannot shake the sense of pride and reverence he has for her—slaying yet another of his beasts.

“Does anyone know?” he whispers, stroking her raw and polished knuckles.

“I don’t think so,” she shivers, remembering the fire she’d set to the barn. She hadn’t stayed to see if it moved to the house, or if anything remained. “I tried to run, like you wanted. But they were waiting for me.”

Sucking in a deep breath, Ben presses his head to hers, the soft brush of her nose steadying him, her presence pulling him down from the rise of his unrest. “Thank you. I know it was a hard promise to keep.”

Remembering that promise she made him only wounds her more, forcing her to remember the secrets she keeps from him. She’d been so willing to abandon his wishes if it meant she could be with him—had clung so desperately to her own plans for their future that she had sent a letter to his mother behind his back. And now, with the child inside of her, her heart thumps painfully in her chest knowing that she must lie to him once more.

Rey pushes her brow against his. “There’s something else.”

Ben winces, though what else could hurt him, at this point?

Her hands shift to hold his, squeezing. “The emperor forced me to make him a promise, too.”

“Promise?” His shoulders tense, his breath gentle on her chin, her neck.

“He told me what his plans are for us. I don’t know if it was the truth, but he said... that he wanted you to win the tournament,” her thumb runs over his, so much bigger, stronger, more able than hers, “by killing me.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Ben—”

“That is not going to happen,” he snaps, his eyes blazing like thrown stars when he steers her chin to meet his unrelenting stare. “I am your husband. I made a vow to lay down my life for you.”
“I just want you to be free!” She chokes back her tears, too full now of anger and hate for this helplessness, knowing he would never really allow her the chance to save him this way. And yet still she begs on her knees, shaking him, trying to break through his stubborn-set jaw. “Once he has me, once he’s done using me to hurt you, then it will all be over. But if you die,” her breath shortens, air suddenly too hard to find, her face hot, “if you die, he’ll still kill me, and I can’t let them take you, too—”

Ben doesn’t wait for her to finish, wrapping his arms around her, pulling her as close as the floor will allow, letting her ride through her wave of emotion. Her tears are warm and slick on his shoulder as he braces his hand behind her neck. When she quiets, her nails digging into him, he presses his lips to her ear. “I am free, Puella.”

She knows what he means, but she cannot believe him. It would be ignorant to pretend not to know whose walls house them, whose hand controls them.

Even more ignorant to think she will escape this alive.

“Do you remember what you promised me?”

Ben sighs. “Rey—”

“You promised me, that if anything happened to me, that you would go on living. You looked me in the eye and I trusted that you were telling me the truth.” She takes his face in her hands, her legs straddling him on the floor, the cold, hard marble digging into her knees. “If I do die, whether it’s tomorrow in the arena, or when Snoke has decided to kill me himself, you have to live.”

He searches her eyes, his lip firming. “And what if we kill Snoke?”

Rey’s hold on him laxes. “That’s still suicide.”

“Is it? Rey,” he brushes a stray hair from her mouth, his voice low, bright with a single thread of conspiracy. When he had thought it best, once, not to tell Rey of Ematt’s scheme, now he thinks better. Perhaps this is not a curse, but a hope she needs—and besides, he cannot be like he once was. To hold secrets from her has only ended in pain for them both. He knows now that he must tell her this, while they still have time to plan. “The Resistance is here, in the palace. They are planning a coup against the emperor.”

She blinks. The Resistance… alive? She’d thought they had abandoned their plans after Poe Dameron had been captured. But seeing that spark in Ben’s eye, remembering Kaydel, Rose, and the words of Ematt… “When?”

“Soon,” he exhales, relaxing as her expression fissures, hooked onto this last hope. “All we have to do is stay alive.”

Rey considers this, an impossible burst of joy blooming within her chest, spreading ever outwards. Maybe their friends had not abandoned them. Maybe this could be the will of God, to honor them for keeping their word to their comrades, to reward her for remaining steadfast in faith.

Maybe… there is still a chance!

The notion flows through her with a fiery passion, and she leans into him, her palms grazing over his chest, finding nicks and bruises under her fingertips. Her kiss is long and lingering, the sound of their lips breaking like the sweet, forgotten ring of a bell. “We have a whole night to feel alive…” she whispers against his mouth, silently thanking him for the peace, however temporary, his news has allotted her.
His hands caress down the length of her bare arms, up towards the gown fitting loose around her shoulders, the curl of her hair against her neck, the skin warmed by the lamplight, catching his attention until her eyes no longer blur from the intoxicating contiguity of her lips. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

Rey nods, wetting her lip as a bolt of pleasure races through her, feeling him stirring between her legs already. “You wanted a night with the Lioness, didn’t you?”

Ben watches as she fits over him, his mind far from any more plans than to put his hands on her. Still, he lets his fingers graze patiently over her back, relishing the slight, inward curve hiding beneath her layers. “I would prefer a night with my wife,” he murmurs, his hunger for her mounting, “but only if she is willing.”

Perhaps it is the uncertainty that moves her, or the love among the foreboding stirring in the rear of her mind, but for him she will brush it aside, if only to let herself succumb to her greed.

Ben meets her there, his arms wrapping more soundly around her, groaning as the touch of her tongue and the sweet rumble of her whimper consumes his body with roaring fire. Her fingers in his hair, scraping down his neck, his back, drive him further from the ledge, and he doesn’t leave her lips as he takes her from the floor, seating her on the bed and crawling over her.

Rey gasps, her lips wet and parted as a wave of euphoria fans from between her legs when his lips close over the sensitive skin below her jaw. She reaches to touch him, her arm bumping his as his hand already strokes over her stomach, from hip to hip, to cup her breast, to trace her collar, to caress her sides, leaving her breathless and too aware of how wide his hand can span over her womb.

The thought that comes to mind is only hers, making her arch into him, already so utterly claimed, even if he may never know.

Ben’s breathing shudders against her cheek, his eyes unable to tear themselves away from her. The distance between them, slight as it is, while he pulls away the cloth that covers her is unbearable, and he descends, kissing her again, at last able to press his fingers into her bare skin.

Her soft breaths madden him, the pride in him relishing how, even now, his touch can still bring her pleasure. Awareness of the dwindling time they only makes every touch more intense, every moment transforming his body into a vessel for her lust, a sacrament to every forbidden exchange of groping hands and bared flesh.

When they are naked she pulls him down upon her, and he falls, letting her have every pound and ounce of him that she will take, unwilling to stop his hands from exploring her, mapping her again. Her legs, so soft and plush, slide like silk over his hips, and the instinct to thrust against her wins out, his cock sliding against the smooth skin of her shaved mound.

Unwilling to forsake her, he begins to lave kisses across her collar, nipping at the places he knows will make her back arch, licking the spots that make her whimper and rock her hips with unabashed impatience. And yet, she does little of either, her hands flying to his shoulders and tugging him back up, her voice tremulous.

“Don’t go,” she whispers, trying to bring him level with her body again. “Please. Stay right here.”

He meets her eyes in the low shadow of the lamp, finding her face still so full of fear. Fear that she could never hide from him.
He heeds her request with a kiss, letting her lead from below him, keeping himself aloft for her to touch. A hiss of building desire escapes his throat as her fingers graze his shaft, her other hand toying at his nape.

Eventually his body gives out, still too weak from the onslaught of Snoke’s guards. But they adapt, moving onto their sides, facing one another, pulled close until the heat of their bodies melds their flesh, the feeling of rightness embalmed into every fleeting moment.

Sweat gathers on his face, his cock hard and leaking, begging for her when his heart will not relent, knowing that to take her would be to end before he is ready to let go. So he slides his fingers between her lips, slippery and hot and ready for him, as he watches her face, the endless goodness of her fierce eyes consuming every drop of devotion left in him.

Rey keeps his eyes even as her breathing labors, as the warmth of embarrassment attempts to drive her away from him, the touch of his body all that keeps her from falling away. *Closer*, her body cries out, and she heeds it, reaching down to take him in her hand, to feel his hardness and ridges and guide every last piece of him inside her.

Ben’s breath catches as he pulls her leg over his waist, sinking himself to the root within her hearth, the wetness still lingering at her lips coating the rest of him. He shivers against her neck, panting with the effort of not moving, feeling the sharp edge of his desire already drawing from his ability to hold on.

She doesn’t move either, bearing herself down upon him, shame coiling like a snake around her as she refuses to ride him until she can feel him start to soften, only to move, to tease him again, and do nothing.

He understands this avarice—feels the same desire. To wait in this purgatory of listless love, to have her safe in his arms, only aware of him. Her walls clutch him and with every new swell he can feel the end coming closer, and when it feels as if hours have passed this way, when he can no longer withstand it, he tries her with a tender, slow, thrust, dragging out of her long, returning to her smooth, letting her savor the way he stretches her just as he takes pleasure finding haven within her.

Tears still leak from the corners of her eyes, and he kisses them away, his hand already drifting between their bodies. “Puella,” he moans, already so close to his precipice. “You have to come.”

“I can’t,” she whispers, her breath hitching, sob transforming into a cry as he slides his four fingers within her lips, smearing them in her slick, rubbing as fast as he is able.

“You can.” He kisses her jaw, her mouth, pumping himself in time with his rapid ministrations, the sound of her welcoming, the moan rising from deep in her lungs, forcing a shiver through him from the heat gathering at the base of his spine. Her breasts press to his arm as it works her, the gentle graze of their peaks making him twitch. “Just let go.”

So easy for him to say, even easier to wish, but so difficult for her to grasp, the ecstasy slipping just beyond her reach until his long thrusts harden, his hand spinning messy, desperate circles over her, and with the shallow inhale of his breath, the sound of him calling to her, but being covered by him most of all—overpowers her.

The finality of it crashes down over her from his touch, drawing from a place deeper than she had been able to remember before this moment, as if her body had forgotten somewhere between then and now. It is a cry that leaves her, melting and uneven, shattering in her every limb and flooding her with the cool numbing pleasure of release.
Ben gasps, the growl of need from deep in his chest becoming her name as he turns her onto her back, letting the power and unsteady rock of his hips lead him fully into her until he is spent and shuddering and soft.

He touches her face and she kisses his wet fingers, uncaring, unashamed, with a lamentatious desire burning in her red and weary eyes. “I love you,” he whispers into her lips, against her cheek. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Rey can’t speak, too close to tears, still washed by the pleasure of him. So she holds him down, and he doesn’t leave her, burying his arms under her body as they cling to one another, resolved to stay until either sleep or the Roman guards come to take them.

Chapter End Notes

[No notes today!]
They lie entangled together when the first light of dawn breaks through the window—when the sound of boots march through the closed chamber door.

Ben starts, waking Rey as he maneuvers her under the blankets just in time for the guards to haul him out from the bed. He exhales sharply, not surprised by their lack of courtesy, but, perhaps, simply exhausted by it.

Rey sits upright, holding the sheet to conceal her, horrified by the way they force his head low, chaining his arms behind his back with cruel hands. “Leave him alone!” she barks. “Can’t you see he isn’t struggling?!”

They ignore her, pulling him back by his hair to push him forward towards the door as his eyes meet hers for only a moment until he is taken away again, the swell of her heart failing to fill the emptiness he leaves.

She only has a moment to breathe, to pray, before the familiar frame of Caluan Ematt, well dressed with beard trimmed and hair combed, steps inside with two armed soldiers. His eyes register the sight before he averts them, speaking more respectfully that she’s become accustomed to from him. “If you will come with me, Leaena. It is time to fit you for your armor.”

Unlike her husband, Rey is given time to dress herself. She knows she must look a mess dressed haphazardly, must reek of stale sweat and open kisses and—yes—the other traces of the night before. But she walks with her chin high, possessing all of it, hoping that any who see her will know that she feels no shame.

Something in her changed. She can feel it. All of her fears and doubts, her guilt, had become so hyper-focused within her body, spilling out until there became nothing left to feel. When Ben was by her side, shepherding her through that small moment where she finally felt safe, she realizes, as Ematt offers her the spear, his presence had weakened her—broken her and rebuilt her into someone else.

Rey accepts the spear. It’s lighter, freer in her palm than the one she’d stolen from the Colosseum beast tamer, and for a second she wonders if he healed well, or became another one of the punished. She holds it in both hands, admiring the smooth finish of the wood, the gleaming ivory tip, sharp enough to nearly pierce her finger at the slightest touch.

“Your husband mentioned that you’d used a spear. It’s a wise weapon to wield for long-distance fighting, especially when most of your opponents will be fighting with a gladius. And this,” he takes a small, round wooden shield from the wall, urging her to fit it onto her left fist, “will make it easier not to get hit.”
Rey’s lip quirks at his slight attempt at humor, the spear and shield held awkwardly at her sides. “I don’t see how I’m supposed to hit anybody if they’re going to have shields, too.”

