They Don't Have A Word For What We Are

by andabatae

Summary

After Crait, Rey retreats to Jakku to grapple with her past... and her unwelcome attraction to Kylo Ren.

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Kylo Ren was a monster. A murderer. So why couldn’t she stop thinking about him?

Rey was already a bad Jedi, so in the dark of the AT-AT that had sheltered her during her vulnerable years, she gave in to the allure of the fantasy. Kylo Ren’s tall frame and big hands,
his dark hair and hungry eyes. His desperation as he’d said “Please.” The sheer size of him, combined with the peek at his vulnerabilities she’d gotten from this strange, antagonistic Force bond.

As if she’d summoned him, his consciousness brushed against her own, dark and tempting.

_You hate me_, he said in her mind.

There wasn’t a word to encompass how she felt about him. _Yes_, she agreed, ignoring the twinge of guilt.

Notes

This is my very first fic! Be gentle, please :) Don't worry, it's going to get filthy soon. Come find my on Twitter @Andabatae1!
Chapter 1

Welcome to my very first fic, and thank you for reading! Expect angst, smut, fluff, and a lot more smut.

Jakku wasn’t what Rey remembered.

Sure, there were parts of it that were the same. The heavy, searing heat—she remembered that. The way any exposed skin tightened the moment she stepped into the sunlight, the desert air leaching moisture from the creatures that scurried across the sands. And the hulking wrecks of starships in the distance, the graveyard of an empire now hideously reborn—yes, she knew that, too.

But the feelings that should have come with returning to her home planet were gone. She had once felt dread and fear and a painful, terrible hope tied to the idea of a ship arcing away across the blue vault of the sky. A memory of people who had loved and left her and promised to return.

That hope and grief had led her to scratch the tally of days into the walls of the AT-AT wreck she’d made into a home. She’d told herself each small line was one step closer to a happier future, and there had been days when those tally marks had been the only things keeping her going.

Now, though, she felt nothing.

Perhaps that was fitting. Hadn’t he told her so? “You come from nothing. You’re nothing.”

Maybe Kylo Ren, like her, could hear the echo of those words across the distance of space even now. Their strange mental bond had worked like that sometimes—an inconvenient sharing of memory, rather than just experience. Rey focused on her mental shields, breathing into and through the sting of memory. She was alone in the galaxy, tied to no one. A tiny creature enclosed in a shell as hard and dark as obsidian that no one—not even him—could penetrate.

With her mental barriers firmly in place, she opened her eyes again, staring out at the desert beyond Niima Outpost. The wind was lively today, sweeping thin crescents of sand across the flats, shifting dunes a few grains at a time. She was wrapped in the old trappings of her scavenger life, swathed in fabric, but the hot wind pushed at the exposed skin around her eyes. Slipping her goggles into place, she took her first steps into the desert.

“Why do you want to do this?” General Leia Organa’s voice echoed in her mind. “There’s nothing there for you anymore.”

And yes, that was the point, although Rey hadn’t been able to tell the general that. Instead, she’d muttered some excuse about needing a break to recover from Luke Skywalker’s death, and while that had been true, it wasn’t the entire truth. Something essential had died in her on Crait, during that final battle that had sapped Luke’s energy as he’d projected himself in front of the First Order’s guns. As yet one more of the tender bonds she’d been able to form since leaving Jakku snapped, she herself had become unmoored. Drifting. Alone.

Except, if she was honest with herself, that disconnect had happened before Crait and the battle and
the sight of her mentor’s Force projection being pummeled with cannon fire.

It had happened with a few simple words.

“Join me. Please.”

Kylo Ren’s scarred face and pleading eyes were a constant in her imagination. And wasn’t that the worst thing of all, imagination? Because in reality, they had fought over Luke’s lightsaber, which had broken between them, and then she had fled. Retreated, rather. Gone to find a way to be with her allies in the Resistance and the only family she had ever known.

But in her imagination, she’d run towards him, rather than away. She’d cupped his face in her hands and lifted onto her toes and kissed him. And her answer had been “Yes,” and the question had been different, too. Not a demand to rule the universe in some totalitarian regime, but a request to be together. Him and her, set free from the expectations of the past.

Imagination lied.

So here she was, trudging through the desert, the heat simultaneously a blanket smothering her and a force invading her lungs. She was burning up, but nothing touched the ice inside.

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Her former home was still there, if not intact. The exposed metal of the AT-AT wreck gleamed in the sunlight, but nothing was left inside but the scratches on the wall. The spinebarrel flower she’d carefully nurtured was gone as if it had never been. Metal, death, emptiness.

It was a fitting resolution for the place that had shielded her childhood years. Wasn’t that what her life had become, anyway? She’d left the planet, but instead of experiencing the wonder of new worlds, she’d experienced the terror of battle and the horror of loss.

I’m broken, she thought. My life is broken.

And as she sank to her knees, she forgot her obsidian shield for a moment, forgot constant vigilance. Loss was a creature, clawing and hungry, and it wanted all of her.

She didn’t cry. Maybe that was a habit innate to Jakku, too. Tears were just excess moisture seeping away. They were the luxury of the rich or the dead. And even though Rey had traveled far, even though she knew she had the credits to leave this horrible planet whenever she wanted, she simply couldn’t weep. Instead, she choked on her own breath, gasping through a mix of self-hatred and grief.

You aren’t broken.

The voice was deep and familiar. It resonated inside her head, as real as the whistle of the wind outside.

Fuck you. The insult was instinctive—apparently her brain had its own defenses entirely unrelated to the Force. But Rey was an alert citizen of her own mind, a woman used to analyzing her thoughts and feelings, and she recognized a horrible truth: part of her had thrilled to have Kylo Ren speaking in her head once more.

Kylo Ren, not Ben Solo. Ben Solo was dead; he’d made that clear enough.

There was a long pause before his response. When it came, she was underwhelmed. Where are you?
None of your business. Don’t you have more planets to subjugate? She wiped her eyes out of habit, even though there was no moisture to wipe away.

It isn’t about subjugation, he sent through their Force bond. It’s about order. You just don’t see it yet.

Rey let out a dry laugh. Oh, if he only knew. There are other ways of providing order. You don’t have to conquer everyone. You don’t have to destroy planets. Have you ever heard of the concept of laws? Democracy? Diplomacy? She stared at the metal walls of her shelter, thinking how ironic it was that the object that had kept her safe into adulthood had been utilized by the precursor of his regime.

Another pause. When his voice sounded in her head again, it sent a shiver through her. I told you we should let the past die.

She slipped her goggles back over her eyes and headed outside, back into the blinding light that might finally burn some sense into her. She shouldn’t be talking with Kylo Ren. She shouldn’t crave anything but his immediate death. You said we should kill the past, she thought, scanning the horizon. Nothing but derelict ships and the occasional silhouette of another scavenger or luggabeast.

And we should. His response was immediate. Rey, don’t you see? It’s all a lie. Why should you care about the faction that recruited you? You’re indoctrinated, same as everyone else.

And you’re not. The response was sarcastic, as he deserved. Rey had never met anyone as indoctrinated as Kylo Ren.

The pause this time was long enough for Rey to have reached the nearest Imperial Star Destroyer and begin scaling it for old time’s sake.

Just come back to me.

The wind whipped away her laughter. Ren, if you think I was ever with you, you are seriously deluded.

This time the silence remained, and as much as Rey told herself otherwise, part of her mourned.

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Night fell the way it always did in the desert—hard, violent, and with a sudden drop in temperature. By the time the sky was streaked with orange and red, Rey was shivering.

It was foolish and nonsensical. She’d experienced worse all her life and in the immediate past, like on the snow-covered Starkiller Base… but she wouldn’t think about that. She couldn’t think about that. Because if she did, she’d remember the cold snow—her first snow—and the heat of a red lightsaber near her skin and the heat of a body near hers, and then she’d start thinking about dark hair and sad eyes and a body taller and broader than her own. And then she’d remember her inappropriate reaction to an enemy even before this weird Force bond had manifested.

Kylo Ren was a symptom of some sickness inside her.

Instead of dwelling on him, she set up her camp inside the old AT-AT. She’d brought a backpack full of survival essentials, and it should have felt amazing that she now had the means to provide for herself, but the starving scavenger in her was afraid as the sun went down. What if she didn’t get enough food? What if someone attacked to get what she had? It was nonsensical, and it was alarming how being a trained Jedi didn’t fix the programming of her childhood.
I want. I need. I have to have.

This was where fundamental makeup contrasted with reason. She’d always been willing to fight for food, water, and shelter, but her recent experiences had made her want more intangible things. Friendship. Affection. Loyalty. Love. The scavenger in her would do anything to get them.

She’d gotten much of that with the Resistance, but something fundamental was missing. As horrifying as it was, that ever-dissatisfied part of her couldn’t stop thinking about Kylo.

No. No more.

Rey unrolled her sleeping mat and lay down. She’d slept on a similar mat all her life, but now it was uncomfortable. Had she already become so spoiled by life beyond Jakku? Her fellow Resistance fighters had joked about the poor nature of their accommodations, but she’d always counted their bunks as luxury. Had she betrayed her past self so easily?

Rey took a deep breath, then counted the seconds of her exhale. A true Jedi was a master of their fears and memories. A true Jedi didn’t care about discomfort or regret. A true Jedi was calm, controlled, and totally detached from the needs of everyday life.

“Fuck.” Rey slammed her hand into the floor beside her sleeping pallet. It didn’t hurt enough, so she hit the ground harder.

She was a bad Jedi. If Luke could see her now, he would brand her a failure.

Except… Hadn’t he spent years dedicated to regret? And most of that regret had been because of Ben, too…

Kylo Ren, she reminded herself. A monster. A murderer. So why couldn’t she stop thinking about him?

She was already a bad Jedi, so in the dark of the AT-AT that had sheltered her during her vulnerable years, she gave in to the allure of the fantasy. Kylo Ren’s tall frame and big hands, his dark hair and hungry eyes. His desperation as he’d said “Please.” The sheer size of him, combined with the peek at his vulnerabilities she’d gotten from this strange, antagonistic Force bond.

As if she’d summoned him, his consciousness brushed against her own, dark and tempting.

You hate me, he said in her mind.

There wasn’t a word to encompass how she felt about him. Yes, she agreed, ignoring the twinge of guilt.

Their recent communications had been entirely mental since Crait, but now she got a glimpse of his surroundings, as she had when they’d first begun exploring the bond between them. He was lying in his bunk, staring at the ceiling. If she strained, she could feel the firm pillow beneath his head and the stiff mattress beneath his mostly-unclothed body.

Oh, shit. The echoes of sensation told her he wasn’t wearing anything but tight black underpants. The skin prickled on her arms, and an unwelcome throb began between her legs.

Your hate feels… complicated, he said.

Rey’s cheeks burned with mortification. He was in her head, and her shields were weak. He must know how conflicted she was… and that she fantasized about him, even as she despised him. My
hate feels simple to me, she told him, hoping vainly he didn’t detect the lie.

He shifted on the bed. She felt it in a way that defied explanation—like she was part of him and next to him and far away at the same time. The crinkle of crisp sheets was as real as the feeling of the hard floor beneath her.

*I think about you*, he said abruptly. *All the time. I can’t stop.*

And fuck, those words ruined her. She gasped, and her pussy clenched. The self-hate that filled her was no match for the lust beating through her veins and pulsing through her body. Moisture pooled between her legs.

*I think about you, too*, she managed to send. *About how I want to see you dead.*

He hummed in her mind, and it only made him more vivid. They were in his room together, lying face-to-face on black sheets, and they were also in her shelter, lying on a thin sleeping mat. She could see him so clearly, but she could also feel him with her. The Force bond had never been so intense, and Rey sucked in a panicked breath as taboo urges rioted inside her. She should touch his bare chest, trace her fingers over all that hot skin and tally his scars. She should flick her tongue out to taste him. She should slip her leg over his and rub her core against his muscled thigh.

Kylo groaned. Rey… His lips shaped her name like a curse, and it was too much. Rey scrambled across the small interior of her shelter, her back slamming against the scratched wall. Those marks were all the evidence she needed that her hopes were foolish, that her dreams couldn’t be trusted.

He stared at her, something stormy in his brown eyes. His gaze trailed over her, then moved to the wall. His brows drew together. *Where are you?* he asked for the second time that day.

Alarm bells went off in Rey’s mind at the insistence in his tone. She felt him reaching into her mind through the bond, trying to pry loose her location.

If Kylo Ren found her, he would kill her.

Rey closed her eyes and focused on rebuilding her mental shields. Piece by piece, she crafted her shell of obsidian until it stood glossy and smooth between them. When she opened her eyes again, he was gone.
Chapter 2

Rey woke gasping from a dream of Kylo Ren cutting down her friends. Finn, Rose, Poe, Leia… they screamed and fell, but he didn’t stop. He just kept coming towards her across the battlefield, the hellish red glow of his lightsaber reflecting off his black helmet.

The dream had made sweat bead on her brow and trickle between her breasts, so she used some of her precious water reserves to wipe herself clean. Then she dressed in her gear and goggles again and headed out into the desert, determined to banish thoughts of Kylo Ren through physical exertion.

The metal hulks that protruded out of the sand had been picked mostly clean over the years since the Battle of Jakku, but Rey was smaller than most of the scavengers out here and had always had decent luck in hard-to-access places. She rappelled down into the sand-encrusted interior of a bombed-out Star Destroyer, then pried a panel loose and slipped into a ventilation shaft. She didn’t have a particular destination in mind—and even if she did find something of value, she would leave it for others to scavenge—but the act of exploration was soothing in itself.

She’d been someone entirely different the last time she’d done this. A girl who didn’t know about the Force or Kylo Ren or the First Order or any of it. A girl who hadn’t seen Han Solo die on Starkiller Base, slain by his own son. A girl who hadn’t dreamed of that murderer even after he’d caused the death of her Jedi mentor.

Her path terminated at the aft docking bay, and Rey sat at the edge of the tunnel with her legs dangling over empty space. The TIE fighters that had once launched from this bay had been destroyed in the Battle of Jakku, too, blasted into oblivion.

The Rebel Alliance had won that battle. They had won that war.

Rey’s rebels hadn’t.

*It just goes in circles, doesn’t it?* Kylo murmured in her ear. He’d found a crack in her shields, and his voice was as clear as if he were sitting beside her. *Someone wants to rule the galaxy, someone else thinks they shouldn’t, and millions die while we sort it out.*

*Millions are murdered, you mean,* Rey said, unwilling to let him hide behind trite statements about history repeating itself. *By you.*

She felt his shrug, and a flash of him came to her. He was wearing his armor and cloak, his helmet on the table next to him as if he had just returned to his quarters or was planning on leaving shortly. He wasn’t looking at her, but out the window, which showed the white streaks of a starfield viewed at lightspeed.

*Where are you going?* she asked suspiciously.

*You’re a murderer, too,* he said, ignoring the question. *That’s what the Jedi never acknowledged.*
They claimed to love peace and order, but they were killers. Just as violent as the Sith, but deluded by their own hypocrisy.

Yes, I’ve killed people. She saw them sometimes at night, the lines of anonymous, armored troopers she’d slain in battle. Sometimes she wondered what their faces had looked like beneath their helmets. But I used my own blade, not a superweapon. You destroyed entire planets.

That was Hux.

She choked on a laugh that held nothing of amusement in it. Maybe he gave the order, but you were there. You knew the plan. You were just as guilty as he was. She paused, remembering a different time when she’d explored enemy territory, how she’d looked across a different room and watched a man she’d grown to admire plummet to his death. You killed your father.

Kylo turned from the window abruptly, his cape swirling around his ankles. His lips twisted into a sneer as he met her eyes. Will you always bring that up? Do you imagine your petty accusations will somehow bring him back?

No. She had a different, more damning idea. And because the realization of her true intentions was new to her, something she had never openly acknowledged, she accidentally let the thought slip loose. But it might bring you back.

He recoiled as if he’d been slapped. Rage washed over his angular features, and he bared his teeth at her. Don’t imagine you can redeem me, scavenger girl. He looked her up and down with contempt. It’s the dream of a fool.

He’d heard her silent musings last night, then. Foolish dreams, for a foolish girl.

Better a fool, she said, clinging to her dignity in spite of the hurt, than a monster.

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After a long day exploring the Starship Graveyard, Rey was exhausted. She changed into her thin night clothes and collapsed onto her sleeping mat, eagerly anticipating slumber. Her muscles ached in welcome ways, and since she’d apparently driven Kylo Ren away with her accusation earlier that day, her mind was relatively at peace.

But even though she was worn out, sleep didn’t come.

She couldn’t stop picturing Kylo’s face when she’d called him a monster. There’d been a crack in that angry, defiant facade, and something like hurt had flashed across his expression. Then he’d severed the connection, leaving her alone in the ravaged Star Destroyer.

It bothered her, that hurt. It made her restless and twitchy.

What else was she supposed to call him, though? That was the only word that could adequately describe the kind of man who killed his own father and anyone else who got in his way, who destroyed entire planets. She’d called him that before, and he’d readily agreed.

Some monsters know what they are. That wasn’t his thought, but hers. It slipped into her churning mind like a stone tossed in a stream, and she felt the truth in its solid contours. Some monsters despised what they were. Some felt regret far too late to turn back.

Tears pricked her eyes. “Idiot,” she muttered, pressing the heels of her palms against her eyes. “Don’t waste water on him.” Only fools imagined that evil could feel regret.
But Kylo Ren wasn’t purely evil. She knew it, even though everything he’d done thus far had fit the
definition. She’d been inside his head, and there was something decent buried in there. A piece of the
light screaming to get out. The echo of a boy who had been recruited young by the first person to see
his conflicted nature, all that raw talent and need, and give him a purpose.

Snoke was dead now, though. Kylo had killed him to save Rey. Killed the dark to save the light,
even if Rey wasn’t sure she could be termed light anymore.

Maybe she wasn’t such a fool, after all.

She shifted on her mat, wishing she could just purge Kylo from her thoughts. Thinking about his
hidden depths, about the pain on his face and the hunger in his eyes and the way his deep voice had
trembled on the word “Please” after he’d told her she wasn’t nothing to him, always led her down a
dangerous path.

She fidgeted again, feeling hot. Thinking about his eyes made her think about his wide mouth and
bold nose and the scar she’d given him. She felt primal whenever she looked at it—she had done
that to the great Kylo Ren. Her mark would be on his body forever.

“Fuck,” she whispered as her nipples tightened and a throb started between her legs. She wanted to
claw her marks all over him, to vent her rage and frustration on his skin. She wanted to bite him. She
wanted him to bite her.

Exhaling heavily, she gave in to the urge and slid her hand into her leggings. He had kept his own
shields up all day, which meant she was finally safe to do what she had been craving to since seeing
him the previous night.

Her eyelids fluttered shut as her fingertips slicked across wet skin. She was wildly aroused, and the
enraging fact that she was wet for him didn’t change how badly she wanted this orgasm. She circled
her clitoris and moaned as pleasure shocked through her.

His fingers would be big and firm, the skin roughened by the calluses of a warrior. Unless he kept
his gloves on…

Rey swore and bucked her hips, imagining his leather-gloved fingers stroking up and down her
pussy and smearing moisture over her clitoris. The visual was filthy hot, and she was well on her
way to coming just from imagining his hands on her.

*Rey.*

His voice was hoarse and desperate-sounding. Rey stiffened and quickly pulled her fingers out of her
leggings, but the damage was done. Kylo was lying on his side in his bunk again, facing her, and he
stared at her slick fingers with a hungry sort of awe. The fabric of his black underwear was tented
by a massive erection. When he said her name again, her pussy clenched, and she couldn’t stifle a
whimper of arousal.

The moment unspooled like thread, stretching impossibly long, and then Kylo’s hand slid over his
taut abs, down, down… Rey squeezed her thighs together in anticipation as his elegant fingers
gripped the elastic band of his underwear. Then he tugged the garment down his thighs, revealing
himself to her.

Rey stared. She’d seen penises before, of course, in pornography and in the cramped spaces the
Resistance fighters often shared. But she’d never seen his. She was ashamed by how often she’d
imagined it, but none of her fantasies did it justice.
His cock was long and thick, lined with twisting veins and topped with a smooth head that leaked a drop of pre-cum as she stared at it. The skin was ruddier in this secret place than his normal ivory skin tone. She’d imagined he would look like a marble statue, all smooth white skin and sculpted lines, but this was so much better. He was raw and real: a man, rather than some cold and distant god. Rey imagined sliding her fingers over him in exploration, tracing those tantalizing veins, sifting through his crisp black curls, cupping his testicles to feel the weight of them.

Kylo groaned. *I can’t think when you look at me like that.* Then he fist his cock and slid his hand up and down.

Rey gasped. The visual was stimulating, but she *felt* it, too. Her palm echoed with the ghost of that touch, and her belly tightened with an arousal that wasn’t entirely her own.

Madness called. She was shaking with arousal; whatever her thoughts about Kylo Ren, her body knew what it wanted. Lust hummed through her veins, taking her away from the barren shelter on Jakku. She’d felt very little since Crait, but she felt *this.*

*I hate you,* she told him as she tugged her own leggings down, giving in to the boiling need. *And I can’t stop.* She kicked the fabric off, then slid her hand between her legs. As she stroked, Kylo’s hunger and amazement filtered through the Force bond.

He needed to suffer the way she was suffering. As Rey’s fingers glided over her damp curls and wet folds, she sent the tactile sensations across the bond to him so he would know her contours as well as she did. Know them… and know that he would never touch them.

Kylo moaned, and his hand sped up. He was rough with himself, rougher than Rey would have dared to be. He stroked and squeezed that thick column, spending extra time on the sensitive head. She felt all of it through the bond, and the sensation was intoxicating, even though she knew it was only an echo of what they could experience together in person.

That sense of slight disconnect made her reckless. It was only an echo, after all. This wasn’t real. Rage and desire combined into a heady, intoxicating mixture, and she gave in to her filthiest urges. *I think about your fingers in me,* she told him, slipping her own slim finger inside. She was so wet already, and imagining his fingers replacing her own made fresh moisture well between her legs. *About how big they would feel.*

*I would slide them so deep,* he replied in his smoky-starlight voice, sending her a visual of his long, calloused fingers disappearing inside her. *Make you take them, then make you take my cock.* His hand slicked over his erection, his movements lubricated by more pre-cum.

Rey imagined sitting astride him, riding that thick length. *I would take it,* she told him. *But I would take you, too.* She would rake her nails over his chest as she moved on top of him; she would mark him with her teeth. She would make him bleed.

Kylo groaned at the furious images, and his hips jerked. *Rey, you drive me insane.*

She was insane, too, desperate for a man she hated. *This isn’t real,* she told herself, even as she rubbed her clitoris harder, her hips pumping and toes curling as she strained towards orgasm.

*It’s real,* Kylo told her, thrusting his cock into his fist. *You and I—we’re real only with each other.*

Before she could analyze the pain that lanced through her chest at those words, he sent her another image: that he had taken over for her, that his fingers were the ones on her clit.

*Yes,* she told him, jerking under her own touch, half-convincing it was really his. *Oh, yes.*
Kylo groaned. *Do you want all of me?*

Fuck you, she said, aware that she ought to be stopping this entirely, but unable to call a halt. She burned with desire hot enough to melt away every other consideration, and desperation gave way to total surrender. *Show me,* she begged. *Make this worth it.*

And the Force help her, he did. Her mind was suddenly stuffed full of thoughts of him—his hands roaming over her, his clever fingers inside her, his lips trailing over her breasts. His teeth sinking into the sensitive skin of her inner thigh, his mouth working between her legs. His tongue penetrating her while his cock filled her mouth. His muscled body on top of her. He would bend her legs up and take her deep, pin her down and take her from behind. He would fill her everywhere he could—mouth, pussy, ass. He would mark her with his hands and his teeth and his cum.

It should have felt degrading. He wanted to claim her in every way, to own her body and soul. Kylo Ren was a bottomless pit of hunger, and Rey was the sustenance he craved. But in this perfect fantasy, Rey felt nothing but greed and a dark jubilance at knowing how completely he wanted her.

*It isn’t a fantasy,* he said. *You can’t pretend this away.*

*Shut the fuck up and keep going.*

His amusement was a flutter at the edge of her consciousness, but as she sped up her fingers, it receded, replaced by pure lust. He sent another flood of filthy images, working his cock in time with her strokes over her clit. Rey’s lower belly tightened, and soon she was moaning with the thrilling tension of an oncoming orgasm.

*That’s it.* His deep voice crooned in her mind. *Come for me, Rey. My dearest enemy. My obsession. My darling.*

The words sent her over the brink. She stiffened and shook, pleasure rocketing through her body, sparks bursting behind her eyelids like supernovas.

When the orgasm finally receded, she slumped onto the sleeping mat. Her hand went lax, but his sped up. Then he stiffened and groaned, and his cum poured out between them.

They lay face-to-face in the aftermath, staring at each other. His chest worked with huge, gasping breaths that matched her own. She felt like she’d run miles; she was soaked with sweat.

Gradually, the haze receded. When Rey shivered in the cool air, she remembered where she was: lying half-clothed in an abandoned AT-AT on the planet where she had first learned to hope and hate in equal measure.

Reality came crashing in. She scrambled off her sleeping mat, wide-eyed with horror even though her traitorous body still quivered for him. She had just slept with the enemy, and even though it wasn’t real, revulsion washed over her. *Go away,* she said, more panic than anger flavoring her tone.

She felt his sigh in her own chest. *All right,* he said, some heavy emotion behind the words that she didn’t have time to parse. Then he vanished.

Rey was left alone and aching in her shelter, her soul a maelstrom of loathing, fear, and desire.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Can't have the smut without the angst :(

This is a quick one. TW for mild self-harm (wall punching).

*Pain is educational.*

That was what Kylo Ren told himself as the echo of Rey’s horror resonated through his soul. The pleasure that had melted through their Force bond, her arousal as hot and sweet as chocolate, had vanished, replaced by disdain. Now there was nothing.

He could almost believe it had been a dream, were it not for the physical evidence staining his sheets. He’d had enough of those dreams over the previous months to last him a lifetime. Nighttime hauntings full of hazel eyes and freckles, a lithe body and stubborn chin. Visions of her gasping beneath him, whispering words he would never admit he wanted to hear. His dreams of her were so vivid with beauty and pain that sometimes he woke from them with tears stinging his eyes.

It was mortifying. This weakness was unacceptable in a warrior. A leader.

A monster.

He sighed and scrubbed his eyelids with the heels of his palms. He wasn’t tired, even though he’d been trying to adjust his sleep schedule to match hers. Another futile, pointless gesture, aimed at… he didn’t know. It was the practical choice, that was all. He was going to find her soon, and he needed to be perfectly alert when he did.

He stripped the sheets, then went to the refresher and took a shower so cold, it was like being stabbed with icicles. He shivered and welcomed the discomfort, wishing it were even more intense. Without Snoke to torture him anymore, he felt adrift, his body and mind clamoring for a punishment he hadn’t even realized he’d come to rely on.

Pain was educational, but it was also what he deserved.

He punched the tiled wall, and that made him feel a little better, so he did it again and again, hard enough to split the skin over his knuckles. His blood mixed with the icy water, swirling like a cyclone into the drain.

Everything had changed. With no Snoke to rule him, the Resistance scattered and diminished, and his generals handily plotting out the minutiae of the First Order’s new rule over the galaxy, Kylo had too much space and time to think about who he was and what he’d done. So he’d set out in search of a new sort of pain, taking a cruiser and heading into the black, following a nameless longing.

He was close. She’d shown him enough these last two days: tally marks on a metal wall, the hot expanse of the desert, the wreck of a Star Destroyer. He’d been exultant to realize his instincts had led him well; they were in neighboring systems.

And when he caught up with her…
Kylo Ren wasn’t sure what he would do.
The next day, Rey went out into the desert again.

She deliberately aimed away from the hulks of the Starship Graveyard, heading instead towards the empty sands where she wasn’t in danger of encountering anyone. She couldn’t handle any eyes on her.

Last night, Kylo Ren had completely unraveled her.

The memory of that searing pleasure was tinged with horror. She’d once fought back-to-back with him, and she hadn’t always hated being inside his head, but nothing excused her actions. Kylo Ren was a monster, whatever her foolish heart said.

And she’d orgasmed with him.

Rey was appalled at herself. It didn’t matter that he was attractive or that his sad eyes tore at her soul. It didn’t matter if he had the potential for good within him. He wasn’t willing to actually be good, and that was where all hypotheticals ended. Potential was just an empty promise. Actions mattered.

“Something’s wrong with me,” Rey muttered as she headed towards a shimmering mirage in the distance. “Something that needs correcting.”

That was where Jedi training should kick in. Being a proper Jedi was about denial of the self. Denial of feeling. Denial of passion.

Rey collapsed to her knees at the top of a dune, holding her head in her hands. The wind whipped at her goggles and the fabric covering her limbs. What was wrong with her, that she struggled so much with being selfless? She wasn’t dark—surely she would know that, after all this time—but was she really light? She wanted touch and connection. She wanted the power to help her friends. She wanted a better life for all of them. She wanted.

And the most taboo thing she wanted was the epitome of the dark side himself, Kylo Ren.

Rey arranged herself into a meditative posture at the top of the dune, ignoring the heat of the sun through her clothes. A true Jedi could tap into the Force no matter where they were, no matter the discomfort. So she closed her eyes and breathed in, taking the scorching air into her lungs, and tried to clear her mind.

The discomfort of the heat and sand helped for a while. It was hard to focus on anything but the pain of being outside during the day on Jakku. Rey embraced it, relishing the lightheadedness that came after hours of exposure on the dunes.

Luke would have chastised her for this. He would have told her that accessing the Force from a place of fear and pain was what the dark did, that meditation wasn’t about suffering, but stillness. He would have expected more of her, and he would have told her so with that mix of gruff brusqueness
and compassion that had won her loyalty.

But Luke was gone, like all the others. Her parents. Han Solo. Anyone who had touched her life long enough to give her hope inevitably disappeared.

*You’re hurting yourself.*

She ignored the voice. He was the reason she no longer had a mentor, after all.

*Rey. Go inside.*

There was a certain grim amusement in knowing Luke would have told her the same thing. “No,” she said out loud. Her voice came out a croak, and she realized she hadn’t had any water since that morning. The sun was descending towards the horizon, and the sliver of skin exposed around her goggles stung. She blinked, and dark spots swam across her vision.

*Rey. Please.*

Tears pricked her eyes, even though that was the fastest route to dehydration. *Please,* he’d said to her in front of Snoke’s corpse, when she’d foolishly thought he could be redeemed. *Please.* But he hadn’t meant what she’d wanted him to mean, and since then, his actions had destroyed her mentor and sent the Resistance into hiding. Kylo Ren wanted to rule the galaxy, no matter the cost. It didn’t matter how much she wanted him.

*It matters,* he said in her head, louder than ever before. Her mental blocks were crumbling.

*Get out of my head,* she snapped. When she sucked in a breath, it was heavy with heat and sand. *Get to shelter.* His concern echoed in her body in a way that made her want to rip her heart out.

*No.* A pointless refusal, but this was the only thing she felt like she could control. She wasn’t dead yet, and she could meditate this agony and confusion away.

*I’m coming for you.*

The words sent a thrill of terror through her. She tried to breathe deeply and recover her equilibrium, but it was pointless. Her heart hammered with a confusing mix of emotions. She flashed back to the first time he’d offered to train her… to a snowy forest and their first lightsaber battle… to fighting back-to-back with him as he’d betrayed his mentor and master. And then, worst of all, him holding his hand out to her. *Join me. Please.*

The most tempting offer… but not how he’d meant it. Because as distanced from the light as Rey apparently was, she could never accept a life that involved making other people suffer.

Kylo Ren was poison. And if she wanted that poison with every fiber of her being… well, people who craved poison usually died.

Rey stayed out in the dunes. She stayed past sunset, through the night, and into the morning, staring at the horizon with exhaustion-blurred eyes. The Force hummed around her, connecting and binding every living thing, but even that primal force seemed dissatisfied. It wanted something she didn’t understand or know how to give. She sank deeper into her trance, reaching for answers. The web of the universe spread out before her, millions of interconnected specks of light, but she only had eyes for one red flicker.

As the sun reached its zenith and the heat bore down, Rey surfaced and realized she’d made a
mistake. She wasn’t any closer to a profound realization, and she was dehydrated and overheated.

She stood up and staggered back towards her shelter. As she did, though, a thought sent her stumbling.

*I miss him.*

The desert was hot and deadly.

Rey knew this. She’d lived this. And so it was with a particularly morbid humor that she collapsed on the sand only a few minutes away from her shelter.

The sun beat down on her back, but she wasn’t sweating anymore. Her muscles cramped, and her heart raced in a frantic, erratic patter. She breathed in, then coughed when fine sand filled her lungs. The cough soon turned into a laugh. Wouldn’t it be funny to die like this? For her home planet to consume her at last?

As Rey breathed in hot, sandy air, succumbing to heatstroke so close to her shelter, she acknowledged that maybe this was what she’d really wanted in coming to Jakku. An ending.

The girl who felt nothing and had nothing wanted to *be* nothing.
Chapter 5

As he landed on the hard-packed expanse of dirt that Niima Outpost had the gall to call a spaceport, Kylo felt Rey's shields give way entirely. He'd been glimpsing her in alarming flickers of heat and grief for hours, but even in her weakened state, she'd managed to protect some of herself from him. Now those barriers vanished, and he slid easily into her mind.

She lay face-down on the sand, her body burning, her heart tapping a distressed rhythm. He knew instantly that she was dying.

And that part of her was relieved.

Panic burst in Kylo's chest on a flurry of dark wings. "No," he shouted, grabbing his helmet and the pack he'd filled the previous night. He lowered the ramp and jumped off before it even hit the ground. Some grubby creature no doubt bent on fleecing him of his credits squawked and leapt out of the way. Kylo sprinted away from his ship, uncaring that it might be stripped for parts by the time he returned.

The sun was merciless. He wore black wool—an exceedingly poor choice, but there was no time to change. He slipped his helmet on, and that, at least, provided some relief from the direct rays of the sun. The helmet was new—simple and practical, designed solely for being outside in hostile environments. The part of Kylo Ren that had needed to feel like the echo of a fabled past was gone, buried in rubble he hadn't yet begun to excavate.

The rasp of his breathing was loud in his ears. All around him, alien creatures stared and whispered, so he engaged his lightsaber for a few seconds. That was all it took to make them recoil and scatter.

They knew what he was.

Kylo ignored the burst of rage their fear roused in him. He plunged into the loose sand of the nearest dune, cursing as he scrambled up it. Running in sand was nearly impossible, but he forged on anyway. Nothing would keep him from her.

He opened himself to the dark side of the Force, and his visceral fear sent a wave of power through him. It lifted him up out of the sand, sent him flying over the peak of the dune. He landed on the downslope and sprinted the rest of the way, then used the Force to launch himself up the next dune, too. Force flight was exhausting, and he was burning up from the heat and exertion, but there was no time to waste. He could feel her life flickering.

He crested another dune and looked down to see a small, brown shape huddled at the base of it. Relief sent him spinning out of his Force flight, and he tumbled down the slope, scrambling towards her with the clumsy inelegance of a child. Finally, he was there, his shadow covering her, his hands turning her over and stripping off her goggles and headscarf. Rey's cheeks burned brick red, and her breathing was faint.

He rummaged in his pack for water and held the canteen to her lips. Rey's throat rippled, and then she moaned and drank greedily. He was so deeply enmeshed in her now that he felt the moment her parched cells began to heal.

She would live.

As Kylo's relief and gratitude went spinning through the Force, an energy bright as sunlight and soothing as spring water answered.
Mine to protect. The thought was both easy and profound, fitting into his fractured soul like a long-missing puzzle piece sliding into place.

Always.
Heat on her skin. Heat in her veins.

The firm grip of arms around her.

Rey’s goggles were ripped off and a canteen shoved against her lips. Metallic-tasting water poured into her mouth, and she gulped it down eagerly. The flow was too strong at first, and rivulets dripped down her chin and dampened the neck of her shirt.

Then the canteen was removed, and Rey cried out in loss. But her savior returned soon enough, tracing a damp washcloth over her hot face. She moaned and leaned into a broad chest, rubbing her face against the cool washcloth. Whoever held her was using his bulk to shield her from the sunlight, and even that small reduction in temperature felt like a blessing.

She shifted, and dizziness washed over her. She turned her head and vomited.

“It’s all right,” the disembodied voice of Kylo Ren said, because apparently even when dying she couldn’t escape him. “You’ll be better soon.”

Rey shuddered. As the damp cloth continued to glide up and down her skin, she fell back into unconsciousness.

#

Rey’s head hurt.

She moaned, and immediately a glass was pressed to her lips. The cold water was the most amazing thing she’d ever tasted. She gulped it down greedily.

She was shockingly cool, despite the warm body pressed against her back and the strong legs bracketing her own. The extra layers of fabric she’d worn in the desert had been stripped away, leaving her in a sleeveless tunic and leggings. Both the fabric and her exposed skin and hair were damp, as if someone had shoved her fully clothed into a cold shower. The air was clean, chilly, and dry, free of any dust. Recycled air. Shipboard air.

Her eyes shot open.

She was on a ship. In space. The pinpricks of stars shone beyond the window of the small cabin she was in.

The arm around her waist tightened, and she turned her head to view her rescuer.

Then promptly shrieked.

Kylo Ren had found her.
He wore a simple black tunic and trousers, rather than his usual uniform, and he looked exhausted. 
“How do you feel?” he asked, eyeing her with something bizarrely like concern. His deep voice rasped over her nerve endings.

She lunged forward, trying to break his hold. His arm was like a band of iron around her stomach, though, and he jerked her back into his chest. She dug her nails into his muscled forearms, making him hiss in pain.

