in a gilded trail of stars

by kimaracretak

Summary

Ben Solo finds out the hard way that purrgil are far from the worst things one might find in the unknown regions.

Notes

I can deny Nina nothing, including space mermaid vore.

Asshole comments about the Scots-speaking droid will be deleted.

The engine gives out three hours, four minutes, and thirty-six seconds after Ben's astromech informs him that not only are there no maps for this sector, she's not entirely sure where this sector ends. They drop into realspace with a shudder and the scream of unhappy metal. The stars around them snap back into disorienting dots, light peeking through needle-holes in the fabric of the universe that look even less substantial than the ropey supports of hyperspace tunnels that they had been for the past day.

Ben Organa-Solo, sometime-smuggler and sometime-Jedi, forever cursed and definitely truant from at least three responsibilities, puts his head in his hands and sighs.

His ship sighs back at him, but he suspects a note of satisfaction in its tone that he thinks is uncalled for. Okay, maybe he should have listened to his father. Or his mothers. Or his uncles. Or Su, or Yui,
or Moa, or any of his other classmates who told him this was a bad idea, and had been telling him this was a bad idea since he was three years old and pretending to pilot his dad's ship, in fact.

It doesn't mean he deserved to be stranded out here. Wherever here was.

Ben rubs at his temples, a vain attempt to stave off the headache that always seems to accompany him for hours after the drop out of hyperspace, and listens as the ship groans and hisses and settles into place. The unpleasant scent of burning rubber curls into his nose, and something deep below their feet is making a worrying click click click noise that he feels almost more than he hears.

R4-3H, generally known as Raeh unless she's actively causing trouble, whistles irritably at him, and he drops his hands to give her a look. Ben might not be entirely fluent in her dialect of droidspeak, but he can pick out 'cannae believe', 'o Jakku' and 'wildert here', that last with a particularly indignant tone, and he definitely knows when he's being scolded. What else were astromechs for, anyway?

"Tell that to the engine," he points out. "Didn't someone swear that all the parts we'd cannibalised to expand her astrogation buffer weren't being used anywhere vital?"

The droid mutters something about never treating another machine so poorly, and wheels off to stand by the ladder to the engine compartment, every centimetre of her casing somehow managing to project offended impatience. Ben drags himself to his feet and follows her, the need to deal with the clicking from down below winning out over his desire to make Raeh wait.

He winces at the feeling of the metal against his bare feet, swears as he stubs his toe on one of the rungs of the ladder. Raeh follows him down with a quick firing of her rocket that sounds suspiciously like laughter.

The clicking is louder closer to the engine, but as he paces the small compartment, examining coolant hoses and magnetic seals, he realises that it's still coming from somewhere below him. Except ...

below, now, is just the outer hull, and then the vacuum of whatever part of the Unknown Regions "Raeh, can you run an engine diagnostic?" he asks, but she's already plugged in, whirring softly to herself in pleasure at, Ben assumes, talking to someone who's not him. While he waits for her readouts, he sits carefully against the wall and presses his palms to the floor. The ship is still shivering slightly from the perpetual movement of sublight's closest equivalent to a standstill. The clicking continues.

No. Not clicking, not anymore. Tapping, like ... like maybe something wants to get in.

His ship is at least tenth-hand, with a patched hull and just enough shields to be hyperspace-legal. Horror creeps up his throat, burning cold, and Ben's never been as thankful for Raeh as he is when she distracts him by unceremoniously shoving a readout in his face.

The relief lasts for just as long as it takes for him to see that, according to Raeh, the engine is fine.

"Run it again," he says, mouth dry. What he really wants to say is scan the outer hull, tell me if something's ... there, but he's not quite ready for that answer.

<<A'm nae mistaen>> Raeh beeps with renewed annoyance, but she rolls back to the interface port anyway, determined to prove herself right and Ben wrong. He doesn't mind. The more she grumbles to herself or the engine or the void, the less he can hear the tapping - scratching - skittering - thing outside.

Maybe he's going insane, he thinks, almost hopefully. Maybe there's some sort of bloodburn equivalent for your brain, where the stars punch through your ship and circle round and around your
head on the bad days and the good alike until you don't have any more days to try to sort.

There's worse ways to go. Ben's not naive enough to think purrgil are the only - or even the worst - things to be found in deep space, especially in the Unknown Regions. Other things might have teeth.

Raeh bumps into his leg waving another readout. "Leuk tae" she declares. "Leuk tae, Maister Solo, awthing guid."