“That,” Ematt holds up his finger, “is an excellent point. But in your case, my dear, we are going to attempt a tactic that is much simpler than fighting.”

“What is?”

“Intimidation.” He grins under his beard, moving to adjust her left arm to hold the shield over her chest, and the spear to point slightly down, like the tail of a scorpion. “Remember—to them, you are not a slave from Egypt, but the mighty Lioness whose strength has bested both man and beast. So all you must do, for now, is stand by your mate, and bear your fangs.”

Rey quirks a brow, focusing on the dummy sack of straw in front of her, jabbing down with the spear. The position is awkward, but as she saws through the air, she can at least adjust to the movement.

“Very good,” Ematt praises, tugging at her left elbow. “Practice moving your shield down to your shins, and when you do, don’t forget to squat with it. Some fighters will trick you into leaving your neck and chest exposed by taking a quick swipe at your legs. Understood?”

“Squat with the shield and duck my head, got it.” She lowers her arm, her legs only slightly burning from lack of exercise as she squats to conceal her chest, pushing her head behind it as far as she can. When she comes back up, she frowns. “What if they won’t stop hitting me?”

“Then you will have to take the chance of striking.” He withdraws a gladius from the stack on the wall, the morning sunlight gleaming off the steel. Slowly, he swipes forward in a short arc from the side. “This is a typical blow. Widen your stance, feet shoulder-width apart, and turn your body into it…”

Rey does as he says, pivoting her hips and holding the shield out.

Ematt stops, the sword just tapping the wood. “Well done. However, their strength is going to push your arm into your body if you aren’t careful. And because these men have been training, you will have to time your defense just right not only to absorb, but to hit.”

“Alright.” Rey repositions herself, and follows Ematt’s steady arcing strike until it reaches a critical moment, where instead of merely lifting the shield, she too swipes, knocking the sword away. He does it again, reminding her to duck, and she does, thrusting out with her spear at the same time.

“Ah!” Ematt smiles, pumping his fist. “Very good! Now you are thinking like a warrior!”

Rey’s smile is an uneasy one. The shield is already heavy on her arm. “Thank you, Ematt.”

“For what? As your manager, it is my job to train and encourage you,” he winks. “Which reminds me, I should feed you, too.”

He produces from his bag a fold of bread and green vegetables, urging Rey to join him on one of the many seats in the mock arena placed within the courtyard. They sit and eat together, and the monotony of it almost makes her forget what’s to come.

“Before that boy met you, I was certain his soul would be forever lost to the loneliness that consumed him.”
Rey toys with the pleats of her pteruges skirt, her voice distant in the way of mourning that Ematt instantly recognizes. “Ahsoka felt that way, too.”

He sighs, resting a hand on Rey’s shoulder, his heart aching for her, and for Ben. “She was a good woman. The firm hand for him, when I couldn’t be.”

“You mean a lot to him,” she smiles, letting his touch comfort her while the memory of Ahsoka presses her down. “He trusts you.”

“It is an honor for a veteran of his stature to see me as such. So young, when he became a commander. But you are a good fit for him because of it.”

“Oh really,” she blushes, “tell me more.”

“Any other man of his command might have bed and wed some youngling with bravery the size of her smallest finger. But you,” he chuckles, “you are more like the blood of the Spartan warrior women. A heart made of iron, forged through fire and toil. Enough to compliment, to balance the sword.”

Rey smiles. “‘The sword?’”

“Yes. You see, your husband is like a sword. Straight, unbanding, to the point. It will cut through anything when it has the proper motivation. As useful as it is deadly.”

“And what am I,” she cocks her head, “the shield?”

“I wouldn’t say that. Shields are made to take damage, to be the first defense. You are not that—you are far too precious. You are like…” he stretches his hands out slightly, “…the sheath. Sturdy. Safe. A place that the sword can truly find rest. And,” his smile softens, his eyes gleaming when he sees the wonder on her face, “the only thing that can contain all of its sharp edges.”

“Then… ‘she murmurs, taking his word on a breath, “what is our shield?”

“Hm.” He leans closer to her, quirking a salty brow. “Your faith, perhaps?”

_Faith._ How much of that she has been expected to carry, so much faith and hope in her own plans that never fell into the Lord’s. If she weren’t so confident about Ben, if she felt any conviction at all, then perhaps she would think that her faith has failed her.

And yet, they both live. HEre she sits, breathing and healthy and no longer barren, given a chance to save him. Maybe, if what Ben says about the Resistance is true, save all three of them.

Rey considers this as they both stare up through the open ceiling of the Ludus Magnus, to where the great wall of the Colosseum looms. Birds chirp and fly from the roof, the clouds grazing along the sky like wandering sheep, uncaring of them.

“I would like to see you both alive when this is over. And happy. I am an old man—romantic.” He shrugs. “I am Roman.”

“If that coup happens like you say it will, then you might get to.”

Ematt chuckles. “So he told you.”

“Yes.” she glances away. “We’ve never been too good at keeping secrets from each other.”

“Hm,” Ematt nods, grunting and groaning as he rises to his feet. “Then perhaps you two should
stop trying in the first place.”

Rey considers him, a pang of guilt ringing through her chest. She hasn’t been sick yet today, and she hopes Rose has kept her promise not to tell. No… no one else must know about the child, it is only her conscience trying to condemn her.

“Come on,” he urges softly, waving for her to follow. “It’s time to join the line.”

She’d thought she would be happier to see him when he was placed in front of her for release into the arena, but the sight of him in his old gladiator ensemble brings on a sudden wave of nausea that makes her head spin.

He glances back at her from over his shoulder, as much as he can in the small space, the stairs inching up from the same tunnel they’d used to march her to her death. Feeling brave enough to return the gesture, and conveniently level with his backside, she pokes his ass through the leather of his skirt.

Ben scoffs, trying, and failing, not to let his worry cloud his judgement.

It circles in his mind in an endless loop, his goal to protect Rey, to keep her near. It seems that Ematt had armed her according to his request, and, if her little sign is any indication, feels confident enough to wield it.

“Just wait until I get my hands on you,” he murmurs.

“You already did.”

When the line moves his slight smile fades, his fingers clenched around his black gladius, shoulders raised and instincts priming when they emerge into the light of the Colosseum, the drums pounding, people roaring as over one hundred gladiators are led into a wide circle, their backs against the Colosseum wall.

Rey fights to steady her breathing, tightening her hold on the spear in her hand and looking out at the competitors. It was as Ematt predicted—most only wielded the short gladius sword. The notion put her at ease. Somewhat.

They have been placed almost adjacent to the box where the emperor is definitely watching, making it hard to see him. But Rey glares at him anyway, even as the announcer shouts into the crowd with his commanding voice.

“Welcome, all, to the Tournament of Champions!”

The people cheer, some of the gladiators tap their swords to their shields.

“This is the battle royale,” the announcer continues, his voice flaring with drama as servants produce a large hourglass. “Whoever is still standing when the sand runs out shall progress in the tournament for the chance to win title, riches, and renown from the emperor. Those who fall will fall to their deaths. Fighters—prepare yourselves!”

The drums roll and Rey and Ben look to one another, his wide, certain eyes bringing her a powerful wave of peace.

And when the hourglass is turned, the powerful sound of the drums rolls to a standstill.
The men surge over the sand, and Ben is already halfway to Rey by the time she is able to move her feet. He places himself to position her closer to the wall and she follows his lead, more than cover him from behind.

“If someone comes for you,” he says with raised voice over the ring of clashing weapons, “tell me.”

“As long as we stay away from the middle,” Rey agrees, nervously eyes the clamor of bodies weaving in the center of the battlefield. When she looks back at him, his shield is up, a man already beginning to rush forward.

It takes more control to avoid helping Ben as he fights. There are many opportunities where she could try to strike him while they exchange blows. But she forces herself to stay in control. To keep her shield and spear raised.

*Bare your fangs.*

In the near distance she spots a different gladiator, who locks eyes with her. Like a wild dog he meets her challenge, charging towards her.

“Ben!”

Ben glances back just a second before his opponent makes to slash his neck, but he backs away just in time, leading with his shield to shove the man’s defensive arm back and ram the tip of the gladius straight through his stomach.

Rey shouts, prepared to lunge her spear at the gladiator advancing on her. He stalls, giving her a wide berth, long enough for Ben to round and fall upon him with a rapid series of harsh, devastating blows that send him scurrying into a different fight.

“Thanks,” she swallows, her throat dry.

He nods, his hair already sagging with sweat, his expression besetting her. She’s never been this close to him when he fought, only the aftermath. And even then, the ferocity of it was tempered by sport.

Something about the way he looks at her now, however, feeds the other Rey, tempting her like a spread of fresh fish and garum, of honey and fruit, all hers to take.

She snaps out of it when a duo approaches him in stride from behind. “Two!”

When Ben turns she turns, unwilling to let her back go unwatched, but the sounds of Ben’s struggle pulls her away from her task. Her eyes widen when she sees how he manages to parry them both, dancing between them with forceful grace, and her love and pride in him surges.

And is suddenly snuffed.

She backs away just in time to avoid the wide sweep of a man’s arm—a man she recognizes, the one who tried to kiss her hand. He is smaller than Ben, almost her height, watching her with an angry calculation. She shouts, knowing her husband will hear, but also knowing with warm trepidation that he may be unable to come.

The man strikes first, but she strikes back, ducking and meeting the swipe of his gladius to knock it back with her shield. The power behind it rattles her bones to her teeth, but she can barely feel it from the cool enlightenment rushing through her senses, driving her spear forward.
He deflects, but just barely, her jab enough to send him back a few steps. Rey returns to her position, trying blindly to find Ben’s back again, her eyes on everything they can take in. Most of her hopes that he will decide to hunt someone else, but the rest of her knows better.

He doesn’t, continuing to advance on her. She poises herself as Ematt showed her, embracing the mad pound of her heartbeat, letting it guide her steps, backing away from him as he tries to flank her side.

“Ave, Leaena!” he taunts. “Where is your pride now?”

Rage builds up from the balls of her feet and she lunges at him, mostly false bravado and anger and faith. She roars once, aiming for his feet, and when he ducks his shield but doesn’t follow through, she tries again and strikes blind at his exposed chest.

He only manages to deflect to his shoulder, enough for her to see that she has drawn blood. The way he looks at her after has lost all mirth and, to her amazement, is replaced by a pinch of fear. She angles herself to attempt an advance on him, only to put herself back against the safety of the wall, where Ben can find her again.

She tries not to turn back to look for him, to keep herself focused, to trust. And she is rewarded for it. Even as her shield arm tires, she still holds it firm, keeping his every swipe at a distance until another fighter tries to take him by surprise from the side, leaving her a window to escape.

She takes it, stealing the moment to search for her husband. She finds him much further than she expected, locked hand-and-wrist with a gladiator near his size and build—his back completely exposed.

Ben!

Suddenly she becomes aware of the screaming, of the din of people watching from above, the shouts and battle cries and grunts of pain and struggle. It pounds in her ears, but she pushes through, running to him.

Then a woman’s voice breaks through. She follows the sound just in time to see a man’s shield connect with the gladiatrix Phasma’s face, sending her to the ground.

She’s close enough to reach, more near than Ben, and though every rational instinct tells her to keep trying to find him, she listens instead to the warmth within her, the small, unreasonable knot of spirit that demands she do something foolish.

So Rey charges him.

His sword arm is already raised, prepared to deliver a final blow, but Rey uses the long reach of the spear to jab against his ribs. She doesn’t try to kill him, but it’s enough for him to drop his sword to clutch his wounds and run.

Rey looks down, meeting Phasma’s eyes. They are bright and wide like the sun behind a stormy sky, her pale skin gleaming with blood on her face. She doesn’t move, as though waiting for some strike.

She lowers her spear.

The clamor of footsteps rushes her, and she turns, the shield absorbing a hard blow that sends her tumbling back, scraping her knee on the silt. The burn flames beneath her skin and she can only keep her arm up, the brute force of his next blow pushing the shield against her cheek like a
punch.

*You will have to take the strike,* she bolsters, waiting until the hit lands before moving the shield away, leaving herself open for only an instant as she strikes upward—

And at the same instant, the blade of a black gladius pierces through the man’s chest from behind, his scream dying off as Ben pulls his body back, shoving him lifelessly to the silt.