“How do you feel?” he asked, eyeing her with something bizarrely like concern. His deep voice rasped over her nerve endings.

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“Stop that,” he ordered.

Rey laughed, feeling positively deranged. “Couldn’t you have just let the desert have me?” she asked, still futilely trying to claw her way to freedom. “Or did you want to be the one to strike the killing blow?”

His hold slackened at her words, and she finally scrambled free. She leapt off the bed and turned to face him.

He was so fucking beautiful, and she hated it. Even with reddened eyes and tousled hair, he drew her like a magnet. He leaned against the headboard with his long legs stretched in front of him, and his tunic revealed brawny arms and a slice of pale chest—a chest she’d been so close to last night.

That wasn’t real.

Kylo’s brow furrowed in a thunderous expression. “Why did you want to die?”

Rey could have told him that she didn’t know—that she wasn’t even sure if she had truly wanted it or if it had been a moment of weakness brought on by heat and exhaustion. She could have confessed the anger and grief choking her, but he was the cause for most of it, and she didn’t owe him any answers, anyway.

His lightsaber was on the nightstand. Needing to lash out to stop him from looking at her like that, she called the weapon to her with the Force. Bizarrely, he allowed her to, merely watching as she flicked the blade on. Energy hummed into her hand through the hilt, and the familiar surge of battle adrenaline erased the last of her headache. The Force sang through her, dark and crooning, inviting her to taste the sweet ecstasy of violence.

She lunged at Kylo… then stopped when he didn’t move. “Fight me,” she demanded, trembling with the need to hurt him.

“Is that what you want?” That dark, sensual voice wound around her, making unwanted memories shiver through her. She saw him gasping as he came, and that vision was followed by another: she was outside herself, watching her own body arch while her face contorted in pleasure. His memory, not hers.

Kylo’s pupils dilated as the images pulsed between them, and his hands fist the sheets. Rey’s pussy clenched in response, and a fresh wave of hate flooded her. She lifted her chin. “Fight me,” she repeated.

He shifted to the side of the bed and slowly rose to his feet. “Then put the lightsaber away.”

Hardly caring how they fought, so long as she got to vent her frustration on his body, she flicked the saber off and wafted it towards an antique wooden bookshelf at the other end of his sleeping quarters. How like Kylo this room was: austere and black, all clean lines and sharp edges, except for that tantalizingly out-of-place bookshelf and its leather-bound tomes. A puzzle wrapped in darkness.
He took a combat stance, and Rey snapped. She flung herself towards him, striking with hands, elbows, and knees in a form of close-quarter combat the Resistance had trained her in. He blocked her blows with his broad hands, shifting out of the way with silken movements.

“Fight back,” she snapped as she flowed away from the knee she’d launched towards his groin. Her follow-up left hook crashed into his cheekbone, but even that didn’t spur him into action. He shook the hit off and kept blocking, curving his hands around her blows in a way that felt far too much like caresses.

“Are you satisfied yet?” he asked, all cool composure.

Rey screamed and leapt on him, knocking him to the floor. She straddled his waist and punched him again and again, enjoying the sting of pain as her knuckles crashed into his jaw. He was smirking again, somehow looking like the one in control even as he received a beating. It was maddening.

Kylo gripped her waist in his big hands, and she split his lip in retaliation. Blood beaded on the plush surface, and the dark ruby shine of it was mesmerizing against his pale skin. Black hair, white skin, red blood—he was always painted in such stark colors, a man of night and stars and death.

Some sort of madness swept over Rey then.

She fitted her hand around Kylo’s throat and squeezed, holding him in place as she dipped down to lick the blood off his lip. The rich, coppery taste burst on her tongue, and she shivered in feral joy.

“You like that?” Rey demanded, pulling back to look at him. He was so sexy beneath her, trapped by her hand and her thighs, his eyes heavy with pleasure even as blood painted his mouth. Her tormentor, her rescuer, her victim. Moisture flooded her cunt, and she undulated against him, rubbing her aching clit against his taut abs.

He wasn’t defeated, though. He surged up beneath her, breaking her hold on his throat and fisting his hand in her hair. He tugged her head to his and kissed her desperately, and she was helpless not to kiss him back.

They tangled together on the floor, rolling and grappling, each fighting for the upper hand. He tasted like blood and sweat, and Rey licked into his mouth eagerly, desperate to consume all of him. She hated him, oh, how she hated him, yet she wanted him more than she’d ever wanted anything.

He pinned her at last with her arms over her head, then settled between her legs. Her thighs parted eagerly, welcoming him as close as he could get as they kissed with frantic urgency. They were both fully clothed, but the heat of his erection burned through the fabric separating them. He rolled his hips, and Rey gasped as the bulge of his cock rubbed over her clit.

“That’s it,” he said against her lips, rocking against her sex again. “That’s my greedy little scavenger.”

She arched her back to rub her breasts against his chest. Her nipples were tight and sensitive, and she moaned when his chest raked over them as his cock dragged over her clitoris.

“You’re not allowed to die,” he murmured, drawing back enough to look her in the eyes. There was a fanatical gleam in those brown depths. “Not by my hand, not by anyone else’s. Not even yours.”
Rey’s breath broke into a sob as he punctuated the order with another roll of his hips. “You hate me,” she whispered. “We’re mortal enemies.”

“I could never hate you,” he said, as fierce as she’d ever heard him. “And they don’t have a word for what we are.” Then his mouth was on hers again. He consumed her like he was the one who had just been lost in the desert, and she the only source of water. He licked deep into her mouth, his tongue rubbing against hers in a sensual dance that only intensified her craving for him.

She kissed him back with the full force of her anger, need, and confusion. She was desperate for this, and it was a thousand times more intense than when they’d orgasmed together. His body was strong and hard, the pressure of his lips nearly bruising. As their minds and bodies twined together, the Force bond hummed with pleasure.

She was tapping into the dark side, she realized. Need and aggression and want and pain and glory… the Force roared through her like a symphony, but it didn’t feel like a sin. It felt essential. Human.

Kylo drew back and gripped the hem of her shirt in his fists. His biceps flexed as he ripped it up the middle. Her breastband swiftly followed, and both garments were launched across the room. Rey gasped as her chest was exposed.

“Gorgeous,” Kylo said, looking stunned as he stared at her breasts. His awe poured through the bond, and she reveled in the heady power she had over him. She could see her own straining pink nipples and flushed chest through his eyes, and she arched her back in a display meant to drive him wild.

He groaned, and then his head dipped with the speed of a warrior’s strike, and his lips closed around her nipple.

“Ah!” Rey bucked under him, digging her heels into the floor as he sucked. Her nipples had always been sensitive, but she’d never appreciated exactly how sensitive until this moment. The hot, wet suction of his mouth was shredding her sanity. When he nipped the tightly furled tip, lightning sizzled through her, intensifying the heavy ache in her core.

“Need you,” Kylo muttered as he switched to her other breast. “Don’t understand it.”

It could have been an insult, but Rey knew what he meant. This draw between them was essential and raw, something elevated beyond common experience. The Force bond was proof of that.

*How did this begin?* she thought dazedly as he sucked one nipple while pinching the other.

*On Starkiller Base*, he responded immediately. *You were angry at me. You pushed at my mind. I let you in.*

*Deep*, he didn’t say, but she felt the truth of it. In her ignorance of Jedi ways, she’d attacked him with both body and mind, and despite knowing better, he’d opened his mind to her, letting her plunge deep into his soul. That was when she’d first felt the hints of light in him.

*Not now*, he thought, shifting against her. His mental signature signaled rejection. *Now we just feel.*

“Yes,” she said out loud, sinking into the sensations. “Now we feel.”

The next moments were a blur of grasping hands and ripping fabric. Rey tore his tunic from him, and he ripped the seam of her leggings as he stripped them off her. Soon they were both naked and writhing against each other.
Rey lifted her hips and rubbed her pussy up and down his cock, smearing her wetness over his skin. They moaned in unison.

“You haven’t done this before,” he said with the certainty of a man who saw inside her head.

“You haven’t either,” she replied, equally certain.

He shuddered as his erection slid between the lips of her pussy. “Somehow, I think we’ll figure it out.”

Rey had watched pornography. She’d gotten a contraceptive implant, as most women did. Logistically, she knew what to do.

And yet.

Kylo Ren was naked against her. Big shoulders, big body, big cock. He moved over her like a rolling ocean wave, and she wanted him inside her as much as she feared it.

“One moment,” he said in a strangled voice. He disentangled himself from her arms and scooted down her body. Then his shoulders were stretching her thighs wide, and his mouth was on her.

“Oh,” she gasped as his tongue danced over her clitoris, igniting sparks across her nerve endings.

“Oh, please.”

*Please* wasn’t a word she normally used, but with his hot mouth on her pussy, she couldn’t think about anything but her need. *Yes. There. Harder.*

He was in her head; he knew what to do. One long finger slid inside her as his tongue laved her clitoris. Rey’s toes curled, and she pinched her nipples with both hands, relishing the sting as Kylo consumed her.

One finger was replaced by two, and it was mildly uncomfortable. But Rey had been raised in pain, trained in it, and this was so minor as to barely count. “More,” she demanded.

Kylo raised his head. Her wetness gleamed on his lips. “I need you, Rey,” he said in that smoky sex voice.

“Yes.”

“And I don’t want to hurt you.”

Rey stared at him, briefly befuddled. Sex hurt sometimes, didn’t it? And she had punched him beforehand, anyway. The coppery aftertaste of his blood was still in her mouth.

But his eyes were wide and earnest, and with his mind open to her, she knew his concern was real. Something twinged in her chest. “Do it,” she said, placing a hand against his cheek. “If it hurts, it’ll be worth it.”

Kylo heaved a shuddering sigh, then rose up over her. His hips settled between her thighs, and then she felt the firm press of his erection against her. He lowered a hand to guide himself into her body, and she shifted to allow him easier entry.

*Oh.*

His cock was hard and hot and so thick. He pushed into her, an inexorable invasion that she simultaneously wanted to shrink from and embrace. Her body burned as it tried to accommodate the
intrusion.

“Are you all right?” he asked when he was halfway in. His jaw was clenched, and sweat beaded on his brow.

Rey shifted her hips experimentally. “Almost,” she said, dipping a hand between their bodies. “Give me a moment.”

She rubbed her clit, embracing the pleasure. As her body relaxed, the pressure of Kylo’s cock started feeling not just good, but essential.

Kylo held himself on his elbows over her, keeping his weight off her as he stared down in concern. “Now,” she ordered, not wanting to think about that concern. “Do it.”

At her words, he closed his eyes and shivered. She felt the movement deep inside, and her vagina clenched around him.

“Rey,” he said, opening his eyes. He stroked the hair away from her face with his long fingers. “Rey.”

Then he pushed all the way in. It was so much, almost too much, but Rey was quickly realizing that no amount of Kylo Ren would ever be enough. He began moving in surges as firm and rhythmic as the sea.

She’d never imagined a possession this complete. His cock filled her beyond what she’d ever anticipated. His body pressed down on her, heavy and strong. His sweat-slick chest slid over her breasts. She wound her arms around him and instinctively lifted her knees, and when he hit some new place inside her, she gasped and wrapped her legs around his hips.

“Rey,” he said, apparently beyond any speech but her name. One big hand shifted under her buttocks, lifting her to his penetration. “Rey.”

Then they fell into silence, consuming each other both physically and mentally. The Force bond amplified the pleasure, sent it spinning to every corner of their shared consciousness. Rey felt him deep inside her body, but she also felt his wonder and lust, the desperation that led him to fuck her with harder, faster strokes. He wanted to consume her, to make her completely his own.

I want that, too, she thought. I want all of you.

Kylo shouted, then plunged deep, stiffened, and shook. Warm, wet heat flooded her. It was followed quickly by his reflected embarrassment.

“It’s all right—” Rey began as Kylo drew back.

“Shut up.” Kylo pulled out of her body, then slid a hand between her legs. He toyed with her clitoris before plunging inside her with three thick fingers. Rey arched, welcoming his fingers the same way she’d welcomed his cock. He penetrated her for a few long strokes, then focused on her clit.

“Oh,” Rey said again as an orgasm built. “Yes, like that.”

Next time I’ll make her come first. She heard Kylo’s thought, even though it wasn’t directed at her, and a bizarre rush of affection flooded her. Lust was easier to handle, so she focused on that. “Make me come now,” she demanded. “Make me come hard.”

He obliged, rubbing firm circles over her clit. Rey’s body seized, and she tipped her head back with
a cry, nearly blacking out as pleasure ricocheted through her body. Her thighs quivered, snapping around his hand. “Fuck,” she said over and over again.

She’s beautiful.

That thought was all Kylo’s, and for a moment, she saw herself as he saw her. Brave, bold, beautiful. Unique in all the galaxy.

Essential.
They lay tangled together on the floor, a pile of sweaty skin and shaking limbs. Rey shuddered as an aftershock rippled through her. Her breath came in gasps, and strands of loose hair stuck damply to her forehead.

Kylo propped his head on one hand, his gaze heavy and intense as he traced lazy circles on her stomach and hips. Rey slipped into his mind and found a mix of lust, pride, and… peace.

For perhaps the first time in his life, Kylo Ren was satisfied.

As Rey’s skin cooled, her mind sharpened. She was lying naked on the floor with the galaxy’s most notorious mass murderer. She’d welcomed him inside her body—and wait, had he just abducted her?

She sat bolt upright, staring at the stars through the window. “Where are we?” she demanded.

“My personal cruiser. We’re still in orbit around Jakku.”

She sat up, and as Kylo’s gaze fixated on her breasts, she felt abruptly awkward about her nudity. She draped an arm over her chest, batting Kylo’s hands away when he tried to pry it off. “You don’t have the right,” she said.

His brows rose. “Don’t I? As I recall, I was inside you just now.”

Her cheeks flamed. Her pussy was still wet for him—wet from him—and she felt the urgent desire to wash. “Don’t follow me,” she snapped, surging to her feet.

It wasn’t hard to find the ‘fresher. This was a small cruiser, operable by a single pilot, and the shower was just off his sleeping chamber. She locked the door, even though that wouldn’t stop him if he truly wanted to get in.

A shiver went over her as she imagined it. Kylo beating down the door, or maybe launching it against the opposite wall with the Force. Kylo surging into the shower with his muscles and dexterous fingers and all that horrible, tantalizing longing tangled up in his head. Kylo picking her up and flattening her against the wall, his mouth hot and hungry at her throat.

She shoved the fantasy away and started the shower. *It’s normal to feel desire*, she told herself as she soaped the sweat and intimate fluids off her body. *This is a normal human need, nothing to pay too much attention to.*

It didn’t feel normal, though.

She’d never wanted anyone else this way. She’d never imagined one of the other men of her acquaintance slamming her into a wall and fucking her mindless. Never craved and despised someone so much at the same time.

Distantly, she was aware of him getting up, wiping himself off on a spare shirt, and heading into the cockpit. He stared out at the expanse of stars, hands on his lean hips, still fully naked. There was an agony beneath his natural mental shields that felt like swallowing sharp glass when she prodded it, so she slammed her own shields down and rejected their connection.
A short time later, she was clean and dressed in her tunic and leggings again. Thankfully, Kylo had chosen to dress as well. She joined him in the cockpit, her gut rioting with unease, her skin tingling with desire. “You have to take me back,” she said.

“Do I?” he asked, staring out at the gleam of stars.

“My shuttle is there.” It was a battered thing, rented to maintain her anonymity, but she couldn’t leave it on Jakku. “I have to return it.”

“My people will take care of it.”

Frustrated by his rigid posture and distant voice, she punched his shoulder. “I don’t want them to take care of it. I don’t want anything to do with ‘your people.’”

That finally convinced him to glance sideways at her. “Yet you have no problem having quite a lot to do with me.”

Her cheeks burned. “Just because I enjoyed your cock once doesn’t mean I want the rest of you.”

She regretted the words an instant after they landed. Kylo stiffened, and something haunting passed over his face. An awful, familiar loneliness expanded in her chest, and she couldn’t tell if it was his or hers.

He closed his eyes and sighed. She waited, tense, to see what he would do, and when he stepped towards her, her body thrilled with more than just alarm. Kylo backed her against the wall of the cockpit, planting his hands on either side of her head. Her shoulders jammed into various buttons and switches, and the ship whined in confusion, the floor shuddering.

“Don’t do this,” he said, leaning close to stare into her eyes. She was pinned by his gaze, captivated by that intense regard. His surface betrayed some of his distress, but the emotions seething under his skin were so much more, so painful she had to shut them out.

“Don’t do what?” she asked, hardly able to breathe. “Don’t act like we’re enemies? Don’t tell you this changes nothing?”

His face contracted with a pained expression. “It changes everything, Rey.”

_He saved me._ Rey’s eyes burned, and the words of gratitude she should have spoken when she first woke up got stuck in her throat. When she reached out to the Force for support, the light was so very hard to find. Dark, angry energy throbbed within easy reach, though, so she gave in to whatever would give her strength.

“Does having sex with me erase everything you’ve done?” she asked. “Does saving me from the desert bring your father back? Does it bring Luke back? Does it bring all the other people you’ve tortured and killed back?” Her voice rose with every word.

“You’ve always known what I am.” His voice was guttural, his expression furious.

“Yes,” she said, refusing to flinch. “I know what you are. And I know that no matter what you made me feel, I will never forgive myself for touching you.”

A horrible silence fell. Cold seeped into Rey’s bones.
“Fine,” Kylo said, stepping back. His face was a mask again, cold and distant. “I’ll leave you on that hellish planet to rot.” He strode away, then paused in the doorway, rubbing his chest as if it ached. “Thank you. You’ve given me what I needed.”

#

He left her on Jakku.

It was crazy to cry as his cruiser arced away, but Rey did, anyway.

This is what you wanted, she reminded herself. Accept it as a gift.

But as the sun cracked her exposed face and the heat infiltrated her lungs, she knew there was no banishing this hurt. The same way her young mind had latched onto the empty sky as a promise of hope, her adult heart had attached itself to that ship.

Kylo Ren was gone, and Rey was once again alone.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

It's Kylo time! Which means a new warning for violence :( From this point on, let's assume the pretty consistent presence of angst, violence, or smut (or all three at once, if we're lucky).

Kylo Ren embraced the rhythms of combat. Turn, strike, deflect, counterstrike. It was meditation of a sort, although the turmoil inside his chest was laughably far away from peace.

The sparring yard was on the lowest level of his new castle on Mustafar. It was ridiculous to call this repurposed Imperial Base a castle, but Darth Vader’s former castle was nearby, and Kylo could hardly downgrade.

His Knights had asked him to establish this location for them now that Snoke and the Supremacy were gone. They needed a place to commune with the dark side of the Force—somewhere private to train, separate from the antiseptic bases of the First Order. At the time, Mustafar had seemed ideal, but now that Kylo woke every morning to the sight of his grandfather’s castle towering black and ominous above the lava, he regretted the choice.

It was one more marker of his weakness. Not because he had failed to emulate Vader—that particular delusion had died a violent death in a turbolift on the Supremacy— but because he had spent so long trying.

Kylo Ren was no Vader. He was something else entirely.

Kylo charged across the sparring yard at the three Knights of Ren bold enough to spar with him when he was in this sort of mood. His lightsaber crashed into the Mandalorian beskad Miriash deployed with vicious cunning. The other two also wielded lightsaber-resistant weapons: one long stave of songsteel and one electrostaff. He’d felt the sting of all three weapons more times than he could tally. Pain was educational, after all, and Snoke had always demanded that his underlings draw blood… and worse.

The Knights were slightly more careful with him now that he was Supreme Leader, less likely to turn a fight into an exercise in sadism. Kylo had yet to determine if it was the absence of Snoke or their enhanced fear of him that was responsible.

It always took at least three of the Knights to truly challenge him. Kylo flowed under Rolkiel’s songsteel stave and swung backhanded at Miriash. Her Mandalorian armor would deflect the blow, but she leapt back anyway. Cassemi’s electrostaff darted towards Kylo’s exposed flank, scoring a burning line down his ribs.

Kylo never wore armor during these exercises. Snoke hadn’t let him, and the habit had proven useful. Learning to fight through pain was essential for any warrior, and for those who served the dark, that agony could give additional power. He thumped a fist against the slice in his side, relishing the hot sting as the Force curled dark and furious inside him.

As the beskad saber pierced deep into Kylo’s calf, a nauseating exhilaration rose inside him. His spin
tore the blade out through muscle, and then Kylo’s lightsaber sliced over Miriash’s extended arm. She fell back with a curse, and Kylo pressed the advantage, lunging forward on his abused leg.

Blood streaked across the floor, marking the path of the fight. Most of it was Kylo’s, since he was the least protected, but every fighter in the courtyard had bled today. His arms stung from glancing cuts, and he hoped some of the wounds would require stitches.

The three regrouped and attacked as one. It was a signal that exercise was over; although the Knights were all Force-sensitive, they couldn’t outlast him in a fight. His power was magnitudes beyond theirs and bolstered his strength, which meant the three aimed to end this quickly. And logically, Kylo knew it was time to stop, but he wanted to keep going. He needed to hurt so badly it blocked out everything else.

Block. Turn. Strike. Parry. The battle flowed, violence inscribed in the air by the gleam of metal and the crackling purple sparks of the electrostaff. Through it all, Kylo’s lightsaber arced in burning red streaks, faster and faster, until the lines burned together in his eyes like lava.

Darth Vader had been born in the lava that shrouded this world. And Kylo Ren had been born… well. Nowhere so noble.

Dizziness washed over him, accompanied by the brush of a familiar mind. The ground tilted. When he stumbled, Miriash’s saber sliced across his gut, and Cassemi’s electrostaff singed his bicep.

The world spun, and with his mind and body compromised, there was a real chance this would become fatal, so Kylo called on the Force. Energy exploded out of him, knocking the three warriors away from him. They flew through the air and smashed into the ground.

“Enough,” he rasped when the Knights began doggedly clambering to their feet once more. They would attack until he told them to stop—another perk of being Supreme Leader.

He struggled to keep his feet in a straight line as he limped out of the courtyard. This nausea was different than the usual dizziness provided by pain, and he swallowed to suppress the urge to vomit. A flash of grief rose when he realized what was happening, but he shoved it away, as he had so many unwelcome and futile emotions these past three months.

You’re drunk, he said accusingly across the bond as he stumbled up a stairwell towards his quarters. Blood poured from his wounds, leaving a wet trail behind him.

You’re hurt. Rey’s voice was quiet in his head.

Yes, and especially so because you’re drunk. Did you have to project that while I was in the middle of a fight?

I could feel you hurting. I had to know.

He reached his chamber at last and ripped off his gloves to fumble with the door panel. As soon as he was inside, he sank to his hands and knees, breathing through the agony of his cramping leg and throbbing gut. Blood dripped and pooled beneath him. Did you hope I was dying? he asked nastily, but she didn’t answer.

He staggered into the refresher and turned the dial to set it to a healing spray. The water contained an analgesic and disinfectant that would make it easier to treat his myriad wounds. Nothing was bad enough to require immersion in a bacta tank, but the next hour was not going to be pleasant.

He felt her with him, her eyes running over his injuries. Normally having Rey paying attention to his
nude body in the shower would be cause for an erection, but he was too battered to feel anything but an ache in his chest. *Don’t pretend you care,* he said, switching off the water and staggering into his room. He pulled out the medpac, then collapsed on the bed.

*Why do you spar like this?* He could see her now, slumped over a glowing green drink in some hellish cantina. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen her like this over the past three months, and every time it felt like another piece of him died.

*Pain is educational,* he told her.

He applied bacta spray to the shallow cuts, burns, and scrapes, then examined the worst wounds. The slice across his gut was long but relatively shallow, and the one in his calf was deep, but nothing some stitches and a bacta patch couldn’t handle.

He applied bacta spray and a disinfectant to the calf injury, then pulled out the needle and thread and got to work. His breath hissed through his teeth as the needle sank into his flesh.

*Why aren’t you using pain relievers?* Rey asked sharply. *Or seeing a proper medic?*

*It’s unnecessary.* He avoided both as a matter of habit, although sometimes—like the time she’d flayed his cheek open—it was needed. Strange to feel a moment of longing at that memory…but maybe not. It was the first time Rey had truly hurt him, and, like an addict, he’d been unable to stay away from her after that.

The only care he’d experienced in many years had come through pain.

The needle bit again and again like a stinging insect. Too quickly, his calf was sewn up. The sutures would dissolve once the flesh had begun to knit together. He slapped a bacta patch over it roughly, then got to work on his stomach.

As he sank into the rhythm of this sharp, methodical pain, he focused back on Rey. Still scowling into her green drink. *You’ll get a hangover,* he warned her, sounding prissy even to his own ears. *This is juvenile behavior.*

*Oh, and trying to get hurt isn’t?* She sighed, looking up at him with exhaustion-shadowed eyes. *These fights go too far.*

*Then stop watching them.* The needle plunged in, curved out. Neat, even stitches, as he’d learned to do the day he’d first gone to Snoke. *Or don’t.* You probably enjoy seeing me hurt.

*Stop it.* She tossed back the drink, then stood unsteadily and headed out of the cantina. It was dark where she was. The street was narrow and filled with detritus—impossible to determine which slum she was currently wasting her life in.

He finished the stitches, applied a med patch, and sank back onto the sheets. They were wet, since he hadn’t dried off after the shower, but he didn’t feel like moving to change them or get a towel. The euphoria that came after a punishing sparring session made him lightheaded, and he closed his eyes, sinking into it.

*Why are you drinking tonight?* he asked, his mind already fuzzing at the edges. He’d asked before, but she’d never answered him.

The pause was long enough that he assumed she wasn’t going to tell him. Then, to his surprise, she spoke. *Sometimes when I drink, I don’t dream.*
He exhaled a heavy breath. *You’re right. That is a good reason to drink.*

Their connection drifted after that like tattered clouds on the wind. It was late afternoon where he was, but exhaustion hit Kylo hard. As the world faded around him, Rey faded with it, and he was glad.

The dream was one he’d had many times. His first day with Snoke.

Dread filled him as Kylo/Ben knelt in front of his master’s throne, and only half of it was Ben’s fledgling fear. Kylo had been trained in the awareness of his own mind—he knew that he was dreaming, and he hated what was coming.

Snoke had called to Ben Solo after he’d fled Luke’s training school with ashes in his wake. Snoke had been in Ben’s mind long before that, of course, whispering about power and glory, but the boy had shown foolish devotion to Luke Skywalker for many years. It had taken Luke attempting to kill him for Ben to fully accept that his path lay not with light, but with darkness, and that a worthier teacher was required.

“Luke Skywalker is afraid of your power,” Snoke said as Kylo/Ben knelt in front of him in the audience chamber of his ship. “And he covets it. He attacked you out of jealousy because he knows what you can become.” A sneer twisted that deformed face. “What I can make you.”

“Yes, Master Snoke,” Ben said. Grief and hope mixed in the young man’s chest—the agony of betrayal mixed with the desire to matter to someone. Oh, how Kylo Ren hated this part of the dream. It was a reminder of the ignorant fool he’d been.

“You still want to matter to someone.” The voice was soft, feminine, concerned.

No, no, no. She wasn’t part of this dream, and he didn’t want her to be. Kylo ignored the presence he sensed drifting at the edges of the room, focusing once more on Ben Solo’s first taste of true agony.

“Luke Skywalker tried to forge you into the weapon of his choosing. He was wrong, and so the weapon is faulty. It must be broken in order to be reforged.” Snoke lifted one gaunt finger, and Kylo/Ben felt the first pressure against his mind. A heavy, painful feeling, like his skull was being bored into.

“I will break you, Ben Solo,” Snoke said, and the pressure became lancing agony. “And then I will make you anew.”

Kylo/Ben screamed as his mind was torn open, all his insecurities and fears exposed to the penetrating eyes of his new master. He felt raw, like a snail whose shell had been ripped off. Snoke raked harsh claws through his brain, shredding the parts that felt love and loyalty. The parts that needed.

“You mind is weak,” Snoke said. “Your body, too. Let us rectify that.”

Tendrils of the force wrapped around Kylo/Ben’s kneeling body. The first snapped his arm. The next broke each and every one of his fingers as he pleaded and screamed. Then Kylo/Ben was pulled upright by the throat and lifted into the air. He scrabbled at his throat, choking on the invisible hand cutting off his airway.

Distantly, Kylo/Ben heard someone weeping. Not him, but the unseen watcher in the shadows.
“Pain is educational,” Snoke said as Kylo/Ben writhed in the air before him. “This is your first lesson.”

He flung the young man hard into the wall, and when Kylo/Ben’s head cracked against the stone, the blow brought both darkness and relief.

#

He stood outside in a sun-drenched field. Silvery grass whispered in a gentle breeze, and when Kylo looked down, his body was whole again. He sighed, releasing a breath it felt like he’d been holding for years.

Rey ran towards him across the field. She was wearing the same scavenger’s outfit he’d seen her in so many times before, and her hair was tied back in three buns. But the worry on her face was new—a soft concern that made his heart clench.

“She hurt you,” she said, stopping a few feet away.

“Yes,” he agreed.

“How often?”

She was beautiful in sunlight—it brought out the gold in her eyes and the freckles on her cheeks. She’d been made for the day, just as he had been made for the night. Kylo lifted a hand and trailed it down her cheek, gratified when she sighed and leaned into the caress. “Every day. Every hour. Until it was all I knew and all I needed.”

“He tortured you.” Her jaw set, and those beautiful eyes sparked with anger.

“He made me,” Kylo said, needing her to understand. Ben Solo had, indeed, been broken, but Snoke had followed through on his promise. Kylo Ren had been reforged from the twisted remains of that child. “Without him, I’d still be pathetic and lost.”

“You weren’t pathetic, Ben—”

He surged towards her, needing to stop that name from ever passing her lips again. And because this was a dream, the only place where he ever got to have her like this, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

She sighed and relaxed into him, lacing her fingers together behind his neck. Her mouth was sweet and giving, and as her tongue traced his lips, she whispered soft, kind words. Words he only ever heard here, in the privacy of his most demented fantasies. “You were betrayed by the mentors in your life. Luke, Snoke… they hurt you in different ways, but you didn’t deserve any of it. You deserved kindness.”

He gasped and clutched her tighter to him. The real Rey must never know about these secret dreams of absolution, he vowed to himself. She would recoil with contempt if she knew about them. They were for him alone—his only chance to experience the good, pure, perfect things he would never have in waking life.

She felt more real in this dream than she ever had before. This time it wasn’t just her body tangling with his, but her mind. She stroked him over the Force bond, her pure soul brushing his ruined one like a cool hand on a fevered brow. He clutched her close, running his hands over her back in long sweeps, then gave in to the desire pumping through him and bore her down to the grass.
“You’re beautiful,” he told her once she lay beneath him. “You make me wish I was different. Better.”

The tenderness in her expression broke his heart. “You make me feel less alone,” she said, so quietly he almost couldn’t hear the confession.

He couldn’t take it anymore. He started unwrapping the fabric shielding her from him, trailing his fingertips over her exposed skin with gentle reverence. “I need you,” he said as he charted her arms and collarbones, her breasts and the dip of her waist.

“Kylo,” she whispered once he’d completely bared her. “I need you, too.” She lay golden in the sunlight, her taut muscles and slight curves his favorite sight in the universe. She widened her legs and held her arms out to him. “I need you, Ben.”

He crushed his mouth to hers again, kissing her hard. “Don’t call me that,” he said, grinding between her legs. His clothes were already gone; it was a dream, after all. He rocked over her, reveling in the wetness of her sweet cunt against his cock. He wouldn’t penetrate her yet—he wanted to draw this out…

“I’ll call you Ben if I want to,” she said mutinously.

Kylo stifled a laugh and pressed his forehead against hers. “Damn it, Rey, this is my dream. I get to make the rules.” He pulled back to look at her stubbornly jutting chin, his heart aching at the little extra bit of realism that made these dreams so painful.

Her forehead creased. “What are you talking about? This is my dream.”

The wind stilled, and the field fell silent. Feeling a dawning horror, Kylo delved through the Force bond. She was doing the same, rifling through his mind to figure out if he, like her, was sleeping right now. If he, like her, had sought out this achingly tender connection.

She was real. She was here. This was happening.

“Oh, shit,” they said in unison, and the dream snapped in half.
Chapter 9

Rey was dreaming.

Her dreams were fuzzed at first from the drinking, just a blur of half-formed images, but they cleared abruptly. She was standing in a room decorated in red and black. Snoke sat there, and fear tightened her belly until she realized his focus wasn’t on her, but on the figure kneeling at his feet.

Kylo Ren.

No, that wasn’t right. This person was younger, more vulnerable looking. A young man with grief written clearly across a face that hadn’t yet hardened. This was Ben Solo.

She dreamed about Kylo more often than she wanted to admit, but they were always angry, searing dreams. She’d never dreamed about him as Ben Solo before. But as Snoke began speaking about Luke, she drifted closer, lured by the promise of forbidden information. Distantly, she knew this was an idiotic idea, since her own subconscious had constructed this dream, but she couldn’t resist learning Kylo Ren’s secrets.

*I don’t want to matter to anyone anymore.* In nonsensical dream logic, the drifting thought was Kylo’s, not Ben’s.

Here, she was able to say what she thought without care that the real man might hear and judge. *You still want to matter to someone,* she told him across the dream Force bond. His loneliness called to her, its jagged edges and deep crevasses so similar to her own. Sometimes she felt both of their lonelinesses at once, and it made her want to weep.

A swift mental rejection, and the scene continued. Snoke spoke about breaking and reforging weapons, and then Ben Solo screamed.

Rey felt his mind being tunneled into. Her forehead ached with it. When his bone snapped, she cried out and grabbed her own arm. By the time he was choking in the air, writhing under Snoke’s horrible power, Rey was openly weeping.

Damn it. She didn’t need to do this to herself. Didn’t need to imagine a reason for Kylo to be what he was today. Didn’t need to find a reason to understand or, worse, forgive him. But as he was bashed into the wall and dropped, unconscious, she couldn’t help but run towards him.

They were in a field.

It was Kylo Ren, not Ben, this time. He stood strong and tall, a black slash across the sunny landscape, shadows behind his eyes and scars marring his skin. But when he saw her approaching, a smile bloomed on his face unlike any she’d seen before.

“Snoke hurt you,” she said, needing to talk to him about what she’d just witnessed.

“Yes.”

Oh, he was beautiful in sunlight. She’d so rarely seen him in such bright environs. His hair gleamed like sable, and his skin, scarred as it was, no longer held its corpse-like pallor. Even his eyes were warmer. Through the bond, she felt his happiness at seeing her, combined with a horrible, haunting certainty that he didn’t deserve this, that he would never have something so good and pure in real life.
Her mind was really fucking with her, but she couldn’t resist the bait. She told him what he needed so desperately to hear—that he had deserved better—and then she called the scarred man Ben, and then he kissed her so sweetly and desperately, it brought tears to her eyes.

*It could be like this between us,* she thought nonsensically. *Because of course it couldn’t; this was a fantasy, spun by her lonely mind to explain her attraction to a murderer.*

He took her down to the grass and undressed her like she was delicate and precious. Then he was naked, too—bless her mind for rushing through those particulars—and they were grinding and kissing and sinking into each other’s souls.

The real Kylo Ren could never know she craved this tenderness; he would mock her mercilessly. “Kylo, I need you, too,” she whispered, wanting him to fill her empty body and aching soul. Except no, this dream lover was someone else, the person who might have existed if an angry, confused young man had just been given a chance. “I need you, Ben.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“I’ll call you Ben if I want to.” Did he have to be so kriffing stubborn even in her sex dreams?

He chuckled a little, and she instantly wanted more of that sound. “Damn it, Rey, this is my dream. I get to make the rules.”

Wait. “What are you talking about?” she demanded, hoping this was just some weird twist in her subconscious, even though her stomach was already dropping with dread. “This is my dream.”

But she felt the truth through the Force bond blazing between them. They were no longer just sharing visions—they were sharing dreams.

“Oh, shit.”

#

Rey’s eyes snapped open. Her heart pounded, and her head ached. She rolled over, then moaned as pain stabbed her brain.

*I told you you’d be hungover.* His mental voice was surly.

*Do not talk to me right now.* The man had no sense of boundaries. Any reasonable person would have given them both at least a few minutes to recover from the horrible shock of realizing they were sharing a disgustingly tender sex dream.

Rey lurched to the ‘fresher and filled a glass of water. When that was drained, she closed her eyes and attempted to effect some Force healing to fix the hangover. It didn’t work particularly well—she was far too agitated to manage proper focus—but it was enough to clear some of the cobwebs.

She planted her hands on the sink and stared at herself in the mirror. Her hair was lank and tangled, her face exhausted, her eyes bleary. She looked pathetic. “This can not continue,” she said out loud. No more drinking, no more pining.

She returned to the cheap bedroom she’d rented for the night. She was on Hedone 69, an asteroid with artificial gravity that was packed with cantinas, casinos, and brothels. It was the perfect place to disappear into a crowd, and the fact that everyone there sought forgetting as much as she did made it feel like shelter. It wasn’t, though.
She was hiding.

Embarrassment trickled over her. It was far from the first time she’d felt ashamed of her actions these last three months, but this time there was enough anger to motivate her into action. When had she gotten so weak? She’d never been this much of a coward—not on Jakku, not on the Falcon, not ever. She was the kind of woman who hunted down the universe’s most elusive Jedi Master and demanded his help, who launched herself towards an enemy ship unaccompanied to pry answers from the dark killer she’d been bound to. And yet here she was, cowering on a filthy pleasure asteroid because she was afraid of the contents of her own head.

No more.

Rey started packing her bag, and Kylo stirred in interest. He was still lying on his bed where he’d collapsed after that awful sparring session she’d witnessed. Where are you going?