She only calls him Maister Solo when she thinks he's being an idiot, Ben thinks, and takes this readout with slightly more trepidation. The engine's drawing a little less power than it was during the first diagnostic, but well within normal parameters for a post-drop cooldown. Well within Raeh's definition of good, but the disparity is enough to send Ben's anxiety skyrocketing again.

He can't put it off any longer. "Raeh, scan the outer hull. Please. I need to know if we're alone."

She emits what can only be a sigh, and then a quick burst of chatter from which he only understands 'furth yersel'. He is absolutely under no circumstances conducting a spacewalk right now, but telling her so only provokes another flood of mostly-incomprehensible droidspeak.

"'Brockle' is an insult, isn't it?" he asks her retreating back. It's a rhetorical question, but her mechanical giggle suggests he's right.

While Raeh scans the hull, Ben takes advantage of the momentary quiet to consider his options if something is clinging to the hull. He could attempt a spacewalk, Raeh isn't entirely wrong, but he doesn't much trust the tethers he have in storage. He could ask Raeh to go investigate, but that seems more likely to lead to her locking herself to the floor in the cockpit and refusing to move until he finally gives in and tells her she doesn't have to. He could try to jump again, since the engine does seem to be fine, and hope that that dislodges whatever's there.

He don't get any further in his planning, though, before Raeh approaches with another readout. She's moving so slowly that if she were bipedal Ben would say she was dragging her feet. "What?" he asks with trepidation.

"Organics." is all she says in reply.

Purrgil? If they were anywhere in space they would be here, but an encounter with the beasts tended to leave one smashed to stardust, not stalled in realspace. Not purrgil, he realises, scanning the text quickly. Something Raeh doesn't recognise.

"Is that -" he starts, but then she jabs insistently at his thigh with one of her manipulators, and Ben looks up to see a flickering blue holo projected in front of his face. There's their ship, with her gloriously patched-together hull. And there, perched on top, dangling upside down so it can press its face against one of the viewports, is a mermaid.

Ben screams.

Raeh rolls backwards and rockets back up out of the engine room, laughing the whole way and leaving Ben wondering for a wild moment if he'd imagined the holo.

"R4, you get back down here!" he yells, scrambling to his feet. But there's only silence.

Real silence, unbroken by any sort of click-scratch-screech from the hull beneath them. Real silence, hollow like a vacuum bubble imploded somewhere deep beneath his lungs and pulled him down into some never-place where sound isn't only robbed of life, it never gains life to begin with.
It's the silence of hyperspace, like Ben always imagined he'd feel if he ever gave into the impulse he sometimes has to override the few remaining safety protocols, detach the transparisteel from its place in the viewport frame, and tumble out to swim in the waves of blue. It's the silence of the Force, the one he never sees more than a glimpse of no matter how much Master Luke or his mother or Amilyn try.

It's the silence of being whole.

It's also a silence that makes thinking somehow more difficult, like he's trying to fight his way up a too-quick river of half-remembered thoughts and stories. Amilyn had told him about mermaids when he was little, grand exaggerated stories she'd picked up from her fellow pilots. Most of the stories made Han roll his eyes and remind everyone present that he had never seen any such thing, and there were some that Amilyn only told late at night when Leia and her opinions on appropriate bedtime stories were nowhere to be seen, but there were always some similarities.

Mermaids were feral scavengers with no conception of time, who stalled ships and waited for the living things on board to die before hauling the metal skeletons off to be welded into their giant maze-like castles. Mermaids were alluring sirens who rode purrgil through hyperspace lanes, scooping up unwary pilots to ensure the continuation of their species. Mermaids were forgotten ghosts of the first species to discover hyperspace, doomed to wander the in-between as some sort of punishment.

Ben puts his head back in his hands. Any of the stories could be true or none, but it didn't change the most immediate fact of the moment which was that he was totally, utterly, kriffed.

Raeh, who's whistling insistently for him to come be polite to their guest, isn't helping matters.

Guest. Ben pauses, replays Raeh's words. No, she had definitely said guest; both their dialects shared that word. Ben scrambles to his feet and climbs up the ladder as fast as possible, trying to ignore the dread rising in his throat.

"R4-3H did you bring -"

She hadn't, not that it necessarily made a difference. Something about having things right outside your ship made transparisteel feel woefully thin, and when the something in question was pressed right up against the surface, grinning with a mouth overflowing with teeth so sharp they could probably puncture the viewport with ease ...

Yeah. Guest. Kriff. They're out of range for anything approximating real-time calls with anyone he knows - that had been the point of this trip to start with - but right now he would give most things he had to be able to talk to Amilyn, or even his father.