A nervous smile flickers on her face as he pulls her to stand, the two of them flocking away from the new cloud of struggle. Her gaze tangles over the limbs of the fallen fighters as he herds her away, and she spots Phasma watching them from across the field, a long fisher’s pike clenched in her hand.

Something about it makes Rey’s throat run dry.

Next to no one attempts to fight them as the minutes dwindle on, Rey’s heart finally slowing, allowing her the time to survey the people, the carnage. Her legs stings—it will have to be dressed. But her chest swarms with a heated swirl, numbing her of everything, and when the sand runs out of the hourglass, the blare of horns rouses her from the odd haze that had suddenly surrounded her.

And when she and Ben are lined with the other living gladiators before the emperor, his wicked smile cast down upon them, Rey wonders if this was the same pride, the same emptiness, Ahsoka had felt when she, too, fought beside the man she loved most.

Chapter End Notes

[In case anyone was in want for it, I elected not to use the “Morituri te salutant” or any of the other "We who are about to die, salute you" variations. This is because, although the Gladiator film made the phrase popular, there is only one recorded time when such a phrase was spoken before a gladiatorial fight—during a fake naval battle performed for Emperor Claudius in 112 A.D. to celebrate draining a lake for excavation, a feat that took eleven years to complete]
Revelation

Chapter Notes

This one took an all nighter. Sleep is for the weak, ya'll! (Can someone come give me a backrub, please?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Only twenty men died in the arena.

Ben frowns, keeping steady pace behind Rey. His hand brushes against the small of her back. More than anything he must stay tethered to her, remind her of where she is, take hold of her before the reality of what she has been forced to witness sinks fully into her mind.

He had not intended to kill a man so brutally in front of her. Though that is what he has always been, this monster at the end of the emperor’s chain, he would be a fool to think she has not impacted him. While there is no drop of guilt for defending her life, there is, now, a fragile bloom of remorse.

But by the way she strides even as she limps, determination firmly set in her brow, he at least feels like she is strong enough to push away the ghosts, and soldier on.

He wishes he were capable of loving her more for it.

They are released into the Ludus as children in a schoolyard, now that the tournament has commenced, free to roam about the facility as they choose.

Ben caresses her arm, still covered in dust from the arena. “You did very well,” he commends softly, frowning at the blood on her knee. “You should have that bandaged by the physician.”

“Thank you, and I intend to find one.” She steals his hand, squeezing tight. “What will you do?”

He considers that. He would prefer to follow her everywhere in this place, where the other men have been leering. Their attention upon her winds him tightly, wracking his every nerve. If one were to pass too closely, Ben doesn’t know what he would do first—kill or brutalize.

As always, she catches his distraction, bringing him back to her with a gentle hand on his soiled cheek. “Ben,” she murmurs, her eyes wide and infinitely sad, “I think you should find Ematt. Learn more about the Resistance, while you can. I’ve been thinking about what you said, and I believe that there still might be a way for us to escape this.”

He nods. Of course she would be the more productive one after being thrown into a gladiatorial match. Leave it to her to be the more sensible of the two of them, even when he’s made a career of it. Twice.

Although... the sight of her in a warrior’s dress may have inflated his libido, making rational thought even more difficult.

“Very well.” He snags an arm behind her back, pulling her flush against him. Her soft yelp tickles against his lips when he kisses her, the way her hands brace his chest a cool balm to burning
wounds. With a lingering embrace certain to leave her breathless—and onlookers wary—he releases her in kiss only, savoring the heady pleasure of speaking low into her ear and feeling her shift. “Ave atque vale, mea Puella.”

Her gaze burns into him in its sweetness and fire, his succession at tempting her taking form in the rich color of her eyes, the way she looks at his lips, as if to kiss him again, before she groans, forcing herself out of his arms in the direction of the well-guarded hospital tent. “I can’t decide if you are too much, or if I love you too much.”

He could almost smile at that. “Just get some rest. I’ll find you.”

The bow of her head and gleam of mirth amidst her sorrow is her only response, and as he watches her go, he could swear upon his sword that she is intentionally walking that way to provoke him.

Somehow, since he’d seen her unleashed to the lions, her countenance has only grown more beautiful—impossible as it is. One night was not enough. But, for now, he must keep a level head if he could ever hope to have more.

He only needs to ask a few separate sources for his manager to learn that Ematt is already pacing in the atrium, his expression light and expectant as sunshine bounces between the columns. He grabs Ben by the arms, startling him.

“The two of you were fantastic!” he hoots. “Everyone in Rome is talking about you. I have been receiving countless bets in favor of you and the Lioness!”

Ben frowns at the name. He knows Rey dislikes it. “So?”

“So this is the opportunity we have been striving for! Think of it, boy, picture it—with the people’s rumors and a few of my own mixed in, they are titillated to know that the girl who saved Kylo Ren has become the story of the emperor’s warrior lovers.”

Grunting, Ben looks around, worried that someone may hear. Thankfully, the place is still empty—the bathhouse and infirmary likely more occupied—allowing them at least some privacy. “You are making her image stronger.”

“Yes, and yours more sympathetic.” Ematt releases him, finally lowering his voice. “As the tournament draws near its close, their bloodthirst may yet remain, but at the very least your willingness to sacrifice your life for hers and protect what you love will show the people that you are a man of loyalty.”

Even as I conspire against my emperor, Ben muses. “Have you been in contact with the Resistance?”

“Yes. In fact, she is still waiting outside to meet with you.”

“She?”

Ematt accedes before marching out of the atrium, returning with a young woman concealed underneath her palla. It is only when she nears that he recognizes her pale face and small mouth, then her hay-colored hair.

“Kaydel.”

“Master Solo,” she nods, her eyes flitting nervously about.
“Don’t worry, young lady,” Ematt comforts, his hand on her shoulder reminding Ben of the wedding ceremony they’d both attended. “Any guards who see you will just assume you are here to entertain with one of the men.”

“I don’t want to waste a lot of time.” She scours his face, a flicker of hatred buried deep in her eyes. “Ematt says you’re willing to take Snoke’s place for us, until the senate is restored.”

“Yes, I am.”

“And how can I trust you, knowing you’re the one who murdered Poe?”

Ben folds his lips, finally understanding her simmering ire. “I didn’t know. But Poe confessed that he was the one who betrayed you.” He leans forward. “I kept my word—he crossed me, so I killed him.”

Kaydel’s lip trembles. “He was our leader. He helped you and your wife. You owed him your life, and you still took him from us.”

“I went to his villa,” Ben murmurs darkly. “I saw the bodies. I had pity for them, just as I pity Poe Dameron for succumbing to their torture. But now we must focus on what’s ahead, and if you want my assistance, then you will ensure my demands are met.”

Kaydel crosses her arms. “What demands?”

“You will not return to this place again. All of our communication will be done through Ematt.”


“If your end does not succeed, then I have already decided to take my life so that my wife can go free.” Pain cinches in his chest to speak those words aloud. “As soon as Snoke lets her go, I want you to take her as far from the city as you can.”

“Allright,” Kaydel murmurs, her hard eyes finally softening. “Anywhere in particular?”

He scowls at the light brandished along the marble floors, picturing her in a different home, a place where she can garden and ride, remember and forget him. “Someplace green.”

“Speaking of ends...” Ematt cuts in, “what is the Resistance’s plan, Kaydel?”

Kaydel looks between the two of them, as if deliberating whether or not she dares place her trust in another soul—a sentiment Ben understands completely. But eventually she caves into it, accepting that Ben’s desires are too compelling.

Odd, that she doesn’t have reason to trust Ematt, and yet tells them so freely. As soon as she opens her mouth Ben wonders this, determined to ask Ematt exactly how deeply he has been involved without his knowing.

“I found Finn. After stalking around the palatium as a servant, I was able to escape to one of our hiding places underground. Most of our people are gone, but he’s amassing a new army. Thanks to you,” she gestures to Ben, “I can confirm his plan to wait until the last night of the tournament, when Snoke and his guards are distracted the most.”

“And how do you plan on doing that?”

“Finn’s wife, Rose, is one of the attendants in the royal bathhouse. She has the emperor’s trust.”
She leans closer, forcing Ben to stoop lower. “And she is in the *Ludus*. All it would take is the signal from you for her to slash a strigil through his wrinkly, leprosy-addled throat, and let the Resistance handle the rest.”

“The guards would kill her,” Ben murmurs.

“Only if she’s not fast enough.” Kaydel smiles. “But I think you underestimate the amount of hatred the people harbor for their emperor. With you as the alternative, we might stand more of a chance at winning.”

“Like a modern Spartacus,” Ematt chuckles.

Ben scowls at that. He is no Spartacus—and he certainly doesn’t want to die like one. “Fine, then. Whoever finds Rose first can give her the task. I just hope, for your sake, that your revolt bears fruit.”

She shrugs. “Hope is usually the first step. Just do your part and protect your woman, Solo, and let the experienced rebels handle the rest.”

When she extends her hand, Ben studies it clasping it delicately. “Deal.”

Satisfied, Kaydel spins on her heel, marching for the exit. Ematt moves to escort her, but Ben catches him by the shoulder. “Wait. I need to speak with you.”

Ematt turns, his beard scrunching around pursed lips. “What is it, my boy?”

“I know you are a member of the Resistance. But there is something more you aren’t telling me.”

Sighing deeply, Ematt shakes his head. “Sometimes I cannot tell whether you are a brute who chances upon wisdom, or a wise man playing the brute.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It would be in your best interest if I did not tell you.”

“Caluan,” Ben presses, squeezing his manager’s shoulder. He can’t fight the desperation threading low in his voice. “Rey’s life is depending on me. On you. I can’t afford to put her life in your hands if I cannot trust you completely.”

Ematt blew air from his cheeks, running a hand over his long, fine white hair. “It will make you angry.”

“Nothing you can do will upset me more than what has already been taken from me,” Ben murmurs, pushing down the grief rising up in him. Even curiosity has become exhausting. “Just tell me.”

“As you wish.” Ematt moves to stand before Ben, and bows his head. “I am in league with the Resistance, yes. But what Kaydel says, what they all say, is a lie.”

“How do you mean?”

“Poe Dameron was not the leader of the Resistance.” His bow deepens. “The true leader is Leia Organa. Your mother.”

Ben’s thoughts slog, rendering him empty for a long moment, until he steps backward, right into one of the marble columns. “My mother…”
“I truly am sorry, but it was more important to hide it from you.” Ematt rises from his bow, his voice stern. “Until now, I had never known where your loyalties lied. You were simply too close to Snoke.”

A shaky breath expels from his lungs, and he turns his wild gaze upon his manager, the threads weaving together in his mind. “How long?”

“From before I knew you. I met her, during my time touring the various ludi schools across the territories. At first I mistook her for an unimposing woman, but when I shared my rage over the deaths of my beloved wife and child… her ideals became my own.”

Ben wipes his mouth. “And after you knew me?”

“I had already been corresponding with her in letters, giving her what information I could. When I discovered that you were her lost son, I took it upon myself to watch over you, for her sake.” He ducks his head again. “I hope you can forgive my secrecy.”

He leans his head back against the column wall. He had learned his mother was alive with Rey’s help. First from Amilyn Holdo, and then that friend of Finn’s, Jannah. But to know Ematt had been in commune with her, all these years… it’s too overwhelming to process, now.

“Perhaps there is something you could do for me?” he murmurs weakly, looking down his tarnished cheeks. “One last request, from a gladiator to his guardian…”

Ematt smiles, though it is limp, drained of hidden wiles and secrets when Ben makes his request known, and pats the young man’s back with a vigor all its own.

“Of course, my boy. I’ll see to that immediately.”

Rey almost doesn’t heed Ben’s advice to get rest when her leg is cured by the physician—who seemed very eager to touch the Lioness and provide a bucket for her spirited volley of sick. But she limps back to her cell anyway, already fantasizing about sleep.

Food is waiting for her inside, a tray of bread and water and half a fig that she doesn’t bother slowing down to savor. So enraptured is she by this, craving the juicy sweetness, that she doesn’t notice Phasma is with her until she speaks.

“What game are you playing at?”

Rey turns, swallowing hard. “Game?”

The Amazon rises, pacing closer, her generous eyes challenging as they sweep up and down Rey’s smaller figure. “You may have tempted Kylo Ren with your body, but I will not form an alliance with you.”

“I wasn’t expecting an alliance,” Rey frowns, taking another bite of her unleavened bread. It’s hard and old, but better than nothing. “He’s my husband.”

Her words seem to both diffuse and Phasma, but not enough to shrink down her bristling shoulders. “How stupid. There can only be one victor in the Tournament of Champions.”