None of your business, she said, but the words lacked their usual heat. That dream had put her off-kilter.

Hm. His voice was a purr, but she sensed that he was hiding something from her: an uneasiness that crawled beneath his skin. Are we going to pretend you didn’t just say I make you feel less lonely?

Her cheeks burned. If we talk about that, we’ll have to talk about how I make you wish you were different.

He winced. Never mind.

That creeping feeling he tried to hide was embarrassment, she realized. Supreme Leader Kylo Ren was just as embarrassed as she was.

Oh, this was a mess. She sat on the edge of her bed and rubbed her eyes. When she opened them again, she saw him as clearly as if he was in the room with her. His long limbs stretched across her bed, and a tight line of stitches marched across his abdomen. His bare abdomen. And below that…

Well. Kylo Ren had certainly been enjoying the dream. She stared at his erection hungrily, remembering how it had felt rubbing against her. The place between her legs throbbed.

That quickly, Kylo’s embarrassment shifted towards masculine satisfaction. She felt the glow of it through the bond. He laced his fingers behind his head, and his biceps bunched. Like what you see?

he asked, flexing his hips. The movement made his cock bob and muscles in his abdomen ripple.

The sight was undeniably arousing, but there were so many scars on his body. She’d never looked at them too closely, afraid it would just lead to more of these horrible, soft feelings about him, but the damage had been done. That dream had mixed up the dynamic between them somehow, turning pure hostility into a wretched jumble of emotion she couldn’t pick apart just yet.

She traced the scars with her eyes. Faint lines criss-crossed thicker ridges of scar tissue, and she recognized the uneven marks of burns and the scattered devastation of shrapnel wounds. The marks were echoed on his arms and legs—there was hardly any part of him that hadn’t been subjected to injury. And given how ragged many of them were, the wounds hadn’t been treated properly.

Why did you stay with Snoke? she asked. He hurt you so much. She knew now that the torture scene she’d witnessed had been real and only the first of many. Ben Solo had truly been broken.

He turned his face away from her, and that puff of masculine satisfaction died, replaced by a gnawing bitterness. The injuries aren’t all from him or the Knights. A lot are from the rebels. And
you’ve left your mark, as well.

I wish I regretted that, she said with blunt honesty, reaching out to trail a finger over the mark that slashed across his face. His skin was warm under her touch, and he shivered.

I don’t regret it, he said, capturing her hand in his. His eyes snagged hers, and she couldn’t look away. It’s the only one I cherish.

Rey’s throat ached. What are we doing? she whispered, unable to look away from his troubled brown eyes.

He exhaled. I don’t know.

They stayed locked like that for long moments, hands and eyes and unsteady minds connected. Then Rey slipped her hand out of his and pulled away.

We’re still on opposite sides, she said, but the words lacked their usual rancor. And I’m going back to them, Kylo. I can’t live my life like this.

He winced. I know.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself. You could—

Don’t. He cut her off, surging upright and stalking across the room. Don’t try to turn me. Don’t try to recruit me. I made my choice long ago.

She nodded, ignoring the prickling in her eyes. His rejection had slammed down between them like a steel bulkhead, cutting off the nascent sense of true connection. Then we need to stay away from each other for a while.

Silence met that declaration. She knew he didn’t want to stay away from her, and honestly, she didn’t want to stay away from him, either. Which was precisely the problem. She needed to rebuild her strength and rediscover her purpose, and if he was going to continue down his dark path, separation was the only option. The next time they met would be as adversaries.

I’ll try, he said at last. But if we dream…

She shivered. Maybe we won’t.
Chapter 10

Rey ran through quarterstaff exercises in her rented starship. The single-occupant space was cramped, but it was good to move like this again, and the tight quarters made for an interesting challenge.

She was on her way to the Resistance’s new hideout on Durkteel. It was an old hideout, technically. The Tak-Beam complex had been destroyed during the Galactic Civil War, but new excavations had uncovered a secret level below the old base. It was enough space to set up operations for the ragtag band of survivors who had escaped Crait on the Millennium Falcon.

Leia had given her the location when Rey had first gone on “sabbatical,” and she’d locked it up tight in her mind where Kylo couldn’t find it. Had he been like Snoke, willing to viciously carve open another person’s brain, she never would have risked the journey. But Kylo wasn’t Snoke; while he had tried to delve into her thoughts when they first met, she knew he would never progress to outright brutality.

He wouldn’t do to her what had been done to him.

She ignored thoughts of Kylo and kept exercising. It had taken her a little over a week to formulate her plan and find a ship capable of the trip—and a Resistance-sympathetic vendor willing to rent to her with no questions asked—time she’d used to recuperate, meditate, and begin honing her body again. She’d become embarrassingly out of shape during the months she’d been in hiding, and she relished the ache of muscles recovering their purpose. Now she was one day out from Durkteel and felt restored almost to normal.

The only thing missing from her exercise sessions was a lightsaber. Hers was well and truly broken, split in half during her confrontation with Kylo, and although she’d kept the broken pieces, she doubted they could be repaired. She hadn’t been using it for that long, but she felt incomplete without it.

A Jedi without a master, a lightsaber, or much training wasn’t a Jedi at all.

She smashed the quarterstaff into the side of her metal bunk hard enough to send a painful jolt up her arms. Wincing, she set the staff down and settled into a meditative posture. The ship was on autopilot, so there was nothing to worry about but her connection to the Force.

Well, almost nothing to worry about.

Rey breathed in deeply and cleared her mind. The Force hummed around and through her, caressing her like a long-lost friend. One of Luke’s first lessons had been that the Force was accessed with the mind, not the body, but she still thought of it in terms of “feeling.” When she was deep in that web of entangled life, she felt like a dewdrop suspended in a spider’s web—cool and quiet, shivering in an unseen breeze.

The web of light that made up the universe spread before her. She breathed slowly and relaxed, allowing herself to drift. This connection, too, had faltered during her dark months of aimless wandering. Now it was back, sustaining her and giving her hope.

The Resistance would rise again. The fight would go on.

A red light gleamed in the distance. She was always aware of that light, no matter how many other souls shone around her. She felt its flickering and the moments when it burned brightest, and she
struggled with the urge to reach out and touch it. To bridge their minds once more.

It had been less than two weeks of silence, but it felt like years.

Rey may have recovered her old self over the last few days, but she’d felt Kylo becoming more unhinged. Jagged spikes of anger or grief occasionally penetrated his shields, and sometimes her skin ached with reflected pain. She was desperate to know what was happening but knew she couldn’t—shouldn’t—ask.

They hadn’t shared dreams again, thankfully. Rey tried to sleep at times when she suspected he wasn’t, and so far, it had worked. She’d also resisted fantasizing about him in the quiet moments before sleep, and her dreams had been largely peaceful as a result.

The red light throbbed, drawing her attention. He was feeling something powerfully negative, and a stab of helpless rage pierced her heart, shattering her meditative peace. Disturbed, Rey rubbed her chest, and the feeling faded.

One more day until Durkteel. Maybe then, surrounded by her friends and allies, she would stop feeling his suffering so acutely.

Sighing, Rey settled under the blankets, determined to rest while she could.

#

She stood in a black cell deep beneath the ground. It was freezing, and the only light came from an illuminated plinth. On it rested the twisted remnants of Darth Vader’s mask.

Kylo Ren knelt before the plinth. His legs were attached to the floor by heavy chains, and his arms were bound tightly behind his back. Blood seeped from his eyes and nose, and his face was twisted in agony.

“Kylo,” she whispered, but he didn’t hear her.

“You are weak.” Snoke’s voice resonated off the walls. “Pathetic. Unworthy of even looking at Vader’s mask.”

“Yes,” Kylo agreed. But no, Snoke was dead. Which meant this was Ben Solo, and Rey was in Kylo’s dreams again.

“How long have you been kneeling here?” Snoke asked.

“Three days,” Ben said roughly. His hunger cramped Rey’s stomach, and his thirst burned her throat. Something glittered beneath him, and she realized with horror that he was kneeling on broken glass. Blood stained the ground.

“If you were worth anything, three days would be nothing. It would have been nothing to Vader. You presented yourself to me as his successor; was I wrong to take you in?”

Pressure compressed her skull, and she watched as fresh blood poured from Ben’s nose. He shuddered and squeezed his eyes shut. “Not wrong, Master Snoke,” he croaked. “I will become strong.”

“Good,” Snoke purred. “Continue your meditation for three more days. I will return then—if you survive.”
The insidious presence drifted away, leaving Ben Solo alone in the tiny cell. He stared at the plinth with a mix of tears and blood pouring from his eyes. “Three more days,” he muttered to himself. “Just three more.”

Rey couldn’t watch any more of this. She rushed forward and dropped to her knees in front of him. Ben Solo’s eyes widened, and then the scar stretched across his face, and she was staring at Kylo Ren. “Rey?” he croaked. “Or another fantasy?”

She wiped tears from her eyes. “If this is what you fantasize about, I have concerns.”

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. “Rey, then.” He shuddered. “Don’t know how to make the dream end. It goes on and on and on....” He lapsed into delirious muttering.

“I’ll make it end,” she promised, reaching out to the Force for aid.

The energy in the cell was black and heavy, as deep and dark as a turbulent ocean. She was drawn to it, even though the proof of its danger knelt bloody and broken before her. *Just a little pain,* it whispered. *And then a little power.* The dark caressed her with shadowy fingers, casting a shroud over the light that flickered inside her.

Kylo was shaking and bleeding, falling into an endless pit, and Rey had to do something. She was tempted almost beyond resistance to call on the dark and its promise of power to free him, but his chains had been forged by that malevolent energy. They wouldn't be broken by it.

Kylo groaned, and more blood dribbled from his mouth. Rey cupped his face in both hands, focusing on the first memory of light she could access.

A grassy field and the spark of sun on his hair. Lips touching and hands stroking. Whispered confessions that never should have been spoken aloud.

Kylo shivered, and the chains fell away. Rey grabbed hold of the dream fabric and tugged, and the black cell swirled away, replaced by sunlight.

They knelt face-to-face in the open field. Rey sucked in a deep breath, grateful for the scent of plant life rather than blood and cold stone. Her hands still cupped Kylo’s face, and she stroked the pads of her fingers along his jawline, willing him to come back to her.

Kylo’s eyes fluttered open. The blood had vanished from his skin, but the lines of his jaw were tight, and his eyes were haunted. Desperation coiled in his gut, strong enough that she felt the echo of it. “Need you,” he said, reaching for her with a hand that shook. “Just this once.”

She should say no. Rey knew she should say no.

She couldn't.

He needed, and frankly, she did too, her composure shaken by that horrific memory.

She leaned in to kiss him. The second her lips touched his, he surged upright, tugging her up until they knelt with chests and stomachs pressed tightly together. She opened her mouth to him, accepting his tongue with euphoric greed.

It had been so long since she’d tasted him. Nearly two weeks. An eternity.

She gripped his hair tightly in her fist, and he responded with an animal snarl, kissing her even harder. He clutched her ass and tugged her against him, grinding his erection between her legs. The
hard pressure against her clit made her keen.

Kylo’s mouth and hands were brutal, not tender. His teeth sank into her lower lip, and an answering wildness rose within her. They would burn the memory of that frigid cell away together, using their bodies to banish that razor-sharp agony with a sweeter pain. Her nipples had budded into sensitive points, and she rubbed them against his firm chest, exhaling shakily as sparks shot through her.

She shoved at his shoulders, trying to knock him onto his back so she could straddle him, but he didn’t budge. “Not this time,” he panted against her lips. “Need you… need… control…”

And oh, fuck, that was hot. Moisture flooded her pussy at the guttural declaration. Yes, she said across the bond, knowing he needed that confirmation. Take it.

Kylo stood and pulled her roughly to her feet. His hand fisted in her hair, and he jerked her head to the side, leaving her neck exposed. His teeth closed on that sensitive skin, and she gasped and rocked her hips against him, trying to ease the ache between her thighs. He soothed the stinging spot with his tongue, then worked his way down, nibbling and sucking until she was nearly writhing out of her skin.

“Kylo, please” she begged, beyond all dignity or sense. “I need more. Please.”

The Force exploded from him in a wave that thumped against her chest. When she pulled back, she saw that he’d flattened the grass in a twenty-meter radius around them.

“You’re going to get more,” he promised. His eyes were wild and dangerous as he scooped her up and laid her down on the crushed stalks. She struggled out of her top while he stripped away her bottoms, and then she was totally nude. He knelt between her legs and pressed her thighs wide, eyes riveted to her pussy. “What a sweet cunt you have,” he said, his voice tight with desire. He traced a finger over her. “Delicate and delicious and so, so wet.” The finger pushed inside her, and Rey moaned and arched her back. Kylo flicked his eyes to hers. “Do you like that, Rey? Do you like it when I fuck you with my finger?”

“Yes,” she moaned, going nearly out of her mind from the sound of that deep voice speaking such filthy words.

A second finger joined the first, stretching her. “Do you like it when I fuck you with two fingers?” When she nodded, he curled those fingers, pressing a sensitive place deep inside her. Rey bucked against him, her heels sliding over the grass. “I can tell you like it,” he said, crooking his fingers again. “I can tell because you’re soaking my hand. Tell me, Rey, do you enjoy driving me out of my mind? Taunting me with that perfect pussy?”

“Yes, yes.” Rey hardly recognized her own voice. Words spilled out of her on high-pitched gasps. “Oh, fuck. Please, Kylo.”

“Please what?” he asked, pressing inside her again as he used the index finger of his other hand to rub her clitoris.

Her head thrashed on the grass. She pinched her nipples, desperate to reach her peak. “Please fuck me, Kylo.”

He pulled his fingers out and flipped her onto her stomach. Her cheek rested against the grass for half a second before he tugged her to her hands and knees. He fumbled with his trousers, and then his naked erection brushed against her ass. “You’re going to take me,” he told her. Excitement and urgency and a wild, all-consuming need throbbed across the bond. “All of me.”
She moaned as he nudged her thighs wider and settled between them. His cock pressed against her entrance. A breathless moment of anticipation… and then he shoved in, thick and unyielding.

Rey whimpered at the rough penetration. “So good,” she gasped once he was fully seated inside her. “Kylo, so good.”

He gripped her hips and started to move—sharp, punishing thrusts that hit some nearly-painful spot deep inside her. Rey hung her head and panted, rocking her hips to try to take him even deeper.

He gripped her hair and tugged her head up, tilting it just enough that she could see him out of the corner of her vision. His teeth were bared, and sweat beaded on his brow. “Who’s doing this to you?” he demanded.

“Kylo Ren,” she gasped, and just speaking his name made her pussy clench around him. She groaned at the feel of his thick cock stretching her body almost to its limits. His possession was punishing. Merciless.

She loved it.

“You belong to me, Rey,” he said, and although a shiver of alarm went over her, her body squeezed helplessly around him again at the blunt declaration. “Every part of you. There’s nothing of you I won’t take.”

She moaned, and when he thrust hard, she lost her balance and tumbled forward onto her elbows. His palm flattened on her back, and he pushed her down further, until her cheek was pressed against the grass and her back was arched at an extreme angle.

“I’m going to make you scream,” Kylo vowed, plunging back in. The angle made the penetration even more profound, and tears sprang to Rey’s eyes as ecstasy and pain mingled into an addictive drug.

Then his big fingers rubbed her clitoris in firm circles, and the pleasure-pain tightened into a ball of exquisite agony at her core. She was the universe before its violent expansion; she was electricity and potential coiled tight before the storm.

A final stroke, and Rey screamed. Deep, pulsing throbs tore her apart as hidden muscles clenched and fluttered. Joy radiated through her body, making a wreck of her even as it made her anew. Her vision blackened at the edges as she shuddered out her desire, gasping into the grass.

She was barely aware of the hands clenching her hips hard enough to bruise or the loud curses echoing in counterpoint to his thrusts. Then Kylo shouted and jerked, and she felt the heat of his cum deep inside her. “Kylo,” she moaned, falling into a well of pleasure so deep it might as well have been death. “Ben.”

His groan filled her ear. “Rey,” he said, fervent as a prayer. “Rey.”
Kylo sat upright in bed, gasping. His hands fisted in the sheets, and it took a moment to understand why he wasn’t touching smooth, warm skin or why the room was dark.

A dream.

He groaned, simultaneously aroused and furious. When he shifted his hips, his still-sensitive cock smeared through the cum painting the underside of his sheets. “Rey,” he gasped, collapsing onto his back. He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, wishing he could force this unwelcome new reality to recede.

The bond between them crackled and hummed. It took less than a breath to seize that thread and pull their minds together.

She lay on her side on a narrow bed. Her eyes were wide and dazed, her cheeks rosy. “Kylo?”

He shuddered at the sound of her voice. “Yeah,” he said. “Did you…”

She nodded, then shivered.

“That was…” He swallowed hard. “It was…”

“Yeah,” she agreed.

“Are you…” He couldn’t manage to form words. The questions buzzed through his mind like bees: Are you okay? Are you happy? Are you angry?

Eyes huge, she nodded, and he felt a surge of panic at not knowing if she was responding to one of his unspoken questions or something else entirely.

Something beeped in the background, and Rey struggled upright. “I have to go,” she said. She nibbled her lip in a way that made his cock twitch, despite how recently he’d come. “Just this once, right?” she asked.

Kylo’s stomach plummeted. Kriff, why had he said that? “Just this once,” he agreed, although he had to force the words out.

She nodded, and the connection cut off.

Kylo gripped his hair in his fists and pulled. What was worse—never having experienced this new level of passion between them? Or tasting possibility and knowing he would never have it again?

He screamed, and the Force burst from him in a concussive wave, shattering everything breakable in the room. There admittedly wasn’t much left to break after the last two weeks. It was a sign of how turbulent his mind had become that the guards outside didn’t even bother to knock at the commotion.

This was definitely worse, he decided.

#

“Myrtah has refused to rescind their declaration of war,” Hux declared to the assembled First Order generals who sat at a long table in a council room on Coruscant. As Supreme Leader, Kylo sat at the head of the table, although he was ill-at-ease there. He had been made for fighting, not politics.
Hux stood beside a holographic projection of the planet Myrtah. He was clad in austere black, with his red hair slicked down in its usual unflattering way. His face was pinched, as if he’d been sucking on lemons. Hux always looked sour, but his displeasure had grown even more apparent now that Kylo had taken over the position of Supreme Leader. The general had liked life better when they were equals, scrapping for Snoke’s attention.

Like children fighting over an abusive parent, Kylo thought with a hint of embarrassment. But that rivalry had originated during the mask years, when Kylo had been desperate for a sense of purpose and belonging. He still had neither, but at least now he knew better than to expect them.

“We need to make an example of them,” Hux said. “Show them that the First Order will not be defied.”

Kylo tapped his gloved fingers on the table. “What do you suggest, General?”

“Complete and total annihilation,” Hux sneered. “Bomb their cities. Destroy their leaders. Leave nothing but ashes.”

Kylo studied the holographic image. Myrtah was a small but beautiful planet full of verdant forests and crystalline lakes. Its inhabitants were largely peaceful, although obviously not at the moment. They hadn’t been content to obey the Empire, either; as a result, most of their cities lay in ruins. The remaining population was either scattered across the surface or gathered in three major cities: Tyrkkah, Labryyk, and Y’yllah.

“How many inhabitants?”

“250 million in the cities, with 150 million dispersed across the rest of the planet.”

Kylo stared at his leather-clad fists. 400 million was a laughably small number compared to the one trillion beings who inhabited Coruscant. And what was 400 million compared to the billions already destroyed on Hosnian Prime?

Nothing.

400 million.

Rey’s voice echoed in his head. It wasn’t really her—that connection had been dark for days—but a memory. Maybe he gave the order, but you were there. You knew the plan. You were just as guilty as he was.

Now that he was Supreme Leader, Kylo didn’t have the luxury of blaming Hux or Snoke for each new genocide. “They haven’t attacked us yet,” he said, struggling to buy time before he had to make a decision. “Correct?”

Hux exchanged glances with General Halsan, a craggy battle-ax who had fought under Darth Vader. The older man had made little secret of his distaste for Kylo, although he was more careful with his disdain now. “They have not,” Halsan said.

“Are they likely to?”

“That isn’t the point,” Hux said. “They—”

Kylo cut him off with a sharp gesture. “They lack our military capabilities. They lack allies. This declaration of war was a mere legislative item passed during the previous parliamentary session.”
Hux’s brow furrowed. “So?”

“It was a symbolic statement, not something they have the capacity to follow through on.”

Halsan and Hux shared another incredulous look. “Supreme Leader,” Hux said after a long pause, “all of us in this room know the danger of symbolism. All it will take is one successful sign of resistance to our regime to draw malcontents out of hiding. Myrtah could provide that, especially considering that General Organa still lives, as does Luke Skywalker’s protegee—”

“I know,” Kylo snapped, slamming his fist down on the table. The generals seated to either side of him jumped.

“I know the incident on Crait was… unfortunate,” Hux said. Utter stillness fell over the room, and Kylo’s skin began prickling with hints of electricity. “To be seen flailing at a Force projection,” Hux said, oblivious to the danger he was in, “and then to watch your quarry escape… it must have been upsetting to you.”

The Force rippled around Kylo, and the black marble slab they used as a table quivered. “I would be very careful what you say next, general,” he said in lethally quiet tones.

Hux continued doggedly. “Regardless of whatever reluctance you may be feeling, we need to take action against Myrtah. We will lose the respect of the galaxy if we do not.”

Hux was right. This was how war worked. Kylo sucked in a shaky breath, trying to suppress the illogical and overwhelming panic that crashed over him. The walls were closing in, and his gut tightened with dread. This wasn’t supposed to be his call; it should have been Snoke’s.

Ben. Another whisper of memory: Rey kneeling before him in the red throne room on the Supremacy as Snoke commanded Kylo to kill her. Kylo had made the choice to end his mentor, instead—to do anything for her.

Maybe not just for her.

The generals stared at him, each and every one of them expecting him to give the correct answer. To agree that, yes, 400 million lives was a small price to pay for the continued reign of the First Order. But the First Order hadn’t even begun to reign yet. All it had done was destroy. And now that Kylo sat at the head of it…

He wasn’t Snoke. Or Hux. Or the heir apparent to Darth Vader.

He didn’t entirely know what he was, but it wasn’t this.

Kylo stood and planted his fists on the table. “General Hux,” he rumbled. “You overstep.” A sharp crack sounded, and a fracture streaked down the table. “We have subjugated the galaxy and trampled the Resistance. We have won, and yet we still sit in battle conferences, plotting who to destroy next. We should be discussing how to rule the worlds we have conquered.”

A muscle ticked in Hux’s cheek. “Our troopers are on the ground across the galaxy—”

“And now what?” Kylo demanded. “What comes after our takeover? What will we do to bring true order to the galaxy?” The assembled generals stared at him, and Kylo’s rage was tempered by the absurd urge to laugh. “You haven’t thought about it, have you?” And he hadn’t, either. He’d trusted that Snoke had a vision for how the galaxy would prosper under the stricter policies of the First Order.
“Of course we have,” Halsan said. His gray mustache quivered. “We will begin by executing any remaining rebels or reformers. We’ll implement a strict chain of command on each planet, ultimately reporting to us, and put troopers in place to enforce the laws of the First Order.”

One set of laws for the entire galaxy—and Kylo had an idea what those laws would entail, once they were drafted. Harsh punishments for even minor crimes. Strict curfews. Limitations on gathering sizes. The crime rate would go down, work hours and productivity would go up, and the First Order would take its cut of the profits. One brutal machine designed to operate as efficiently as possible.

He had never stopped to ask why he should want this. The dream of galactic order had been handed to him along with his grandfather’s legacy, and since Snoke and Vader had wanted it, he had, too. He’d craved the stability it promised. After too many years of uncertainty, he had finally found a place where the expectations of him were clear and any deviation from them would be punished.

Pain was educational. Pain was clarifying. Pain meant he would never have to question his own path again.

Everyone was staring at him, but Kylo couldn’t summon the right words. The blinders of obedience had been ripped from his eyes, and he didn’t know how to make sense of the complicated choices that spread out before him.

“We will not destroy Myrtah,” he said, certain only of that. “Not yet.” Hux started to protest, so Kylo launched the red-headed general back into the wall and held him there with a Force choke. Rage and frustration boiled over into more violence, and the black marble slab splintered and collapsed in on itself, sending tablets flying as the generals scrambled back. They stared at him like he had transformed into a monster—as if he hadn’t been one all along.

Kylo knew then that something had profoundly changed, both inside him and within the complicated power dynamics of the First Order’s top echelons.

“I am the Supreme Leader,” he said in a voice cold as death. “My word is law, and you will respect it.”

He turned on his heel and swept out of the room, his cape billowing behind him.
“Rey.” General Leia Organa walked towards her with arms outstretched, and Rey hurried into the older woman’s embrace gratefully, stifling a sob. She was finally back where she belonged.

“You’re back,” Leia murmured against her hair. “You came back to us.”

Rey knew she didn’t just mean physically. The general was Force-sensitive, after all. “I did,” Rey said, drawing back. She grinned, wiping tears from her eyes. It had been a long, arduous road, but she was finally back with her people.

Leia’s eyes traced over Rey, from her half-swept back hair to her new, simple clothes. Gray trousers, a gray tunic. The clothing of a woman determined to return to a life of discipline. The general’s lips quirked, and she shook her head. “You’ve come a long way,” she said. “Come see what we’ve done while you were gone.”

They toured the small facility together, and Rey marveled at how quickly the infrastructure had been put in place. Consoles and monitors hummed away in a central command room, and an armory was filled to the brim with a mismatched assortment of weapons. Beyond that was a warehouse full of supplies, followed by a long room converted into simple barracks.

“We’ve grown,” Leia said as she showed Rey the rows of bunk beds. “Just under forty escaped on the Falcon, but our numbers total a few hundred now. And we’re making progress off-world, too. I’ve revived my political connections, and several planets will stand behind us when the time comes to fight again. It will take time, but we will never be defeated.”

Rey’s stomach gave a strange little lurch at the thought of fighting again. Because they wouldn’t just be facing nameless fascists—they would be fighting him.

The vision of Kylo Ren standing tall and dark in his battle armor, red lightsaber engaged, quickly bled into a different image of him looming over her in a sun-bright field. Her cheeks burned red at the memory of what they’d done during that last dream.

“Are you all right, Rey?” Leia asked, frowning. “You look feverish.”

“Fine,” Rey croaked out. “Just fine.”

Leia opened her mouth to say something else, but then a whoop sounded from down the corridor, followed by running footsteps. The next thing she knew, Rey was being swept up in an enormous hug. Finn laughed and spun her around a few times before setting her back on her feet. He looked good: tall and broad-shouldered and smiling like the happiest man in the galaxy. Rey’s heart clenched at finally seeing her best friend again.

Rose Tico and Poe Dameron stood slightly back. Rey didn’t know either of them well, but she liked them so far, and she grinned as they both embraced her. Down the corridor, Chewie roared an excited greeting.

Something settled into place in her chest. This was what she’d needed: friends and a place to belong. And if she needed something else, too… well, it was impossible to have everything.

#
Rey sat under a tree outside the Resistance base, staring at the sunset. Durkteel was a farming planet, and neatly cultivated fields marched into the distance, gleaming gold under the fading light. The air smelled sharp and grassy, spiced with the heavy scent of manure from the lumbering, six-legged beasts that grazed in a nearby meadow. Rey sighed and relaxed back against the tree trunk, reveling in the simplicity of being alone in nature.

The peace didn’t last.

She felt the surge of Kylo’s anger, followed by a dark agitation she couldn’t identify. He hadn’t shielded himself particularly well, and, curious about what had set him off this time, Rey slipped down the bond as stealthily as possible. Maybe he wouldn’t notice her, and she would finally get some idea of what atrocities were happening on his side of the bond.

Kylo strode down a wide hallway, his cloak billowing behind him. His jaw was tight, and his mind was a swirling riot of emotion that quickly overwhelmed her. Rey’s muscles tensed to match his, her heart rate and breathing accelerated, and her chest compressed under a heavy weight.

It felt a lot like panic.

Rey’s faint gasp caught Kylo’s attention. He looked directly at her, then grimaced and switched directions. “Not now,” he muttered, heading for an elaborately engraved metal door. “Go away.”

It was the last response she would have expected, and it only made Rey more determined to find out what was going on. She followed him out onto an open-air balcony that overlooked a gleaming world of skyscrapers. They were dizzyingly high in the air. It was nighttime, but the buildings glowed so brightly that the low clouds were tinted orange. He must be on Coruscant, the city-planet where the First Order had established their official seat of power.

The balcony was walled in by waist-high glass topped by a metal railing. Kylo strode to the railing and gripped it tightly with his gloved hands. He braced himself, lowering his head as he sucked in deep breaths. Rey joined him, staying out of arm’s reach just in case he was about to explode in a fit of violence or… whatever.

The thought of whatever made her nipples tighten and her skin grow hot, and she was briefly ashamed of herself. Evil dictator or not, Kylo Ren was apparently in the midst of a severe emotional crisis, and here she was thinking about fucking him.

400 million.

She heard the thought as plainly as if he’d spoken it aloud. “What?” she demanded. The flash of arousal was replaced by growing dread. Very few things were measured in numbers that large.

Kylo didn’t look at her, although his fingers flexed on the railing. “That’s the number of people Hux wants to destroy next.”

Agony shredded Rey’s heart as if she’d been stabbed. He was going to commit genocide? She didn’t know why she had expected otherwise—he’d always been clear about what he was—but the sense of betrayal she felt was cataclysmic. She’d been in his head and let him into her body. She’d witnessed his past torture, then comforted him. Maybe it was foolish, but she’d started to believe things were different now… and yet for him, nothing had changed.

This pit of grief that would swallow her alive if she let it, so Rey embraced anger, instead. “You mean that’s the number of people you want to destroy,” she snapped. She advanced on him, armoring herself in rage. “Is there even anyone left to kill, Supreme Leader?”
He straightened and looked at her with exhaustion-shadowed eyes. “There’s always someone left to kill.”

Rey slapped him.

The crack reverberated across the patio, and Kylo staggered back, cupping his cheek. When he pulled his hand away, his cheek bore a burning red mark from the impact. The shock in his eyes quickly morphed into something hot. “Yes,” he snarled, backing her towards the railing. “Hit me again. Give me what I need.”

The words were an unpleasant echo of something he’d said in response to her rejection after they’d first had sex. Thank you. You’ve given me what I needed. She hadn’t understood it then—had thought he was making a crude comment about sexual gratification—but the true meaning was suddenly clear. “You need pain,” she whispered as her back came up against the railing.

Kylo’s arms planted on either side of her. He leaned in, his chest heaving with frantic breaths. “I deserve it, Rey. You know I do.” His voice was urgent, desperate. “Hit me. Make this feeling stop.”

A dark craving rolled through her—both hers and his. The need to punish him for his brutality was strong, but it would be a mistake to indulge that urge. He would just cover up his panic with the sting of the fight, forgetting whatever internal turmoil had sent him out onto this balcony to contemplate 400 million deaths. And besides, the fight would probably lead to something else, and they’d end up fucking on this exposed patio with the city spread out below them.

As tantalizing as the forbidden thought was, the problems between them were too large to be solved by sex or violence. “No,” Rey said, ducking under his arm. “You don’t get to hide behind pain.”

Kylo let out a sound that raised the hairs on her arms, more wounded animal than man. He slammed his fist into one of the wall panels, and the glass exploded. Rey flinched and backed away, watching in horror as Kylo stood at the very edge of the balcony, staring down at what must have been a thousand-foot drop. There was nothing between him and a deadly fall, and she wanted to grab his arm and yank him back from the edge, but she didn’t know if that would only drive him deeper into whatever madness was consuming him.

She slipped into his mind and found a howling maelstrom of confusion, loss, hate, and agony. This isn’t what I am, he thought as he stared down at the city. I don’t know what I am.

“You are,” she said, unwilling to let go of this small string that might tether him to sanity. To her. You’re Ben Solo, and you’ve suffered enough.

He shuddered and fell to his knees on the shattered glass. Rey rushed towards him, but he stopped her with an outstretched hand. “Please, Rey,” he croaked. The hand trembled. “Leave me alone.”

She hesitated, torn between the desire to respect his wishes and an unholy need to save him. But Kylo Ren couldn’t be saved—not by her. “All right,” she said, stepping back. “I’ll go.”

Before she closed off their connection, she sent him one last thought, hoping it would be enough: You’re not alone.
“Have you decided to attack Myrtha yet?” Hux asked, standing annoyingly close to Kylo on the bridge of the *Domination*, the First Order’s new Star Dreadnought. Kylo had been lost in thought, staring at the display screen and its endless stars, and Hux’s voice jolted him back to unpleasant reality.

“Hux.” Kylo pitched his words low and lethal. “I gave you my decision a week ago.”

But the red-headed imbecile lingered, his shoulders tenser than normal. “General Halsan is deeply concerned about our inaction—”

“So? He’s an old man. This is a new era.”

“The man is a legend.” Hux sounded appalled. “He fought with Vader.”

“And Vader lost.”

The words fell between them with more profundity than Kylo intended. Silence rippled outward, as if the declaration had been a stone tossed in the lake of the universe. Kylo caught his breath at the realization of what he’d just admitted.

Vader had lost.

When Ben Solo had learned that the only way to find purpose or certainty was to abandon his identity, he’d looked to the past for inspiration. He’d spent years of his life trying to become Vader’s heir, but he’d never really considered his grandfather’s legacy against the longue durée of galactic history. Vader had been a hero; Vader had been right about ending the Jedi; Vader’s legacy would rise again… these thoughts were familiar to the man once known as Ben Solo, now known as Kylo Ren. But when Anakin Skywalker had rediscovered his conscience, Darth Vader had *lost*, along with the Empire.

The First Order paid homage to the Empire in all things. What did that say about them?

Kylo exhaled raggedly, aware of yet another scale falling from his eyes.

“Vader was a hero,” Hux said in a faint voice. His eyes were wide, his skin even paler than normal. “You cannot mean to deny his legacy.”

Hux had been shaped by Snoke, too—it was no wonder they both parroted back the same empty phrases. “I do not deny Vader’s legacy,” Kylo said. That legacy had shaped his life and was far too painful and complicated for him to dissect yet. “But times change. We need to adapt with them.” He turned to look at Hux fully and was struck by how petulant the general appeared. He looked like a boy, not a man… just as Kylo, too, had often felt like an angry child.

If the two highest ranking officers in the First Order were just boys playing at war, was it any wonder no one knew how to rule now that the killing was done?

Once again, Kylo Ren was aware of his internal landscape shifting and resettling. An earthquake deep beneath the surface was shaking his thoughts into new and frightening positions.

“With all due respect,” Hux said through gritted teeth, “the generals will not accept inaction forever. I strongly recommend you reconsider.”
Kylo flexed his fingers, sending just enough current through the Force to make Hux twitch. “And I strongly recommend you remember which one of us is Supreme Leader.”

Hux bowed in a gesture of obsequiousness, but when he turned away, his face was twisted with rage.

Kylo punched the target dummy again and again, relishing the solid smack of his knuckles on synthetic flesh. He could almost imagine he was punching Hux, that little shit, who had only grown more intolerable over the past weeks as he’d continued to demand an answer to the problem of Myrtah.

It had been a month since that battle council. One month since part of his soul had fractured on a balcony overlooking Coruscant. One month since Rey had seen him weak and suffering.

She hadn’t reached out since then, and Kylo hadn’t, either. He was ashamed of his weakness, and his head was too muddled to deal with her, anyway. His mind had undergone a seismic upheaval, and he couldn’t analyze or deal with the damage when she was nearby.

He’d felt her, though. Every once in a while, a slim thread of light had filtered into his consciousness. *I see you*, that soft ray of sunlight seemed to say. *You’re not alone.* Little nudges of concern from a woman who had somehow managed to wrest compassion from horror.

He didn’t deserve her concern.

Sweat trickled down his bare chest as he mixed the punches with kicks. He didn’t often fight hand-to-hand like this, but it was good to keep every muscle honed. The Force had been calling to him for weeks, eddying around him with increasing urgency. Something was about to change. A storm roiled on the horizon, and Kylo needed to be prepared for when it broke.

“Supreme Leader,” a droid said, interrupting his concentration. “The generals request a meeting at 0900 hours.”

Two hours from now. Dread cramped Kylo’s stomach. There was no need for another battle council—they were en route to the Jinata System to meet with allies, and no other threats besides Myrtah loomed on the horizon. The Force hummed around him in warning: the storm was breaking far sooner than he’d expected.

“I’ll be there,” he said.

The droid left, and Kylo finished the workout with a hit that knocked the dummy completely off its base. If only all his enemies could be defeated so easily. He wiped the sweat off his face with a towel and headed back to his quarters to prepare.

The door hissed shut behind him, and Kylo locked it immediately. Snoke had never allowed him to lock his doors, and he’d grown covetous of the privilege now that he was Supreme Leader. The sitting room was dark and minimalist, with a glossy black floor and red lighting tracks lining the durasteel walls. A single table and chair sat beside the window looking out over space, and the walls held an assortment of bookshelves and weapons. He passed them, heading for the door to his bedroom. A shower, that was what he needed. Then he would prepare for battle.

He stopped halfway between his bed and the refresher that adjoined his sleeping quarters, caught up by a different urge entirely. This might be his last day of existence. And even if it wasn’t… he needed to see her.
Rey. He sent her name gently but insistently across the bond. Are you there?

An answering shiver from her end, and then the connection solidified. She was outside again, standing in the middle of a dew-strewn field as dawn broke over the horizon. She wore simple gray garments and a coat that didn’t look nearly thick enough for a pre-dawn stroll. He wondered what planet she was on—then decided it was best if he didn’t know.