Instead, Ben raises his hand and waves, hoping a second too late that the mermaid doesn't speak some sort of gesture-based language in which he's just said something inexcusably rude.

The creature's mouth opens wider, revealing that its teeth are not only sharp, they're probably as long as Ben's hand. At least the expression still looks like a smile. Well, like it's probably a smile. "Raeh, is it ... smiling at us?"

<<Maist like>> Raeh says, but there's a note of uncertainty in her voice that Ben doesn't like at all.

"Why is it smiling at us?"

Raeh's casing can't shrug, but her response that she's not sure why anyone would smile at Ben either is clear enough.
He scowls at her, thankful for something to look at beyond the mermaid's teeth. "I thought we were being polite."

<<Tae her>> Raeh says, but she nudges against Ben's ankle in her version of an apology anyway.

At least, Ben thinks, they don't seem to be in immediate danger. Sure, the mermaid is there - and, more importantly, so are her teeth - but she's also just ... there. Hovering, like Raeh on a particularly good day, or Threepio when he's waiting for the opportunity to say I told you so.

As he slowly takes in the rest of her beyond the teeth, he becomes slightly more confident in that assessment. From what he can see of the creature she seems roughly human-sized, though no one would ever mistake her for one. She's translucent in places, for a start, far off stars and nebulae winking through the parts of her body that simply ... aren't. She wears a tunic and leggings that could almost have come from any desert planet, and her long brown hair drifts around her like a comet's tail.

One of her hands comes up and presses against the window, and in place of fingernails she has long thin claws of shimmering blue.

*Click scratch click* her nails go against the transparisteel, and even though Ben thinks she might scratch right through it, he steps forward anyway. The longer he looks the more he thinks he recognises her. *Click click screech* her nails whisper, and Raeh startles.

<<She wants tae come in>> Raeh says, sounding as bewildered as Ben has ever heard her. <<That's droidspeak>>

It doesn't sound like any droidspeak Ben has ever heard but, as Raeh keeps reminding him, his education on that front hasn't been entirely comprehensive. But it raises more questions that it answers.

"Can she even survive in here?"

The question is addressed to Raeh, though Ben's eyes never leave the mermaid. She's drifting along the side of the ship now, her nails dragging against the hull in a plaintive wail. She looks back over the gap in space where her shoulder should be, and Ben hears the question as clearly as if she were standing next to him: *why aren't you following me?*

"Because," Ben says, before he can wonder at why he's speaking aloud, "To my left is only --"

But he turns, and to the left is the corridor down to the airlock, the same as it has always been.

<<Maister Solo>> Raeh whistles, but the tone hangs in the air between them, vibrating uncertainly. Ben reaches out but -- no. There's no bulkhead there, there never has been.

So he walks. It seems, only, the thing to do, between the mermaid song and the comforting hum of the revitalised engine below. Behind him, Raeh's saying something again, nerves sending her dialect further into unintelligibility. "Don't worry," he murmurs. If he presses his hand against the hull, he can feel her. Waiting. "She won't come inside."

Why had he ever worried about that? There's a mermaid outside, and maybe she isn't breathing, maybe she isn't flesh, but she's real, she's there, and he'll never be alone in hyperspace again.

He can get lost in the galaxies of her. He will be lost in her, he knows it more surely than he knows his own name. And he will never need to be afraid again, not with her protecting him.
The deck is warm under his feet now. He can feel every ridge and divot of the metal against his soles, pressing into his skin like a memory in the making. Like it wants him to remember it.

Remember *something*.

The ship had been cold earlier, and Ben nearly asks --

But Raeh streaks past, rocket firing, and, oh, of *course* it's warmer now. The mermaid's smile makes everything warmer, from where her face is pressed against the airlock viewport and her tongue, flickering behind her many teeth like a solar flare, sends colours cascading through the tiny chamber.

Raeh sounds fainter now. The door must have closed on her, because he can hear everything else still: the thin happy song of the mermaid's nails against the hull, the brittle crunching *crack* as her upper teeth pierce the transparisteel and the web of imperfections echo outwards from the centre.

The dull *pop* of his ears as he steps forward, as the void comes in.

There's physics behind the pull he feels but there's only her hand in front of him, only her mouth, all framed by the gemstone-bright bits of rock caught in the web of her hair. Her lips are cold and her tongue is hot, and somewhere between them, at the edge of an airlock that is now a bridge instead of a barrier, is all Ben Solo ever was.

There is less and less of him now, though her teeth are sharp enough that he feels no pain as she moves up his arm, down his body. All he feels is the incandescent burn of the stars inside her as he joins them.

And he is content.

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