“I’m not exactly here of my own will,” Rey replies, lifting her chin. She isn’t afraid of this woman, although… she probably should be. “And neither is he. We don’t want any part of this.”
“Is that so?” Phasma begins to circle her again, but this time Rey turns to follow her, refusing to turn her back. “Then you certainly had me fooled. Your enthusiasm in the arena was quite bloody.”

Rey watches this woman, trying to summon back that coil of purpose she’d felt when she saved her. She considers why she had let herself do it, when Phasma seems so intent on becoming her enemy.

But she had spared this woman’s life. It was the right thing to do.

Wasn’t it?

“If you don’t want an alliance with me, then why prolong my role in this tournament?” Phasma grunts, at last stopping, her long, muscular arms resting perched at her hips. “What is your intent, little Leaena?”

“My name is Rey,” Rey replies, silent for a moment, searching this woman’s face for the answer, until. “Like I told you, I don’t want any part of this. I have already killed one person to save my life.” Her gaze falls. “I don’t want to kill any more.”

“And if your husband is the one in danger?”

Rey meets her eyes, so hard and cruel, but if she has learned anything from her time with Ben, it is to recognize the veil of hatred concealing something breakable underneath.

Phasma rights herself, her posture finally relaxed, even if her words sting Rey like barbs. “I heard you yesterday, in the bathhouse, when you called off that rabid mongrel husband of yours. ‘Mercy,’ you said.” She sneers. “I knew then that you weren’t a true gladiatrix.”

“Why? Because I won’t kill?”

“No,” Phasma scoffs, turning her back. “Because you’re naive enough to think you will have a choice.”

Rey watches the woman stalk out of their shared cell, and sits, folding her hands in her lap.

Choice.

Her mind returns to the image of General Hux, his hand around her throat. Her instincts had been so prepared to wound him, to strike back, even before she could consider mercy as an option. In her mind, those scenarios are different, but the more she thinks on it, if she was left with the choice to kill for Ben, or let him die, she knows what option she would choose.

Head pounding, her stomach rolls again, and she hides her face beneath her hand. Hypocrite.

She looks down at her stomach. Safe and alone, she takes a breath and reaches down, running her hand over the supple cloth of the standard tunica granted her by the Ludus Magnus. She wonders what the child within her looks like, how small it must be, if its heart is already beating, alive.

Regret pools cold beneath her touch, knowing that she had the opportunity to tell Ben, but hadn’t taken it. What kind of wife has she become, keeping secrets upon secrets from a husband who has only ever accepted and loved her—what kind of mother, to be willing to let their unborn child die without even a memory of it left behind to mourn?

The sound of the opening gate interrupts her musing and she stands, facing a trio of Praetorian guards. “Yes?”
“The emperor demands your presence,” he nods his head, his eyes gleaming with recognition and, if Rey is not mistaken, a hint of embarrassment. “You are to accompany us.”

Rey remembers that Ben promised to come find her, but she also remembers that the emperor’s patience with her has run thin enough. Unwilling to test it, she doesn’t fight, leaving to walk the familiar path back to the palatium.

Snoke has forsaken his golden robes for a simple white toga and pallium cloak, today, the grand garment in royal colors sweeping over him. He waves Rey inside with a delighted smile that sends rivulets of warning down to her toes.

Sunlight bleeds through the open terrace doors, the view from this higher floor allowing for an impressive range of sight about the city below Palatine Hill, a soft wind stirring the curtains about the decor, brushing over the carpets.

“You were quite the spectacle today, my Lioness,” Snoke praises, gesturing to a table prepared with roasted bird and saucers of garum. “Such a performance deserves an equally exquisite reward. Come, sit and dine with me.”

Swallowing the urge to gag as the smells that once delighted her turn wicked in her nose, she bows, taking a seat in the cushioned kline. She doesn’t dare lay down upon it, watching warily as he moves to sit on the opposite side. She forces herself to eat with him, too disgusted by the garum dripping down his chin to see a slave until he takes a steel pot and pours its contents into a cup for her.

She looks up to thank him, and freezes.

Dopheld Mitaka.

“Ah yes, I’m sure the two of you have met. Thank you for joining us, Mitaka. You’re just in time.”

The boy bows, and Rey notices a deep gash on his cheekbone, the dark circles under his eyes.

“I received some interesting information today, regarding the death of my general,” Snoke croons, sipping at his chalice. “It would seem that not only was his absence a blow to my militia, but an untimely death, caused by this.”

Rey attempts to allow for only the necessary amount of shock to cross her features, watching tense and still as Snoke shows it to Mitaka.

“Tell me, young man. Do you know whom this knife belongs to? I would be inclined to punish whoever murdered my finest general.”

She looks to Dopheld, but he does not seem to notice her, accepting the knife from Snoke’s hands, turning it over. Something crosses over his features, a sudden twinge of sadness, but more importantly—decision.

He offers it back to the emperor. “This knife belonged to Ahsoka Tano, my lord. A servant in the Ren household.”

“Ah, yes, the Fulcrum,” Snoke hums, admiring the short blade before tucking it back into his robes. “It does not surprise me that one gladiatrix would die so that another could rise. I trust her story must be very inspiring to you, Leaena.”

“More than you could ever hope to know,” she bites back a snarl, “your imperial majesty.”
“Her death really is a tragedy, I must say. Were it not for you, perhaps she would still be alive.”

Rey’s body goes cold.

“You look surprised. You shouldn’t be.” Snoke’s leer tightens, his long fingers gesturing to Mitaka, who stands waiting for orders with his head bowed low. “If it were not for your little note, we may never have discovered your tretchary.”

Tears boil in Rey’s eyes before she can stop them, but she will not let them fall. She cannot let herself show weakness in front of this loathsome beast—even as grief and guilt erodes her from the chest outward, the horror of her betrayal at last sinking like a knife into her consciousness.

Snoke chuckles, the steam of his tea lapping against his chin. “You may be excused, boy. And if you are finished, little one, I will not keep you. I have gleaned all the information I need.”

Rey takes him for his word, rising and bowing, the guards already approaching to escort her away. Mitaka averts his eyes and she leaves him, her heart pounding down to her sandals.

“Wait.”

She turns.

“Are you not going to drink your tea?” he smiles, motioning to the cup. “I had it brewed especially for you. Women enjoy such things, do they not?”

Rey, her brow furrowed, reaches down to study the cup. She takes a whiff and the strong scent of mint rises to meet her, sending a foreboding chill down her legs when she recognizes it for what it is.

Pennyroyal.

“Well?”

“You are generous, your imperial majesty,” she drones, fear and anger writhing a caduceus around her spine. She places the cup back down upon the table, letting her hatred of him burn unabashed in her eyes. “But this tea does not agree with me.”

His smile curls into another low laugh. “Oh, my sweet child, I am certain there are many things I can offer you that you will not agree with. Consider yourself fortunate that they are what shall give me pleasure the most.”

His words are an unyielding threat, and she would be a fool not to know it. Deciding not to humor him any further, she lets the guards escort her away from the palace, not letting the tears fall until she is alone in the cell, curled into a ball upon the bed.

Ahsoka. The note, the letter they had written to Ben’s mother… Ahsoka had trusted Mitaka to deliver it, and he had betrayed them. Or, by the beating on his face, had been tormented for its contents.

Either way, she knows there is no one to blame but herself.

She sobs into the pillow as guilt wracks her body, taking hold over her for what feels like hours, endless hours. Because of her greed for a new life, her selfish desire to provide for Ben, her blatant disregard for his wishes, she had lit the fire that destroyed her family, forged a secret that the enemy had exploited.
“Abba,” she whimpers, covering her face, everything burning, burning. “Please, forgive me. I’ve been such a fool. Please don’t let anyone else suffer because of me.”

The peace doesn’t come like it normally does when she prays. But she rides it anyway, letting herself feel the shame and torment of bearing it on her shoulders. Though she knows that she was not the one who thrust the blade into her body, realizing that she is to blame for their discovery solidifies the image of Ahsoka in her mind, her bright eyes so calm, so forgiving, as if she had already known.

And that is when she decides—there can be no more secrets. For too long she has denied anyone entry fully within herself, even from the ones she cares about. The man she cares for the most. First her Christianity, then her love, and now...

She can’t hide from him anymore. As much as it pushes against everything she thinks wise to do, this consuming conviction that torments her shows her that her way, all along, has been wrong.

Trust.

“Give me strength,” she whispers, closing her eyes, her breath at last steadying. “Be with me.”

The cell door opens and she jolts, thinking Phasma has come back, her heart breaking when Ematt comes to her bedside, immediately noticing her tears. “Child? What’s the matter?”

“I,” she sniffs, “I need to speak with Ben. Can you take me to him?”

“Yes,” he nods, easing her to her feet. “I can do you one better.”

He leads her to another cell, closer to the front of the building. The door is not bars, but a wooden one with locks and iron latches, the interior well-furnished with candles and vanities.

“What is this place?”

“A room set aside for,” Ematt thumbs his nose, “services, if you will.”

She stares at the bed, horror gripping her chest, and she fears she may cry again. “Did Snoke… has Ben been—”

“No, child,” he interrupts soundly. “And neither will you.”

“How can you be so sure?”

He grins, wiping a tear away. “We had some business settled. Thanks to one Solum Filius, both the services of Kylo Ren and the Lioness have been booked until the end of the tournament.”

A tall shadow lumbers quickly through the door and Rey meets his eyes, a whimper leaking past her lips as she runs to him, jumping into his arms.

Ben catches her soundly, finally able to breathe again, nodding his thanks as Ematt slips out of the room, closing the heavy door behind him. He sinks her gently to the ground, sighing with pleasure as she cups his face, when he is able to have her under his hands again, able to look in her eyes, to kiss her lips. “Rey—”

“I’m pregnant.”

He pauses, sluggish, as though he has been suckerpunched for a second time this day. “What?”
Rey inhales shakily, stroking his face, his hair, his neck. “I’m with child, Ben. I’m sorry that I hid it from you. I was so afraid that you would— mmph!”

Iron arms clasp around her body and pull her flush against him, bending her until the words die under the pressure of his sudden and ruthless kiss, rough and hard, as if he’d sacrificed the pleasure of it for the closeness.

Ben’s heart rips in two when her hands cusp his neck, overflowing in him with tremendous power and unbridled joy. 

Rey is carrying his child!

When he finally relents he can taste her tears on his lips—or are they his own?—his hands roving down her back to brace her more firmly against him as she looks into his eyes as a doe would a tiger. “You’re not upset?” she whispers, her beautiful mouth swollen and red, and his.

He shakes his head, words failing him. A watery smile forms on his lips as he searches every inch of her face, his fingers cradling the back of her neck to pull her head into as gentle a kiss he can manage, folding her into his arms.

Her embrace is tight as they stand alone together, and he clutches his family close, the finality of this moment hardening stone around his heart, strengthening and stoking the flame of his will ever higher.

Even in the worst of circumstances, his beloved has given him a most precious gift. And he will protect it.

Whether it gives them rule over the entire empire, or costs him his life.

Chapter End Notes

"Ave atque vale" is Latin for "hail and farewell," the most common way to say "see you soon." If you go to Google Translate and type in "hail and farewell, my girl" from English to Latin, you will be able to hear what Ben said in a much less sexy way.

Spartacus was a Thracian gladiator famous for leading a slave rebellion about a century B.C. He died on the battlefield, chopped into pieces, but his bravery and ferocity lived on to inspire numerous revolts against the Roman Empire.

Friendly (or not) reminder that Pennyroyal tea was a popular abortive in Ancient Rome.

Many gladiators were pimped out by their owners, especially the popular ones -- in this case, "Solum Filius" (Ben Solo's pseudonym that Ematt used to stash all of his money) would have had to spend an entire fortune to basically rent out TWO popular gladiators.
As the days pass, they fall into routine.

In the first light of morning he briefs with Ematt—she forces herself to eat the rations given her. In the late morning he teaches her new ways of battle—she learns, hardening her arms and legs until she can feel them changing beneath her skin. In the afternoon he is dragged away to fight—she paces and prays he will come back. In the evening he always does—she always catches him.

And in the night, they take what moments they can.

“How many are left?” she whispers, nestled into the crook of his arm, her voice raw.

His thumb passes over her bare skin in the darkness. “Half.”

She sucks in a breath, the smell of him chasing away the lingering traces of sick still burning in the back of her throat.

Eight days, she has counted. Eight days Ben has been taken to fight, but not her.

Ematt explained the plot of the tournament to her, the day after Rey finally found the strength to tell Ben that she has become mother to his child. Their child. According to Ematt, the fighters are given limited time to best one another, swapping between opponents until the long hours take their toll on the people of Rome, who, though itching for entertainment, dare not spend their full days frittering time away when there is work to be done.