What is it? she asked, brow furrowed. Her eyes traced over his sweat-dampened chest before snapping back up.

Kylo sank onto the bed, exhausted even though he’d only been awake for a few hours. Normally his routine of caf and exercise energized him, but this morning was different. I think it’s my last day as Supreme Leader, he said bluntly. If he was right about that meeting with the generals, then there was nothing to lose in being honest with her.

Her jaw dropped, and she blinked a few times. Then she strode towards him and cupped his chin, her palm warm on his skin as she tilted his face up for her appraisal. She looked gorgeous like this, with bright eyes and pink cheeks and the dawn light gilding her loose hair like a crown. Kylo absorbed her with all his senses, trying to commit her to memory.

What happened? she asked.

When you saw me...

Her mouth tightened. On Coruscant. Yes. You were contemplating ending 400 million lives.

What you didn’t know is that I’d already made my decision. Kylo took a deep breath, opening himself to her in a way that went beyond simple words. He let her see the truth inside him. I couldn’t do it.

He waited while she rifled through his memories of that meeting with the generals. Her breath hitched. You told them not to attack, she said wonderingly.

I’m no Snoke. I wasn’t made to lead.

She shook her head and fixed him with a fierce look. You weren’t made to massacre, she said sharply. That’s entirely different. And you were right—they don’t know how to rule now that they’ve conquered.

He was committing treason by letting her see inside a First Order battle council, but Kylo no longer cared. Rey was woven into the fabric of his soul. There was no excluding her from any of this. The generals do not agree with my decision. They’ve been pressuring me to declare an attack.

Her eyes widened with comprehension. You think they will initiate a coup.

She’d always been quick; it was part of what drew him to her. A sharp mind, a strong will, and a sense of purpose that resonated in his soul like a battle march. I can feel a change coming, he said, knowing she would understand the occasionally portentous eddies of the Force. This stalemate will not last.

She nodded decisively. I’ll come get you.

He nearly choked on the laugh that wanted to rip out of him. It doesn’t work like that, Rey. You can’t just march onto a Star Dreadnought to rescue me. Although damn if that image didn’t make his heart sting. This will be over before you even board your ship.
So soon? The golden warmth of her concern cascaded across the bond. He didn’t deserve it; couldn’t she see that? But he absorbed it anyway, seizing that warmth like a frozen landscape kissed by the sun.

Sooner. His lips twisted. So you see, I needed to speak with you one last time. The ache of this moment felt precious to him, the first hint of a true connection shining delicate and fragile between them.

Rey tightened her fingers on his chin to the point of near pain, then shook his face back and forth like he was a poorly-behaved dog. No, she snapped, righteous fire in her eyes. Get on a shuttle. I’ll find you.

Affection warred with amusement at her blatant aggression. Kriff, how could she make him feel this… good? The Force was swelling in waves that told him this meeting with the generals would be pivotal, likely to result in the destruction of everything he’d spent his life working towards, but he couldn’t hold on to anything but her. I’m not going to run, Rey.

She bared her teeth at him, the feral little thing. Fuck the First Order. Fuck Hux. Fuck whatever dark knight sense of honor makes you want to stay and fight them. You matter, Ben.

His chest squeezed with an unbearable mix of tenderness and anger. I don’t, he said. You’ll realize that eventually. But you matter, Rey. Don’t let anyone stop you from thriving. This honesty was heady and intoxicating. He could finally tell her all the softer things he’d dreamed of. Maybe she would weep for him, just a little, and he could take that memory to the inevitable confrontation with the generals...

You half-witted, karking laserbrain! Rey released his chin only to shove at his chest—hard. Kylo had to brace himself against the bed to avoid toppling over. He opened his mouth for a rebuttal, and Rey punched his shoulder. No! she shouted. No more of this self-hating garbage. No more kriffing tragedy. You don’t get to be sweet now just because you think you’re going to die.

Apparently weeping for him was off the table. He blinked at her, utterly perplexed. You don’t want me to be sweet?

She punched his shoulder again. I want you to live, you ludicrous ass! So shut up and let’s figure out how to get you out of there.

This time Kylo couldn’t contain the laugh. It burst out of him on a huff of air, more bark than chuckle. Then it happened again, and before he knew it, he was laughing in earnest. It was a thing he hadn’t done in a very long time, and the sound was rusty and halting. But the waves of mirth kept coming, and when he realized that Rey was staring at him with blank incomprehension, it made him laugh harder. Your face, he gasped.

I fail to understand what’s so amusing, she said, crossing her arms defensively. Maybe you’re unhinged.

Mirth shuddered through him. I am, he said between breaths. Oh, Rey, I am.

The laughter was cathartic, but he needed to regain his composure. He shuddered and swallowed the last few chuckles. I’m sorry, he said when he was in control of himself again. I suppose I was expecting a more poetic sentiment.

She looked at him like he was a lunatic. From me?

Yes. Well. He cleared his throat. The point is, I’m not going to kill 400 million people, and that
means I’m about to be stripped of my command.

Killed, you mean.

He inclined his head. That’s how the First Order works. But don’t worry—I won’t go down without a fight. And it would be an epic one. Kylo could easily take down the generals—it would be the mass of elite guards and troopers who rallied to support them that would eventually overwhelm him.

She blew out another exasperated breath. The point is that I don’t want you to fight. Just get out of there.

No, Rey. He struggled for the words to make her understand. I’ve dedicated my life to this cause. If I’m no longer capable of fulfilling it…

She clearly didn’t understand. What? she asked, her brow crinkling in confusion.

Then I will take the punishment I deserve.

She gaped at him for long moments. Then, to his surprise, she grabbed him by the back of the neck and yanked him up off the bed. No, she said as she crowded closer. Her breasts brushed his sweat-soaked chest, and her hips nudged against his. His cock stirred, insatiable as ever. Rey’s eyes narrowed in a look he recognized from the battlefield. I’ll show you the punishment you deserve for even thinking such nonsense.

She hooked a leg behind his and shoved his shoulder hard. He was startled enough by the sudden violence that he lost his balance and toppled to the floor. Before he could rise again, she was straddling his hips, her hands pressed firmly against his chest.

Stay there, she snapped. I’m going to teach you a lesson.

Kylo was baffled, but he wasn’t about to ask what complicated emotional gymnastics she’d just performed to lead her to this course of action. He rocked his hips, rubbing his swelling erection between her legs. She caught the wave of his movement and adopted the rhythm, riding his clothed erection mercilessly until he was gripping her hips with desperate need.

This isn’t much of a punishment, he choked out. The friction was merciless, but that edge of pain was exactly what he liked.

She clasped her hand around his throat. Your punishment is having to feel everything you’ll be missing, she hissed, squeezing hard enough to send an involuntary thrill of panic-lust through him.

Oh, Rey. He threaded his fingers through the silky strands of her hair, then trailed them down her neck. I’ve felt that every day since the first moment I touched you.

She inhaled sharply, and her hand loosened around his neck. For a moment her wide hazel eyes shone like stars. Then she scowled and punched him in the shoulder again. Stop being sweet, she demanded. I need you to fight.

Fight you? he asked, completely lost.

Not me, she said, raking her nails over his damp chest. He arched beneath her, gasping at the pleasure as she marked his skin with stinging pink lines. Fight this desire to give in to whatever stupid fate you think you deserve. You’re being a coward, Ben.

I am not! Outraged, he sat upright, making her squeak as their torsos came together. Pressing his
forehead against hers, he murmured against her lips. I’m going to fight, Rey. They won’t take me
down easily.

I’m not talking about that, she said. You’re a coward because you’re only being honest with me now
that you think you won’t have to follow through. You can say all these nice things because you won’t
have to try actually being with me.

He shuddered as something delicate and fragile bloomed inside his chest. You would actually be with
me? he whispered.

I don’t know, she said with her trademark brutal honesty. There’s so much pain between us. She
kissed him deep and hard, then pulled away again, fixing him with a determined glare. But if you
don’t leave that kriffing ship, we’ll never know.

He groaned, because as much as he wanted to promise Rey he’d leave without fighting, it wasn’t that
simple. The generals would be watching his movements. Right now, they expected him to walk
blindly into their trap; if he fled, he would lose the element of surprise. He would never again have a
chance to eliminate all of the First Order’s most bloodthirsty generals at once.

He wasn’t sure when that had become one of his goals, but once he’d acknowledged he would never
be a true successor to either Snoke or Vader, it had become easier to discard everything else, too.
Yes, he wanted to kill the generals for turning on him—vengeance was something he would always
understand—but there was more to this desire. Kylo Ren, Armitage Hux, the generals… all of them
were echoes of a bygone era. There were plenty of politicians left to rule the First Order’s territory,
but the time for warmongers was over.

Kylo would take them all down with him.

Ben. Rey’s hands stroked down his back. I can feel your resolve. Please don’t do this. Her tears ran
wet down his cheeks as she pressed her temple against his.

I need to, he said. And then, because it was impossible to articulate all of these raw revelations, he
opened his mind to her again. She’d been right, after all—he did have a strange, dark sense of honor.
He had helped create this nightmare. He would not run from the consequences.

Rey gasped and shuddered as his thoughts rocketed between them. When it was done, she gripped
his hair and forced him to meet her eyes. I think I understand, she said, although she was still crying.
I know you need to… make it right, in your own brutal way. But I need you to promise me
something.

Anything. The universe for her, if she asked it.

Once you’ve done what you have to do, try to escape. Don’t take the whole ship down with you.
Don’t go down in a blaze of glory. Come find me, instead.

His throat was thick. I’ll try.

She kissed him again, and it was sweet and fierce all at once. A kiss just like his Rey. He opened his
mouth hungrily, absorbing the taste of her like a dying man presented with his last meal. He would
take her kisses with him into the fight; maybe they would be enough to see him through.

She shoved his shoulders again, and he willingly lowered himself back to the floor. She rose above
him like a conqueror, her hair tangling around her face and her eyes fierce with possession. I’m still
going to teach you a lesson, she said.
It was amazing that he could smile at a moment like this, but Kylo did. *Whatever you like, Rey.*

Her movements were rough, not elegant, as she stood and stripped off her coat, tunic, and breast band, but as her small, rosy-tipped breasts tumbled out into air that was half-dawn, half starship’s red glow, Kylo thought he’d never seen a more alluring sight. She tackled her trousers and underwear with equal aggression, fumbling with her boots and socks and slapping his hand away when he tried to assist her. Then she stood over him, fully nude. He caught a glimpse of the pink flesh between her legs, shielded by dark curls, and his cock twitched.

She trailed her fingers over herself, spreading her lips to show him more. *This is what you’ll be missing,* she said, tracing her labia with the index finger of her other hand. Moisture gathered at her entrance as she circled her clit, and then she slipped that narrow finger inside herself and pumped slowly.

Kylo groaned and fumbled at his trousers, then stopped when she shook her head and gave him a stern look. *I’m in charge,* she told him.

Kylo huffed a laugh. This was how their dynamic worked: a push and pull of power, a fight even when they were battling towards the same goal. *Then do what you want with me,* he said, spreading his arms wide.

Rey nibbled her lip, running her gaze over him as if deciding where she wanted to start first. *Take off your trousers,* she commanded.

He snorted. *That’s what I was just doing. You stopped me.*

*Because I’m in charge, not you. Now do it.*

Aroused nearly to the point of pain, Kylo unfastened his trousers and pushed them off. He’d been sparring barefoot, so there was nothing left to remove but his underwear. He quirked a brow at her; when she nodded, he stripped those off, too.

Rey knelt beside him, her heels tucked neatly beneath her. She trailed a finger over the proud jut of his cock, smiling a little when it pulsed and emitted a drop of pre-cum. *Here’s something you’ll miss,* she said, stroking her hand up and down the thick column.

He groaned at the soft clasp of her hand. *You can squeeze harder,* he said.

*Let me taste you,* he gasped, sending her another filthy image. *Please.*
She obeyed without hesitation, moving until she was straddling his face while still greedily sucking his cock. Her lush pussy was inches away from his lips, and Kylo surged up to seal his mouth over her. He gripped her ass to hold her in place and licked voraciously, loving the tangy-sweet taste of her arousal. Rey’s moan shuddered through his cock. Her teeth scraped over sensitive skin, and Kylo hissed in a breath.

*Sorry*. She sent the apology to him mentally rather than stopping her sucking.

*I liked it*, he thought as he traced his tongue from her clit to her ass and back, eliciting a shiver from her. *I like it when you’re rough with me.*

She hummed, then took him at his word, sucking and squeezing him hard. The fingers of her other hand tugged gently on his testicles, and she alternated between luscious licks and light scrapes of her teeth until he was groaning and swearing into her cunt, his own finesse utterly lost as he devoured her. *Need you*, he gasped, feeling his control slipping.

Rey drew back, breaking the suction on his erection with a *pop*, then turned and straddled his hips. Her cheeks were feverish, her hair tousled and eyes bright. *This is what you’ll be missing*, she told him as she positioned his cock beneath her. Then she slid down onto him, taking his entire length in one deep stroke.

Kylo gripped her hips and ground up into her. Her body clasped him tightly, and all that warmth and wetness was the best welcome imaginable. She slid slowly up and down, wrecking him with her merciless control. Kylo watched the place where they connected with something like awe as his cock slid out of her, glistening with her arousal, then disappeared back inside.

She rode him steadily, and Kylo moved with her, guiding her hips with his hands as they claimed each other. When Rey leaned over to kiss him, he wrapped his arms around her, clutching her close. They exchanged breaths, gasping as a glorious tension danced across the bond, ratcheting their shared arousal even higher.

Kylo dug his heels into the ground to thrust up into her hard, and Rey let out a guttural cry. *Now*, he said, less request than demand.

*Now*, she agreed. She braced her hands on his shoulders and lifted off just enough to gain leverage before slamming back down. She repeated the motion again and again, claiming her pleasure like a conqueror seizing the spoils of war.

Kylo lost his mind, his harsh groans mixing with garbled compliments and desperate pleas. *You wreck me*, he thought as she drove him higher and higher. *You ruin me, you destroy me... You are everything.*

Rey shuddered over him, and Kylo was lost. He bucked up into her in messy, uneven strokes as his balls tightened and his lower back tingled with an orgasm he was pretty sure was going to kill him before the generals ever could. The tension broke, and he came inside her, pumping her full of his essence as pleasure burned him to the ground.

It was like dying and being reborn. Constellations spun behind Kylo’s closed eyelids, and the Force swirled around them in waves of dark and light that merged into an ocean of starlight. Unbearably beautiful.

Rey nestled into his side, resting her head on his shoulder. *I don’t want the universe, Ben*, she whispered. *I want you.*
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

This chapter's short, sorry! But big things are on the horizon...

Thank you SO much for the comments and support. Reading your comments makes me incredibly happy and inspires me to keep going. I had no idea where this fic would end up when I started it, but somewhere along the way a wild plot appeared in between the smut. I'm not sure how long this will end up being, but I can promise there's still plenty of angst and smut to come!

Rey sprinted back to the base. When she burst through the door, she nearly knocked Finn and Poe over. The two were standing close together, having some hushed conversation.

“Hey!”

“Whoa, everything all right?”

She ignored them and blew past. Leia would be in the command center even at this early hour, and there wasn’t a moment to lose.

Rey skidded into the small room, startling more members of the Resistance. She was aware that Poe and Finn had followed her, but she only had eyes for the general, who was leaning over one of the consoles, deep in conversation with a tech. “General Organa, I need to talk to you.”

Leia looked up and took in Rey’s disheveled state. Rey swiped at her tangled hair, wishing too late she’d cleaned up before confronting her lover’s mother. But despite Rey’s obvious agitation, Leia didn’t seem alarmed. She just studied Rey with those perceptive brown eyes, then nodded. “Let’s take a walk.”

Rey ignored Finn and Poe’s worried glances as she followed Leia out of the room. The general was moving slower than Rey would have liked, and it was an exercise in patience to resist shouting at her to hurry up.

_Ben, Ben, Ben._ His name echoed through her like a pulse, her frantic heart pumping a plea to the universe. _Let him live._ She had to see him again, had to touch him in the flesh.

In a few short minutes, everything between them had changed. Ben was finally shaking off the poisonous legacy that had left him tortured and broken. He was taking his first steps towards a future away from the First Order, and for the first time, it was a future Rey could imagine herself being a part of.

Rey had always fought hard for what she needed, whether it was food and water or a place to belong. She had craved Kylo Ren on a visceral level, but she _needed_ to meet this new version of him with a near-feral intensity... which meant it was time to fight.

They emerged into the bright morning. The dew had burned off during Rey’s passionate interlude with Ben, and the sun’s rays were already intense, promising a hot day. When they reached the fence enclosing the nearest pasture, Leia turned to Rey. “All right,” the general said. “What is it?”
Rey stared at the woman who was the closest thing she’d ever had to a mother. Or not a mother, precisely—that was Ben’s claim, not hers—but a role model. A template for who Rey could be if she seized potential and responsibility in both hands and never let go, no matter the odds. Despite her graying hair and age-lined skin, Leia’s Force energy shone stronger than ever. She had lost a husband, brother, and son, but she was still standing, refusing to accept defeat.

Rey wouldn’t accept defeat, either. “Myrtah needs to rescind their declaration of war,” she blurted. She knew Leia had contacts in government there.

Leia’s eyebrows shot up. “That was not what I expected you to say.”

Rey’s cheeks burned at the spark of knowledge in Leia’s eyes. She refused to ask what the general had expected her to say. “The First Order wants to make an example of Myrtah,” she said. “Even though they’ve won, they see the planet as a symbol of the Resistance. They want to bomb it. But if Myrtah publicly rescinds their declaration of war—even if they’re still working with us—the First Order won’t have a reason to target them anymore.”

Leia sighed heavily. “Child, I know there’s much you aren’t telling me. But for me to reach out to my contacts there… I need to know how you got this information.”

Tears stung Rey’s eyes, and she looked away. This was only the first of the confessions she needed to make to Leia, and time was running out. Ben would be meeting the generals in less than an hour, and there was so much to do.

Ben.

His presence was a soothing stroke down her mind, although she’d shielded her current activities from him, not wanting to distract him or force him to confront thoughts of his mother while he was preparing for battle. I’m here, he said, strong and determined in spite of the terrifying challenge he was about to face.

But he might not be here for long. Sucking in a shuddering breath, Rey looked back at Leia. “I talk to Ben,” she said, bracing herself for the general’s disapproval. “A lot.” Leia didn’t change expression, and Rey frowned at the general’s lack of reaction. “Why aren’t you surprised?”

Leia’s mouth twisted sadly. “I sensed the connection between you two. I had hoped it had faded, but…” Her eyes searched Rey’s, and then hope bloomed across her face like a sunrise. “You called him Ben,” she whispered.

Rey dashed the tears away. “Because he is. He’s still Ben Solo. He showed me what happened—the generals wanted him to strike against Myrtah, and he refused. And now they’re going to kill him for it.”

Leia pressed a hand to her chest and leaned heavily against the fence. “He turned,” she said wonderingly. Tears glittered in her eyes. “I never thought I would see it happen.”

“He hasn’t fully turned,” Rey cautioned, not wanting to give Leia false hope. She’d felt the darkness that still echoed through Ben Solo and had a feeling it would never fully go away. But even that part of him sang to her, resonating with a matching streak of darkness deep inside Rey that she’d spent too long time trying to ignore. “He’ll never be like you or Luke.”

Leia shook her head and pulled Rey into a tight hug. Surprised, Rey stood awkwardly for a few seconds with her hands at her sides before returning the embrace.

Leia pulled away. “You brought Ben back,” she said. “That’s more than enough.”
“He brought himself back,” Rey said, remembering her look into his mind. Conviction and regret had been intertwined with his hunger for revenge, and she’d known instantly that this fight was Ben’s first tentative step towards redemption.

Rey vowed it wouldn’t be his last. “Now that you know about Myrtah,” she said, “I need to go.”

Leia stared at Rey for a long moment. The general seemed simultaneously younger and older in the morning light—fragile, yet radiant with new hope. Then Leia nodded decisively. “Take the Falcon,” she ordered. “And don’t stop until you find him.”

It was all Rey needed to hear. She turned away, preparing to run towards the small spaceport where the Falcon was docked.

“And Rey?” When Rey looked back over her shoulder, Leia smiled and raised a hand in farewell. “May the Force be with you.”
Chapter 15

Adrenaline pumped through Kylo as he strode down a harshly lit corridor towards the council room. His cape swept behind him, and his booted footsteps echoed off the durasteel walls. He wore lightweight armor over a long-sleeved tunic and pants woven from blaster-resistant fabric, and besides his lightsaber, he had blasters strapped to both thighs and a knife sheathed at his back.

He’d never felt so much like Han Solo’s son.

It was a thought that hurt almost unbearably but also felt in some strange way like coming home. Kylo Ren was leaving the First Order in the most dramatic manner possible, and he knew his father would have been proud. Han’s voice echoed in memory, a familiar growl: *Never tell me the odds.*

Kylo finally understood why his father had always flatly refused to listen to such warnings. One hundred stormtroopers to one, one thousand stormtroopers to one… it didn’t matter. Kylo’s course of action was going to be identical no matter how many enemies he faced, which meant the odds were immaterial.

*Ben?* Rey’s voice nudged at his subconscious. He couldn’t see her, but he felt her presence, warm and worried. He was grateful for the distraction from thoughts of Han Solo.

*I’m here,* he said. Rey’s relief echoed in his own chest, and he rubbed a hand over his heart, wondering if being the recipient of her concern would ever feel less astounding.

The odds might be immaterial, but Kylo needed to focus. He paused to collect himself, inhaling deeply and reaching to the Force for strength. A sea of energy surrounded him, but the swirl of black now reflected brilliant starlight, and trails of phosphorescence shimmered across the surface. It was a mirror of the vision he’d had during this morning’s devastating orgasm, and he stared at the mix of light and dark with alarm. What did it mean?

Rey nudged him again, so he sent her an image of the stormy ocean glimmering with light. *It didn’t used to look like that,* he said.

Her curiosity turned to awe. *It’s like us,* she said. *Light and dark together.*

Kylo felt better about those streaks of phosphorescence now that he could link the illumination to her. He had been a servant of the dark for so long—there was no reason why the light would welcome him again. He would only ever glimpse its reflection through the woman tied to his soul.

But that light-streaked blackness still churned around him, calling for him to reach deep and seize what he needed. This new, mingled power was there for the taking, and Kylo wouldn’t refuse a potential weapon.

He hadn’t reached for the light in many years, and he felt uncharacteristically afraid of what he might find in those deep waters. But he wasn’t a coward, so Kylo delved into the starlit ocean, embracing the currents of the Force. Energy flooded him, crackling at his fingertips. It was intoxicating—power in a stinging, complicated form he hadn’t encountered before. Want and rage, peace and hope: the conflicting impulses wove around each other in a tapestry as complex as his own heart. Kylo pulled on that mingled energy, seizing steadiness from the light and anger from the dark. His nerves faded, replaced by furious certainty.

*It’s time,* he told Rey.
His steps were confident as he headed towards the council chamber where his future would be decided. He passed an intersection and spotted a group of stormtroopers down the corridor. It was a common enough sight, but he knew they weren’t just running drills this time. They were reinforcements.

Rey’s voice was fierce. Finish this and come back to me, Ben.

I will, he vowed. This isn’t the end.

But even as he said it, he knew he might be lying to her. He was only one man against hundreds of the First Order’s finest soldiers. There was a strong possibility he wouldn’t make it out alive. The old version of Kylo Ren wouldn’t have cared, but this new one had a very compelling reason to live. For her, he was going to try.

Fuck the odds.

The first blaster bolt shot towards him the moment the council room door hissed open. Kylo was ready, though. His lightsaber hummed as he deflected it. A rain of fire followed, blaster bolts arcing at him from all sides from the generals and their guards. He moved through his defensive forms, spinning and slicing his way deeper into the chamber.

It had been smart of the generals not to wait or attempt discourse. The only way to kill someone like Kylo Ren was to take him by surprise.

Too bad for them he wasn’t surprised.

The energy surging through him demanded blood. General Halsan lunged at him with a pair of vibro-arbir blades that reminded Kylo of when he and Rey had fought together against Snoke’s Praetorian Guard. The thrill of that memory was joined by a surge of protective rage at the thought of Rey in danger, and Kylo let out a primal yell as he spun out of the way of the cleaving blades, deflected another blaster bolt, and severed the general’s torso on the backswing. The general collapsed in two pieces, his weapons clattering uselessly to the ground.

More attacks, more cuts, more screams. The battle flowed on currents of the Force, and that dark-light energy told Kylo all he needed to know. He saw threats before they manifested and outcomes before they happened, and as he gave himself up to the dual purposes of destroying and surviving, the stabs and shouts merged into a blinding, beautiful web of potential and action. He ducked, dodged, and sliced, delivering a maelstrom of glowing red death to the generals who had thought to defy him. Scalding rage fueled him, but behind it was a sense of purpose as solid as iron.

The door slid open again, and stormtroopers poured into the room and started firing. Kylo froze most of the bolts in mid-air, but one grazed his cheek. He grunted in pain, then sent a percussive blast through the room, knocking his opponents to the ground.

Hux was cowering beneath the long table. Kylo’s grin was feral as he grabbed the general by the collar and dragged him upright. The stormtroopers were recovering, and Kylo spun just in time to use Hux’s body as a shield against the renewed fire. The red-headed general shuddered as blaster bolts punched into his torso.

“Looks like you’re Supreme Leader now,” Kylo murmured in Hux’s ear. “At least for the next few seconds. I hope it was worth it.”

He flicked his lightsaber off, then brought the black hilt between them to press against the base of
Hux’s spine. With a press of his thumb, Kylo engaged it again, and the red blade punched up at a sharp angle from the small of the man’s back through his chest. Kylo’s last remaining nemesis collapsed without a sound.

Except Hux wasn’t his final nemesis, was he? That honor belonged to Kylo Ren himself.

*Let the past die.*

Kylo killed his past methodically and brutally. Red light, red blood. Soon the room was littered with corpses, and the few stormtroopers who had survived his assault fled. Kylo sprinted out of the room, knowing the fight wasn’t over yet. The First Order was ruthless; there was no chance the generals hadn’t arranged for more troops to engage him. He headed for the docking bay, determined to honor his promise to Rey.

If it wasn’t for that promise, Kylo would have found a way to make the ship self-destruct. Take everyone out with him in an explosion that would send shockwaves through the entire galaxy. But a shining golden filament stretched from Kylo’s mind to the best person he had ever known, and he was going to do his best to make sure that light never went out.

The docking bay was full of stormtroopers. Hundreds of them, arrayed in battle formations. He would need to cut through a substantial swath of them to get to the nearest TIE fighter.

*Never tell me the odds.*

He pulled out a heavy blaster with his left hand and started firing. The stormtroopers hadn’t expected him to use anything but a lightsaber, and there was a flurry of panic in the nearest lines as the first stormtroopers dropped. Their gleaming white armor was built to disperse the energy of blaster bolts, but a direct hit was enough to incapacitate them, and Kylo took merciless advantage. The front lines collapsed, and he advanced through them, cutting and blasting his way through anyone who got in his way.

Rey would probably tell him the stormtroopers were just obeying orders, he thought as he kept killing. As if that absolved any of them; he had been obeying orders, too, when he’d tortured and killed for Snoke. But Rey was friends with the defector, FN-2187, and she likely wouldn’t approve of a complete massacre. “Your commanders are all dead,” he shouted, amplifying his voice with the Force. “Retreat, and I will spare your lives.”

Fully half of the stormtroopers scattered, and Kylo acknowledged that Rey’s ideals had some use. The fighters that remained were obstacles standing between him and Rey; he took no mercy on them. “No one keeps me from her,” he snarled, and at the savage words, more stormtroopers broke and ran.

As Kylo carved his way into the room, a squadron of stormtroopers circled around behind him. His blaster-resistant attire couldn’t block direct hits, and despite keeping his lightsaber in constant motion, a few shots broke through his guard. One plugged him in the thigh, while another burned his upper arm. He staggered on, grateful for the thousands of brutal sparring sessions that had taught him how to use pain to bolster his strength. He gloried in the brutal burn of another bolt across his back before sending that pain back to its originator on a crushing wave of the Force.

The energy swirling around him was dark, dark, dark: an endless night of rage and violence. The sea had lost its phosphorescence, although a single bright star still burned far above. He fixed that star in his mind as a waypoint—a marker of a path back to sanity—before abandoning himself to the dark with a primal scream.
Blaster bolts chipped away at his armor and scalded his skin. An elite trooper with a virbo-voulge swung for him, slicing through the lightweight armor on his chest and cutting a deep gash over his ribs. Another with a Bilari electro-chain whip skewered him in the gut with the rapier-sharp tip, sending a savage shock through his entire body. Kylo threw the men back into a cluster of soldiers, scattering them like children’s toys.

He was trailing blood, but he didn’t stop. The TIE fighter was fifteen meters away. Ten. Five.

He hardly felt the cut that flayed his side open directly over the scar left by Chewbacca’s bowcaster. It was just an echo; all of this was an echo. Just one in a string of countless days spent wallowing in agony and death.

The past bled out. The future receded. There was only now and this and her.

At last, he broke through the final defenders keeping him from his goal. Blood poured from his wounds as he scrambled into the TIE fighter’s cockpit and prepared for launch. He didn’t bother with any pre-flight checklists; there wasn’t time, not when other pilots were scrambling into their own fighters. He blasted out into space, and the Star Dreadnought fell away beneath him.

This was a Special Forces TIE fighter, which thankfully had hyperdrive installed. As Kylo prepared for the jump to lightspeed, a wave of dizziness washed over him. Blood soaked his clothing and pooled in the seat beneath him. Not all of it was his... but enough of it was. This needed to be a short jump, then. Just enough to get away from the pursuing fighters so he could treat his wounds.

Rey. He called to her with the desperation of a postulant begging for an audience with the divine. He needed her more than air, more than blood. He needed to feel her determination and hope through the bond, telling him the fight had been worth it and there was a reason for him to exist, after all.

Ben! Hold on. I’m almost there.

Her voice was honey and sunlight. He closed his eyes, letting it wash over him. My goddess, he slurred back. He was close to losing consciousness, so he dropped out of lightspeed, letting her look through his eyes at the instrument readouts. They were near a small desert planet—he could land there and wait for her.

He was still far above the surface when his vision faded. The pain went with it, and that, out of everything, told him how badly off he was. Pain had been a constant for as long as he could remember; without it, there was nothing to anchor him in his skin. His hands slipped on the controls, falling limp and bloody to his lap before he managed to muster a final bit of strength to strap on an oxygen mask and grip the ejection handle.

This wasn’t going to be a landing.

His heart stuttered and skipped as it tried to keep him alive with a massively depleted blood supply. Almost made it, he told Rey as that fragile organ faltered. It belonged to her, anyway. He’d only been borrowing it.

His goddess was screaming at him. No, Ben! You have to fight!

A chuckle bubbled out of him, sticky with blood. So bossy, he said, then coughed wetly. I’ve always loved that about you.

Then she was gone and so was the Force and so was everything. He breathed one last sigh and hit the eject button.
Death came more softly than Kylo Ren had ever dreamed it would.
Chapter 16

Something ripped apart in Rey’s chest. She screamed in agony at the feeling of a mortal wound, but when she felt her chest for an injury, there was nothing there. The damage wasn’t in her flesh, but her soul.

Ben was dying.

“No,” she shouted, refusing to accept it. But the pain was spreading across her body, and she knew it was only a fraction of what he was feeling. The ache in her chest was the worst, as if an essential artery was being sawed in half. It was the bond, she realized. The bond between them was fraying.

She wouldn’t survive it.

Rey closed her eyes and reached out to the Force. Ben was still there, a roiling mass of darkness at the end of the bond, but she could see him breaking apart. The shadows were wisping away like smoke.

Rey called on all her strength, every ounce of raw power that had propelled her through a life of deprivation and loss, and sent it down the bond to him. The golden strands of her essence surrounded him, wrapping his aching soul in a cradle of light. It stopped the shadows from drifting apart further, but it wouldn't last. She wasn’t powerful enough to live for both of them for very long.

But she had his coordinates. She'd been plunging through hyperspace for two hours now, drawn to the sense of him across the stars, and thankfully, his trajectory had brought him even closer to her. She was almost there.

_Live_, she willed him, but he didn’t answer. When she tried to slip into his mind, all she found was darkness. Not knowing if it would help at all, she imagined breathing for him and pumping his heart. Keeping his vitals stable until she could save him.

She dropped out of hyperspace next to a desert planet. The invisible pull of the Force bond tugged her through the atmosphere and towards the surface.

It was then that she saw the black TIE fighter plummeting towards the cracked earth of the desert. Rey gasped and sent the Falcon diving after it. He was going too fast, he needed to pull up…

The fighter slammed into the rocky ground and exploded in a ball of orange flame.

Rey screamed. A cloud of dust billowed up before raining shrapnel over the surface, and smoke twisted in a noxious column towards the sky. “No, no, no.” She repeated the denial over and over again. Ben Solo had somehow become the other half of her. He couldn’t be dead.

Rey brought the Falcon down next to the wreck and fumbled for an oxygen mask. The temperature outside was survivable, but the air wasn’t breathable by humans. Even so, nothing could have stopped her from going after him. Rey hadn’t survived this long by giving in to despair. If there were any pieces of Ben Solo left, she would stitch him back together.

She lowered the ramp and sprinted onto the surface. It was even hotter than Jakku, and dust coated her exposed skin as the wind skipped pebbles along the cracked brown earth. She reached the wreckage quickly—and just as quickly realized nothing could have survived that.

The heat was too intense to get close, and Rey sank to her knees and screamed in despair. “Ben,” she sobbed, tears sliding down her dust-smeared cheeks. If only she’d argued longer when he’d insisted on fighting his way out. If only she’d found him earlier. If only she’d opened her heart to him sooner. If only she’d told him… told him...

Something moved in her peripheral vision. Rey tilted her head up to the yellow sky and saw the flutter of a parachute.

He’d ejected.

Hope surged almost violently inside her. Rey ran towards the spot where the pilot seat was about to make landfall, then winced as the chair hit the ground and bounced, dragging the billowing chute behind it. At last it skidded to a stop and toppled over.

“Ben!” She knelt beside the chair and nearly screamed when she saw the state of him. He was coated in blood, and deep wounds gaped on his stomach, arms, and chest. His eyes were closed, his face burned from blaster fire. She pressed her head to his chest and heard the faint patter of a heartbeat, but she didn’t need to be a physician to understand that he was close to death. The Force bond ached, and even though she was funneling all her strength into him, it wouldn’t be enough.

“Force healing,” she muttered. That was the only solution: fixing him up enough to survive the journey to a facility with a bacta tank. She pressed her hands over his chest, closed her eyes, and opened every sense to the Force.

The web of starlight spread around her, its whisper-thin strands quivering in unseen currents. Now, though, she saw the dark threads winding through it. Ben’s influence—or maybe her own. His ocean and her web were no longer simple or easily defined, but somehow that made them even more beautiful.

She reached for the energy that connected Ben to her and the larger universe and imagined gathering that light into a ball to press inside his wounds. She pumped his body full of light, illuminating the damage done to him. These fresh injuries were devastating—ruptured organs, broken bones, severed muscles—but almost as bad were the old ones. His body was riddled with scar tissue, much of it beneath the surface. The result of extensive torture by a Force user who had never allowed his victim to properly heal.

Rey wished Snoke was still alive... so she could kill him again.

She soothed Ben’s torn side and mauled chest with the light, imagining the Force knitting his skin back together. Then she pushed it into his gut, wincing at the depth and severity of the wound. It would take more than she was capable of to fix that, but she was at least able to stop the bleeding.

Patiently, piece by piece, she knitted him back together. Sweat trickled down her temples, and her body shook from the effort. She’d never healed such severe injuries before, and she’d already expended a huge amount of energy keeping him alive during those awful blank moments before he’d hit the surface.

*Live, she whispered inside his head. *Live for me.*

Rey gave everything of herself until she had no more to give. She collapsed next to him, trembling. In the darkness behind her closed eyelids, the bond pulsed golden and pure. His soul was still caged by her light, and she held her breath as she withdrew those psychic tendrils. This was the moment of truth: either her efforts would be enough… or they wouldn’t be.
The darkness shifted. It hummed. And then one word drifted to her from very far away.

*Rey.*
Chapter 17

Kylo Ren floated in nothingness.

No, that wasn’t quite right. He was floating in something, but he was too relaxed to care what. An ocean, maybe. Cool liquid coated his skin, and his hair drifted around him. The hiss of air in and out of his lungs was soothing, if oddly loud.

If this was death, it was nice but frankly underwhelming.

His eyes fluttered open, and it took a moment to understand what he was seeing. A mask had been suctioned to his face—thus explaining the oddly loud sound of air being pumped into him—and what he could see of the clinical-looking room beyond it was shielded by bluish liquid.

He was in a bacta tank.

There were tubes threaded into his skin, and the fact that Kylo didn’t immediately rip them all out and demand answers from whatever doctor had done this to him was proof that they’d sedated him. Instead, he smiled lazily and looked down at himself.

Well. That was certainly an unflattering pair of underwear. More tubes snaked out of the diaper-like garment, and he didn’t want to think too closely about that, so he made a casual study of his bare torso, instead. The gaping wounds were now sealed, the scars pink and shiny. Miraculously, nothing hurt.

How had he gotten into a bacta tank? The last thing he remembered was rocketing out of a doomed TIE fighter, absolutely certain that death had come for him. Rey had been shouting at him, and—

Rey.

He blinked to greater awareness, shoving down the fogginess of the drugs. Panic shivered through him. Where was she? Had the First Order followed him? Had she been captured?

I’m here. The reassurance came almost instantaneously across the bond, and then he saw something moving in the room beyond as a slender figure wearing familiar brown rags launched herself out of a chair towards him. Rey stopped with her hands pressed up against the glass of his tank, looking at him with wide, starry eyes. You’re awake.

If he could have moved his limbs, he would have pressed his hands against the other side of the glass to get that much closer to her. Instead he blinked at her slowly and attempted another smile.

Her lips twitched. You look high.

I think I am, he said. It would explain why it was so hard to put coherent thoughts together.

It’s cute.

Before he could muster any outrage at being called cute—Kylo Ren the Jedi Killer, former Supreme Leader, and Master of the Knights of Ren, cute, honestly—she wrinkled her nose at him, and he promptly became distracted by how very pretty she was. I like your freckles, he said, wishing he could kiss each and every one. Rey blushed, and he liked that even better than the freckles.

Those must be some powerful painkillers, she said.
Not as powerful as those freckles. She laughed, and he didn’t know why. Didn’t she understand that those little golden flecks were lethal? They deserved their own weapons class. Weapons of mass infatuation.

Oh, Ben. She sighed and leaned her forehead against the glass. If you aren’t careful, I’ll want to keep you drugged all the time.

He wouldn’t mind that so much. This blissful floating was far preferable to anything else he’d experienced—except being in her arms. His eyes slid shut against his will, and he began sinking back into unconsciousness. Want her, he thought drowsily. Want to be awake for her.

Sleep, Ben.

He did.

#

Bacta tanks were boring.

Kylo glowered at the medic who was examining his vitals on a tablet. Let me out, he thought, but the man apparently wasn’t Force-sensitive, because the mental command had no impact.

Don’t be impatient, Rey chided him. She was curled up in her favorite chair across the room again, and he felt her laughter bubble across the bond like champagne. It was nice, but not nice enough to make up for two days of floating in blue soup.

This is unbearably dull.

And you are thankfully not unbearably dead, so I think you can stand it a little longer.

He glared at her, but he’d discovered over the last day that intimidation was hard to manage when one was wearing nothing but an oxygen mask and a giant diaper. A pile of plain black clothes rested on the chair next to Rey, and he wanted them desperately. This isn’t dignified.

Her eyes trailed over him. Oh, I don’t know. The tank gives me an excellent view of that ridiculously muscled chest of yours. Her lips pressed together with suppressed mirth. And the diaper, of course.

He was pretty sure he was blushing with mortification, not that anyone would be able to tell with this confounded contraption on his face. Are you still leering at me? he snapped. Haven’t you gotten your fill of ogling wounded, half-naked men yet, you insatiable pervert?

Now it was her turn to blush. “Doctor,” Rey said out loud, “How much longer do you think he needs to be in there?”

The doctor looked up from his tablet. “He’s almost ready to come out. Two more hours.”

Rey fixed Kylo with a wicked look. “Let’s make it three. Just to be safe.”

And because he was in a kriffing bacta tank in an oxygen mask and a diaper, no one seemed to notice or care about his angry shriek when the doctor agreed.
Rey finished preparing the Millennium Falcon for takeoff. They were docked at a moon outpost that provided goods and services for travelers on long space hauls, so she’d stocked up on provisions while waiting for Ben to heal.

She’d done one other thing while waiting: she’d returned to the scene of the crash to retrieve the ejection seat and parachute. Then she’d gone to the nearest desert town to report a downed TIE fighter. No survivors.

Eventually the gossip would spread, and Kylo Ren would be declared dead. It had been hard to leave Ben vulnerable and drifting in that bacta tank—and thank the Maker the first outpost she’d reached had had a doctor—but this step was essential if they were to have any sort of future together.

She just had to figure out what that future was going to be.

She sat in the pilot’s seat with her head in her hands, pondering what to do next. It felt strange to pilot the Falcon on her own, but her Force powers had allowed her to perform a co-pilot’s roles in addition to hers. Now she supposed Ben would be her co-pilot. He probably knew every centimeter of this ship backwards and forwards. Sometimes it was jarring to remember exactly who he was—the result of the greatest love story of the Galactic Civil War—but moments like this made her think of that long-ago fairy tale.

Once upon a time, a smuggler and a princess fell in love while saving the galaxy…

And then the smuggler and the princess had created him: a boy destined for greatness. But somewhere along the way, that potential had been twisted, and the boy had turned into a killer. The man who tore the fairy tale apart.

She still didn’t entirely understand why.

Rey sighed into her palms. This was the core conflict she’d been dealing with all along, wasn’t it? How Ben Solo could be both her passionate lover and the man who murdered his own father. She’d gotten pieces of the tale along the way—in those awful dreams and the scars that littered his body—but there was more he hadn’t told her. A lifetime of trauma. A lifetime of choices that Rey wasn’t sure she’d ever understand.

Here was what she did understand, though:

She wanted Ben Solo. She needed him. Right now, everything else was immaterial.

A hand touched her shoulder, and Rey spun, already lashing out with her fist. Ben’s broad palm stopped the blow, though, and she stared at him, wonderstruck. He was tall and broad and as dangerous-looking as ever in the simple black clothes she’d bought him, but his scarred face was somehow… softer. More open. Rey stared and stared, wanting nothing more than to drown in him.

Wait. Her brow furrowed. “Why are you here? You’re supposed to have an hour left in the tank.”

He shrugged, and a tiny smile lifted one corner of his mouth. “You’re very convincing, but it turns out the doctor was invested in getting us out of his clinic as soon as possible.”
She sighed and rubbed her forehead. “I hope he didn’t recognize you.”

“Unlikely.” He gestured to his bare face. “I haven’t made that many public appearances without a mask. But he might have recognized you. You are the only Jedi left in the galaxy.”

She made a face. “I’m not a Jedi.”

Ben watched her for long moments, and she wondered what thoughts churned behind those brown eyes. She could have delved into his head to find out, but she didn’t, allowing him his privacy. “Maybe not,” he said at last. “But you’re a symbol, all the same.”

She wouldn’t be a symbol if Luke Skywalker was still alive. Rey shoved the thought away, not wanting it to intrude on this moment. Ben was restored to her, standing tall and strong in the cockpit of the Millennium Falcon, and her heart needed him for its own arcane reasons, no matter what he had done.

“Do you think the doctor will report us to the authorities?” Ben asked, raking a hand through his damp hair. He must have showered off the bacta residue. “Even if he didn’t recognize either of us, our arrival was... suspicious.”

Rey shook her head. “He’s been paid too much.” And that had been a surprise—when she’d accessed her credits to pay the first doctor she’d found on this outpost, the amount available had been nigh-astronomical. She knew it had been Leia’s doing, although Rey wouldn’t tell Ben that yet. Recognizing the determined and slightly demented look on his face as he stared out the cockpit window towards the clinic, Rey realized an intervention was in order. “You’re not allowed to kill the doctor,” she said, resisting the urge to roll her eyes.

He huffed a frustrated-sounding breath. “You’re too soft-hearted.” But there was no real vitriol in his voice, and the threat to the doctor’s life faded as Ben turned to face her fully, leaning back against the console. His hands were braced beside him, and Rey frowned as she realized they were shaking.

"Are you feeling unwell?” she asked. “Do we need to go back to the clinic?"

He cursed and flexed one of those hands, stretching out the long fingers. “No, Rey. The problem is that we're talking logistics right now when all I want to do is touch you.”

Oh. That demented look hadn’t been directed at the doctor, after all. He fixed her with that half-wild stare now, and heat flooded her. She knew he wouldn’t be content with just touching her; he wanted to fuck.

Ben had almost died blowing up his old life, but he was here now, and he was hers.

Rey’s hunger surged to match his. She stood, maintaining eye contact as she braced herself for what she was about to unleash. “Do it,” she said, low and urgent.

She had expected him to start mauling her immediately, but instead Ben straightened from the console... and stood perfectly still. The tension in the air thickened as he maintained a tight leash on whatever primal urges seethed under his skin. Rey’s nipples stiffened, and her pussy dampened in anticipation.

He reached out one finger and trailed it over her cheek and down her neck oh, so slowly, and that small contact held the electric potential of a lightning strike. He paused at the collar of her new gray tunic, watching her for endless moments.

The tension in the air wasn’t just sexual; a gathering storm of energy thrummed around them. Ben
lifted his hand from her neckline, twisted his fingers... and ripped her shirt straight down the middle with the Force. She gasped as the fabric went flying.

“I just bought that,” she said, but her voice trembled as hard as her knees.

Ben ignored the feeble protest and split her trousers next, shredding them with the ruthless precision of one of the most powerful darksiders ever to exist. He levitated her briefly to rip off her boots and socks, and then the breast band and underwear joined the pile of torn clothing. The brush of his power against her skin felt like a caress, and Rey shuddered as he stripped her bare without touching her at all.

Energy seethed around him, and that churning heat was reflected in his blown pupils as he stared at her body. “Nothing keeps me from you,” he said in low, lethal tones. “You’re mine, Rey.”

Her skin prickled at the intensity of his claim, and her lower belly tensed. Sensing that he needed a response from her, Rey nodded. “I’m yours,” she whispered.

The leash snapped.

Chapter End Notes

Leaving you with a different sort of cliffhanger this time...

How many sex scenes are too many sex scenes? Is there a limit per fic?
Kylo was on Rey in an instant. He tugged her against him, kissing her with all the passion he’d been restraining since the moment he’d entered the cockpit to find her lost in thought. It was the first time they’d kissed in person since Jakku, and a savage thrill shot through him as Rey opened her mouth to let him in without hesitation.

It was so much better than touching her in dreams or shared visions. Her naked body was smooth and warm, and he charted it eagerly with calloused fingertips. She was all lean muscle and delicate curves, her frame tiny against his. Her presence was so large that it was easy to forget how small she was, and he loved everything about that dichotomy.

He caged her waist between his hands, exultant over the way she went up on her toes and wrapped her arms around his neck. She nipped at him, then swiped her tongue over his, meeting him kiss for kiss. Ravenous for more of her taste, Kylo tore his lips away to trail them down her neck, sucking tiny bruises into the skin. She gasped and writhed against him, and it still wasn’t enough.

It would never be enough.

Kylo picked her up and carried her out of the cockpit, heading for the captain’s quarters. She wrapped her legs around him, grinding her pussy against his stomach as she nibbled his ear. She was wet enough that he felt it through the fabric of his shirt, and fuck. He stopped in the hallway, unable to make it another step without tasting her.

The Force rippled around him, feeding into his frenzied need. He buoyed Rey up with the Force, lifting her against the wall so her cunt was level with his mouth and her legs were hooked over his shoulders. She gasped as he froze her in place there. “Fuck, Ben,” she said, squirming against the wall. “You’re so strong...”

Hearing those words sent a primal thrill through him, and he clamped down on her movements even more using the Force. She shivered, pinned for him like a butterfly with her chest heaving and her skin flushing red.

Kylo parted the lips of her pussy with a thin tendril of energy. She glistened for him, pink and open, and he’d never seen a more delicious sight. He licked straight through the core of her, and Rey screamed.

This was paradise: the taste of Rey on his tongue while the Force hummed through them, connecting them on a level as fundamental as the bond between atoms. He laved her clit with firm strokes, then dipped down to sip from her opening. She shuddered when his stubbled cheek rasped against her inner thigh, so he did it again and again. He knew exactly how much she loved what he was doing to her—it was mirrored in her pulsing cunt and frantic thoughts.

It took focus to eat her out while keeping her imprisoned by the Force, and he’d never been as proud of his power as he was using it for this. “You’re mine,” he murmured against her sensitive flesh. With the Force lifting her for him, his hands were free to play, and he splayed one across her lower belly while the other explored her thighs and the space between her legs. He slid two fingers inside her, growling against her clit when her body squeezed around him.

“Let me touch you,” she begged, and Kylo took mercy on her. He released his control of her arms, although he kept the rest of her pinned. She immediately plunged her hands into his hair and tugged sharply, demanding he look up at her, and he lifted his eyes while continuing to work her with his
mouth. She was flushed and disheveled, but the gleam in her eyes was decidedly militant. “You’re mine, too,” she said, gripping his hair hard enough to sting. “Don’t forget that.”

He moaned into her, and his heart fucking ached at that declaration. Kylo had never belonged to anyone like this before. No one had ever wanted what he’d become.

“I want you,” Rey said, picking up on his thoughts. “And I’m going to have you.”

He sucked on her clit in gratitude, and she orgasmed with a breathy gasp. Her inner muscles fluttered around his fingers, and pulses of bliss flowed into him across the bond. “Need you to fuck me,” she gasped as tremors rocked her. “Now, Ben.”

His erection throbbed at the demand. She was always fighting him in some way. It didn’t matter if he had her pinned or if he was the one dealing the pleasure: Rey would always claw for control. He lowered her, and the moment her feet touched the floor, he snatched her up in his arms and carried her into the captain’s quarters. He tossed her onto the bed, then followed her down.

Rey grabbed the back of his head and pulled him to her lips, not seeming to care that his mouth was still wet with her. She kissed him like a conqueror claiming a new planet, and he returned the intensity, devouring her until both of their lips were swollen and stinging.

Rey shoved at his shoulder, rolling him over on the narrow bed. Then she knelt above him and began ripping his clothes off. She used her hands, not the Force, but when he tried to sit up and seize control of the kiss again, she shoved him back down with a wave of energy.

“You’re perfect,” he said, awestruck by the sight of her rising over him like a queen. “I would burn the galaxy to ashes for you.”

He heard her frantic thought—that shouldn’t be sexy, oh fuck, why is that sexy—and grinned. His noble, fierce Rey might be a warrior of the light, but she liked the dark better than she admitted.

When he was fully nude, Rey straddled him, rubbing her pussy up and down his erection. Her cheeks burned red, and little bruises peppered her throat. Kylo wanted to shout in triumph at seeing the marks of his passion spread across her skin.

“That’s how this makes me feel,” she said, trailing a finger down his scar. “Maybe it’s wrong of me, but I like knowing that I’ve marked you.”

The idea was perverse and arousing as fuck. He thrust up against her, groaning as the sensitive head of his cock slid over hot, wet skin. “You claimed me that day, even if it was a different type of battle.”

“Maybe I should give you another mark now,” Rey said, and then she gripped his erection in one small hand, angled him against her entrance, and sank down onto him.

Kylo swore and slammed his head back against the mattress as her pussy surrounded him in liquid heat. Fuck, she was wet, so slippery that when she rose up, trails of her arousal slid down his erection and pooled at the base. “Maker,” he gasped as she rode him aggressively. Her taut thighs flexed, and her small breasts bounced with each punishing rock of her hips. She was a vision above him, the goddess he’d called her when he’d thought he was dying.

This was a bit like dying, too. Kylo was coming apart, losing all his control. Something crashed to the floor as his grip on his Force powers faltered, and the lights flickered. Rey grinned down at him, and damn, power looked good on her. Then she lifted her hand and flicked those delicate fingers, and pressure squeezed his throat.
Yes, he cried out across the bond as she Force choked him. The pressure wasn’t enough to truly hurt him, but even so, his vocal cords weren’t capable of anything but desperate whimpers. How did she know…

*Pain is another facet of passion,* she said in his mind. *And it isn’t all bad. I learned that from you.*

Tears pooled at the corners of his eyes as she rode him, but figuring out whether they were pain or relief or sheer fucking gratitude or all of the above was more than his overloaded mind could handle. She raked her nails down his chest, and the extra sting made him grunt and thrust up into her.

“You want to lose control,” she whispered. “And I want to take it.”

And yes, yes, that was it. He wanted to *seize* control from her and for her to *seize* it back. He wanted the fight. And he wanted this surrender, too—a moment to be her victim, her toy, the cock she used.

*It isn’t using,* she said across the bond. The pressure on his throat lightened. *We’re both giving. And taking.*

Then the Force choke vanished and she was kissing him again, hard and desperate. He wrapped her in his arms, holding her against him as he bucked up into her. They must have been crafted just for each other, because each thrust went as deep inside her as he could possibly go. The light overhead shattered, and he had no idea which one of them was responsible.

“Ben,” she gasped against his lips, and it was too much. Terrified that he would come first, he called on the Force one last time and brushed a wave of energy against her clit. Rey screamed and fell apart, and then Kylo was falling, too. He pumped into her, and it really was like dying, because his vision faded and the room was being torn apart around them and all he could think was *yes* and *please* and *finally.*
Rey lay next to Ben, staring dazedly at the ceiling. He was already asleep, his breathing deep and even. He lay on his side with his arm flung over her waist in a kind of casual intimacy that somehow seemed even more profound than the rest of it. She’d never slept beside a man before, and she’d never seen Ben so relaxed and vulnerable.

She’d done that to him by riding him within an inch of his life until he was gasping and shivering beneath her. He’d given back as good as he got, ruining her with his mouth and hands and that thick, perfect cock. Their sex was mind-blowing. Intense. Addictive.

Everything Ben himself was.

She ached between her thighs, and her lips felt bruised, but she wouldn’t trade any of the pain for a more tepid passion.

Rey sighed, reliving the moment when she’d choked him and he’d been glad. He’d told her he liked when she was rough with him, so she’d taken him at his word. The erotic punishment was different, somehow, than what Snoke or anyone else had done to him. She’d felt Ben’s pain for so long, the intensity of it agonizing at times, and the roughness of their sex barely registered on the scale of what Ben Solo had been through.

Seeing him come undone beneath her had been thrilling, just as it had been when he’d had her at his mercy earlier. She was learning that when pain was just an edge to be wielded with care, the sting could be sweet for both of them.

She shifted, feeling restless and hot despite having orgasmed so recently. “Ben,” she whispered. His name was a talisman, reminding her that everything had been real and they weren’t dreaming. The cabin lay in ruins around them, every object that hadn’t been bolted down strewn across the floor like shrapnel, but the two of them were whole and happy.

*Happy,* she thought on a giddy little bubble. It wasn’t something she’d felt all that often in her life, and she knew the emotion had been even rarer for Ben.

What should they do now, though? They could fuck and fuck and fuck for days—and she knew they would, their connection already a full-blown addiction—but the reality of the situation was that Kylo Ren was now the galaxy’s most wanted criminal on both sides of the fight. No matter where they went, someone might recognize him and try to end his life, and Rey refused to accept that.

For better or worse, he was hers now.
Being hers didn’t mean she understood or pardoned everything he’d done, though. She stroked a hand over his broad chest, tracking the fluttering of his eyelids as he dreamed, and wondered if life would ever be simple for them. If she would ever uncover the kernel of pure goodness within him.

If she even wanted to.

Rey sighed and closed her eyes, accepting that for now, there were no simple answers.

#

Lines of light streaked past the cockpit windows as the Millennium Falcon plunged through hyperspace. Rey watched the smear of stars, wondering how Kylo would react when he found out where they were going.

He hadn’t asked yet, which told her that he, as much as she, was trying to maintain this truce. They’d fallen into each other’s bodies repeatedly over the last few days, and for now lust was enough. The questions that needed to be asked could wait.

But even their lust was complicated. They were still working out the dynamics between them, and Rey had learned that while Ben relished a fight for control, he felt guilty if he orgasmed first. She’d also learned that he often felt simultaneously awed and ashamed while having sex with her, as if he didn’t think he deserved to touch her. And she’d learned that his lust covered up other, equally desperate needs he refused to acknowledge.

Understanding. Touch. Compassion. His soul ached for those and more, but he never spoke those needs out loud. She understood pride and wariness, so she let them both pretend that she couldn’t feel the sting of those emotional wounds across the bond. As raw and unrestrained as he was with her physically, he wasn’t ready to share his inner turmoil with her yet.

So she would wait.

A beep announced that they were nearing their destination. Rey kicked her boots off the console and pulled them out of hyperdrive. The stars burned around them in pinpoints of light that she recognized from the last time she’d been here.

“Where are we?” Ben asked, ducking into the cockpit. He looked delectable in one of the all-black outfits she’d bought for him. It was ridiculous and a little perverted of her, but when she’d seen black leather in one of the outpost shops, she’d been unable to resist.


She felt the hostility wash over him. His big frame stiffened, and his hands clenched on nothing. “Why?” he demanded.

“Because it’s safe and private.”

“So are a thousand other places in the galaxy.” He stormed over to her and planted his hands on either side of her, gripping the armrests of her chair. “Why there, Rey?”

She tried to look nonchalant. “It’s easy to connect to the Force there. I thought we could…”

“What? Meditate together?” He pushed away with a vile curse, and Rey watched him pace for a short time before he rounded on her again. “I know what you’re doing. You’re trying to seduce me to the light side. Trying to redeem me. It won’t work.” He shook a finger in her face in a way that made her think of a cranky grandmother admonishing her for stealing cookies, and Rey bit her cheek
to avoid the chuckle that wanted to escape. She couldn’t remember when she’d lost all fear of him and started viewing his tantrums as amusing.

But she couldn’t let him reject this plan, and it worried her that he wanted to. “Ben, you already left the First Order,” she said, attempting to reason with him despite knowing that reason rarely worked with such a mercurial creature. “I’ve felt your regret and guilt across the bond. Why not come meditate with me while we figure things out?”

He drove his hands through his hair in agitation. “I’m dark, Rey. I always have been.”

“I saw your ocean. There’s light there.”

“From you!” He was shouting now, his cheeks burning with a volatile emotion she couldn’t quite grasp the contours of yet.

“From both of us,” she snapped back, losing her grip on reason and succumbing to her own hot temper. “My web has dark in it, too.”

“Because I’m corrupting you.” He looked sick at the thought. “I’m too greedy to let you go, so I’m dragging you down into the depths with me.”

Rey had had enough. She shot to her feet and stomped towards him, drilling her finger into his chest forcefully enough to make him wince. “Stop these ridiculous dramatics—”

“Dramatics?”

“—and just listen to me for once! Why are you so karking stubborn?”

“I’m stubborn?” he asked, eyes widening in outrage. “Do you even hear half the words that come out of your mouth?”

“I’m not trying to redeem you,” she said, refusing to rise to that bait. “You have to do that yourself. What I am asking is for you to trust me and come stay on that island with me while we figure this out.”

“It doesn’t really seem like you’re asking, since we’re already practically in orbit!” He scowled at her. “And what do you mean, I have to redeem myself?” His tone was sulky, and Maker, he was such a child sometimes.

Rey blew out an exasperated breath. “Why did you leave the First Order in a blaze of glory?” she asked.

His eyes darted away from her. “Because the generals were going to kill me, and I wanted revenge.”

She gripped his jaw and forced him to face her. “Don’t lie to me, Ben. Not now that I’ve claimed you.”

He shivered a little, as he did whenever she laid claim to him. “The time for warmongers is over, Rey. There’s no place in the galaxy for men like the generals.” His mouth twisted. “Men like me.”

She shook his head back and forth roughly, as she had when trying to make him see reason before his suicide mission. “There is a place for you, you imbecile!”


She was going to hit him over the head with a rock when they got down to the surface. “No, you
obnoxious, blaster-brained… stoopa! Your place is here. With me.”

His brows crashed together, and just like that, the fight went out of Ben Solo. He sagged, wrapping his arms around her and burying his face in her shoulder. “I’m not good enough for you, Rey,” he muttered into her shirt. “But I can’t leave you alone.”

She stroked his hair, torn between anger and grief at his single-minded focus on his own failings. As much as he deserved some of that self-loathing, it was a cancer that would eat away at him if they didn’t address these issues now. “You’re mine,” she said, “and I’m yours. It’s that simple, Ben. And I am going down to that hermit planet, whether you like it or not.”

He exhaled gustily. “Fine,” he said, still with a bit of a sulk in his tone. “But we’re not done talking about this.”

He probably meant to score a point, so Rey refrained from pointing out that that was exactly what she wanted—for Ben Solo to finally talk about everything that was consuming him. “Oh, good,” she said, striving for lightness. “Maybe we should bring lightsabers for that portion of the discussion.”

He huffed a laugh and pulled away. His gaze trailed down her torso, fixing on the broken lightsaber hilt still strapped to her belt. “I can teach you, you know,” he said, and there was something almost shy about his tone. “How to fix it.”

Rey also wouldn’t point out that she was an accomplished scavenger and mechanic who could fix the bloody thing on her own if she could just get her hands on a new kyber crystal. Diplomatic considerations aside, the offer of help did funny things to her heart. “Thank you,” she said. “That would be nice.”
It was storming on the island.

Rey squinted against the driving rain as she descended the ramp of the Falcon. Whatever late afternoon light existed had been extinguished by the heavy clouds. The chill was as jarring as ever—she’d grown up in a desert, and this heavy sort of moisture felt like being wrapped in a damp, clammy blanket.

There was something else in the air, though, something intangible.

Grief.

She hadn’t expected coming back to be this hard. After so much striving and pain, after the long battles and the victories stolen from the jaws of defeat and the endless cycles of hope and despair, she’d thought she’d become inured to gentler emotions. But even though Luke had died peacefully, and even though she’d never really known him to begin with, Rey grieved upon returning to his sanctuary.

Ben moved like a shadow to stand at her side. Unlike her, he hadn’t donned a waterproof slicker. He just stood there, tall, dark, and solemn, watching the turbulent sweep of the waves as the deluge plastered his hair against his skull. “You feel Luke here,” he said at last.

Rey lifted a hand to her eye to knuckle away tears. “I do,” she said, because she wasn’t going to lie to Ben now that he was hers. “And I don’t know why it hurts so much. He was happy at the end.”

Ben’s head snapped around. “He was?” And oh, the jagged edge of hope in his voice killed her.

Ben Solo—or Kylo Ren—had been the instrument of Luke’s downfall, the reason Rey’s mentor had exhausted his life force by projecting his image across the galaxy. But Rey found herself offering comfort to him, all the same. “He was at peace,” she said. “He felt like he’d accomplished his purpose.”

She felt the stab of agony across the bond before Ben cut off the connection. That sudden loss hurt in surprising ways—he hadn’t shut her out for days now, and she’d grown accustomed to the familiar hum of his mind.

Ben stalked away, heading to the edge of the cliff to stare at the pounding surf. It was so like when he’d stood on the balcony on Coruscant, and Rey felt the same urge to lunge forward and drag him back. But Ben wouldn’t welcome that effort, and it wasn’t what he needed, anyway.

How strange to be so enmeshed in another soul that she knew what he needed more than he did.

“I wonder what purpose Luke thought he served,” Ben said harshly, still staring at the waves. “He allowed a few dozen members of the Resistance to escape, yes, but they wouldn’t have posed a threat for long, anyway.”

Anger and devastation ripped through Rey. She was never far removed from anger with him—like passion and pain, it rippled under the surface with them—but this was too far. “Those were my friends,” she said in fierce tones. “And you tried to blast them out of existence. You tried to blast me out of existence.”

“I didn’t know you were on the Falcon—”
“It doesn’t matter!” she shouted. And that vehemence, at last, made him look at her. His eyes were dark and sad, but she couldn’t stop railing at him. Stepping foot on Ahch-To had unstoppered something inside her. “You’re standing here mocking him when you were the one who tried to kill the only people I cared about in the galaxy. And before that, you killed a man I admired—your own father, Ben! And then you killed the only man who ever tried to teach me.” She clapped her hands to her mouth, the sudden deluge of tears startling her. “You killed everyone I started to love,” she whispered through the tears, seeing the pattern now for the first time.

Ben’s face twisted in torment. “Rey…”

“No.” Blindly, she turned away from him, unable to face his regret. “I didn’t think it would be like this,” she offered in a feeble attempt at an explanation. She hadn’t brought him here just to shout at him, but the rain and the green cliffs and the salt sting in her nostrils had unlocked something that had been buried for too long.

Ben didn’t approach her, although she knew he wanted to. “I understand,” he said, and the pain in Rey’s chest twisted tighter. “I’ll leave you alone.”

He turned away and headed towards the nearest slope, and Rey dropped to her knees and wept.

#

She felt him in the middle of the night, when the longing had become too strong for either of them to ignore. He found her curled up in her old hut, and he didn’t even attempt an explanation before sliding beneath the blankets and wrapping his arms around her. Rey stiffened at first, then relaxed against him, unable to resist.

“I understand,” he said quietly in her ear. “Just let me hold you.”

And although he was soaked through with rain, and although her emotions were still tangled and painful, Rey did.
Chapter 22

Ahch-To wasn’t entirely terrible.

Kylo stared out over the sunlit ocean the next morning, wondering how often Rey had stood in this spot and watched the waves. The air smelled sharp and salty, a mix of sea and vegetation that spoke of nothing so much as life.

No wonder Rey liked it here.

The ache he felt in his chest as he watched swooping seabirds was familiar, and he welcomed it, closing his eyes to better focus on the sensation.

Rey had cried yesterday, and it was all his fault.

He’d killed Han Solo. He’d basically killed Luke Skywalker.

He’d killed hundreds and thousands and billions of people besides that, either through direct action or as part of the First Order. Why, then, did those two deaths weigh so heavily on him? It would be easy to dismiss the concern as related to Rey—he cared because she cared—but that wasn’t entirely true. And he was hers now, which meant he needed to be honest with both of them.

Kylo Ren felt… regret.

He knelt on the still-damp grass, adopting a mirror of her position the previous day when she’d collapsed outside the Falcon. I’m sorry, he thought across the bond to her. I’m sorry I took away the people you loved.

Kylo had loved them, too… but his mind shied away from that. An ocean of pain waited for him if he thought about what he’d done and what it meant. So he focused on Rey, the single point of light in his night sky, and shaped his contrition around her. I’m sorry.

She didn’t answer.

#

He found her running through quarterstaff exercises on a promontory over the sea. She spun and struck with beautiful ferocity, and he stood back and watched for a while. Rey was capable of incredible violence, yet she hadn’t tipped over the edge into darkness. Not like Kylo had.

It hurt to look at her. All that power and grace, all that determination and hope. He knew she deserved better than him, but he was fundamentally incapable of staying away.

“You’re staring,” she said, never pausing in her exercises.

“I am.” The confession cost nothing; she already knew he was obsessed with her.

Rey finished the exercise by striking a rock hard enough to send shrapnel flying. A faint cry sounded below, and she winced. “That’s not going to help my reputation,” she muttered.

He’d seen the small, nun-like creatures scurrying around the island, but he’d ignored them so far. Her concern piqued his interest. “They don’t like you?”

“They think I’m destructive.” She cast him an abashed glance, and Kylo wanted nothing more than
to cross to her and wrap her in his arms, but she was still aching from yesterday’s uncomfortable confrontation, so he stayed put.

“You are powerful,” he said. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

She made a face, but he knew she was secretly flattered by the praise. “These buildings have stood for thousands of years. I’ve already managed to destroy several of them.”

He huffed in amusement. “My fierce warrior. Too strong for rules or traditions.”

And oh, he felt how much she loved that, but her bright expression quickly faded to bleakness. “Luke was afraid of my power,” she said, the confession hushed.

“He was afraid of mine, too.”

“I know.” Rey’s eyes met his, and he saw the mixture of rage and grief there. “He told me what happened. But Ben, you were wrong—”

“No.” His denial echoed off the stones. “I know what happened.”

“He wasn’t going to hurt you,” she said, determined as ever. “He reacted reflexively when he saw Snoke’s influence, and then he changed his mind…”

“Do you think that makes me feel better?” he roared. “Knowing he thought it was all Snoke, that none of it was me?”

Her face contracted in an expression of pure pain, and he wanted to punch the entire mountain down in response. “He cared about you,” Rey said. “He felt responsible…”

“For what?” He paced to the edge of the cliff, staring at the waves below. They were like him—harsh, violent, and repetitive in their actions. He would always cycle between rage and regret, and he would always come back to her, no matter how much it hurt. “Luke never understood what I was. He only knew what he wanted me to be.”

“Snoke got into your head—”

His fury was great enough that a slab of rock sheared off the cliff and fell into the ocean. Why didn’t she understand? “It wasn’t just Snoke. I’ve always been volatile. Temperamental.” Angry, he didn’t say. Consumed by need and passion and the desire to burn the world down.

His rage was blurring the air around him, but his fierce Rey wasn’t afraid. She approached and settled a hand on his shoulder like a benediction. “I know,” she said. “And I know it wasn’t just Snoke. But—”

“You keep trying to explain me away,” he interjected, hating that he could care for her so fiercely when she didn’t even understand who he was at his core. “You don’t want to admit that I’m evil—”

“Stop talking,” she snapped, and the order was harsh enough that he obeyed it without question. Rey was seething across from him, and his skin prickled with a primal thrill. Part of him liked seeing her like this, and that was only one of his many sins. “You aren’t evil,” she said, then thumped his chest with her fist when he opened his mouth. “And I don’t care if you’re dark. That’s not the problem.”

He felt like the ground was shifting beneath his feet; he had no sense of where this conversation was heading anymore. “Then what is the problem?” Wasn’t his darkness the obstacle between them? She should castigate him, tell him all the ways he was wrong…
“The problem,” Rey said, “is that you won’t accept that darkness and light can coexist.”

His lips parted. Of all the stupid… “They can’t,” he said. “I know you’re new to the Force, but they can’t. It’s one or the other.”

Rey slapped him. He staggered back as shock and pleasure warred for supremacy. “You don’t get to do that with me,” she said in venomous tones. “You don’t get to pretend I’m some wide-eyed innocent.”

“But you are—"

“I’ve lived, Ben,” she said, thumping her own chest with a clenched fist. “I’ve seen more of people than I ever wanted to learn. And I know who I am, despite it all. I’m not some pristine Jedi. Not a perfect warrior for light.” She stepped forward and gripped his face between her hands, and her eyes were fierce as she stared straight into his soul. “I’m a mixture of light and dark. You can be, too.”

The words she was speaking were nonsensical, but he fell into them anyway, drawn by their magnetic allure. “How?” he whispered.

“It starts with acknowledging all your bad parts,” she said, and that was his Rey, always blunt. Her fingers caressed his cheek. “And then acknowledging the good.”

“I don’t know if I have any good.” His soul was all rage and need and agony—what room was there for light?

“I know you do.” Her hazel eyes were unflinching. “Do you know why?”

He didn’t want this, didn’t want any hint of light, didn’t want to face himself… “Why?” he asked, helpless to resist her.

“Because you care about me, and you’re worried you’re corrupting me. If you were all dark, why would that bother you?”

How easily she stripped him bare. Kylo gasped and staggered back, and Rey advanced like a warrior going in for the kill, her hands still hot on his cheeks.

“I’ve done so much evil,” he said—one last attempt to get her to turn away, to make her realize that he brought nothing but destruction…

“I know,” she said. “But who do you want to be now?”

#

Kylo brooded on Rey’s question for hours, sitting on a promontory overlooking the sea. Who did he want to be?

The only thing he was certain of was that he wanted to be with her, but he also realized that wasn’t enough. Rey was a passionate, powerful woman—she wouldn’t want a man who didn’t have an identity outside of desiring her. And honestly, she shouldn’t want that.

But he didn’t know who he was or what he wanted other than her, and it gave him an itchy feeling of unease. He had nothing in the universe except for Rey, but she needed more from him than he was capable of right now.

Which meant it was time to start confronting all the things he didn’t want to confront.
Some deeds were too dark to look at just yet, so Kylo focused on his minor atrocities. The times he’d Force-choked Hux. The blistering rage that had resulted in a few untimely Stormtrooper deaths. The way he’d carved through battalions on his way to Rey.

He really couldn’t feel bad about that last one, although he knew she might see it differently. He didn’t feel that bad about Hux, either. But there had been times when he’d destroyed lives and property in fits of mindless anger, and that was something he could feel shame about.

He’d told himself it had all been necessary in the pursuit of power, that the path to the dark required sacrifices from more than just him, but looking back at years of unformed rage and violent outbursts, he wondered if he’d truly gained strength from them. And if he had, if it had been worth the cost.

He took a deep breath. Here it was—the first question he’d have to confront. Did the ends justify the means? And if so, were his ends always legitimate?

When it came to Rey, yes. When it came to everything else…

His next breath shuddered in his chest, and pain splintered through him. He’d fought and killed and tortured and yes, he could say he’d been justified, but that was just another lie, wasn’t it? Just empty rhetoric designed to stop him from analyzing his own deeds. Life was the accumulation of actions; the ends were just a desired result. His actions over the last decade had built a twisted life, and the result had never manifested.

He’d dedicated himself to the First Order regardless of morality or reason because that course of action had been simpler; because for once, his purpose and path had seemed clear. He hadn’t even cared about the politics all that much, but he had belonged for the first time. He’d even been valued, in a sick way. And Snoke had encouraged that all-or-nothing line of thinking—he’d wanted a weapon, not a philosopher. He’d known exactly what tools and emotional faults to use to break Kylo Ren open.

But Kylo couldn’t blame Snoke; it would be hypocritical after his little speech to Rey. He couldn’t paint himself a victim.

I’m not trying to listen in, Rey said across the bond, but you’re thinking very loudly. Maybe consider that you can do awful things and still be a victim?

And kriff, why would that make him cry? But Kylo’s eyes were welling with tears, and he hated the weakness that spawned them. He cut off the bond, unable to bear having Rey see him like this.

You can do awful things and still be a victim.

The bond may have stilled, but those words were already stuck on a repeating loop in his head, and he had a feeling they’d resonate for days to come. He didn’t know whether to embrace or deny them. Rey clearly felt some affection for him, deserved or not, which meant her judgment was compromised, and yet he yearned to agree with her. That yearning felt like more weakness, but it also felt true, and Kylo didn’t know what to do with that contradiction.

This was Luke Skywalker’s island, the place where the galaxy’s greatest hero had made a hermit of himself. It was also the birthplace of the Jedi Order. Kylo wasn’t a Jedi, nowhere near it, but the invisible currents of the Force brushed against him welcomingly, anyway. Maybe it wouldn’t be disastrous to adopt some of those old Jedi teachings again. Maybe he could sit here and meditate. Maybe it really would clear his mind.