Not every opponent dies in each match. She dared not ask Ben how many men he had been left without choice to kill, but she has learned to tell the difference by whether he returns to her clean or covered in blood.

His hand rests over her middle, warm and heavy. “How is he?”

Rey tries to smile, enjoying the softness of his skin against her lips as she speaks. “Rose says everything is fine.”

Ben grunts.

Shifting, she moves to hover over him on hands and knees, her hair a limp shadow in the void sucking through the edges of her eyes. The candles have long since burned out, but even in the dark, she knows he is looking for her. “You want a boy?”

The back of his fingers caress her navel, slipping up between her breasts to elicit a fan of pleasure, unfurling like wings over her ribs. “I do not care if it is a horse, as long as it’s born.”
“Hm.” She leans down, bumping his nose before she can fit against his lips. His hands find her waist, moving and squeezing the flesh between there and her thighs. She hums when he inevitably decides to pinch the fat below her backside, flopping down to use his chest as a mattress. “Well, if you say boy, then I say girl.”

He exhales a gentle scoff, the closest to a laugh she can wring out of him.

Though the emperor seems determined to give her a useless amount of free time to worry, Ben has made an excruciating effort to take all of the worry upon himself. And yet, Rey’s hopes are steadily building again. Learning of Kaydel’s presence, especially the role of Leia as much more than Jannah’s mentor and ally, and—most significantly—Ben’s overwhelming attention and possession of their child, has given her a renewed sense of intent.

And, if Ben’s engrossment in her body and constant questioning of her status in any indication, no amount of worry or anger, or uncertainty of the coming future, will prevent him from pursuing that same feeling of purpose in their suffering.

Even in a fortress of darkness, a single beam of light still shines on them.

Rey grips the spear tight in her hand, glaring at the grey sky hanging over the group of warriors segregated across the field, the air dense around her shoulders.

The floorboards creak under Ben as he shifts his weight, his eyes recounting the men aboard their boat. “What are you thinking?” he murmurs.

“I’m wondering how they expect us to fight when we’re trapped in these things.” Her dark eyes flit up to him. “They’re pushing us closer together, and I don’t like it.”

Thunder roils and the massive shade is drawn over the people. The first patter of rain drips on her nose.

“With only half contestants remaining, it’s time for the second royale.” Ben rolls his shoulder. “Last year was a naval battle as well. Snoke’s men decided not to get creative.”

The announcer gives his drivel, but Rey and Ben don’t pay it much heed, watching as the ground shifts and walls are opened, letting water spill into the field, filling it slow enough to allow her nerves time to creep around her ankles.

“How deep will it go?”

“Up to your chest,” Ben intones gravely. “If you fall the wrong way, it could kill you.”

“Good thing you taught me how to swim,” she jests, looking up into a tight scowl.

Drums pound and Rey watches the announcer, who hasn’t yet shifted the hourglass. When the water finally touches at the center of the field, level and rippling like an untouched bath, both she and Ben keep their backs to the stern of the little flat-bottomed boat, catching the eyes of their fellow passengers.

“They aren’t going to kill you,” Ben murmurs in her ear, just above the beat of the drum and the scattering drops of gentle rainfall.

She would glance at him, if she and Phasma were not already glaring at one another from across the boat. “How do you know that?”
“If one man kills everyone on his ship, he’ll have no numbers to defend him from the ship of his enemy.” His eyes are soft and contemplative, no threat to be found as it meets with those of the other gladiators, a silent message, willingness to remain united. “They will need you until you’re the last one standing in their way.”

Frowning, Rey looks over the edge of the ship. The water has climbed high enough to hide the ground beneath, spindles of loose sand rocking between the waves, battered by the fine kiss of rain.

She tries to remind herself of Ben’s words. Only eight other gladiators accompany them—and she counted four other boats. The odds between all of them have been smoothly evened out, she realizes, as the associates upon their boat loom over the long rowing paddles, haggard and wide-eyed.

Pity closes over Rey’s neck. Like this, it’s impossible to tell who was a slave forced into the competition, and who was a free man unprepared to die in it.

The boat lifts at last in the water, slick and unsteady under her feet, and the drums stop.

Phasma barks out an order, and the men reach down for the oars, steering them towards the closest boat. With an exchanged look Ben gives his gladius to Rey, crouching to help drive them faster as Rey keeps her eye on the other gladiators, standing vigil over her husband.

When the current of their power, ragged from the paddles still touching the bottom of the arena, rams them into the other boat, Rey lurches, losing balance. Ben catches her by the waist, gently plucking his sword from her shield hand and depositing her behind him while the gladiators clash off the bow, with Phasma leading the charge.

Rey holds tight to her spear, turning to spot another boat beginning a charge in their direction from the other side of the arena. Terror grips her, realizing that not only are more people coming, but the current is forcing the two boats side by side. “Ben!”

“I see it,” he grunts, swaying close beside her. “Just focus on one enemy for now. I’m right here.”

It’s the last thing he says before the cluster of rival gladiators reach for their boat as the broad sides connect, their swords high. Rey thinks quickly, pushing her spear outward to deter one, poking at the offending arm in hopes of dropping his gladius into the water.

Ben, however, offers much less restraint. With a hard shove, he pushes back against the boat, trying to separate them, but a man’s blade grazes above his head, stalling his progress.

Don’t leave her.

He snarls, lunging up with a hard, wide swipe of his arm, the clash of it overwhelming the other man as he tries to climb aboard, offering Ben the opportunity to grab him by the hair and force him down into the water, crushed between the ships with a curt scream.

Rey’s eyes fasten to the other boat, the one still coming toward them. Phasma’s charge and Ben’s efforts had cinched a swift victory for the first, the last of the rival men jumping into the water.

The next boat jars harshly when their attackers finally come for them, the first of the gladiators training his gaze on Rey. She readies her shield but Ben is already there, the water slick under his feet as he slices the distracted man on the legs, leaving him to be trampled screaming by the others.

“Get back, now!” Ben calls above the roar, the rain falling harder, the sky and all of its color
swallowed up in shades of grey and blood.

The boat lurches as their comrades come near, pushing between her and Ben, sending her slipping backwards. She catches herself on the wall of the boat in time to spot Phasma reaching for the handle of an oar, directing it through its fastening to push back and bring the opponent into a better position.

Instinct takes her faster than rationality can.

Rey rushes over, taking the oar beside Phasma, following her direction with a harsh cry for strength. Her hands are slippery on the polished wood, but to her amazement, the other boat is pushed away.

She meets Phasma’s eyes when the fighting lulls, gratified when the Amazon acknowledges her with the slightest nod.

Rey’s smile is cut short when she hears Ben calling her name, just as the hard scrape of wood thunders in her ears, the hard rock of the boat sending her shield skidding across the deck. But the spear is in reach and she catches it, rolling onto her back to point the tip for an upward defensive strike.

The man above her is not her husband.

She lashes out, pulling herself onto her knees, already soaked through by the rain as it batters above them. Again the man attempts to close the distance and he does, close enough for her to see the wide whites of his eyes, too close now to be pierced by her spear—

—but not too close to be pierced by Phasma’s.

The long pike finds a home in his throat and Rey falls back, his blood hot on her face, his eyes now flickering and lifeless as Phasma drives her pike deeper, through his neck and to the other side, before she twists with a mighty effort, pitching him overboard as she might a large catch.

Rey finally finds her feet again, swallowing as she sweeps up her shield and watches Phasma continue into battle, leaving her clutching her weapons alone, blinking back the water as it streams down her face.

*She saved my life.*

Ben struggles for breath, his heart pounding, only allowing a moment’s relief when he sees that Rey is left standing. He tries to go to her, but the onslaught of the other boat closes in on them, forcing his body to combat with shield and powerful thrusts while his mind cries out to find her, to be near her, to protect her and their baby.

Another ship slices through the water towards them, ready to corner their ship, and Rey’s pulse thunders in her throat as she runs for the other oars, holding it out with a strangled gasp, knowing that, if she fails, they will all die.

She cries out with the effort of holding the oar outright, throwing all of her weight down upon it, her wrists screaming when the other boat collides into its tip, coerced to a stop leaving their flank exposed.

A blur emerges from the bow of the newest boat, jumping aboard with a powerful, chance leap while his ship is left in recoil from the collision.
She forces herself to rise, staring into the face of a man who doesn't mince words, already jabbing at her. She backs away, cornering herself back onto the stern as the boat shudders, the sounds of cries and bloody screams blending with the thunder overhead as he batters against her scutum, over and over again to force her against the wall until her arm, still trembling from exertion, lulls in its hold over the shield.

It's enough.

She screams when his sword slashes against her arm, more from the fear than the pain, her precarious stance on the wall going slack.

And she falls.

The sound of her scream pulls Ben away from his opponent, his eyes blazing to see a man’s gladius pull back from Rey, a shield ramming her shield until her body is forced off the edge of the boat.

No—!

The lapse of attention almost costs him his leg, but the gladiator’s overconfidence earns him another attack from Phasma, her long pike jabbing into his side.

Ben takes the opening and runs to the other end of the boat, nearly pitching himself over the side, his eyes sweeping over the sea of floating bodies as terror pulses its hot froth under his skin.

“Rey!”

Water closes in over her and her feet touch the bottom, her hold tight on the spear while the scutum pulls against the water, fighting against her until she fights her stance in the water, her chin just under the surface. She gasps, her nose burning, the water around her spotted with blood. “Ben! Ben!”

He follows the sound of her voice before her attacker descends on him, forcing him to lift his shield. He shoves back, plunging his gladius forward, exchanging prairies with vengeance tightening his grip. The man looks fearful—as he should, knowing he is about to be slaughtered.

Rey bounces on her toes, wading closer to the boat, away from the bodies. She can’t see the hourglass from her position, but, perhaps, if she could wait in the water long enough, the time would run out.

Ben is still up there.

Her heart overtakes her lungs, the scent of the water and burning in her arm threatening to overpower her completely. She pushes the spear against the arena floor to elevate herself, to give her more breathing room, but it only gives her better vantage to watch as the final boat sails towards them.

A commotion in the water draws her attention downward. The man, the short one who called her Leaena that day of the first royale, wades closer to her, his skin slick with water and blood.

“Oh, God, not now!

“Zuji!”

Her voice fills him from below, her terror becoming his own, molding, shaped by the gladius in his
hand to something more. He stands back as this gladiator, fierce and lithe and well-trained, slashes for his middle, his foot slipping on the flooded deck, his posture crooked, leaving only one, small opening.

He thinks of her face in the morning sunlight.

And cleaves the man’s throat.

The final boat approaches them at a rapid pace, and Rey hangs onto one of the oars, her arm heavy, going numb from the weight of the shield as she tries to lift it even as she knows she cannot fight with both without being left slow and unmov ing in the water. She looks up, prepared to scream for help, when he’s there, his gaze wild and hair soaked, so out of sorts.

But alive.

Ben looks and sees the ship coming, the other fighter marching through the high water. “Hold on!” he bellows, dropping his weapons to take the handle into his grasp.

Understanding, Rey takes a harsh breath and releases her spear, her better hand clinging onto the long oar. The offending man’s gladius bounces ineffectively against her scutum as she ascends, forced to drop that, too, so she won’t slip from the thin paddle.

His dying scream is silenced by the blare of the horns, by the sound of hearts beating in their ears when he drags her into his arms, dragging her onto the ship with him, running his hand over her hair as they and their fellow fighters stand silent.

Victorious.

“Let me see it.”

“Ben—I told you, I’m fine.”

He tugs the door, ensuring it’s locked—as is his tendency these days—storming over to her. He takes her arm tenderly into his hand, so contrary to the ferocity of his expression, undoing the binds to peek at the gash underneath.

She pulls away from him, replacing the bandages. “It’s just a cut.”

He snorts, running a frustrated hand through his hair, looking half-tempted to pull it out, before he stiffly moves to follow her, pulling her into a tight embrace. He lets the quiet surround them, erasing the memory of the din, even when the fear remains. “I’m sorry. It’s my fault.”

She winces, still a bit stiff, fitting her arms under his tight snare to pull him close, inhaling the scent of rainwater and sweat still clinging to him. “You can’t keep blaming yourself.”

“Not one second passes when I don’t remember how close I come to losing you,” he murmurs, burying his brow in her neck. The image of her falling from the edge of the boat returns to his mind, gripping him again in the horror of the memory, and he wonders when it will ever leave him. “I made a promise to protect you. And I failed.”

“No, you didn’t. You heard me. You still protected me.”

He doesn’t reply.