The thought of seeking peace terrified him, but Kylo Ren had decided not to be a coward, so he
closed his eyes and reached out to the Force.
Rey was worried about Ben, but she knew better than to approach him. He sat in a meditative posture at the edge of a cliff, and although he was doing his best to keep her out, the ebb and flow of his emotions was too powerful to be contained. Fury and self-recrimination blasted out of him at regular intervals, and when she skimmed along the surface of his mind, she realized he was reliving old crimes. Not wanting to violate his privacy, she withdrew immediately.

But those bursts of hate weren’t the only emotions emanating from him. There was grief, of course—sometimes sharp, sometimes a softer sort of melancholy—but also a few sparkles of gratitude and awe. He was probably thinking about her then; it was tragic that Rey was the only good thing in Ben’s life, but he had to start somewhere if he was going to rebuild himself. Gradually, his mind quieted, and soon he was drifting through a deep meditative state she hoped brought him peace.

Rey kept herself busy by rummaging through Luke’s things. Maybe she was violating her master’s privacy instead of Ben’s, but Rey was a scavenger at heart, and when someone had willingly dissolved into pure energy, they didn’t have much of a case for protecting their things. She was happy to find warm clothes and rations, as well as a few knickknacks. She even found a little holographic representation of Han, Leia, and a tiny Ben Solo. It was shocking how young Han and Leia looked—and also how happy.

Ben had been adorable back then, of course, all big eyes and messy black hair. He peeped out shyly from behind Leia’s legs. Rey traced a finger over his contours, wondering what his childhood had been like. He must have been extremely sensitive, prone to big emotions even then, and as the child of two of the most famous people in the galaxy, he would have always been in the spotlight. Add to that the near-frightening intensity of his powers, and a lot of things could have gone wrong.

But boys became men, and men had to take responsibility for their choices. Rey had grown up starving, frequently beaten by the filthy junk trader who owned her, desperate and sad and so alone the ache went soul-deep, but she hadn’t become a monster. Knowing Ben had struggled as a child didn’t excuse or explain his actions… but it might help her understand him better.

She found a small wooden box tucked away in a corner. A beautiful image of a tree was burned into the lid, its branches dotted with semi-precious stones, and the box rattled when shaken. Rey fiddled with the delicate metal clasp, curious what she would find inside.

The box opened to reveal a handful of clear crystals of varying sizes. Energy seemed to hum around them, and Rey reached for two of them, entranced. They were each approximately the size of her smallest finger, and something about the way they called to her reminded her of music. She picked them up and immediately felt a profound sense of rightness.
They were kyber crystals.


She thought she knew, though. They were pieces of his past as a teacher. These ones had never been paired with students, but he had kept them anyway—although whether as a reminder of his sins or out of hope for the future, she couldn’t say.

She opened herself to the Force, and the stones warmed and glowed in her hand, becoming milky-bright before swirling through a spectrum of blue and red. The color condensed and darkened, and Rey was left holding two purple crystals.

They were perfect. Dark mixed with light.

Rey scrambled to get her toolkit from the Falcon, then spread out her tools and the broken pieces of the saber on the floor of her hut. She’d bought new components for a custom hilt in anticipation of this moment, and her hands shook as she laid them out for assembly.

Then she remembered: Kylo wanted to teach her. And even though Rey could manage this herself, he’d been so sweetly shy about his offer. She shouldn’t do this without him.

She groaned and slumped over with her head in her hands. “Please hurry up the self-reflection,” she muttered, although she made sure not to actually send the thought to him. His meditation was more important than this.

But Rey was going to go insane waiting for him to finish.

#

Kylo blinked out of his trance when he became aware that he wasn’t alone.

A small, disgustingly... adorable creature perched on the ground beside his knee. It was all soft feathers and huge eyes, and it crooned at him like it was happy to see him. He briefly wondered if it would taste good, then realized there was no way he would be able to slaughter it. “I guess I’m turning light already,” he said, knowing Rey would laugh at him. But honestly, even Darth Vader wouldn’t have killed the thing.

He stretched, cracking his neck. It was mid-afternoon—he’d lost hours to meditation. He felt strange. Pleasant, a little dizzy. He was... calm? Kylo wasn’t sure he’d ever been calm in his life, and he marveled at how relaxing it was. The Force swirled around him, but it lacked the raw, burning intensity he’d always experienced with that mystical power. Anger still whispered around the edges, but his inner sea was placid, and when he closed his eyes to really look at it, he saw that the phosphorescence drifting through the dark water had spread.

Rey had been right, he thought wonderingly. The light wasn’t all from her.

Nothing was fixed yet, and the jagged edges of his pain hadn’t been smoothed away, just dulled for the moment, but it was a start.

As he came back to himself, a new tension filled him, and he realized that the Force bond was vibrating with intense emotion. Rey was trying to keep it under wraps, but that unformed anxiety was strong enough to break through her shields.

Kylo shot to his feet and started running, making the disturbingly cute animal trill and topple backwards. He sensed Rey in one of the stone huts, and his lightsaber was already ignited when he
burst through the door, startling a shriek from her. “What is it?” he demanded, his heart racing frantically. He spun to inspect every centimeter of the tiny room, but there was no one there—just an alarmed-looking Rey sitting beside a pile of junk on the floor.

“I see you finished meditating,” she said.

“Why are you so tense?” All the peace gained from his meditation was gone. He crouched down in front of her and cupped her chin so he could look into her eyes. She didn’t seem hurt, but some dangers were mental, not physical—Kylo knew that better than most.

“I’m fine,” she said in the soothing tones one might use to gentle a spooked fathier. “Nothing’s wrong. Maybe, um, turn your lightsaber off?”

The saber still hissed and crackled, and her blanket was smoldering beneath the blade. Kylo switched it off and sat back on the floor with his legs bent in front of him, exhaling gustily. “You almost gave me a heart attack.”

She smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. I wasn’t upset, just… excited. And impatient.”

Now that he could calm down enough to think, he recognized that the flavor of her buzzing energy was anticipatory, not panicked. He surveyed the parts in front of her and was surprised to recognize the components of a lightsaber hilt, along with the broken pieces of his grandfather’s old blade. “You’re trying to build a new one?” It was pointless without a crystal, but maybe she just wanted to get started.

Then she grinned big enough to make his heart stutter. “Look,” she said, holding out her clenched fist. When she uncurled her fingers, he saw two purple kyber crystals resting in her palm.

“Where did you get those?” he asked, peering at them with interest. No wonder she was so excited.

“Luke brought some with him, apparently. I liked these two the best.”

“They chose you.” His throat thickened—he remembered the thrill of that moment. Luke had taken him to Ilum’s Crystal Caves as a teenager to pick out his very own, and he’d been ecstatic when a crystal shone blue as a summer sky in his palm.

A few years later, of course, he’d cracked that crystal he’d once loved. He’d defeated his enemy in the light—Ben Solo—and built a new, bloody legacy on that boy’s grave. Now Kylo Ren’s saber hummed and spat flame-red.

“They’re beautiful,” he told Rey. “A very unusual color.” Purple was rare, and most often wielded by Jedi who embraced a few techniques of the dark.

“Blue and red combined,” she said, stroking a finger over one of them like it was a new pet. “Both light and dark.”

He was glad for her, truly he was. This was the beginning of her journey as a Force user, and he was happy at all the shining possibility that stone represented. But a traitorous part of him was afraid that this was also her first step down a path he couldn’t follow.

“That’s not what it means,” she said, wrapping her free hand over his. Her eyes held such compassion, and he squeezed her fingers, ashamed for making this moment even a little bit about himself.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I really am excited for you.”
“I know.” She looked back at the parts, and that nervous buzzing started again. Her fingers twitched as she reached for a tool, and then she withdrew her hand and looked at him. “You wanted to teach me?” she said.

And oh, his sweet Rey. Looking at her now, at the parts she’d acquired and the tools she owned, it was obvious that she had no need of his help. But she was pretending for him because she wanted him to feel included. She must have been dying of anticipation the entire time he’d been meditating. “How about you get started,” he said, “and then I can help if you have any questions.”

She was actually listing towards the tools, as if drawn to them magnetically. “Are you sure?” she asked, her hand inching towards a tangle of wire.

Kylo pressed his lips together to keep from laughing. “Positive,” he said. “Every Force user should build their own lightsaber.”

She didn’t ask again, instead falling on the components like a ravenous wolf. Her hands moved so fast they were almost a blur as she arranged and connected pieces. “I studied so many diagrams,” she babbled happily, “and I created a custom design. Well, not that custom—it’s been done before, obviously, but I tailored the specifications for the length and weight distribution ideally suited to my fighting style. I can’t wait to use it.” Her eyes widened. “Can we duel today?”

“Of course,” he said, settling in against the wall to watch her work. “We’ll duel the moment it’s ready.”

She squeaked a little in her excitement, and Kylo’s heart fucking melted. “You can’t go easy on me,” she said as she put the cycling field energizers in place. “I need to know if this will actually work with my combat style, which means you need to test me to my limits. Maybe use the Force, go a little dark.” She frowned. “Wait, maybe that’s a bad idea. I just need this to be as real as possible, like we’re actually in the field—"

“Rey.”

“Hm?”

“I solemnly swear not to go easy on you.” He grinned, unable to contain it.

She looked up, then seemed arrested by the sight of his face. “Oh, I like it when you smile at me,” she said before returning to her work. “But I’m going to like kicking your ass even better.”

She’d created a saberstaff.

Kylo was so proud as Rey turned the completed hilt over in her hands. It was elegant and deadly, just like her, and the staff could be split into two separate blades if needed. Now it made perfect sense why she’d been drawn to two crystals at once. With her quarterstaff skills already finely honed, she would be deadly with this weapon.

Her eyes were wide and shining as she stroked the hilt. “Hi, baby,” she said. She’d been crooning to it throughout the building process, and Kylo was already half in love with the thing himself just knowing how happy it made her.

“Well?” he asked. “Are we going to fight?”

“I hope you’re ready for pain,” Rey said. She was out the door before he could even scramble to his
feet.
Rey flicked her saberstaff on, enchanted by the rich purple glow emanating from both ends. It felt a little different from her quarterstaff, but once she started spinning it, it was easy to fall into a familiar rhythm.

“Saberstaffs are excellent offensive weapons,” Ben said as he followed her to the rocky outcrop where she’d been running exercises that morning. “They deliver maximum damage and are disorienting to opponents, but the downside is a loss of precision.”

She rolled her eyes at his pedantic tone. “Thank you, Master Ben. I’ve only been wielding a quarterstaff for most of my life.”

He swatted her on the rump, and she jumped and squeaked. “I think I like it when you call me Master,” he said with a wicked grin.

Rey was abruptly breathless from more than just excitement. “Don’t get used to it,” she said, not wanting him to know how easily he got through her defenses. She was still a little mad at him, although it was hard to maintain when he’d been so enthusiastic about her new weapon.

The sun was sinking into the ocean, casting buttery light over the cliffs—they would have to start the fight soon if they didn’t want it to be full night when they finished. Rey went through a few forms, relishing the feel of her muscles falling into familiar rhythms.

Kylo rolled out his neck and paced to the edge of the promontory to limber up. He’d changed into sparring gear—calf-high black boots, flexible trousers, and a long-sleeved shirt that clung to his shoulders and arms in an exceedingly distracting way. Most distracting of all were the leather gloves. She hadn’t seen him wearing gloves in a while, and her eyes were glued to them as he started stretching.

Catching the direction of her stare, he raised his eyebrows. “I wanted to ask you about the gloves. Why did you buy me new ones?”

Her cheeks felt a little hot. “Because your old ones were damaged.”

“But I didn’t need them anymore. They were part of my First Order uniform.” He straightened and laced those black-gloved fingers together over his head in a stretch that made a long, elegant line of his body.

“Well, whatever.” Rey was absolutely blushing now. “I wanted you to be comfortable. You’re welcome.”

“I have another theory,” he mused, and she did not want to hear it, but of course, being Ben, he was going to tell her anyway. “I was surprised to find all that black clothing waiting for me on the Falcon. And the military boots and the gloves, and of course we can’t forget the cape…”

let's goooooo
Kriff, she knew the cape had been a step too far. “Are you going to talk forever?” she snapped. “Or can we fight?”

He smirked and walked up to her, ignoring the glowing weapon she was clutching in front of her like a shield. He reached out to stroke a hand down her cheek, and she shivered at the smooth slide of leather against her skin. “I think you have a kink, Rey.”

She gasped, outraged. “I do not!”

“I think you like it when I’m bad.” One gloved finger trailed down to the neckline of her tunic, and she was going to burst into flames from the mixture of lust and mortification. “Tell me,” he said, seizing on her vulnerability with his usual ruthlessness and disregard for social norms. “Have you fantasized about me wearing black leather?”

She couldn’t help it—her mind flashed immediately to the vision she’d once masturbated to, the one that had started this intense erotic connection. His gloved fingers gliding between her thighs. She whimpered, and a rush of moisture spilled out between her legs.

“Fuck.” Ben groaned, his head falling back a little. “Is that really what you were imagining?”

And Rey had unintentionally shared the image with him. Fabulous. “Let’s fight, all right?” she said, still burning with embarrassment. She was unbearably aroused, but he wasn’t going to distract her from the chance to try out her new weapon.

“All right,” he said, stepping back. She was gratified to notice a significant bulge in his trousers. “But I have a proposal.”

“I’m sure you do,” she muttered.

“Whoever wins gets to claim whatever prize they want.”

She blinked at him innocently. “If you want a puppy, you can just tell me.”

That got him to snort. “A sexual prize, Rey.”

“Hm.” She pretended to consider it, although her mind was already made up. With the adrenaline of the fight pumping through them, their passion would be explosive. But then she remembered their arguments and his painful meditation earlier and hesitated.

Tension crept back into his face. “This isn’t going to be better between us overnight,” he said. “It’s going to take time. But we have time, don’t we? That’s why we’re here. And you know one thing is always good between us.”

“Sex,” she said, and even speaking the word made her pussy clench.

“Passion,” he corrected. “Of every kind. We feel intensely, Rey. And that means we’re going to argue, but it also means we have an excellent way to work through our issues.”

It was disturbingly rational for him, but apparently Ben Solo was capable of doing just about anything to get her naked. Her lips quirked. “Seduction as conflict resolution. How pragmatic.”

He sighed and cast his eyes to the sky. “Let me be clearer. What I’m saying is that once we’re done with the duel, I want to stick my tongue and my cock and my gloved fingers inside you and make you come so hard you knock another dozen buildings down. How does that sound?”
All the air rushed out of her. “Good,” she wheezed. “That sounds good.”

He flicked his saber on, and the scarlet blade crackled and hissed as he took up a combat stance across from her. “Good. Now show me what you can do.”

She twirled her saberstaff, focusing on the hum of it in her hands as she sucked in deep, even breaths. The thrill of the fight surged forward, filling her with a crackling energy that mirrored their glowing blades.

He attacked without warning, bringing his saber down over her in a viciously fast blow. She blocked with one of the blades, then jabbed the other end of the staff towards his legs. He skipped back, barely dodging the slice.

“Don’t go easy on me,” she reminded him. “We go until someone is hurt or concedes.”

“You wanted dark, you get dark,” he said, then lunged in and swung again. He was so strong, and Rey gritted her teeth and braced herself as he subjected her to a series of heavy blows. This was how he planned to win—by overwhelming her with brute strength—so Rey danced away as much as she could, keeping the blade spinning while she sought out an opening in his guard.

Adrenaline mixed with arousal. There was something sexy about battling him like this, with no holds barred and death just one misstep away. She had faith in both of them to pull back at the last moment if needed, but there was no denying the danger. She slashed up at him, grinning when he fell back.

He didn’t retreat for long, though. He charged, catching her saberstaff on a downstrike that brought their bodies together. She stared at him over their intersecting blades, admiring the play of red and purple on his face. It was a mirror of when they’d first fought on Starkiller Base.

“You enjoy this,” he said as she heaved him off with all her strength. He was back almost instantly, fast and lethal as he sought a path through her guard. “You enjoyed it then, too.” He pulled the memory of Starkiller Base from her head, studying it through her eyes. “What an interesting fighting technique. I hadn’t realized you looked at my ass quite that much.”

“Are you always this talkative?” Rey spun and sent her blade humming towards his neck.

He jerked back, barely avoiding a burn. “Only with you.” His saber slammed into the ground beside her boots as she skipped away, and the spitting blade gouged a chunk out of the rock. “I thought you were beautiful, you know. This fierce little scavenger, glaring up at me over our crossed blades. I wanted to fuck you right there in the snow.”

He was trying to distract her, and it was working, because Rey barely got out of the way in time to avoid a gash to her arm. “Unfair,” she protested.

“There’s no such thing as fair.” He laughed suddenly, and the sound raised the hairs on her neck. Force energy roiled around them. He was veering towards the explosive intensity she recognized from their more antagonistic days, and the extra edge of danger both thrilled and alarmed her. “Do you tap into the dark side when you fight?” he asked, following the question with a series of punishing blows. “I’m sure you do, but you’re too afraid to admit it. Does thinking about making me bleed get you wet?”

She shivered, because she was wet, and this ravenous hunger—for him, for victory—certainly wasn’t rooted in light. They were careening towards something cataclysmic, and she didn’t know how much more of this throbbing tension she could take before she ended the fight and demanded that he fuck her.
But as much as Rey wanted to feel the full force of his passion, she didn’t want to undo any of the progress he’d made during meditation. She forced herself to ask the question. “Ben, do we need to stop?”

“Only if you need to stop. But if you concede, you know what will happen.” He bared his teeth at her. “It ends with you on your hands and knees.”

Her breath hitched, and her swing towards his shoulder went wide. Maker, he was so overwhelming.

He apparently sensed her alarm, because he backed off a tiny bit. “I won’t hurt you, Rey,” he said, stalking around her, the saber blade snapping at his side. “Not unless you want it and enjoy it. But the dark isn’t always about suffering—it’s about pleasure, too. Feeling something beyond what’s acceptable or even sane. You keep pushing me to accept that I can be light and dark at once—so why don’t you?” He leveled the saber at her, tilting his head so a lock of black hair fell over his scarred brow. “Let go, Rey. Show me what you can do.”

He made a beautiful, brutal kind of sense, and Rey was tired of fighting herself. She slashed at him, gratified when she singed off a strand of his hair as he spun away. “That,” she said, “is a very good point.”

And there was an exultant freedom to be found in letting go and allowing herself to feel. Anger, violence, want, exhilaration. Their bodies were crafted for this; the two of them had been made to move together in arcs of blazing light.

The battle intensified, ranging over the entire promontory. She ducked and spun, avoiding his heavy swings with her greater agility, and he pursued her with single-minded determination. The sun was gone now, leaving them in a murky twilight that made it hard to see anything but the burning lines of their weapons, but she could sense every flicker of his muscles through the Force.

“I want to show you what the dark feels like to me,” Ben said. His chest heaved, and sweat rolled down his brow, but his hits were just as hard and fast as when they’d begun. “And I want you to take it. So you can understand.”

He opened his mind, and waves of emotion roared out. She gasped as angerpowerlustcontrolneeddomination tumbled over each other in a turbulent deluge. Her next block barely connected in time, and then he was swinging for her other side, forcing her back. He battered at her defenses, using his speed and power against her while his mind caressed hers. It felt like being fucked from the inside out, like the oncoming tension of an orgasm mixed with the sensation of being a pool of gasoline just centimeters away from the match.

She moaned, finally understanding the full seduction of the dark side. It wasn’t just hate and violence; it was pure, ecstatic passion. She was burning up as she fought him, immolating in the volatile mix of his desire and hers. He wanted to own her, mark her, tear down her defenses, make her surrendersubmitscream —

She barely ducked in time, and slivers of rock flew off the stone at her back. Embracing her own lust and joy, she sliced up towards his thigh, forcing him to dive out of the way. “You think you can make me scream?” she taunted as she followed through with a hard strike from the other direction. Her saberstaff was a blur of purple, deadly and intoxicating, and she realized she was hitting harder, moving faster, with the darkness running through her.

He grunted as he blocked. “I know you’re going to scream.”

“What should I do with you after I win?” she asked, beginning her favorite offensive sequence of
spinning strikes and tight turns. Her blades flowed faster than the eye could track, forming glowing circles in the air. “Maybe I’ll choke you again. Or tie you up and ride you until you can’t take it anymore.”

“Yes,” he panted, retreating under her onslaught. “That sounds perfect. There’s just one problem.”

“What?” she asked, ready to culminate the sequence with a strike that would rip a burning line up his abdomen.

His lightsaber abruptly shot through the air over her head, and she staggered, disoriented. The glow was what she’d been fixated on in the dim twilight, and for a wild moment it seemed like he had just flown over her. But no, he was darting past, an elegant shadow, and then he called his saber to him and held it to her throat from behind. Rey gasped, freezing in place as the blade crackled mere centimeters from her skin.

His lips brushed her ear. “You didn’t win.”
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

This chapter required the addition of several tags 😊

Rey shuddered. Ben had defeated her… and now he was going to claim his prize.

He wrapped one strong arm around her abdomen, tugging her against him even as his blade still hummed at her throat. His erection pressed against her ass, and she couldn’t help rocking against it. “Do you concede?” he asked in a voice like black velvet.

Rey flicked the saberstaff off, knowing there was no seizing victory from this scenario. She was so wet that every shift of her weight made her underwear rub unbearably against slick, sensitive skin. “I concede,” she said, dropping the hilt to the ground.

Ben didn’t turn off his saber. His forearm was banded like iron around her, and his mind was still wide open, sharing the full intensity of his turbulent emotions. Victory howled across the bond, mixed with a surge of desire so intense, her knees shook.

The hand pressed against her abdomen descended, and his leather-clad fingers disappeared beneath her leggings, sliding over the soft skin of her lower belly. Rey desperately wanted to look, but his saber still burned under her chin, hot enough to make her sweat. He brushed over her clitoris, then impaled her with two fingers, thrusting them hard and deep enough to jerk her back against him. Rey gasped and clutched at his forearm. She could feel the muscles there working as he pumped in and out of her in a steady rhythm.

“You’re very wet,” he said in her ear. “Can you hear it?”

Rey moaned, because she could hear it, even over the crackling of his saber. Slick, filthy sounds as he worked his fingers in and out of her. Her pussy quivered—she was already so keyed up from the duel that she was close to orgasm.

He slid the fingers out, and she cried out in protest. “Here’s what’s going to happen,” he said. “I’m going to do everything I want to you, and you’re going to take it and beg for more like the greedy scavenger you are.” Keep your shields open, he added across the bond, only slightly more gently. And if it’s too much, say the word ‘Jakku,’ and I’ll stop.

There was no chance she was going to stop him, but the idea that whatever he was planning was so intense she needed a safe word made her shiver. I will, she promised.

The saber left her throat, and then Rey was spun around and shoved to her knees almost violently. A little cushion of air protected her knees from the impact against hard dirt and stone, and fuck, how did he have the focus to manage Force powers right now? Rey was a shaking mess, and he was just getting stronger.

“Welcome to the dark,” Ben said, tracing her lips with the fingers that had just been inside her. He pressed down on her lower lip, and when she opened for him, he slid those fingers inside. Rey wrapped her lips around them and sucked, looking up at him as she tasted the bitterness of leather
and the tang of her own juices.

His jaw clenched, making his scar stand out even more. He looked like some ancient god with the red light of the saber caressing the sharp planes of his face and reflecting off his dark pupils. “You belong to me,” he told her, and it was a variation on You’re mine that made Rey uncomfortable, that gave her flashes of being sold for drinking money on a barren desert world.

Not like that, he whispered in her head as he slid his fingers in and out of her mouth. Not like a slave. Not property.

Then what? she asked.

Belonging means our souls are tied together. You’re never going to get away from me, Rey. It sounded almost like a threat, but her cunt reacted like he’d stroked it. You’re mine forever, mine to protect and fight and fuck and worship.

It was intense and a little terrifying, but it was also something Rey of Jakku had never had before—a person to belong to. Someone who would always want her.

It’s far past wanting, he said. Sometimes it makes me furious, how badly I need you.

She knew it was because Ben hated being vulnerable, and even though he had just defeated her in battle and was looming over her and fucking her mouth with his fingers, she had power over him. The belonging goes both ways, she told him. She wouldn’t always be on her knees in front of him, and they both knew it.

Now show me all the things you want to do to me.

Whatever she expected, it wasn’t the slight lift of his lips and a crinkling at the corners of his eyes. Apparently Ben Solo was growing accustomed to being hers, too. He slid his fingers out of her mouth. “Grab the hem of your shirt and pull it taut,” he ordered out loud.

The time for talking was over. Sexual tension ratcheted tight between them again, and the heady currents of the dark lapped at Rey’s mind, whispering of passion and pleasure and the joy of submission. She gripped the hem of her shirt and pulled it out, stretching the fabric tight.

Ben sliced through it bottom to top with a sweep of his lightsaber that left her gasping. He was so precise, the heat of his saber radiating off her skin without cutting her. Rey stripped the remnants of the shirt off, then tore off her breast band.

“Impatient,” he said. When she went to take off her leggings, he shook his head. “The boots first, and then I want you to put both hands inside your leggings and push the fabric away from your body.” He sent her an image of what he wanted—Rey kneeling upright with her legs spread and her hands stretching the fabric out, giving him room to cut through the crotch.

His lightsaber was about to be centimeters away from her pussy. Rey whimpered but did as he commanded, her hands at either side of the gusset of her panties, pressing until the fabric was no longer touching her cunt.

This one he did slowly. His lightsaber moved between her thighs, and then he sliced a precise line across the crotch. The heat of his blade passing so close to her pussy was almost painful and unbearably exquisite. Rey’s heart raced, and she grew even wetter at the onslaught of sensation. It was such a contradiction—the deadly weapon wielded so delicately, Ben’s mind howling with possession even though his hands were steady.

“There,” he said with satisfaction when the cut was complete. He flicked the saber off and clipped it to his belt, then shoved her on her back with the Force and knelt between her legs. He gripped the
cut edges of the fabric and ripped, splitting both garments along the seams. Rey arched up as cool air hit the wet place between her legs.

As Ben stripped the remaining fabric from her ruthlessly, she let out a breathless laugh. “Was that really necessary?” she asked. Why use his lightsaber when all he really wanted to do was rip the clothes off of her?

“It was,” Ben said, and maybe he was right, because moisture slicked her thighs, and her heart hadn’t slowed down yet from that heady punch of fear and desire. This explosive lust between them had edges sharp enough to cut, and the only thing keeping her safe was Ben’s control over the darkness roiling through him.

He knelt between her thighs and started running his gloved fingers over her exposed body. This time Rey was able to watch the black leather coasting over her tanned skin, and it was better than fantasy, better than anything. He was fully clothed, dressed like the knight of darkness she’d first known him as, while she lay nude and vulnerable beneath him.

When she’d fantasized about this in the past, before she’d gotten so tangled up with him, it had always come with fear. Fear that he would touch her and realize how much she lusted after him, then exploit that weakness. Fear that he would fuck her mercilessly, maybe on a battlefield littered with the corpses of her friends, and she would like it. She’d been afraid of herself, really, and what her hunger for a monster said about her.

She knew him now, though. He was intense and complicated and angry and kind and cruel and a thousand other frightening and exquisite things, but he was just a man.

“I’m still a monster sometimes,” he said, riding the waves of her thoughts as if they were his own. He pinched her nipples hard enough to send an electric jolt through her. His eyes flicked up to hers, and she bit her lip at the furious lust she saw reflected there. “You know the dark is always going to be part of me.”

“I know,” she said, gasping as he massaged her breasts and tweaked her nipples again. “But now you’re my monster.”

Savage triumph roared through him, and he squeezed her breasts again. His hands were huge against her; yet another reminder of his power. “You do like the dark,” he said with satisfaction. “Tell me, how dark do you want it?”

He was offering her one last chance to back out, to request something softer than the full intensity of his battle-whetted lust, but Rey would never back down. “I want everything you can give me,” she said.

He trailed his hand down her stomach and between her legs. “Then tell me who’s fucking you tonight.”

She whimpered, knowing what he wanted to hear. “Kylo Ren,” she said.

And like a switch had been flipped, Kylo Ren exploded into action.

He plunged between her legs with a snarl, opening his mouth over her clitoris and sucking hard before dragging his tongue over her folds. Rey screamed as he devoured her. He drove his tongue into her, kissing and licking and even raking his teeth over sensitive skin. His hands were everywhere, forcing her thighs wider, then stroking over her cunt in tandem with his mouth, then filling her with gloved and insistent fingers. He pressed and rubbed inside her as his teeth scraped
over her clit, and Rey orgasmed on a wave so intense, her torso came off the ground. She gripped his hair, grinding against him as shudders rocked her.

He wasn’t done.

When she came back down, he flipped her over and tugged her onto her hands and knees. A finger penetrated her again, and his mouth danced past it, heading to the sensitive pucker of her ass. Rey yelped as he licked her there, because she’d never really thought about what this would be like, and now it was happening, and it was so much …

He pulled his finger out of her pussy to rub her wetness over her ass, then dipped back in and repeated the motion. Rey bucked against him, knowing that this was heading somewhere even more intense than she’d guessed. Then his fingertip pressed against that tight hole, and she stiffened.

“Let me in,” he coaxed, gathering more of her cunt’s moisture to lubricate her. “Just relax and take it.”

*I’m going to do everything I want to you, and you’re going to take it and beg for more like the greedy scavenger you are.*

When his fingertip breached her, it didn’t hurt the way she’d feared. He worked that slick finger inside her, and it was different from when he fingered her vagina, but still pleasant. Once she’d grown accustomed to the feeling, she rocked, sending the digit in and out of her.

“Good girl,” he said, then bent down to kiss her lower back.

Rey sighed and let go of any remaining reservations. She’d asked for this, her mind was open to him, and she had a safe word if she needed it. Whether he was Kylo Ren or Ben Solo, Rey knew he would never hurt her.

Yes, he hissed in her mind. *Everything I am is yours, Rey.*

The words made her feel powerful, even in the midst of being dominated by a volatile darksider. He was doing this for her.

*For both of us,* he said, and she felt the quick bite of his amusement across the bond. *I’m not so noble as the Jedi, and I do love debauching you.*

*Shut up,* she ordered him, rocking her hips again. *Show me more.* The finger no longer just felt pleasant—she ached with the need to take more of him.

Kylo brought his other hand up to toy with her clitoris again. Then he shifted, and two of those fingers slid into her vagina.

Rey gasped. She felt so full as he pumped into her with both hands in tandem. The added tightness made everything more intense, and as his fingers rubbed against each other through her inner walls, Rey keened and arched her back. The world burned to ashes; there was nothing left but him and his clever hands.

Then he added his filthy mouth, and Rey knew there was no way she was going to survive the night.

“*You’re so tight,*” he said. “*And you’re taking me so sweetly. Do you know what you look like right now?*” He sent the image across the bond before she could respond: Rey from the back, her spine curving and cunt glistening as Kylo’s black-gloved fingers slid in and out of her. “*You look like every fantasy I’ve ever had come to life.*”
It was too soon to come again, surely, but Rey’s belly was tightening, and heat spread across her skin. She rocked her hips, gasping for more.

“Touch your clit,” Kylo commanded. “I want to feel you come like this.”

Rey moaned and reached beneath her. She rubbed roughly, the way he would have done it, and it didn’t take long for her body to seize up and start spasming. She lost the use of her arms, crashing down to her elbows as she shuddered.

“Fuck,” he said as she broke apart. “I can feel you squeezing me.”

After the last shivers had faded, Rey whimpered. She was overstimulated, so sensitive that every touch felt like it was raking over exposed nerves. Kylo eased his fingers out of her, then kissed her pussy again almost gently. “I’ll give you a break,” he said, helping her settle into a kneeling position. “But we aren’t nearly done.”

And oh, how had Rey thought she could handle him at his most intense? She was flushed and panting, her body singing and mind soaring from two devastating orgasms, while he was still fully dressed. He stood in front of her, all black leather, sharp edges, and scars, and while anyone else would have been afraid at the sight, Rey just wanted to worship at his feet.

“No, goddess,” he said, running a hand over her hair. “I’m the one who gets to worship you.”

She squeezed her eyes shut against inexplicable tears. She was just Rey of Jakku, just a scavenger—nobody, nothing—who had been drawn into someone else’s conflict. How, then, had she ended up with this dark prince worshipping her? “Let me touch you,” she said, needing to show her gratitude to him somehow. “Please, Kylo.”

When she opened her eyes again, it was to find him staring at her with an ocean of pain reflected on his face. Chaotic thoughts flitted across the bond: Don’t deserve her and So beautiful and She isn’t nothing, how could I ever have said that—

“Kylo,” she said, interrupting the ruminations that wouldn’t lead anywhere productive. “I’m not really asking. Take your cock out.”

And there it was: the crack in the ice, the smile that tugged at his lips and made his scar shift. “It’s always a fight with you,” he said, and she felt his self-critical thoughts recede. His intention shifted, his aggression rising again to the challenge she’d offered.

He tangled his fingers in her hair and squeezed until Rey’s eyes watered from the sting at her scalp. A fresh rush of angerpowerlustcontrolneeddomination pounded against her mind, and as he tugged Rey towards his crotch, she knew what he wanted before he said it.

“Suck,” he commanded, and Rey’s fingers were already working at his belt. She lowered the zipper, then reached in and pulled his cock out. She took a moment to admire him in the moonlight, thick and hard and glistening with pre-cum. Then she leaned in to taste him, relishing the pain in her scalp as she tugged against his hold. He grunted as she licked him, then squeezed her hair tighter and forced her to take him deep.

And yes, this was what she wanted in defeat—Kylo seizing what he wanted from her. She sucked greedily, eager for the taste of him, enjoying the slight trembling in his hand as he worked her head back and forth. There was power to be had in this position, too, and when she flicked her gaze up to him, he was staring down at her with wild eyes.

“Take more,” he said, bumping against the back of her throat.
She wanted more: more of his perfect cock, more of his angst and turmoil, more of his combativeness and intensity. More of this burning need he had to simultaneously worship and debase her. Rey tried to swallow him as she’d seen women do in pornographic holovids, but it was hard at this angle. *Help me,* she said across the bond.

Ben pulled her off of him and released her hair, and then she was being lifted by the Force, lying on her back on a cushion of air. It was like lying crossways across a narrow bed: she was supported from her knees to her shoulders, with her feet flat against the stone and her head tilted back. Ben loomed over her and pressed his cock to her lips again, and she realized that in this position, with her head nearly upside down, he would be able to fuck straight into her throat. A thrill shot through her, and Rey felt a moment of panic.

“Relax,” he told her, gently nudging into that narrow channel again. “Breathe through your nose.”

Her eyes were watering. It was uncomfortable, but she wanted so desperately to please him, so she focused on relaxing the muscles of her throat. He slid deeper, and it was easier this time. He reached out to start toying with her clit again, and even though she was sore, the touch sent sparks sizzling through her.

Once she’d gotten the hang of the technique, Rey clutched his ass, pulling him into her. Her throat might feel bruised tomorrow, but it was the kind of pain she—and he—thrived on. Proof of wanting and being wanted beyond reason.

As Rey jerked his cock in and out of her throat, digging her nails into his ass and thighs, Kylo groaned, and then a stream of filthy curses poured out of his mouth. Too soon, he was pulling out. “Not yet,” he said, and it was gratifying to hear the rasp in his voice. She was greedy for him, though, and she surged up, trying to seize him again. He choked out a sound that was half-laugh, half-moan as she caught the tip of him in her mouth. “You’re disobedient,” he said, using the Force to freeze her in place. “I’ll have to do something about that.”

The words sent a shiver through her, and she wasn’t surprised when he flipped her over in the air and lowered her to her hands and knees again. He was powerful in his lust, capable of wielding the Force with the kind of ease Rey usually only achieved through meditation.

He knelt beside her, running his hands over her back in long, soothing sweeps. “My perfect girl,” he said as Rey arched into his touch like a cat being stroked. Then one of his hands came down on her ass with a sharp crack, and she squeaked and lurched forward. “Perfect but bossy. Don’t you know who’s in charge?”

“You said you loved my bossiness.” Over the Force bond, when he’d been dying. Rey suddenly felt awkward, like maybe she shouldn’t have said it, like the word *love* was one that he wouldn’t want between them in any context other than that one specific time, and kriff, what was she thinking—

He spanked her again, shattering that train of thought. “I do,” he said, rubbing a hand soothingly over her stinging flesh. “I’m obsessed with so many things about you, Rey. And we’ll talk about that, but not tonight. Tonight is for the dark.” He spanked both cheeks in quick succession before peppering her upper thighs with light strikes.

Rey moaned and let go of her thoughts, embracing pure feeling as the blows grew more intense. He was ruthlessly precise in this, too. Each hit to her ass and thighs stung, but a pleasant burning
sensation was spreading over her abused flesh, and the mix of pleasure and pain was making her lightheaded. She pillowed her head on her arms and tilted her ass up to grant him better access. He stroked her upper back gently, even as his other hand took no mercy on her.

When her ass was so sore she was flinching away from his hits, he dipped two fingers between her thighs. Rey opened her legs wider, expecting him to stroke her, then yelped when he smacked those fingers against her pussy, instead. The hits were gentler than what he’d been doing to the rest of her, but she was already sore from him finger ing her, and it stung as he rained a flurry of sharp blows over her pussy and ass. She wriggled and gasped, unsure if she could take much more.

“You’ll take whatever I want to give you,” he told her, smacking her clitoris hard enough to make her whimper. His hand retreated, returning to her ass cheek, and oh, she didn’t know if this shivering feeling was fear or anticipation as he trailed his fingers softly over her bruised skin.