“I’m still alive, aren’t I?” she murmurs against his temple, stirring the wet strands there. Her arms
wedge to slide up and caress his shoulder blades, still hidden under the cloth of his tunic. “Ben, it’s not your power, nor mine, that will save us alone. We just have to wait.”

Power. What power do they have, trapped like this, but to fight against chains that may never break? Yes, he has his hopes, smoldering and impatient as they are—but his plans have only ever been victorious when commanding a legion of soldiers. A battle against one man, the man who has choked him by the collar for so many years, feels almost unwinnable.

Almost.

It has not escaped his memory, the prayer he’d sent when Rey was first thrust into the arena. The answer had been a miracle. Even for all of his cruelty, all of his malice and hate and human sin, the God he had forsaken had not forsaken him.

And though he has his doubts, the less stubborn side of him, small and shriveled as it is, lets that truth calm him in the form of Rey’s touch, sinking gently into the reassurance of his wife—and her steadfast, indelible faith.

His grip on her goes lax, but he doesn’t dare release her from his arms just yet. Having her to himself has become more valuable, more full of endless need. And after today, he doesn’t know how he will be able to bear leaving her side ever again.

He guides her to the bed, bidding her to lay down first, his palm smoothing over her stomach. And though her body beckons him, her eyes remain somewhat distant, considerate of his face.

He kisses her lips, lingering, his hand running over her center, up to her face—as though this one motion could chase away the traces of battle he knows have etched at her mind. It’s all he can think to do, all he is capable of, in this place.

“Are you willing?”

Rey sighs, luxuriating under his touch, trying to let him help her float above the fading anxiety of the arena and… the guilt.

Her usual desire for him has suffered in the last week, and until Rose told her why, she had been afraid she was abnormal. The unfortunate truth was simply that Ben’s intensity, the natural spike of fighting for survival, had transformed him into a ravenous creature of lust when they were locked in together during the night. And while Rey adored the attention, and still does, her body—as Rose put it—and her heart have become dedicated to protecting the child, leaving sparse energy or will to think of the activities that created it in the first place.

She reaches down between his legs, feeling the gratifying swell of his hardness twitch to meet her. “I’m still sore from last time.” She smiles softly, willing herself to be thankful that they are both still here, pushing back the memory of the rain. “But I can do this.”

A soft exhale falls from his parted lips, and she knows he won’t complain as he tilts his hips into her hand, sinking over her to tug down the sleeve of her tunica and lave a trail of kisses down her exposed flesh.

“That feels good,” she whispers, closing her eyes, enjoying the slight brush of his pulse when her fingers crawl into his subligar, one hand taking his shaft, the other toying gently with his sack. It only hurts her arms a little.

Her thumb brushes along the swath of fine hair, engorging him with a low growl. “I want to taste you,” he murmurs, caressing her breast, afraid of hurting her, of turning her pleasure away. “Will
that do?"

Rey nods, gasping when his lips and tongue tease her neck, his hands already at her thighs and pushing her tunica higher on her body, loitering, as he has tended to do lately, over her womb. He sinks down, his cock loosed as he continues his efforts along the sensitive line over her stomach, on the ridge of her mound, lingering there as his eyes burn right through her.

She rests her hand in his hair, scraping her nails against his scalp. A searing urge to be close to him captures her in her weariness, a desire to worship her husband, not quite a reward for saving her life, but a spirit, a right. “I want to taste you, too.”

He lays his cheek on her skin, stroking her under the tunica, his deftness as he caresses the underside of her breast making her arch. “You’re sure?”

She smiles and tugs his ear. “Believe me, you are one of the only things that tastes good to me anymore.”

Grunting, he scales back up her body, leaving a long, meaningful kiss on her lips before easing away her layers, rendering her bare in the dwindling twilight peering through the high window. She wets her lip watching him remove his clothing, his knee between her legs, his manhood in perfect position for her to reach out and stroke.

Ben moans, his head falling back before he catches himself, his cock pulsing under every pass of her hand. The sight of her working him sets fire from his throat to his feet. “Puella, I’m not going to last if you keep doing that.”

“Why hold back?” she challenges, staring up at him from the bed, her body as glowing and radiant as a goddess of myth. “I enjoy pleasing you.”

“You first.” He crouches, his abdomen clenching, and slips his tongue into her mouth, wild and distracting enough for her to lose rhythm. She squeaks as he takes her by the hips and slides her further up the bed, his hands parting her legs, thumb pulling at her outermost lips to expose her to the air. He manipulates the skin there, not quite touching her womanhood, rubbing to open and close her, the resulting sound of her arousal smacking in their ears with each purposeful circle.

Rey melts, grabbing his arm, scratching her nails down his skin. When her faculties return to her, she parts to breathe, to gaze into his hungry eyes. “I wish there was a way we could taste each other at the same time.”

His rubbing slows, changing direction to a sweet rocking cradle of his thick, warm fingers, teasing her, refusing to touch the place that begs for him most. “There is. Let me show you.”

She lets him position her on her knees and fit himself behind her, confusion lacing her brow. “And how did you learn this?”

“From the book Holdo gave you,” he rumbles, the barest shadow of a smile ghosting the corner of his lip as he kneels against her back, his hands sliding up her torso to gently toy with her breasts, carefully avoiding her bandages. She leans her head back to his shoulder, the hot prick of his cock against her backside making her flutter with anticipation. “Did you think I wouldn’t learn more than one?”

Her heart hammers against his hands as they consume the width of her, kneading, only making her want to see him more. “What do I have to do?”

In reply, Ben coaxes her legs open, climbing underneath her until she is braced on hands and knees,
watching fascinated as his long legs stretch out before her, and his cock stands at attention conveniently near her mouth—

His hands grasp her rear and squeeze, pulling her hips down with a sudden force, and she cries out as a surprising burst of pleasure spears through every crevice of her body. Ben moans, milking her skin as his tongue finds her entrance, tracing the wet, swollen folds. Her taste and scent fans over him, raw and delicious, the prospect of having his woman in a foreign position exciting him with its marvel newness.

His excitement only escalates when he feels her understand its purpose, her soft, warm body draping over him, her breasts teasing and tickling the skin of his stomach as she settles onto him. He twitches into her hand and groans as the white-hot agony of her lips slip over the head of his cock, her warm, wet, light mouth stroking and suckling.

Rey fascinates herself with this, her tongue exploring him from this new angle, taking in every hot and surging inch of him that desires her so. Thinking about his body, the sensations of his lips weaving love across her cunt and knowing she can please him in turn merge into a tangle of rapture to her very core, colorful and binding as a braided cord, lasting and wonderful.

They relax into the position together, Ben also enjoying how he can give to her as she gives to him, and yet have a goal to distract from losing himself too soon. Even better when she grows abandoned, rocking against his face, encouraging him to move and explore. He spanks the plush skin grazing his nose, playing with her ass, controlling it, tasting as deep as he can go, testing a finger inside and around her crest until her deep hum around his cock and shuddering gush around his lips gives him what he wants.

A helpless cry lies trapped in Rey’s throat, the way he kisses her filling her body with unbridled satiation. She fists his cock and bobs her head all the harder for it, savoring his taste and every small buck of his hips that only she can hold down.

When he comes she doesn’t spit him out, letting the stream of him inside of her, enjoying the way he goes still and grasps her while he moans to the ceiling, as though clutching on for fear of falling.

Finished, she crawls off of him, turning to meet his tired, lidded eyes. His hair is a mess, his lips shining from her, and she laughs as a madwoman might laugh, as a living woman would laugh, folding into his arms and kissing him and wondering how many more simple pleasures they can share until the silver light of night swallows them both.

Chapter End Notes

[Perhaps one of the most spectacular events ever held at the Colosseum were the "Naumachiae", mock naval sea battles. The Colosseum would be filled from anywhere between 2 to 5 feet of water through the aqueducts built into the Colosseum itself, and the fighters would typically ride smaller, flat-bottomed boats (think Vikings). The practice of the naumachiae date even back to the time of Julius Caesar, where he had 2,000 slaves reenact one of his battles in celebration of his victory over Gaul]
Sooooo I found out that the term "gladiatrix" was invented in the 1800s and felt bad about it, so now the word for "gladiatrix" has been changed to "muliere." I'll go back and fix the other chapters when I have time. Thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’m certain you are aware of your situation, my Lioness.”

The light of day drifts low beyond the walls of the palace behind her, bathing them in fire as he reclines, his long fingers entwined.

It has been three days since the great naval royale—a fight that left a mere fourteen opponents left standing. In that time, enough have died to leave only a handful remaining, including Ben and herself. Lesser, now, since Rey was taken to Snoke’s palace just moments after his victorious return.

“Yes,” she murmurs, refusing to bow her head. “I am.”

“Tomorrow, you will fight against the muliere known as Phasma,” he crones, his brow settling. “She will be a difficult opponent. She may even kill you.”

“Are you asking me to let her?”

Snoke sighs, deep and long. His long nail taps against the arm of his throne, raised upon the red stage. “Either way, you will die tomorrow. I would prefer it if it was the boy who kills you, if only to let your… amorous followers detest him for slaying a lover.”

Heat rises up from the ground, weaving around her legs like a vicious serpent. “You’re disgusting,” she spits behind curled lip, unmoving, free to speak as she sees fit in the light of his smug lordship over her. “My death is not enough, but you want him humiliated when all he ever did was your bidding. You should be ashamed—”

“Be grateful I have not executed him already for his treachery!” Snoke booms, rising suddenly to his feet. The sway of his robe betrays the slightest imbalance, drawing Rey’s eye before he continues. “I could have torn you limb from limb, and still it would have been a mercy!”

Rey folds her lips.

He sits, his small jaw clenched tight. “You have pleased my people. You have distracted them, for a time, as was your duty to me. But your time as my imperial muliere has run its course.” He levels a finger at her. “My pet… tomorrow, you will fight your final battle. And when Ben Solo strikes, you… will… fall.”

Her walk back to the Ludus is a haze.

Shadows and greenery and the white streets pass, guards framing her, the people who pass eyeing
her with curiosity and surprise. Some follow and pester, but her thoughts are far from them as she stares at the cold, empty walls of the Colosseum.

She had warned Ben before, but she knows he will be expecting her to tell him what Snoke had ordered from her. As for the Resistance… Ematt still took word from Kaydel, but it had been a day since her last report, which was vague at best. They were left to the sea of uncertainty, floating alone.

Dead in the water.

When she ascends to the second floor of the Ludus, the floor Ben sleeps on, he is not there. She leans against the rail to stare out above the open roof, losing herself to thoughts and thoughtless half-hopes, half-prayers, too numb to hear the soft, approaching footsteps until Rose’s familiar voice pulls her free.

“I heard.”

Rey glances over, watching the smaller woman lean against the rail beside her, mirroring her clenched hands.

Rose’s eyes are solid, thoughtful. “Once, many years ago, I remember looking down at the Colosseum from the top of Palatine Hill. It was beautiful. And I thought to myself, ‘gods, I wish I could put my fist through this whole lousy, beautiful town.’” She scoffs. “And now? I’m one sunrise away from thrusting my strigle into the neck of the man who destroyed so many lives.”

Considering her, Rey frowns. “But we haven’t heard from the Resistance. Even if you kill the emperor, you could be caught, killed…”

“That’s true,” Rose nods. “But if it’s my life that ends so that others can live, then I am willing to pay that price.”

“But you’re a mother,” Rey presses. “You’re a wife. Wouldn’t it just be easier for everyone if it was just me who dies tomorrow?”

Rose offers a sad, slow smile, placing her hand on Rey’s arm. “You’re a wife and mother too, Rey. These last two weeks with you have taught me that there is a greater purpose in all of our lives. And after the miracles I’ve seen through you, I’ve started to believe in something more for me, too.”

“I just wish that no one had to die,” Rey whispers, feeling the lump rise in her throat, knowing to speak louder would only shatter the thin membrane of restraint she still bears. “I don’t want to kill anyone. I don’t want to fight anymore.”

Leaning in to embrace Rey from the side, the two look down at the courtyard and small arena, where Ben strides across the grass, pausing when he looks up and catches Rey’s eye, the two of them the only ones left breathing in the world as Rose’s words blanket them.

“That’s how we’re going to win, Rey. Not by fighting what we hate… but saving what we love.”

He doesn’t stop touching her.

From the moment they come together again, locked away from anything else, his hand is always on her somewhere—as they kiss, as they breathe, as they strip, as they sweat and remember everything.
His eyes bore into her with the same intensity as the rest of him, their gazes dark and unbending aside from the fleeting heights of consuming bliss that tempts the eye to flicker and recoil from the light of it. He holds her with arms like towers, her back resting trapped against the wall, her thighs closing around him to bring him closer with every thrust.