The crack of his hand was loud in the air as he spanked her hard. Rey tried to scramble away, but he jerked her back, holding her in place to take his blows. She moaned as he continued the unrelenting punishment. How could she want this so badly? Her nerves were on fire, sending mixed signals to her brain. As he rained blows over her, hurt and pleasure merged, and the flaming heat spreading over her skin began to feel agonizingly good. Soon she was mindless, gasping and desperate, begging him for things she didn’t even understand.

“Ben, please. Please—I don’t—oh, fuck—”

He massaged her ass, rubbing out the sting from the last few punishing hits. “My greedy little scavenger,” he said. His breath was coming fast, and his voice was tight with excitement. “You like it when I do this to you.” When she didn’t respond, he smacked her again. “Say it.”

“I do,” she moaned. Tears pricked at her eyes, and her whole body shivered. “I don’t know how you do it, how you make me…” She trailed off, whining as he fingers slid between her thighs again. This time he rubbed gently, smearing wetness all over her sensitized skin.

“Make you what?” he asked, charting her intimate contours with a fingertip.

“Lose myself,” she choked out. “You make me forget everything but you.”

His satisfaction at that was a warm, possessive glow across the bond. “It’s okay to let go, Rey,” he said. “I’ll always be here to catch you.”

Rey had been struggling to be in control for so long. An entire lifetime of wary vigilance and worrying about tomorrow, day after day of fear and anxiety and the desperate need to control whatever small things she could, just to prove that life wasn’t going to sweep her away and crush her under its deadly indifference. It was why she’d feared this bond with him so much—because truly wanting another person meant losing control.

She was so tired of always being in control. She sobbed into her arms, overwhelmed by the emotions his brutal passion play had unlocked.

He was rubbing her everywhere now, stroking her hair and back, offering comfort. “Let go,” he repeated. “It doesn’t mean you’re weak or that you’ll never be in control again. But right now, you don’t need to be.”

Because he was there to catch her. Rey tilted her head on her arms to look back at him through tear-blurred eyes. He was so solemn and fierce, strong in both body and mind. He knew the darkness well and could navigate it for both of them.
A rush of affection washed over her, so strong it closed her throat. What a miracle he was.

Rey sighed and let go of the tension she’d been carrying so close. Her body relaxed under his alternately punishing and stroking hands, and the Sith had been wrong: there was peace to be found in passion. She sank into an agonizing bliss, abandoning everything but the only thing that mattered.

She belonged to him.

The burning of her skin was overwhelmed by a darker, deeper ache. He’d rattled her out of her comfort zone, taken her to a place she hadn’t even known she was capable of reaching. Her head spun, and there was only one thing she wanted anymore. “Give me all of you, Ben,” she said. “Kylo. Whatever. Just… give me you.”

He leaned over to press a kiss to her upper back, then moved around to position himself between her thighs. She heard fabric shifting as he pulled his cock out again, and then the tip brushed against her, hot and hard. He slid a hand beneath her, pulling her back to her original position on hands and knees, propping her torso up with one strong forearm banded diagonally across her chest. And then he was sinking into her, and oh, oh —

Rey moaned as he filled her. She was sopping wet, her tissues swollen from his attentions, and the stretch of her body around him was unbearably sweet. When he pushed in to the hilt, a little puff of air escaped her lips. How could she have so much of him and still be ravenous for more?

He didn’t go slow, and he wasn’t gentle. With his arm across her middle, his chest brushed her back on every thrust. The slide of his shirt against her sweat-dampened skin, the bite of his belt buckle against her ass, and the grip of one gloved hand on her hip reminded her that he was still fully dressed in sparring attire. As his thrusts became more forceful, the lightsaber clipped to his belt smacked against her hip. He hadn’t even disarmed before taking her in the dirt.

Rey moaned, jerking back against him to try to get him even deeper. He was over her, around her, inside her—a storm that swept across her senses and left her spinning. The dark tumult of his thoughts flooded her, filling the spaces that had been cracked open by the sting of his hand against her ass. He wanted to consume her, wanted her pain and pleasure, wanted the tight squeeze of her body and the quiver of her thighs and the soft noises coming from her lips; he wanted to take everything she offered and then seize moremoremoremoremore.

The sex was animalistic. Kylo fucked her with hard strokes, squeezing bruises into her hip and breast as he clutched her against him. Rey couldn’t stop the sobbing gasps pouring from her lips, and Kylo’s own harsh grunts grew louder as he increased his pace. She felt the spiraling of his thoughts as the man who had so mercilessly torn her apart succumbed to his own loss of control.

With their minds and bodies linked, they merged into a single being composed of instinct and raw need. When Rey’s arms gave out, Kylo held her upright still, supporting her torso as he fucked her so brutally her vision started to waver.

The hand at her hip slid between her legs, and Rey shuddered as he rubbed her swollen clit. It was too much, she was going to fall apart, going to shatter beneath his power, and when he was finally done with her there would be nothing left.

He bucked hard, hitting a spot that almost hurt, and Rey twisted into orgasm with a scream so loud it echoed off the rocks. Light pulsed behind her eyelids as her body squeezed him frantically. The ripples of pleasure started at her core and spread out, shaking her soul and body apart.

She was distantly aware of him shouting and coming inside her, and as the flare of their twin
orgasms burned white-hot across the bond, Rey knew she would never be the same again.
Kylo was wrecked. Devastated.

He’d been torn apart into his individual elements, then reassembled in the shape of a man who looked the same but wasn’t.

Rey was panting beneath him, her body still clasped tightly around his and her head hanging forward like she couldn’t support it anymore. He stroked down her slender back, feeling the unfamiliar prickle of tears at the corners of his eyes. Beautiful, perfect, generous Rey. She’d taken all of his darkness and given him hers in return.

He was going to take care of her forever.

He pulled out of her gently, then caught Rey before she could topple forward. Her blurry bliss echoed across the bond, and she knew she wouldn’t be capable of walking on her own for a while.

That was more than fine. He scooped her up and adjusted her carefully in his arms until she was cradled against his chest. She was so small, her body dense with muscle but compact against his more obvious brute strength. He took his first wavering step and realized he wasn’t particularly capable of walking, either. But Rey needed to be tended to, so he forced himself to stagger down the slope, never mind that his pants were undone and he could hardly see straight. He headed for the Falcon, which had more amenities than the grim stone hut they’d slept in the previous night.

Rey hummed contentedly against his chest as he strode up the ramp, and he paused to look down at her delicate face. Her lashes curved dark against her cheeks, her skin was flushed, and her hair was a tangled mess. She looked thoroughly debauched.

The Force moved through him as he studied her, and he felt the same sense of destiny and inevitability that had told him his time with the First Order was over. This premonition was gentler, though. He was finally in the exact place in the universe where he was meant to be.

His emotions were still tangled with the dark side of the Force: possession, pride, a ferocious desire to slaughter anything that had ever hurt her. He hadn’t been lying when he’d told Rey there would always be darkness in him. But his heart was blossoming with a sweeter yearning, as well, and it both terrified and tantalized him.

Rey was the star in his sky, but he wanted to shine for her, too. He wanted to be the kind of man she could love.

He loved her.

There was no doubt, and there hadn’t been for a while, but this was the first time he’d been able to acknowledge it. Need, craving, obsession—those were terms of the dark, and he’d been comfortable using them. But love…

That belonged entirely to the light.

Kylo carried Rey to the ‘fresher. She was already nude, so Kylo turned the water on with his Force powers and carried her beneath the warm spray. He didn’t bother changing out of his own clothes,
other than stripping off his gloves so he could more effectively wash her. It would have wasted time, and besides, he didn’t think he could bear to put her down for that long.

It was a tight fit, but Kylo managed to prop her up between him and the wall. Her lashes fluttered, and she looked up at him sleepily. “Shower,” she said, and a drunken-sounding giggle bubbled out of her.

His heart squeezed at seeing her so relaxed and giddy. He lathered up a washcloth with soap, then began gently scrubbing her, starting with her neck. When her torso and arms were clean, he dropped to his knees to get to her legs and toes. Water pounded in his face, but he shook the drops away, concentrating on cleaning the dirt and sweat from her delicate skin. He lingered on her knees, which were scraped from the last moments of their coupling. As he’d tumbled towards orgasm, he’d lost the ability to keep her floating just above the ground. Guilt ripped through him at that small sign of harm.

When he gently ran soap-slicked fingers between her legs, she hissed, and he felt how sore she was through the bond. He couldn’t regret having caused that, but he hated knowing she was hurt. He soothed her, pressing soft kisses against her belly. “Sweet Rey,” he whispered against her skin. “I’ll make it better.”

Once her body and face were thoroughly washed, he worked on her hair. The shampoo aboard the Falcon was utilitarian, but it worked well enough, and there was a tiny bottle of conditioner. She’d bought it for him, amusingly enough, when they’d stocked up on supplies, but she’d started using it, too. He liked that it made them smell the same.

As he worked his fingers across her scalp, she moaned and burrowed her face into his shoulder. He took his time, enjoying the feel of her body against him and the sound of her soft sighs as he worked the conditioner through. He tipped back her head to rinse it out, and she closed her eyes and rested docilely against him as he finger-combed the strands clean.

Had anyone ever trusted him this much?

Again, he felt absurdly like crying. But the rest of this night was about Rey, so he turned off the water and reached for a towel to dry her off. His own clothes were soaked through, his boots probably ruined, but he paid no attention to the puddles he was leaving as he wrapped her in the towel and carried her to bed.

Leaving her side even long enough to change into dry clothes and grab a med kit, comb, and rations was nearly unbearable, but when he returned, she lay exactly where he’d left her, curled up with her damp hair soaking into the pillow. She muttered sleepily as he slid in beside her and started working bacta gel into her scraped knees and the bruises he’d left on her hip and breast. He rubbed a little over her reddened ass and swollen folds, too, hoping it would make the irritation pass more quickly. Rey shifted away from his touch at first, but when he simply soothed and made no attempt to stimulate her, she relaxed and let him trail his fingers over her intimate flesh.

Kriff, she was beautiful. Delicacy and strength in one ferocious package.

Next he forced her to eat an energy bar and drink some water, since her body required sustenance after so much exertion. He had to hand-feed her, since she was still quivering, and the act was deeply satisfying. He’d never cared for anyone like this before.

Kylo swapped her towel for a fluffy robe, ignoring her mumbled protests at being moved, then settled in behind her, sitting against the wall and pulling her between his legs.

She turned her head, staring at him with half-lidded eyes as he started working the comb through her
tangled hair. “You don’t have to do that,” she said.

He shushed her and kept combing. He’d never combed anyone’s hair but his own, but the rough tugs he used on his own locks would be unacceptable here, so it took a long time to gently detangle the strands. Finally, her hair lay damp and straight against the white collar of her robe. Rey sagged back against him, mumbling incoherently.

Kylo cast about for something else to do. How could he make her more comfortable? There had to be something, he hadn’t done nearly enough—

“Hush,” she murmured, apparently sensing his frantic thoughts. “Just hold me.”

His throat thickened with unbearable emotion. That wasn’t enough for her—she deserved flowers and rare delicacies and maybe an entire star system—but if it was what she wanted, he would give it to her. “All right,” he said, wrapping his arms around her and resting his cheek against her wet hair.

They rested together in silence for a long time. Eventually, Rey’s breathing deepened, and her drifting thoughts quieted even more as she sank into sleep. Kylo held her against his chest, counting each of her breaths. She was a miracle made flesh, the closest he’d ever come to the divine.

Tonight Rey had reveled in the dark with him. The idea still frightened him, but he knew it was time to explore the light with her.

She woke after a few hours, stretching against him and yawning adorably. Her cheeks were rosy and her eyes bright, but it was possible she was still in pain from his roughness. “Are you hungry?” Kylo asked. “Thirsty? Does anything hurt?”

Rey laid a palm on his cheek, and he sensed her amusement. “We’ve had sex before, Ben. I’m not fragile.”

But she was the most important thing in the galaxy to him, which meant any threat to her well-being, no matter how minor, needed to be mercilessly hunted down and eliminated. “It’s never been that rough before,” he said. “Your knees—let me see your knees.”

She rolled her eyes but allowed him to draw the hem of the robe up. The bacta had done its work, and the scrapes were almost gone. “I’m sorry I did that,” he said. “I lost control there, right at the very end. I promised I’d catch you, and I let you down—”

“Ben.” Her voice was firm. “Stop talking.”

“But—”

She clapped a hand over his mouth. “Shhh.”

He struggled to contain the flow of questions and apologies that wanted to burst out of him, then clenched his jaw and nodded. She eyed him suspiciously before removing her hand from his mouth. It took all his willpower not to immediately launch into another interrogation.

A brush of affection came over the bond. “I can feel how desperately you want to talk,” she said. “Just let me say a few things first. Okay?”

He nodded.
The hand she’d silenced him with moved to his forehead, and she traced his hairline down to his jaw, tracking the path of her fingers with her hazel eyes. “I loved what we did,” she told him. “I loved seeing that side of the darkness, and I loved that you took me there with you. You’re right—there’s something incredible to be found there. All the pain you inflict on yourself, the rage and hate—I wish those parts of the dark would disappear or at least diminish, but I would never want to take that passion away from you.”

It was a level of acceptance he had never thought to get from her. His eyes watered, and he clenched his jaw tighter to avoid leaping at her and covering her with urgent kisses.

“I looked into my own mind before I fell asleep,” she continued, “and what I saw there comforted me. I have darkness, too, and yes, it’s been growing, but it isn’t growing towards hate. It’s growing towards passion. And honestly, even if anger is part of it, at least it’s better than bottling those feelings up or denying them.”

“And the light?” he asked in a whisper, unable to stop himself.

She kept petting him. “My light is still there, feeding me hope and strength. It’s never going to go away.” Her grin was sweet and radiant. “It just means maybe I get to be a little more honest about my flaws and strengths. I can be angry and also kind. I can be gentle and rough.” Her smile turned naughty. “I can have my wicked way with you and still want to save the galaxy.”

He sighed at that. “What if the galaxy doesn’t deserve saving?”

She climbed into his lap, holding his face tight between her hands. “Everything deserves saving,” she said fiercely, and he knew she was talking about him.

It was painful and wonderful all at once. His heart hurt, but it also sang. He was no better than the dirt beneath her boots, yet she was lifting him up to dizzying heights. “I love you,” he blurted, unable to keep the words restrained a second longer.

Her eyes widened, and she gasped. “Ben—”

“You don’t need to say it back,” he told her. “In fact, don’t.” She wrinkled her brow in confusion, so he plunged ahead. “If you feel it—and you don’t have to, it’s fine, I understand why you wouldn’t—I don’t want you to say it just because I said it. Even if it’s true. Or not true, as the case may be.” Kriff, this wasn’t going well. He took a deep breath. “If you want to say it, say it another time.”

She pressed her lips together, and he had a feeling she was suppressing amusement, but he was too petrified to reach inside her mind to find out. What if he looked inside and found out she didn’t love him? What if she did love him and he’d made a mess of it by not letting her say it? No, better to sit here with his cheeks burning and his stomach plummeting to his knees and then immediately change the subject. “Are you hungry?” he asked.

She leaned in and kissed him.

They hadn’t kissed after the duel, he realized. He’d jumped straight into licking and touching and had neglected her sweet mouth. He made up for the omission with long, drugging kisses, tangling his tongue with hers. She responded in kind, her lips soft and gentle against his. For once, the kisses weren’t a prelude to something else, just a way to be close to one another.

She pulled back and rested her forehead against his. “Thank you for telling me you love me,” she whispered. “You don’t know how happy that makes me.”
He didn’t, because he’d been trying not to peer into her mind, but when she sent a little nudge of joy his way, he accepted it. “Oh, Rey.” She was radiant with the emotion, her internal landscape glimmering gold and blinding white. He knew then that no one had ever told her they loved her before.

He would tell her every day, then. Every hour. As many times as he could to make up for the years she’d spent alone.

“I love you,” he repeated, and it was easier to say the second time. Her Force signature flared again, and it was incredible how three small words could make her light up like that. He nuzzled into her neck, inhaling the clean scent of her skin. “I love you, Rey.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, comments and kudos are really appreciated! Thanks for reading about these angsty space sweethearts.
Chapter 27

Later that night, after a proper dinner and a few rounds of Dejarik, Kylo lay on his back with Rey tucked into his side. Her leg was slung over his, and she kept nuzzling his chest with her nose. He stroked her hair, wondering how he’d ever gotten this lucky.

Rey traced little patterns on his bare chest with her fingers. It was soothing, and Kylo was close to drifting off when she spoke.

“I was so lonely on Jakku.”

He looked down at her, surprised by the soft words. He’d felt the whisper of desert winds across her mind a few times during sex, but he hadn’t wanted to ask her about it. Rey’s loneliness had been obvious the moment he’d gotten inside her head, and she hadn’t made a secret of her past, but she didn’t talk much about those early years.

He didn’t know why she’d brought it up now, but Kylo would seize any opportunity to get another piece of her. “Tell me,” he said.

She was silent for a while, but when he brushed across her mind, he knew she wasn’t hesitating. She was trying to figure out where to begin.

“It was hot,” she said, and she must have been grounding herself in the memory, because he could almost feel sun on his skin. “And dry. My lips were always cracked.”

Kylo had never lived anywhere hot. He tried to imagine what that would feel like day after day for years. Exhausting, probably. Irritating, definitely.

Rey shifted, making herself more comfortable against him. “The dust storms would come up suddenly, and sometimes they would last for weeks. Anyone caught out in one would get their skin stripped to the bone, so I always made sure to bring rations with me on my runs to the Starship Graveyard in case I had to hide out. I had a friend once…” She trailed off, and pain flashed sharp across the bond. It was accompanied by an image: a rotting, sand-caked mass the size of a child. Rey shook her head, shoving the image away. “Never mind.”

Kylo brushed her hair back from his forehead, aching for her. Some memories never faded, no matter how many years had passed. “I’m sorry,” he said.

She turned her nose into his chest and sucked in a deep breath, as if the scent of his skin soothed her. He kept stroking her, letting her find her center again.

“I stopped having friends,” Rey said eventually. “A few scavengers and some old women who cleaned finds were nice to me, but there was no one who… who really knew me.”

Lonely. So lonely. Desolation echoed through her, a pit so vast and so old he didn’t know if it could ever be filled. Kylo cupped her cheek with his free hand, sending affection through the bond. I know you.

She hummed at that, then closed her eyes, sinking deeper into memory. Her voice took on the dreamy cadence of a storyteller. “I was hungry all the time. Any extra rations had to be saved for storms, so I never ate enough to feel full. The first time I ate too much in one sitting was on the Falcon, and I wanted to cry at how strange it felt to have my stomach hurting from eating too much, rather than too little.” He felt dampness on his chest and gently prodded inside her mind, then
flinched when he realized Han Solo was part of that memory.

But tonight was about Rey, so he ignored the panic climbing his throat and just kept petting her, silently encouraging her to continue.

“I was tired, too. I never slept well—I was too afraid.”

Kylo stiffened, then forced himself to relax. He was here to be her rock, not to fly into a rage at the thought of anything frightening her. “What were you afraid of?” he asked as gently as he could manage.

“Too many things.” She laughed a little, although more tears trailed over his chest. “Dying out there was always a concern. Mostly it was the people, though. There were a lot of thieves who would happily kill you for your rations.” As she spoke, memories flitted across her mind. Kylo watched as a bedraggled, sun-cracked old man tried to rip Rey’s bag out of her hands. He felt her guilt as she knocked him to the ground with her quarterstaff.

“You did what you had to,” he told her. “There’s no shame in survival.”

“It stuck with me, though. When Luke told me all living things are connected, I just kept thinking about the ones I’d hurt or who’d tried to hurt me. Some of them were so desperate…”

She was sinking into unnecessary guilt, so Kylo tugged on her hair gently to distract her. “They wouldn’t have lasted long, anyway,” he said. “And if you’d fed them, you would have starved instead. Don’t feel guilty for being strong, Rey.”

Her fingers danced over his chest again, making little tally marks. “That’s easy for you to say. You’ve always been strong. You don’t know what it’s like to grow up vulnerable.”

His throat tightened. He hadn’t always been strong, had he? But that was irrelevant right now. “Maybe not.”

“And there were always men, you know.”

This time he couldn’t stop the jerk of his body as alarm shot through him. “What do you mean?”

“Men who wanted things. I was afraid of them, too. There weren’t many young women on Jakku, you see.”

And oh, he saw, and he wanted to rip every one of them limb from limb. He swallowed down rage. “Did any of them…”

She shook her head. “A few slobbered on me or got a touch in… but they never got a second one.” A bite of vicious pride crossed the bond, accompanied by an image of Rey clobbering a red faced man upside the head. It was quickly followed by the sight of her smacking another scavenger’s knuckles hard enough to break bones.

“Good,” Kylo said, fiercely proud of her. “You showed them their mistake.”

She shifted. “The locals figured out not to bother me quickly enough, but there were always criminals or traders passing through, so I moved out into the desert and found an AT-AT to shelter in. Hellhound Two.”

Another wisp of memory: late night inside Hellhound Two. Someone banging on the exterior, making their steady way around while Rey shivered in a corner of the troop compartment, her
quarterstaff held at the ready. “Are you in there?” a drunken voice called outside the door. “Little girl, open up…”

Kylo’s fists clenched, and the lightbulb overhead—already replaced once—shattered. “Tell me you killed him,” he growled.

She nuzzled him again, streaking fresh tears across his skin. “He didn’t come in. I’d told everyone in Niima Outpost the entrance was booby-trapped.”

“What?”

“No then. But I’d welded everything but the auxiliary hatch shut, and I buried sensors to tell me if anyone approached.”

His clever scavenger. Kylo admired her resilience, but he also vibrated with rage at the thought of her having to take such precautions. If he ever learned that man’s identity, he would hunt him down and torture him slowly. Maybe he’d even offer the kill to Rey, once he’d exacted the worst of the man’s pain. He could deal the punishment, then let her deal the mercy—a gift from a darksider to his light lover.

But despite Kylo’s building fury, this wasn’t the time to unleash it or indulge in violent fantasies. Rey was sharing her past with him like a confession, and whatever her reasons for doing so, he wanted her to keep going. “Tell me more,” he said.

“Everything was awful,” she said bluntly. “And I felt so angry sometimes, wondering how my family could have left me to that life. But the anger just hurt, so I’d spin myself these fairy tales, imagining what had kept them away from me. Maybe I was a princess in disguise, hiding while they dealt with a coup back home. Or maybe they had been abducted by pirates and were fighting their way back to me.”

She was sharing these insights with her usual blunt honesty, but Kylo knew talking about this hurt her. It struck him then how very cruel he’d been to rip the truth of her parents from her mind and parade it in front of her to make a point. They were filthy junk traders. Sold you off for drinking money. They’re dead in a pauper’s grave in the Jakku desert.

You come from nothing. You’re nothing.

Rey had needed to confront the truth about her past, but not like that. Not in words that ripped her open and shattered every pretty lie she’d told herself to survive.

“I didn’t even feel alive sometimes,” she said, pulling his attention back to her story and away from his own self-loathing. “I was just… numb. Like I was after Crait. It felt like there was nothing to feel or hope for anymore, just this endless… gray.” Her lips quirked. “I would scream sometimes, just to remind myself that I was still alive.”

Memory pulsed, and he saw her shrieking into the cavernous docking bay of a downed starship. The sound had echoed, and Kylo knew it was the closest she’d come to hearing another human voice in weeks.

“You are alive,” he told her, brushing his thumb over her wet cheek. “I’ve never met anyone who lives as fiercely as you.”

“I’m just stubborn,” she said into his chest. “I wasn’t willing to die without answers.”

She’d gotten the answers… because he’d given them to her as brutally as possible. And then Rey had
gone back to Jakku, back to the desert where she’d suffered so much, and when heat exhaustion had overwhelmed her on that awful day, she’d felt relieved.

He had done that to her.

Panic surged in Kylo’s chest. He turned onto his side, placing them face to face, and gripped her cheeks in both hands. “You’re not allowed to die,” he said vehemently. “Ever.”

Her eyes were wide and teary, but at that, her mouth wobbled into a small smile. “I don’t think even you can make me immortal, Ben. But I don’t feel that way anymore.”

He kissed her urgently, then pulled back before she could reciprocate. “You’re incredible, Rey.”

With their faces close together and the mental bond open, he knew he’d captured her full attention. “I’m sorry you grew up like that. You didn’t deserve it, and you’re a marvel for surviving it.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

It wasn’t enough, though. She was hurting, and he was part of the cause. “I’m sorry for telling you about your parents like that,” he said. Apologies had never come naturally to him, but this one was necessary. “It was wrong.”

She lifted a hand to stroke his hair. “I appreciate the apology. But Ben, that’s not why I brought it up.”

Kriff, he didn’t know what to say. She’d been pouring her heart out, and still had no idea why this conversation was happening or what to do to make it better. “Tell me,” he begged. “Tell me how I can help you.”

She ran her hand down his hair to his shoulder, then lowered it to his chest. “Just listening is enough.” Her mind brushed against his, soothing and sad all at once. “I’m telling you this because I want you to know me. Really know me. What we did earlier tonight… I didn’t even realize how much I needed it. It was incredible. And losing control made me realize how tightly I’ve been holding on to everything.”

He didn’t entirely understand, but whatever she needed, he would offer. He rubbed his thumb over her temple, then slid it down to her chin. “Let me help you,” he said, keeping his mind open so she could see every piece of the frantic, loving desire that had wound him up in knots.

She burrowed her head under his chin, her lips pressed against his throat. “When you spanked me, it rattled something loose. That’s the best way I can think of to explain it. And I have to confront it for me, but I’m yours, too. So here I am, showing you that broken part of me.”

“I love all your parts,” he said instantly. “I love everything about you.”

She beamed at him, her Force signature brightening even though tear tracks still caked her cheeks. “And that’s why I told you. If you’re going to love me, I want you to love all of me. I want to give you everything.”

“Oh, Rey.” Kylo folded her into his arms, clutching her close. His heart still ached with grief and fury, but both were overwhelmed by gratitude. “There isn’t a single thing you could tell me that I wouldn’t listen to. There isn’t a single thing you could do that would make me love you less.”

Rey sobbed, but the cracking of her restraint echoed with relief as much as pain. She pressed her face against his chest, crying out the past.
He held her, letting her cry. Every moment they experienced together was a gift, but she’d just offered him something impossibly rare. She’d shared the most fragile pieces of her soul.

She’d given him her trust.

Kylo would never violate it. And sometime soon, he would find the courage to share everything of himself with her, too.
Rey woke up from the deepest sleep of her life and was briefly confused about where she was. She was cocooned in blankets, and she didn’t know if she’d ever felt so relaxed and contented.

There was one thing missing, though. The steady warmth that had pressed against her back all night was gone.

She pushed herself upright, and her surroundings came into focus. She was in the captain’s quarters on the Millennium Falcon. The sheets beside her were rumpled from where Ben had slept, but when she pressed her hand to them, they were cool.

He’d slipped out without rousing her, and he’d wrapped her in the blanket before doing so. For someone like Rey, who had grown up needing to stay alert to the slightest hint of danger, her failure to wake was truly unprecedented.

Apparently getting her brains fucked out and then having an emotional meltdown had been exactly what she’d needed.

She was a little embarrassed by her tearful confessions about life on Jakku, but she felt so much lighter having shown Ben those memories. Maybe it wasn’t what she should have done when they’d been resting so peacefully, but she hadn’t been able to stop the words from pouring out. Submitting to him had released a tension she’d been carrying for years, and after a catharsis that powerful, it had made sense to surrender the rest of herself, too.

Besides, Rey was learning something about Ben. If she took the first step towards compromise, he quickly matched her efforts. Shortly after Rey’s enthusiastic acceptance of his dark side, her filthy-talking lover had bathed her tenderly, combed her hair, and told her he loved her.

*He loved her.*

Joy blossomed in Rey’s chest all over again, and she flopped back onto the bed, covering her face with a pillow as she let out an embarrassingly girlish squeal.

Ben Solo loved *her*, Rey of Jakku.

She’d never known how much she needed to hear those words. It was like drinking water when she hadn’t even realized she was dying of thirst. Like seeing a rainbow for the first time on Ahch-To.

And Ben’s confession had been so sweet and awkward that there could be no doubt he meant it. Whatever he’d done in the past, whatever darkness still festered inside him, he was capable of the single most selfless action in the universe. He loved her, with no expectation that she would love him back.

She did, of course.
At least, she assumed that was what this achingly wonderful emotion was. A mix of tender and fierce instincts rioted through her, all of them dedicated to him. She wanted to kiss him and fight him. She wanted to heal him and kill someone for him. She wanted to take all of his intensity and give him hers in return. No matter how difficult the path before them might be, she would feel privileged to walk it by his side.

He astounded her.

He amused and exasperated and infuriated her, too, but that must be part of love. Rey may not have grown up around affection, but she’d seen the contradictory ways couples in the Resistance behaved. They bickered and kissed; they laughed and wept. They were their whole selves with one another, and someone as private as Rey knew exactly how precious that honesty was.

Love wasn’t always gentle or tender; sometimes it was a fight. And sometimes it was sweetly soft, the mutual laying down of burdens.

She wanted to tell Ben she loved him, but Rey knew she needed to wait for the perfect moment. He didn’t believe himself truly worthy of love, even if he hoped for it, and if she spoke too soon, he might doubt her sincerity.

She thought again of the Code of the Sith: *Peace is a lie. There is only passion.* Ben wasn’t a Sith, but he’d surely heard those harsh words. That code needed revising, and Rey knew just how to do it.

*Peace is love. Love is passion.*

Together, they would have both. #

She found Ben at the edge of the promontory where they’d fought the previous night. The mud was churned from their footsteps, and the grass and rocks were singed from lightsaber strikes. She grinned at the evidence of their ardent encounter.

And if she’d needed confirmation that trusting Ben was the right choice, it was here.

He was meditating.

Rey felt a nearly unbearable wash of affection for him. Unprompted by her, he was trying to center himself and find balance. She knew—not from the bond but from her understanding of who Ben Solo was—that he was trying to seek the light for her in exchange for her embracing the dark for him.

His Force signature was still turbulent, but it was calmer than normal, and although he must have sensed her, he didn’t move. Rey settled into a cross-legged position nearby and began her own meditation. She’d never been particularly good at it—her mind was too active—but that peaceful mental state was easier to slip into this morning. She felt whole and uncomplicated in a way she hadn’t before.

It was because of Ben’s presence, she realized. And yes, she was still thinking too much, but ruminating about him during meditation was basically a tradition at this point. Now that the bond between them had strengthened into something as essential as blood or air, she recognized what had distracted her so much when Luke had first been teaching her.

Half of her had been across the galaxy.
That other half was here now, and his mind was relatively quiet, so Rey embraced her own stillness. The web of the Force spread out before her, bright and shining, and for once, the distant red light she’d longed for was as close as her own heartbeat. She folded it into herself and sank into peace.

When Rey surfaced from her meditation, she found Ben watching her. He was seated more comfortably now, with his legs bent before him and his arms resting on his knees, but his expression was tense.

She stretched. “How long have you been staring at me?”

“A while.”

Rey prodded at his mind and found agitation and unease. “Tell me what’s wrong,” she said, moving to sit next to him.

He sighed. “I’m bad at this.”

“At what? Meditation?”

He picked at a tuft of long grass. “Being a better man.”

“Why do you say that?” she asked, resisting the urge to instantly leap to his defense. He had listened to her confessions—now she would listen to his.

“I can’t stop thinking during meditation. Every time I try to relax, I see the faces of everyone I’ve tortured or killed. And I don’t regret all of them, Rey. Not even most of them. I’m not made like you.”

“I don’t regret everyone I’ve killed, either,” she said. “We’ve been at war.”

He winced. “A war I helped start.”

“Yes,” she said, because she wasn’t going to lie to him. “But you were serving Snoke’s wishes. He tortured you—he made you think you were doing the right thing.”

“But that’s just it,” he said, ripping out the stalks of grass with jerky movements. “I never thought I was totally right. Justified, maybe. But I knew what I was doing was wrong. That was what made all the terrible things so thrilling at first, although eventually they just became… routine.”

A heavy silence fell, broken only by the mournful cries of seabirds and the crash of the waves far below. Rey waited patiently for Ben to find the words he needed, knowing this wasn’t easy for him.

“I wanted…” he started to say, then abruptly stopped. “Never mind.”

“Tell me.”

Ben shook his head, then looked at her almost desperately. “How are you feeling?” he asked. “Are you sore from last night?”

Rey punched his upper arm. “Don’t change the subject.” He kept staring at her with wide eyes and his chin jutting out like a little boy’s, so eventually Rey sighed and gave in. “I’m a tiny bit sore, but it’s nothing to worry about. I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

“Do you need more bacta gel? I can bring some—”

His shoulders slumped, and he raked a hand through his messy hair. “I wanted to make myself into a monster,” he muttered. “Everyone already thought I was, so I figured, why resist it? Embracing the dark would prove them right and hurt them all at once.”

She knew who *them* signified in this story: Han, Leia, and Luke. “Why did you want to hurt them?”

A twisted expression crossed his face. “They cast me aside. Threw me away like garbage when they realized I was different.”

A memory flickered across the bond, although whether he’d meant to send it or not was unclear. A much younger Ben was crouching behind a doorway, listening in on his parents’ conversation.

“The other children at school are afraid of him. He broke a boy’s arm the other day—which you’d know if you were ever around.”

“I’m not a lapdog, princess. I have work to do. And so what? Kids get in fights all the time. The little prick probably had it coming.”

“Well, that ‘little prick’ is an ambassador’s son, and Ben broke his arm by Force-levitating him to the roof and dropping him. They’re talking about expelling him, Han.”

“Oh.”

“He’s just so volatile. The tantrums, the aggression… it’s unnerving. I think we need to send him to Luke.”

“What, so he can become just like your brother? Look, I like Luke, but I’ll be damned if a kid of mine ends up some sort of celibate monk.”

“Better he ends up like Luke than like… that.”

Ben flinched at the condemnation in his mother’s tone.

“This is only going to get worse,” Leia continued more softly. “And you know as well as I do that we can’t just think about this as his parents. We have a responsibility.”

“But sending him away… he’s so young, Leia. Aren’t you going to miss him?” No mention of Han missing him, naturally. It shouldn’t have stung, since Ben rarely saw his father these days, but his eyes pricked with tears.

“Of course I will. But there are more important things than how I feel.” Leia sighed heavily.

“Between Luke and me, I thought it would be easy to keep him on the right path. I don’t know what went wrong.”

Rey’s throat closed up as the memory receded. She liked Han and Leia, but she was furious at them on Ben’s behalf. He’d been made to think there was something wrong with him from a very young age; was it any wonder that pain had festered?

“I thought becoming the next Darth Vader would give me a purpose,” Ben said. “A place to belong. I thought it would fix everything, but it didn’t.”

“What would it have fixed?”

He scowled down at the blade of grass pinched between his fingers. “How conflicted I felt,” he said
quietly, as if his conflict was something to be ashamed of. “I kept telling myself that if I accumulated enough power, I wouldn’t feel so torn.”

Rey knew that Ben had always been a child of two worlds. He felt too deeply and intensely to adhere to the Jedi’s joyless dogma, but he wasn’t made for the Sith’s remorseless cruelty, either. With no middle path available, he’d swung to the only side that had accepted him.

“You wanted peace,” she said, recognizing the sad irony of it. It was the one thing the dark side could never have given him.

He flinched. “Snoke told me that once my training was complete, I would no longer question myself. I would be strong.”

“Snoke lied. No matter how far you went, there would always be a part of you that yearned for the light.”

“I don’t yearn for the light,” he said grumpily. “I’m doing this for you.”

Rey wouldn’t be able to let that bit of disingenuousness slide for long. “It’s okay to be conflicted,” she said. “Luke told me—”

“I don’t want to hear about Luke.” He threw the shredded blade of grass away from him, and it fluttered to the ground at his feet.

Rey wouldn’t be scared off that easily, though. “He told me it was time for the Jedi to end. He trained me anyway, but, Ben… he really meant it. We can’t go back to what the Jedi used to be. We have to become something new.”

“We?” His laugh was bitter. “Rey, there’s no universe in which I become any sort of Jedi with you.”

“Why not?” she asked, stung by his dismissal.

“Weren’t you listening?” His voice was rising; they were headed for another fight. “I wanted to be a monster. Maybe I can find some light in me for you, but that’s the extent of it. I’m still Kylo Ren. I’ll always be Kylo Ren.”

Rey was getting angry now. “You’re Ben Solo, too, and you can’t find the light just for me.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not enough,” she snapped. Ben flinched, and she immediately felt guilty, but kriff, he was so dense sometimes. Stubborn as a luggabeast trudging down the same worn track year after year. “I’m not saying you have to be some noble Jedi knight,” she continued. “But using me as your excuse for seeking the light is cowardly. You owe yourself more than that.”

His jaw clenched. “I’m not a coward.”

“Then prove it.”

The wind whipped around them, ruffling Rey’s clothes and tossing Ben’s hair across his forehead. He looked away, his mouth compressed into a grim line. “How?” he finally gritted out.

She pressed a hand against his cheek and was gratified when he didn’t pull away from her. “You can’t keep avoiding thinking about Luke,” she said. “Or your parents.”

“Rey—”
She lowered the hand to cover his mouth, shutting him up. The stubborn idiot needed to be jolted out of his comfort zone, and while it was a monumental undertaking, Rey was just insane and tenacious enough to do it. “You deserve better,” she told him. “Meditating for me means you aren’t meditating for your own sake. You’re focusing on someone else, rather than on actually trying to heal yourself.”

“Mmph mmph,” he said against her hand. When she didn’t relent, he sent the angry rebuttal down the bond. I can’t be healed.

“Nonsense. You’ve already begun.”