Ben shudders, his heart pounding wildly, devoting every thought only to her face, knowing it’s all he can bear to do, now. A face once so new to him, so unassuming to him, a face he had once never wanted—oh, what foolish, ignorant thoughts, so unaware he had been of what her face would come to mean to him, that he would cling to it, touch it, kiss it, hold it, hear the sweetest promises etched from its lips, to know the name of that face, both owned and given.

Rey.

“Puella,” he exhales, squeezing her, his rutting gaining speed, saying her name, just because he can.

It doesn’t feel like sex anymore, just to be close, to truly be hers, to be as only they can, while they can. And with her infinite mercy, she has allowed it. This act he once feared, this becoming one with her.

Rey gasps when he strikes deeper, this place he has her boring her out from the middlemost parts of her, as though to split her in two, to reach and touch a family not yet born. She holds him by the shoulders, trusting in his strength to keep her upright, whispering his name, her name for him, as she pulls his mouth down to hers, kissing, tasting, licking, biting, everything.

She doesn’t realize he’s taken her to bed until her back is on the blankets, his body sliding over her with a slow form of abandon. He relishes the way she writhes and squirms, touching herself and caressing him in the process.

Her hands are above her head and his fingers lace with hers, refusing to let go.

They decide to clothe her in scant, new armor.

Rey eyes the two-piece warrily, not daring to touch. She can’t help but wonder who it has been designed for.

Ematt clears his throat to announce his presence, entering the small dressing room of the bathhouse, refusing to look up—even when she stands fully clothed.

“It’s finished,” he murmurs. “Your husband has defeated his final opponent. He’s on his way here.”

Rey nods, her eyes sweeping over him with affection. “Thank you, Ematt. For everything.”

He clears his throat again; she can see the faintest of shimmers in his eye. “I’ll go make preparations. May… may your Lord be with you.”

“And also with you,” she whispers, watching him leave the silent room.

Her eyes look up into the sunshine before following its stream down into the water, where her face lies reflected. She would not cover her face in Rose’s makeup, no—for this fight, she wants Rome to see her as she is. Not as a Lioness, or even a muliere. Just a woman.

His footsteps echo and are so familiar to her now that he need not say a word for her to know it is
him, for her heart to race, for her hand to curl over the babe sleeping within her.

“I can’t do this,” she whispers, trembling. “I don’t want to kill her, Ben.”

He pulls her into a soft embrace, resting his chin on her head, urging her away from her reflection. He rocks her on her feet, trying in vain to smooth the trembles out of her back. “It’s not about what you want to do now, Rey.”

“But, it is,” she looks up into his face, a hot, traitorous tear surging down her cheek, then another. “I’ve already killed one man, and though I am alive, a small part of me died, too. All of this killing… all of this blood… I want to choose mercy, but I won’t have the strength to do it.”

Ben closes his eyes, letting her sorrow wash over him. He cannot fathom her pain, and yet he understands. The choice between self preservation and being slain, the guilt that comes for a person in the night, unbidden, unwanted. And to have her Christian faith, being forced to kill for her family would only add onto the burden upon her soul to do what is holy and just, even when the flesh yearns for justice.

He sits her down on one of the benches and goes to the wall, returning, clad in the armor she will soon be forced to face against, with a tall jar of oil. She doesn’t fight him as he aids her in disrobing, pooling the oil in his hands, starting with her back,

Rey closes her eyes, savoring the warmth of his touch. “Remember your promise to me, Ben.”

*If I die, you must keep on living.*

His wet hands smooth around her sides, spinning along her stomach, over and over again, feeling as much as he can before coating her breasts, until he can’t do anymore. His head falls to her shoulder, heavy as a stone, the stinging behind his eyes too powerful to ignore any longer knowing what awaits them, now.

She reaches back, a hand only grazing his hair before she turns, taking him into her arms, letting him tremble, as she trembles. She presses her lips to his head as he rubs her skin in nervous circles, her voice barely above a whisper. “Ben… will you pray with me?”

Ben sucks in a breath and nods, lifting himself to take her hands in his, squeezing tightly, his eyes closed as he touches his forehead to hers.

The sight reminds her of a child, so innocent and full of faith, and it lights her heart to the point of bursting to watch the man she adores giving himself back to the God who loves him more than she ever could.

She closes her eyes. *Thank you, Abba. If Ben is with You, then I have done Your work here.*

“Our Father,” they murmur, their voices echoing on the marble, “Who dwell in heaven, hallowed be Your name…”

Rey rolls her shoulder, staring out past the gate, alone.

Until Ematt walks up behind her, ushering her out when the large iron gate finally opens. He accompanies her to her side of the arena, where, to her surprise, attendants stand in wait with a horse.

A horse painted by orange and white splotches.
“Bambino?” Rey gapes, awestruck by the girth of the creature, who had seemed so small to her mere months ago. Her gaze finds Ematt’s, hope soaring in her chest. “He’s here?”

Ematt nods, slightly, attempting to remain unaffected by her sudden burst of confusion and excitement. “Yes. Kaydel brought him at dawn, shortly after I learned yours would be an eques match. It seems Finn Freedman was prepared to give this one to you.”

A small smile touches Rey’s lips as she reaches up to pat the neck of the beast, gratified when he turns to sniff at her. She remembers her exposing state of dress and frowns, spotting Phasma at the other end of the arena, already mounting her white horse in a similar outfit.

“Take care to keep your shield up,” Ematt encourages, looping a sheathed gladius around her waist and helping her onto the saddle. The crowd nearest her whoops and she turns to look at them, their earnest faces unassuming and alight, as if they were completely oblivious to her nearing, potential fate.

The drumming starts.

Rey gets a feel for Bambino’s back, so different from Silencer’s. He’s more narrow, his body built for the speed of the Circus Maximus. She compares him to Phasma’s horse, a brawny creature with a thick rump and muscular torso, and knows she will have to rely on speed to, hopefully, outrun and confuse the animal.

*If I can get the horse to drop her onto the ground, then maybe…*

There’s no getting around it. She must try to survive as long as she can. Her desire not to kill cries out from the depths of her heart, but the sound of the drums drowns her out.

They trot slow circles around one another as the managers and attendants abandon the field. There is no hourglass for them, this time. When the music stops, when the people inch to the edge of their seat, it will be life or death.

When at last they do, the uproar is tremendous as Phasma kicks her horse into a fierce gallop, aiming right towards Rey. Steeling herself, Rey does the same, holding her spear aloft, her eyes stinging from the sharp wind as she careens in a collision-course with the mulieres.

And steers Bambino away at the last moment.

Some of the crowd bemoans while others cheer as Rey turns herself by the waist, jabbing at the flank of Phasma’s horse. Its whinny is sharp and piercing, but it doesn’t stop running, already rushing for the next turn to come back towards them.

Rey’s heart thuds. She cannot let Phasma’s pike touch her—if it does, death will be a certainty. But she cannot try her evasion trick again.

It will have to be a game of wills.

Rey stands in the holsters at the saddle’s feet, rising to help avoid the painful bumping sensation as she urges him into full gallop, racing laps around the arena, attempting to wrap her mind around a strategy.

She could throw her spear, but the odds of it actually striking Phasma are next to nothing. Her horse is a much bigger target, but unlike Ben, who could thrust a spear through a stack of hay from a great distance, Rey doesn’t wield such strength.
At last she makes her decision, and Bambino whinnies, following her heed to race back towards the woman, her spear at the ready and shield drawn. She holds it up with the reins in hand, noticing, as Phasma comes imminently closer, that she has chosen to wrap her reins around her body.

Rey tries to strike at her opponent’s horse once more, but misses, the strike of Phasma’s pike skidding against her shield startling Bambino. He neighs and lifts, and Rey’s mind harkens back to when she fell from Silencer, offering her body just one moment of preparation before she falls, sliding rump-first onto the sand while he runs off.

A harsh laughter peels over the stands as Rey gets to her feet, her mind muggy and thoughts whirring, but not so damningly that she cannot see Phasma advancing towards her, her pike raised high.

Rey stands her ground, swallowing the sense of fear and embracing the urge to trust herself. She tossed the scutum aside, thrusting her spear into her left hand and unsheathing the brilliant gladius in her dominant grip, unhinging her jaw in an unearthly roar.

She catches Phasma’s eyes as the horse comes closer, wide but unafraid, prepared, just as she is, for whatever fate comes next.

The tip of her spear pointing out, Phasma’s horse, smart beast that it is, attempts to stop. Phasma shouts above the sound of the crowd, whipping uselessly at her reigns while the horse stops short of Rey’s weapon, rearing back to its hind legs while Phasma struggles to hold on.

Rey doesn’t think, only crouches and takes the opening, swinging the blade of the gladius across the leather straps helping hold the saddle aloft, slicing it clean through.

Before it can come down on her she rolls away, the animal’s shriek of pain almost as piercing as the curdling agony of Phasma’s cries, her body trapped under the horse’s legs as it gallops away.

It doesn’t take long for those cries to die out, her body stuck to the saddle while her stormy eyes hang open and sightless.

Rey sighs, panting onto the silt as sorrow fills her, bidding her to look away.

The Romans shudder with upheaval, crying out from their seats as the announcer takes his position upon the stand. Their voices echo high above the amphitheatre, shouting and unified.

*Leaena!* *Leaena!* *Leaena!*

Rey rises, looking out among the people who shout her false name, their faces awash with a joy that curdles in her stomach like morning sick. Attendants rally the horses, escorting them out through the gates as the announcer prepares them for the final battle.

She glares up into the shaded box of the emperor, and her heart drops to her sandals.

Rose isn’t there.

Rey’s shoulders fall, a thick swirl of dread swarming within her as the emperor’s cold eyes smile down on her with cruel intent.

*You’ve lost.*

The final gate yawns open and it is Ben who steps out of the shadows, the Romans falling into an off, deadly silence, as though they have realized what they have already known for a long time.
“Kill the bitch!”

“No, don’t hurt her!”

“The Lioness is going to kill Kylo Ren!”

“She doesn’t have the guts!”

Their voices, all unfamiliar and scattered like grains of ash in the wind, bounce off of them, a wave of upset shattering louder than earlier cries of pleasure and joy. Now, it seems, the Romans can understand such things as pity for a slave.

The drums do not play. They don’t have to. As soon as they stand apart, they circle one another, gazes locked in an endless embrace.

“You have to kill me,” she says, peace already gripping her as she speaks the words he doesn’t want to hear. “One of us has to live through this.”

Ben shakes his head. “No.”

Anger balls her fists at her sides, and she swings the gladius at him—he parries easily. “You promised!” she nearly sobs, her thin control breaking. “He’s not going to let me go. You have to live!”

A field of grass sways before him as he looks at her, the scent of grapes and the salt of the ocean bearing down, a mother’s kiss laid on his head, a hand, small and soft as a dream, clenched around his finger while his beloved looks on in health, in love.

My son. What waits for you is greater than we can give. Be guided by His light; your purpose will be made clear.

“You are my life,” he declares with a tangible gentleness, throwing his shield and his gladius to the sand, standing tall, proud, and unashamed as he recites his vow, pulling her back to the moment when she truly belonged to him. “Wherever you go, there I will be...” his dark eyes smolder with promise, with invitation, an island of solace in the crushing sea, “...your husband.”

Rey sobs but cannot hide her smile, nor her tears. “Wherever you go,” she recounts, following him, letting him have his last request as she drops her weapons, striding forward to close the distance between them, “there I will be...” He takes her fingers, pressing them to his lips, his gaze a burning question.

A question freely answered.

“...your wife.”

As soon as the words leave her lips his are there to replace them, his arms encircling her as she throws herself into his embrace, letting the roar of the crowd and chant of their names go unheard, so long as they have this.

They remain entangled when the soldiers come to rip them apart, and they look up to see the people shouting down with curses spewing from their lips—not at them, but at the guards who take them away, forcing them with harsh grips down below the arena now erupted into chaos.

Chapter End Notes
[The "Eques" gladiators were gladiators specifically trained to fight on horseback. They would begin the match with a spear and shield, much like the sport of jousting, and would finish by fighting on foot with gladii. Many eques gladiators were volunteers from aristocratic families]

[The prayer Rey and Ben say together is the famous "Lord's Prayer," a famous guideline given by Jesus Christ as part of his sermon on the mount, delivered to about 5,000 people. In his description, many have decided this to mean that we must pray in the order of: acknowledging God, acknowledging His will, giving thanks, making any requests, and closing with a final affirmation of His power (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4)]

[BONUS: women gladiators, though few and far between, were not allowed to fight other men one on one and typically wore a simple loincloth with their breasts exposed. For this narrative, we're going to go with the 'slave Leia' costume, because this is a fanfiction, and callbacks happen sometimes :3]
They are taken to the courtyard of the Ludus Magnus, standing empty after the tournament has run its course aside from the tall emperor passing to and fro, his robes wrinkled and face twisted into a horrible scowl.

The soldiers force them down onto their knees, their heads pulled back, their necks exposed, eyes forced to watch as Snoke points a cruel and crooked finger to Rey. “You. I warned you about what would happen if you defied me. And now, ungrateful pet, you will suffer for it.”

“No!” Ben fights against the hold of his captors, his veins like scorching flames.

“Ematt! Bring the whip. The girl is in your charge—I want this boy to watch how his disobedience shall be repaid.”

Caluan Ematt swallows, leaving as the guards begin to tie Rey upon one of their many columns on the outskirts of the small garden. Birds chirp in their nests overhead as they fasten the binds over her wrists.

“She’s not at fault,” Ben rasps, his anger shivering as he levels himself upon his master from below. “If you wish to punish me, then punish me, play your games with me!”

Snoke paused as Ematt returned with the whip in hand, his eyes sunken and sad. As Rey watched over her shoulder, she noticed Mitaka standing with the other guards.

Mitaka, who admitted the truth of her whereabouts.

Mitaka, who lied to protect her.

She knew he’d seen her with that knife, and yet he did not tell the emperor. Why, now, is he here? Always by Snoke’s side?

“If that is what you wish,” Snoke drones, his deep voice slow. “Guards. Unbind her… tie him up in her place.”

Rey flinches, gasping as they yank her roughly back, replacing her with Ben. At Snoke’s order they tie him so his back is against the pillar, his arms pulled back taut, leaving his chest naked and vulnerable.

“Give the girl the whip.”

Rey takes a step back when Ematt tries to pass the whip off to her, but he reaches out to snag her wrist, placing the handle firm into her palm, meeting her eyes with a silent plea.
“Oh, come now, don’t be shy,” Snoke chuckles, waving her closer to stand next to him. He leans down, his breath stale on her shoulder, his lips too wet by her ear. “I want you to look him in the eye. That’s a good girl… I’ll show you some courtesy. Seeing as our shared dog has been so willing,” he sneers, “one good whip ought to do the trick.”

“One?” she whispers, her nerves quaking beneath the skin.

“As long as you don’t hold back. If I am not pleased, I may order one of my men to do it. I highly doubt Master Solo will appreciate that.”

Rey meets Ben’s eyes, feeling as though she may be sick on the grass. But his gaze is soft and full of an acceptance that makes her jaw clench, before he nods and closes his eyes, turning his head to the side, offering her a clean shot of his body.

She hesitates.

How could she do this? Is this not all just more of Snoke’s cruel games? But if she refuses… there is a chance he may know she is with child. Perhaps Rose has been taken and tortured, she may be lying dead somewhere, and the Resistance…

“Do it!”

The voice who cries out is Ben’s, broken and hoarse but ready, and she bites her tongue hard enough to keep back the tears as she pulls back the whip, and with one, powerful thrust, strikes true.

Ben screams as the fire blazes across his skin, his wrists pulling against the ties until he sinks down, feeling the pain bloom from his cheek down to his chest, strong and powerful enough to make his hands tremble from the pressure of it.

But he quickly gulps it down, his head rolling slack as sweat beads on his forehead, reminding himself of his wife and their unborn child, that, maybe, buying them more time in this way would be worth it.

Snoke snatches the whip and throws it to the ground at Ben’s feet. “Leave him there overnight and have the girl taken to the prisons. Let them suffer while I decide how best to dispose of them.”

Chapter End Notes

[All gladiators who entered into the Ludi for schooling were sworn to be subject to punishment by their managers, which would typically consists of beatings or whipping]
Silence

Chapter Notes

So I went to a doctor's appointment and it turns out my tendon is sorta messed up from a dog bite I got a few weeks ago. I've been icing it between chapters but this is just a sign that the devil doesn't want me to finish, lol. But I shan't let his evilness win!

Thank ya'll so much for continuing to read and support GF as it nears the end. We're almost there!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Night falls over him, slim moonlight barely illuminating the dewey grass. He shivers, his breath steaming puffs into the darkness, his mind a swirling torrent of wild thoughts and lingering, itching pain.

His arms have grown tired from their bondage, every inhale, more of a soft gasp, stinging against his sore ribs. But he shifts his arms anyway, attempting to lay back, to seek comfort where none will be found.

*Rey*...

He wishes he could fool himself into thinking she is safer than he is, but he knows the prisons. Cold and dark, infested, wet and reeking. It’s the last place she belongs. If she is lucky, all they will do is starve her.

Ben’s fists tighten, his throat closing when his mind conjures images that will drive him to madness. Her forces himself to focus, to open his eyes, to let himself think of a way out.

But he can’t.

Snoke had offered them an opportunity. It would have been so easy, to kill her in the arena, then take his own life after her. But the baby… it was the baby that stayed his hand, the small memory of when he was a child, when his mother promised him more.

His mother, leader of the Resistance.

His mother, who isn’t *here*.

And now here he waits for the sun to come, for the darkness to ebb, but it won’t. Not when Rey isn’t with him, not when he can’t be certain she’s safe. Every iota, every corner of him and every bloody, beating organ feels disjointed, torn apart and reassembled, stitched up, burning.

He doesn’t know what his master has planned, but he knows enough to realize that his wife, his child, are going to be taken from him. By whose hand, he isn’t sure. But if Rey’s testimony of Snoke’s senile rantings and threats are to be considered, and his lust for controlling his gladiator puppet, then he can be almost certain Snoke will once again attempt to weaken Ben’s resolve, to break him down and force his love and mercy for Rey to be what ushers her into death.

Ben grits his teeth, choking back the thick sob rising from his depths. *Wrong*, his heart cries out. It
would be a mistake to kill Rey, it would go against all he vowed to do, to protect her.

And yet… if he could end her life swiftly, spare her the tortures only the cruel minds of Rome could envision, then perhaps Ben would burn in Hell, and do it gladly.

*If to love her is death, then let him die.*

How easy it was, back then, to be willing to die for her. And how easy it is now, further entrenched in that love, to be tempted to kill.

*No,* he shakes his head. *No, I will not.*

Wicked thoughts, temptations. How many years did he fail to recognize them? Small imps of emotions that nest in his heart, binding him to their will, not the will that can save them.

So he pulls them apart.

He wrings his hands, tightening his focus on the ropes, huffing through the pain of flexing strength against his bindings. His wrist catches the harsh twine, feeling it fray, and he pulls harder until the tension finally snaps, his muscles weak and limp, but finally given rest.

For hours, he doesn't move, staring into the empty shadows, free, but still bound. He doesn't dare abandon this spot, choosing instead to lean back against the column, and wait.

Footsteps approach in the darkness, interrupting his soggy thoughts. Had the guards not confiscated his gladius, he might have reached for it. But his skin is too taut from cold to bother do anything but speak.

"Ematt…?"

"Master," a soft, familiar voice calls, the shadow of a young man taking form in front of him, the shining glint of a knife in his hand.

*Mitaka.*

Ben lunges forward, his hands wrapping around his scrawny neck, pushing him to the ground. He flails, pushing back against Ben's hold, not even using the knife.

Curious, Ben pauses, a memory of Rey's despair shining through his red haze of thoughts. He releases Mitaka, letting him choke and cough into the grass.

Ben finds his feet, his knees weak. "Why have you come here?"

"I," Mitaka coughs, rubbing air back into his windpipe, "came to free you, Master. But it seems you've already done so yourself…"

"Free me?" Ben scowls, looming as a shadow darker than death. "Why free me, when it is *your* doing that I am here at all?"

Mitaka flounders, before bowing his head. "I'm so sorry, Master. They tortured me for that letter. I didn't know why it mattered so much, but I was worried for the good Madam, Ahsoka." His hand fists in the wet grass, his voice hard in the darkness. "I never meant to hurt her. But it was Master Dameron who betrayed you both. I swear it." Ben feels something on his feet, realizing with a startle that it is Mitaka's forehead. "I did not realize the girl was your… I have done all I can to help her. I have turned the emperor from his wrath, and," he lifts his head, "I know what he plans to do
Ben glares into the darkness, seeing only the whites of Mitaka's eyes. "How can I trust you?"

"Because I know that Rey is the one who killed the general, and have said nothing, if only for the chance that my disloyalty could be forgiven."

He considers this, letting the silence permeate, and when Mitaka remains steadfast, Ben sighs, sinking down to his knee and resting his hand over the younger man's head.

"I do forgive you, Mitaka. On one condition."

"Yes, Master. Anything."

"After you tell me, I want you to flee from this place. Run as far from the territories you can, and keep running," his voice gravels, "until no one, especially myself, can find you."

Mitaka nods fervently, and Ben can feel the cold dread running through the other man's body like a shuddering foal. "Snoke is going to force you to fight in his royal courtyard. He says he will promise you freedom, but... when the fight is finished, his Praetorian Guard will slaughter the victor."

So, a false promise. It is almost unfortunate in the way it gratifies Ben to hear, to know his hunch was the right one.

He takes Mitaka by the arm, helping him up from the ground. "Thank you, Mitaka. You were always a good servant to me," he murmurs, letting himself forget the betrayal before the temptation to take his vengeance returns. The night has softened him, or perhaps it is something else. "I hope you will become a better master than I was."

Mitaka bows once more, not saying a word as he takes the knife and rushes towards the exit, disappearing into the inky abyss.

And when he is gone, Ben returns to his place by the column, his mind at last returning to its scheming machinations against the emperor.

If Lucius Snoke wishes to have a battle, then Ben Solo will give him one.

Water drips down upon the stone and Rey adjusts herself, her parched lips left open for just one drop. When it comes she gasps, waiting again for more.

A thin strip of daylight shines from a hole above, leading to somewhere she doesn’t know. Her mind was lost after the horror of what she’d done to her husband, mutilating his body with barely a second thought. It hadn’t left her with any strength left to pay attention to her surroundings.

She tries to adjust herself to reach more water, but the chains around her ankles keep her firmly on her side of the round, low-ceilinged cell. She lies on her back, clad in the limp and dirty men's tunic they’d given her, murmuring silent prayers to the daze.

She can’t tell if it is morning or afternoon when the cell door opens and her husband is hauled inside, his gladiator’s garb also traded for a pale, sodden tunic. They chain his wrists to the wall, murmuring and spitting at him before they depart, leaving him to rot as they go about their patrols.

“Ben?” Rey whispers.
He isn’t responsive, and for a moment she is terrified that they might have deafened him, but eventually he looks up.

Tears well in her dry eyes at the sight of him, her lip trembling to see the harsh, red mark etched into his perfect skin, blooming and angry. But he is still her Ben, her heart and her soul calling to him, and she drags herself over the stone floor until she is close enough to reach out, to graze her fingertips against his leg. “Oh, Ben…” she whimpers, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. This is my fault.”

He glares at her in silent question.

“If I hadn’t wanted to get married, none of this would have happened,” she sniffles, wiping her face, grazing her cheek with grime. “We would never have gone to the Resistance for help.”

“You’re forgetting something.”

She pauses in her wallowing, unable to look at him. “What’s that?”

“I asked you to marry me.”

She scoffs, but it becomes a laugh, as impossible as laughter is in a place like this. When she finds the strength to meet his gaze his eyes are soft, but sad.

His voice is even softer. “Rey… I think I know what’s coming. And when it does, I’m going to need you to trust me.”

“I’ll always trust you,” she whispers. “Always.”

She has, hasn’t she? Even when she hated him, even after he'd betrayed her, all in the name of his master, she still trusted him. She always believed in him, and even when they walked blind through it all, she had shown him love. More than he could ever have deserved.

Perhaps, tomorrow, he will at last be able to atone.

He takes a deep breath, his chains scraping against the stone as his eyelids droop with exhaustion, the relief of seeing her taking its toll on his body. “I love you, mea Puella.”

“I love you, too,” Rey murmurs, wishing she could reach for him again, “Zuji.”

Chapter End Notes

[Of the many prisons in Rome, perhaps the most famous was the Tullianum—a facility since renamed to Mamertine Prison, the prison where Peter and Paul were held before they were crucified. The prison was located on Capatoline Hill, on the opposite side of the Colosseum as Palatine Hill, just outside of the Comitium Forum (where many of the temples were congregated)]
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