She could tell those words took him aback. His forehead crinkled as if he was reexamining and reassessing the events of the last few months. If he was honest with himself, he would see what she did—that the man who had first come to her in Force visions was very different from the one sitting here now.

She lifted her hand off his mouth. “I’m pushing you because I care about you,” she said. She wouldn’t tell him she loved him—not yet, not when he was hurting and prone to doubting both himself and her—but she sent a tendril of that love through the bond, brushing it against his mind. “I care about you so much, Ben, but you don’t care about yourself. And it hurts to see you treat yourself poorly or doubt your ability to grow.”

His breaths were coming faster, and his eyes glistened with unshed tears. “You haven’t seen the worst of me,” he whispered. “You think I’m better than I am—”

“Ben, you knocked me out, interrogated me, and tried to murder me multiple times. I watched you kill your own father. Believe me, I’ve seen the worst of you.” The words hurt him, she could tell, but he needed this bluntness. The lies he told himself could only be shattered with brute force. “I’ve seen the best of you, too,” she said, resting her hand over his heart. “You’re strong and caring and intelligent. You’re fierce and passionate. You love me, and I’ve never had anyone cherish me or listen to me the way you do. Every day I wake up astounded at how lucky I am to be with you.”

“Rey.” The way he said her name sounded like a plea. The tears gathering in his eyes spilled over, tracking down his cheeks. “I’m afraid.”

“I know. But you’re right: you aren’t a coward. You can face that fear and come out stronger.”

He looked towards the distant blue horizon. Under her palm, his heart beat a rapid but strong rhythm. Rey knew he wanted to be alone with his thoughts, so she drew back and got to her feet. But before she left, she said one last thing:

“You’ve taken good care of me, Ben. Now please take care of yourself.”
Chapter 29

That night, Kylo dreamed about the Jedi Temple.

He’d known this might happen. After his difficult conversation with Rey, he’d spent the rest of the day grappling with discomfort at having to confront his worst memories. But right before sleep, as Rey had drowsed against him in their bed in the captain’s quarters, he’d accepted it as the only way forward. He would look at his past clearly.

And yes, it was largely for her, but she’d been right to chastise him. His past wasn’t her burden, and his guilt shouldn’t be, either. If he was going to take this step, it had to be partially for his own benefit... even if he was used to hating himself.

The dream sucked him under.

Luke Skywalker stood before Ben Solo and a handful of kneeling apprentices. It had been a week since Ben had arrived at the Jedi Temple, and it was the first day he hadn’t woken up weeping. The pain of being abandoned by his parents was still raw and devastating, but he had finally begun to see some of the benefits of being there. Ben liked Uncle Luke, and he liked the idea of controlling his volatile powers even more.

Unfortunately, every lesson gave Ben the uneasy feeling that he was doing something wrong.

“The Force isn’t a power to be wielded,” Luke said. “It’s the fundamental energy of the universe. You do not control it; you merely channel it.”

“What does it feel like?” a young Zabrak boy asked.

Luke paused to consider. “It might be different for you, but for me, it’s like hearing the heartbeat of every living thing around me. Even for things that don’t have heartbeats, like trees, I can sense the life pulsing through them. It’s beautiful.”

Ben squeezed his eyes shut, trying to imagine feeling the heartbeat of every living thing. Whenever he accessed the Force, it felt violent. Like an ocean crashing against the shore: vast, deep, and brutal.

“You should feel peace when you connect with the Force,” Luke said.

And now Ben knew he was doing something wrong.

The dream spun into another. It was years later, when Ben was Luke’s most powerful student—and also his most unpredictable.

“You have to seek peace,” Luke said, exasperated at Ben’s constantly churning thoughts. “Just empty your mind.”

The two of them were seated outside together in front of a stack of rocks. A gentle rain fell over the temple buildings and the surrounding forest, misting Ben’s face and soaking into his cloak. Luke had been observing Ben’s attempts at meditation for an hour already, and Ben had certainly tried to empty his mind, but something in him refused to settle.

“Peace is boring,” he told Luke, hiding his insecurity with teenage defiance. Even the youngest trainees were better at meditation than Ben was, and he felt that inadequacy every single day.

Well, Ben thought, maybe I’m a dark Force user.

You are, a distant, echoing male voice said in his head. Ben couldn’t remember when he’d first heard that voice, but it had been long before he’d gone to the Jedi Temple to train. The voice always whispered of power and potential—the opposite of Luke’s lessons about humility and sacrifice. The mental visitations had grown more frequent in adolescence, and although it scared Ben, that voice was also the only one who validated him. You’re powerful and misunderstood, it said now. Stay strong and embrace your passion. Soon he will understand.

Yes, Ben thought. He’ll understand soon. I’m different.

Ben was comforted by the thought that there was a reason for his failure to master the basic Jedi skill of meditation—a reason tied to some great destiny that awaited him—but Luke’s next words cut to the bone. “Don’t be lazy, Ben. You owe it to your family to get this right.”

And kriff, that hurt. Because Ben saw his mother… what, twice a year? And his father maybe once? Seven years at Luke’s temple had rendered Ben nearly a stranger to his parents. They hadn’t wanted him. They had thought him unnatural. Unnerving. So they had sent him away to Luke, who found fault with Ben for deviating from the way things were supposed to be.

How did everyone else know how things were supposed to be? Where had they learned those rules? Because as hard as Ben tried, he could never quite figure them out.

You don’t need rules, the voice whispered. You are enough.


Luke walked away, leaving Ben blinking into the rain, his tears hidden by the deluge.

Then it was the last day. The worst day.

Ben was a young adult now, possessed of substantial power and a huge body he was still learning to control. He was Luke’s most senior student, although he still hadn’t mastered meditation. But Ben had a blue lightsaber and more telekinetic skill than anyone at the school, including Luke, and he hoped he might truly shape the future of the galaxy.

Ben fell asleep to the whispers that had become an essential part of his makeup over the past decade. You are powerful, but no one appreciates it. Seize your destiny. Destroy anyone who would make you weak.

When he woke again, it was to the green blaze of a lightsaber over him, illuminating the most frightening expression he’d ever seen on his uncle’s face.

Luke had come to kill him.

He fears your power, the voice shouted. It’s you or him.

And Ben didn’t want to die, not before he’d fulfilled his destiny.

The betrayal felt like being gutted. All those years spent learning the tepid ways of the Jedi, all those years clinging to the one person he could still consider family, all the years of trying and failing to be
the perfect student… it had all led to this. To the moment when Ben’s mentor and ally, his flesh and blood, stood over him with a weapon and a face full of rage.

*You were meant to be alone*, the unknown voice said. *Kill your past.*

Ben called his lightsaber to him to block the green blade. And as his uncle screamed “Ben, no,” he brought the building down around them.

He staggered out of the rubble into a rainy night, clutching his lightsaber and nothing else. The other students had roused at the commotion, but only the boldest dared approach him. Urged on by that strange, savage whisper—*kill your past, kill it all, kill everything*—and his own bleeding rage, Ben faced them.

“Master Luke just tried to kill me,” he shouted into the driving rain. “He was unhinged. He would have turned on you, too, had I not stopped him.”

Shocked protests met his declaration, but he had no patience for questions or concerns. The violence had roused the dark part of him that was never allowed to breathe. He sucked in air, fueling the hungry, furious monstrosity that had always been at his core.

*Yes*, the voice hissed. *You are strong. You are justified.*

“You all have a choice,” Ben said. “Join me and reject Luke’s teachings… or die here with him.”

He hadn’t truly expected anyone to want to die with Luke... but some of them had.

It hadn’t been hard to cut them down. That was the worst part of the dream—reliving his own gleeful savagery as he’d destroyed anyone who still clung to the light side of the Force. That vicious, secret voice encouraged him through every slice. A handful of pupils stood with Ben, each of them equally disillusioned by Luke’s denial of their fundamental selves, and together, they razed the complex to the ground.


Power.

#

Kylo shot upright in bed, gasping. Sweat slicked his chest, and his heart raced.


But it wasn’t all right. Kriff, there was a reason he’d avoided thinking about Luke. Kylo hated those memories.

“Come here,” Rey said, opening her arms to him.

He didn’t deserve her touch, didn’t deserve anything but nightmares and emptiness. But Kylo was weak when it came to her, so he lay down again, letting Rey wrap around his back like a clinging vine. She was so small, but the way she held him made him feel safe.

“I dreamed about Luke,” he told her.

She didn’t respond, just snuggled her face between his shoulder blades while stroking her hands over his chest. She wasn’t surprised, he realized.
“Did you…” It took a moment to form the question because he was afraid of the answer. “Did you see it?”

“I did,” she admitted. “But Ben…”

“Kylo,” he corrected, because at least using that name gave him a sense of control over the situation.

“Kylo,” she acknowledged, surprising him. “I’m never going to judge you for defending yourself. You already know what I told you—that Luke reconsidered his course of action—but that doesn’t matter. You couldn’t have read his mind. He threatened you, and you protected yourself.”

He closed his eyes, wishing all of this would go away. If he could bash his head against a wall hard enough to ensure no more unwelcome memories crowded into his mind, he would.

“I like your head,” Rey said softly, stroking his hair. “I want it in one piece.”

“And the rest of the dream?” Kylo asked, uncomfortable with her kindness. “The part where I killed?”

Her lips shaped soundless words against his back. Then she sighed, the puff of warm air coasting over his skin. “It was hard to see,” she admitted. “But I understood that, too. Snoke had been manipulating you for years, and you’d just suffered a terrible betrayal—”

“Don’t lie to me.” He turned over abruptly, putting them face to face. “You hated it. I disgust you.”

“I hated it,” she agreed, looking at him with those unflinching hazel eyes that seemed to pin him in place. “But you will never disgust me.”

“Rey,” he groaned, because she was being so good, his little beacon of light, even though she couldn’t possibly mean it. “I’m a monster. You should—”

She interrupted him by leaning in and kissing him.

Kylo was so dumbfounded that he was physically incapable of moving his mouth in response. Rey kissed him anyway, sliding her lips over his gently. She sucked at his lower lip, then slid her tongue just past his teeth, tantalizing him.

“You don’t mean this,” he whispered against her mouth.

“Kylo.” She pulled back and fixed him with a firm stare. “If I didn’t mean it, I wouldn’t be doing it.”

And Rey, his perfect, fierce Rey, never lied to him. If she’d seen that dream and still wanted him…

Kylo surged forward and seized her lips in a possessive kiss. He ate at her hungrily, reveling in the plush surface of her lips and her soft, needy noises. She pushed him onto his back and clambered over him, tossing the blankets aside.

“You’re so beautiful,” Kylo said as she rose over him. She had worn one of his black shirts to bed. It reached halfway down her thighs, but when she settled on top of him, he caught a glimpse of her simple white panties. It was one of the most arousing sights he’d ever seen.

She rocked over his erection. He was wearing underwear and nothing else, and the warmth of her cunt sank into him, teasing him with a hint of what was to come. “It doesn’t matter what you did in the past,” she said as she rubbed her pussy along the length of him. “You’re still mine.”

The sound he made then was barely human. She always knew just what to say to drive him wild. He
gripped her hips, tipping his head back with a moan as she ground over him. “Why are you doing this?” he asked, hardly able to get the words out past his gasping breaths. He was so hard it ached.

“Fucking you?” she asked. When he nodded, she leaned down and began sucking little bruises into his neck. “Because you need more than words,” she said against his fluttering pulse. “You need actions. I can tell you that I understand and that you’re mine, but you won’t believe me unless you have proof.” She grabbed his hands from her hips and pushed them onto the pillow beside his head. “So here’s proof."

And then she froze his arms in place with the Force.

Kylo groaned as Rey slid off him. He would have lunged after her, but she had frozen his legs, too. He was forced to lie still, quivering with lust, as she stood next to the bed and stripped off her clothes.

Every time he saw her like this, it took his breath away. She was sleek and muscled, that small frame containing an astounding amount of power. Her breasts were small and rosy-tipped, her waist tiny, her ass frankly awe-inspiring. As she slipped the white panties down her legs, she revealed a swirl of dark public hair and a glimpse of the outer lips of her pussy.

“Fucking perfect,” he said as she stood next to the bed. Her cunt was so close to his face that he could smell the musky scent of her growing arousal, and he desperately wanted to taste her. “Let me put my mouth on you.”

She shook her head and smiled, the curve of her mouth taking on that wicked slant that told him she had great and terrible plans for him. “I’m in control tonight,” she said. And fuck, Kylo’s erection got even harder. Normally he would have wanted to be in control, or at least to fight for it, but the sight of Rey smirking at him, totally nude yet completely in power, was unbearably arousing. The tip of his cock gave up a drop of pre-cum, and he watched in astonishment as Rey dipped her head and lapped it up.

He nearly howled when she pulled away after only taking that one small taste. “More,” he ordered, and she actually laughed at him, but he wasn’t thinking clearly enough to be offended.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” she said, trailing a hand down his chest. She got to the path of dark hair that arrowed down from his navel and stopped, sifting her nails through it in tantalizing patterns. “You need to let go, just like I did last night. So say ‘Jakku’ if you want me to stop, although I really, really don’t think you will.”

Kylo’s heart pounded fast and hard, and with all the blood going straight to his dick, he grew a little lightheaded. Did he want to let go? Did he even know how? Even in their more frantic encounters, he’d always been able to exert some control. Now, though, she had him pinned—and although he could probably break free of her grip if he wanted to, he knew he wouldn’t.

Rey crossed to the closet and retrieved one of the lengths of fabric she wrapped around her arms to shield them from the sun. She brought it back, and before he completely registered what she had planned, she covered his eyes and tied the fabric behind his head. Vision vanished, and he was left with nothing to focus on but the soft scratch of fabric and the smell of Rey in his nostrils.

He strained against her Force hold just to feel his own powerlessness. Blind, immobilized, and, as she stripped off his underwear, completely naked. No one had ever done anything like this to Kylo Ren.
Her breath ghosted over the wet tip of his cock, and he actually whimpered at the sensation. It was so much more intense when he couldn’t see her. The breath went away, but before he could mourn the loss, her fingers started trailing up his leg, starting at the ankle. When she reached his inner thigh, the gentle touch became a scratch as she dug her nails in. He twitched as she raked a line of precious pain up to the top of his inner thigh, just below his testicles...

She removed her hand, and he swore foully.

“So impatient,” she murmured to him in a honey-seductive voice. It was what he’d told her the previous night, when she’d been desperate to rip off her lightsaber-demolished clothes. Was this how she’d felt? Like she’d die if she went another second without their skin touching?

The gentle touch started on his other ankle. He gritted his teeth while her fingers ascended, and then, yes, there was the sting of her nails, but this time when she reached the top, her teeth closed over the sensitive skin of his inner thigh.

He jerked and shouted, trembling as heat flooded her bite mark. Her tongue soothed the sore spot, then stretched an inch further to gently stroke his testicles. His cock was practically weeping with pre-cum, the entire length throbbing for her, but all too soon she pulled away again.

This was unbearable and amazing, and he absolutely wasn’t going to survive the night.

It wasn’t how he would have dominated her—he preferred force and violent passion, a physical manifestation of the possessiveness that howled through him when he got her naked—and because of that, it was devastating. She was going to gently and methodically tear him apart, piece by piece, and he could do nothing about it. He was immobilized and blind, unable to touch her in return, unable to even guess what she was going to do next.

Kylo Ren had never felt quite so helpless. Why that should arouse him, he didn’t know, but as she ran her fingernail down his bicep, he wanted to cry from how badly he wanted her.

“You’re mine,” she said, switching to massaging his shoulders, chest, and arms. It felt incredible—his muscles were a little sore from how intense the previous night had been, and the meditation had left him stiff. “Mine to protect. Mine to claim. Mine to fuck.”

Kriff, when had she started talking like this? Had she gotten it from him? Because if she really started talking dirty, he might expire on the spot.

She pulled away, and he waited in agonizing anticipation for her next move. The silence stretched out, broken only by a few rustling noises. What was she doing?

He jerked in surprise when something brushed over his erection. He didn’t know what it was—maybe another one of her arm wraps, maybe another light piece of fabric, but the soft material gently trailing over him was almost worse than nothing touching him at all. He wanted her to take him in her hand or her mouth or her cunt—he wanted her to work him so hard it hurt. But she didn’t, instead subjecting him to this terrifying gentleness.

The fabric trailed down his legs, then lifted away.

Her hand came down on his inner thigh with a sharp smack that had him moaning and pushing against the Force hold. A series of sharp slaps left both legs stinging and hot, and then her mouth opened over the tip of his erection.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he chanted as her lips slid halfway down, then pulled back. She played with his cock, exploring the broad head and the slit at the tip with her tongue. Her hand cupped his balls, and
she squeezed them with a pressure just shy of too hard.

Kylo’s head spun. He was floating in space, utterly unmoored, unable to move or see or breathe. All he knew was the sweet suck of her mouth and the almost-but-not-quite painful tugs to his sac. He was going to come, and it was embarrassing that it should happen so soon, but he needed it desperately and his abdomen was tensing—

She released him from her mouth with a wet pop and took her hand away.

“No,” Kylo shouted, struggling against the Force hold in earnest as the imminent orgasm receded. “Let me come, damn it.” He heard her muffled laugh, and that was infuriating. He was rock hard, in an agony of desire, and she was fucking laughing? He could move his hips just a little, and he thrust up as much as he could, his erection bobbing with the movement. “Get back here,” he ordered. “Finish me off.”

“I’m in control,” she said. “You’ll just have to wait.”

And oh, waiting was agony. She caressed and massaged him all over, interspersing gentler touches with sharp nips of her teeth and the rake of her nails. She left his cock alone, but there was a real chance he might spontaneously orgasm just from the pleasure of her mouth and hands coasting over him.

The mattress dipped as she climbed onto it, and then he caught the lush scent of her pussy. It was his only warning before she lowered herself over his mouth. He growled and started licking frantically, starving for the taste of her. She was wet; she liked this play just as much as he did.

Rey rocked over him, smearing her juices over his face, and Kylo ate her up greedily. Soon she was moaning, her thighs quivering with an impending orgasm. “Don’t take this away from me,” he growled against her pussy. If she removed her cunt from his mouth before she came, he was fairly sure he would scream.

Thankfully, Rey orgasmed on a breathy moan, her body shaking. He licked gratefully, his own erection throbbing uncomfortably as if in sympathy with the spasms wracking her.

He moaned in protest when she got off his face and resumed her gentle torture. It was worse now, because his lips and chin were wet with her, and he still couldn’t move. All he could do was smell and feel her arousal while she played with his body.

When she squeezed his erection in one fist and started pumping, he hissed in relief.

“So you know what I like about this?” she asked, removing her hand for a moment. When she returned, her palm was wet. He groaned when he realized she was lubricating the motion with the moisture of her own body. “I like getting to look at you,” she continued. “Looking and touching as much as I want. Your muscles, your scars, and that thick cock… I can’t help imagining how good it’s going to feel when I finally get you inside me.”

He wanted that, too. “Do it now,” he said, but he’d lost his tone of command, and the words came out as a plea. “Please, before I come.”

“Oh, Ben,” she said. “How adorable that you think I’m going to let you come.”

Her hand lifted off his cock, and this time Kylo really did scream in frustration. He’d been so close, just a few pumps away from spilling all over her hand, and being denied again hurt. His swollen balls ached, and the sexual denial was sending him spiraling into furious desperation.
“I could straddle you right now,” she said, instantly seizing his attention. “I’m so wet that it would be easy to sink down on you. I’d take that thick, long cock as deep as it can go. Kriff, it feels so good when you’re inside me—but even when I’m stuffed full of you, it’s never enough. I’m always greedy for more.”

He whimpered, knowing she wasn’t actually going to straddle him. This dirty talk was yet another weapon in her arsenal designed to make him lose his sanity.

“When you fuck me,” she continued, “everything else disappears. The whole kriffing galaxy could explode and I wouldn’t notice, because I’m so drunk on how you feel inside me. You do that to me, Ben. You turn me into an animal.”

“Why are you torturing me?” he asked. His voice broke on the words.

“Because you need it,” she said. “Now hush and let me work.”

And oh, she worked. She massaged and stroked every part of him except the place where he wanted her touch most, and soon Kylo was sweating and twitching under the sensual onslaught. Her hot little tongue trailed over his ribs, then down his abs to toy with the bands of muscle arrowing to his groin. Then she started again at his feet, tenderly kissing each of his toes before working her way up, again stopping just shy of where he needed her. The hum of her lightsaber turning on had him shivering in fearful anticipation. She held the blade a few inches above his skin, letting him feel the fiery heat of it as she moved it over his body.

She was mercilessly thorough, shredding him with pleasure. The long minutes blurred into an eternity of sensation as she stroked, squeezed, bit, and licked. Her hands slapped a sting into his inner thighs, and her teeth left aching crescents all over his torso. Twice more she stroked and sucked his cock to a fever pitch of arousal, then denied him completion.

Kylo lost all sense of time and place. He was babbling, he knew, but he wasn’t sure what he was saying. Some mix of the words “Rey” and “please” and “fuck,” sprinkled with breathless compliments and outraged insults directed at her continued cruelty. When yet another orgasm was taken away from him, tears started trailing down his cheeks.

She climbed on top of him then, although she positioned herself in front of his cock so the wet heat of her pussy brushed his stomach. She leaned forward and licked the tears away. “You’re mine, Ben Solo,” she whispered as she rubbed her cunt against his abs. “And Kylo Ren is mine, too. Every part of you is mine. Even the parts you don’t like, and the awful memories, and the guilt. I want all of you, and nothing you can say will stop me from wanting you.”

He was crying in earnest now, his frustrated desire mingling with deep gratitude for the trust and acceptance she gave so freely. How could she want such a broken man? But for some reason, she did. He wanted to conquer galaxies for her, would lay the stars down at her feet if he could.

Rey shifted until the tip of him was positioned at her entrance. Kylo struggled to thrust up into her, but she held him in place. She tugged the blindfold off, and he blinked watery eyes up at her. She was so beautiful, with her hair falling around her shoulders and a smile on her face that looked like the sun coming out from behind the clouds. Then, finally, she started sinking down onto him, her pussy slick and warm and welcoming.

As she took him inside her body, she cupped his face in her hands, close enough that he could see the sincerity shining in her hazel eyes. “I love you,” she said.

Kylo gasped as the full force of her love flooded into him across the bond. The emotion was golden
and precious and fierce, just like her, and it wrapped around his mind as tightly as her cunt wrapped around his cock. She rode him with quick, confident strokes, and she was right, she was so wet that she took him as deep as he could go, but that wasn’t what made him fall and fall and fall into pleasure.

She loved him. She *loved* him.

Kylo came on a hoarse cry, spasming as he pumped his seed into her. It was the longest, fiercest orgasm of his life. The release of all that tightly wound tension nearly made him pass out, and his feet cramped as shuddering waves raced through his body, rattling him down to the bones.

Rey’s hand was hard at work between her legs, and while Kylo was still flying high, she stiffened and shivered, her hips adopting a jagged rhythm. “I love you, Ben Solo,” she said as she came. “I love you, Kylo Ren.”

No one had ever said those words before. Kylo sobbed, and when Rey’s Force hold finally lifted, he wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly to his chest, crying into her hair in relief and devastation.
A wee baby chapter before we get back on the Ben Solo Pain Train. (Space therapy is hard, guys!)

It was Rey’s turn to tend to her lover.

Ben wasn’t as incapacitated as Rey had been the previous night, but he refused to let her go after they had sex. He turned them until they were lying face to face on the bed, and then he clutched her so tightly to his chest that the breath whooshed out of her. His tears continued to fall into her hair for long minutes.

The tears finally stopped, although shivers still shook his massive frame. Rey’s catharsis had been mostly physical, at least until she’d told him about Jakku, but she knew Ben’s was largely emotional. Yes, she’d driven him nearly out of his mind with lust—and hadn’t that been an incredible sight, all those muscles straining while he begged her to make him come—but she’d done it for a reason. To batter down his defenses, get inside that stubborn head, and force him to hear her words of acceptance and love.

With Snoke gone, Ben was his own worst enemy. He simply couldn’t fathom that he deserved understanding or compassion—which meant Rey had to show him that he did. She planned to use all the weapons at her disposal in this campaign to help him heal.

Luckily for both of them, sex was an extremely effective weapon where Ben was concerned.

He nuzzled her hair. “Thank you,” he whispered into the damp strands.

She shifted until he finally loosened his grip, then pulled back just enough to look into his face. His eyes were reddened from crying, his cheeks flushed. His wobbly smile was the most precious thing she’d ever seen. “What are you thanking me for?” Rey asked.

“For… loving me.” His cheeks turned even pinker. “Even if I don’t deserve it.”

Exasperation warred with affection for the idiot, and kriff, one of these days she was going to shake him silly. She smoothed his hair back from his forehead, instead. “You do deserve love. And it’s freely and gladly given.”

He sighed, and his eyelids fluttered closed. “I think I’ve cried more in the last few days than the last two decades,” he said. “It’s frankly embarrassing.”

“Me, too,” she said. “I never really cried on Jakku—it was too dehydrating.”

He huffed a small laugh. “My practical girl.”

She smiled at him, loving the relaxed lines of his face and the amused tilt of his lips. “And it was easier to suppress it, anyway. It felt like… if I ever broke down, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to put myself back together.”
“I didn’t want to be weak,” he said, opening his eyes again. “Pain was supposed to make me stronger, but succumbing to it led to punishment. I learned never to let Snoke see me cry.” He said the words matter-of-factly; it wasn’t a confession, just an offering of another small piece of his past.

Rey hated that he’d been hurt so badly. The scenes she’d witnessed in dreams had been devastating. To have been tortured like that day after day for years… She leaned in to kiss him again, tasting the salt on his lips. “I’m sorry you had to go through that,” she said. “If you ever want to talk about what happened…”

“I probably will,” he said, and Rey was surprised by his easy acquiescence. “If I’m truly going to confront my memories... this dream was just the beginning. You’ll see more than you ever wanted to.”

“I want to see all of it,” she told him. “And I’ll give you whatever you need.”

He smiled, and it was amazing how easily he did that now. The man she’d first met had vacillated between fury and stony silence, but this one had grown comfortable showing the full range of his emotions. “Right now I don’t want to think about any of that,” he said. “I just want to be with you.”

_You love me_, he thought at her across the bond, and the words sparkled with fresh wonder.

Rey kissed his nose. “I do love you. And now I’m going to take care of you.”

#

She brought him food and water, as he had for her, then badgered him into taking a shower with her. She couldn’t exactly carry or support him—Maker, the man was large—but she did scrub him from head to toe while he chuckled at her earnest dedication to the task. She lavished his hair with conditioner, then had to ask him to duck down so she could rinse it out. She ran her hands over his scalp, humming in contentment.

It was nice doing this for another person. As nice as having it done for her.

She wrapped him in a towel and dragged him back to bed. The room was starting to smell strongly of sex, so she changed the sheets before laying him down on his stomach. She straddled his back and dug her knuckles into the knots along his spine, enjoying the way he groaned and pressed his face into the pillow. He was so strong, a tempest of a man, yet she could reduce him to a puddle with a single touch.

“You’re too good to me,” he muttered into the pillow as she massaged his muscled buttocks.

“No such thing,” she said. She leaned down to kiss one firm cheek. “And besides, the view is unbeatable.”

He chuckled and wiggled his ass a little, and she had to order him to stay still so she could finish the massage without being bucked off. Twenty minutes later, he was snoring softly into the pillow, and although Rey’s hands were sore, her heart was happy.

She turned off the light and snuggled into his side. _This is where I’m supposed to be_, she thought.

Somehow, two of the galaxy’s loneliest individuals had found each other. They’d fought and challenged each other, run from each other, pursued each other, wanted each other, and finally fallen in love.
Chapter 31

Ben hadn’t been wrong about Rey witnessing a deluge of memories. Over the next days, she saw scenes that horrified her, either through the bond during his meditations or at night when he dreamed. She bit her tongue as she watched him cutting down members of the Resistance on the battlefield and dug her nails into her palms when she saw him torture or slaughter people who had done nothing more than get in his way. He’d been filled with seething, mindless fury for years, his rage against the universe fed by pain of every kind.


Kylo Ren had been twisted into something truly horrific—and he’d known it. He’d hated who he was, but Snoke had told him hate was clarifying, so Kylo had assumed he was on the right path. Besides, it had been far too late to turn back; he’d damned himself to the dark the moment he’d killed Luke’s students.

Power was its own reward, even if that power only led to more torture and hate and killing. And if it hurt, if everything hurt so fucking much that his soul felt like a raw, exposed wound… well, it was only because Kylo’s training hadn’t been completed yet. He was still too weak.

If he could kill the last spark of light in himself, he would finally be at peace with what he’d become.

There were times Kylo thought he’d almost gotten there. The killings had become routine. Torture had rarely made his heart rate accelerate anymore. He’d embraced those small indicators that he was finally hardening into a true warrior of the dark.

And then he’d met her.

#

Rey saw their first encounter from his perspective during a dream. The dream had begun, as usual, in Snoke’s torture chamber. After that horrific scene of blood and splintering bone had faded, she’d been transported into a sun-dappled forest on Takodana.

She hovered unseen at Kylo’s side as he stalked through the forest after his prey. His thoughts were as clear to her as her own. The map, he needed to find the map. It would lead him to Skywalker, who infuriatingly still lived. Then Kylo Ren would kill his old master and destroy that piece of the past forever.

Rey was startled to see herself from an outside perspective. Kriff, she looked young, with her hair drawn up in three buns and her arm shaking as she fired her blaster at Kylo.

Kylo deflected the bolts with ease, then froze the younger Rey’s arm by her side. “The girl I’ve heard so much about,” he said, and it was jarring to hear those words through the voice modulator of his old mask. He didn’t even sound human, and somehow Rey had forgotten exactly how terrified she’d been of him back then.

“The droid. Where is it?”

His blade hovered at the girl’s neck, and Kylo was thinking how very easy it would be to sever her head and send it tumbling to the ground. No matter that she was young and beautiful and afraid, or that her fear did something strange to his insides. That shivering, crawling feeling was excitement; that must be it. He enjoyed making people afraid.
“The map. You’ve seen it.”

Rey watched her own face flinch in pain as Kylo dug around in her memories.

“Forget the droid. We have what we need.”

Then Rey’s younger self was slumping to the ground, and Rey hadn’t even known that Kylo had caught her. He hefted her in his arms and carried her back to his shuttle.

Rey followed, as insubstantial as a ghost. Which she was, in a way. The echo of a young, lost girl who had never meant to tumble into an intergalactic conflict. Who had never guessed that one day she would love this creature in a mask so much it made her heart ache.

Kylo studied her face as he walked, and Rey felt his interest stir. *Delicate,* he thought. *Exquisite.*

He wasn’t the kind of man who could be entrusted with delicate things.

#

Rey stood invisibly in a corner of the interrogation chamber, watching as Kylo stared at her younger self. She felt his eager anticipation and heard his every dark, obsessive thought as they shared the dream space. He was familiar, yet not—she’d grown accustomed to his intensity, but this was an earlier incarnation of the man she loved, and his mind was shadowed, full of pitfalls and sharp, bloody edges.

Kylo couldn’t wait for the girl to wake from the Force sleep he’d put her in. He admired the way she was strapped into the chair, her slender limbs restrained.

Restrained for *him.*

He felt possessive of her. Covetous. This little desert flower, so afraid yet so defiant. A beauty with a mind as open and bright as a flame, who carried the knowledge he craved above all else: Skywalker’s location.

When the girl roused, he was struck again by her defiant hazel eyes. “Where am I?” she demanded.

“You’re my guest,” Kylo said, finding humor in the idea. He’d never had a guest before. Wouldn’t even know what to do with one.

“Where are the others?”

“You mean the murderers, traitors, and thieves you call friends? You’ll be relieved to hear I have no idea.” Kylo brushed against the girl’s mind, curious what she thought about him. He found anger there, along with some deliciously homicidal inclinations, and he was charmed despite himself. “You still want to kill me?”

“That happens when you’re being hunted by a creature in a mask.”

The words stung, although he didn’t know why. *I am a creature,* he thought to himself. *She’s right.* But he couldn’t stop himself from removing the mask, even though he knew she would be easier to manipulate if she was terrified of him. For some perverse reason, he wanted her to *see* him.

Her eyes flickered as she took him in, clearly surprised that he was so young. He heard a whisper at the edge of her mind, something he almost could have sworn was the word *handsome.*

But it couldn’t have been, because no one had found him handsome even before the mask years. His
face was too long, his nose and ears too big, and he knew there was something behind his eyes that unsettled others. It was the dark, maybe, peering out from his corrupted soul. The shiny predator gaze of the creature she’d named him.

Rey sank even deeper into Kylo’s dream self, unable to resist the lure of his disturbing yet intoxicating intensity. Soon it was as if they were one being; she looked out from his eyes, her mouth moved in time with his, and her hands clenched inside his leather gloves.

The girl refused to tell Kylo about the droid, talking back to him with technical specifications that just charmed him further. Kriff, her defiance. “You know, I can take whatever I want,” he said in an almost conspiratorial tone.

And oh, how those words simultaneously thrilled and appalled him. There was an unspoken threat beneath them—that she belonged to him, body and mind alike. That she had no power should he wish to take more than just a memory. He had never taken a woman against her will, didn’t think he ever could, but for a sick moment, he imagined her struggling beneath him, and it aroused him.

Kylo hated himself so much then.

Hate was a useful tool, so he forged it into a scalpel sharp enough to cut her mind open, telling himself it didn’t matter if this hurt her or if she hated him for it. He seized delicate things and broke them. That was who he was. That was all he was good for.

The girl’s mind opened like a flower, and Kylo/Rey looked inside.

It was a vision of desolation. A desert at night, tally marks on a wall, a heart that was empty, empty. An ocean and an island, the images she’d fixed in her mind to give her an escape from her barren existence.

Kylo nearly recoiled when he touched that loneliness. It was of a magnitude similar to his own, and he’d never once imagined that someone else in the universe might feel that pain as acutely as he did. He was assailed by strange impulses—to open his mind so she could feel his loneliness, too. To caress her and whisper dark words in her ear. To ease that loneliness with his touch.

Her name appeared, shining and lovely: Rey. Like a beam of light, that one syllable somehow exuding warmth. He picked through her memories, marveling at each one like it was a piece of treasure. She was…

“Get out of my head,” the girl snapped.

“Don’t be afraid,” he told her, running covetous mental fingers over every new facet of her soul his explorations revealed. They were alike in ways he’d never been alike to anyone before, even though the differences were profound. “I feel it, too.”

The feeling was impossible to define, but it was overwhelming, like being swamped by a rogue wave. She matched him, and now a thread was being woven between their aching souls, shining and delicate. Like speaking to like across the vast gulf of loneliness.

Rey fought back. And this was more than just a resilient mind—the girl was using the Force with native ease, delving into his head so deeply that it both frightened and thrilled him. No one had ever wanted to be inside his head before, other than Snoke, and she was so different from that mangled monster—beautiful and angry and so bright her Force signature hurt to look at. He sucked her in greedily and pushed harder into her mind, and the thread between them thickened into a rope.

She was his match.
Then she split his head open with a mental probe she shouldn’t have been capable of. “You’re afraid that you will never be as strong as Darth Vader,” she spat.

Having her in his head hurt now. He stumbled back at her words. She wasn’t supposed to see that; he wasn’t supposed to be so weak. She was tearing him apart, revealing all his insecurities and fears, and this was beyond dangerous. If Snoke saw that weakness the next time he looked inside Kylo’s head, there would be no limit to the torture inflicted.

Kylo had to get away from her.

#

Back in his quarters, Kylo paced, nearly ripping his hair out. Rey had slipped out of his head, but she matched his footsteps, unseen and unheard as she kept vigil with him.

The way he’d thought of her back then both fascinated and repelled her. His furious hunger had been overwhelming, and although she’d caught glimpses of softer emotions, they’d been buried beneath possessiveness, craving, and dominance.

Still, it was clear he’d longed for her even then. He’d thought of her as his match.

Why did I do it? Kylo asked himself the question as he crossed to the viewport to look out at space. Why had he let her inside his head? Why had he taken off his mask? Why had he needed her to see him?

It wasn’t just her beauty—there was plenty of that in the galaxy. No, it was some bizarre alchemy of beauty, fury, and strength. A steady pride and an unbroken spirit. Courage in the face of her fear.

She was every good and true thing he would never be, and the light of her soul burned him, but he hadn’t been able to turn away. He craved the pain that came from being too near her.

I’m just a creature in a mask, he thought, then slammed his fist into the viewport. He did it again and again, until his knuckles split and blood splattered on the glass. If he were to return to her and touch her as he wanted to, he would leave that blood caked all over her golden skin.

He wasn’t fit to touch her. He was just a monster longing for what it could never have.

#

The dream blurred, and when a snowflake kissed her forehead, Rey knew instantly what she would see next.

Starkiller Base. Their first true battle.

Rey watched from the snow-shrouded trees as Kylo lunged at the younger version of her. She felt his amazement when she called the lightsaber to her—my lightsaber, he thought fiercely, mine by right—and then she was falling into his churning thoughts again.

Kylo swung at the girl as aggression and fear pumped through him. She was strong and clearly had combat training, but not with a lightsaber. Her hits were fierce but clumsy. If this were any other battle, she would be dead at his feet by now.

This was different, though. He was wounded, his side a fiery mass of agony from where Chewbacca had shot him. His old friend was now a sworn enemy, and Kylo had deserved that shot for what he’d done.
He’d killed his father.

Kylo’s heartbeat was a raging scream in his ears, and black speckled his vision. He slammed his fist into the wound on his side, embracing the splintering pain. It would give him the focus he needed to finish this.

Their blades locked. The girl was so close to him; her wide eyes reflected their crossed sabers. He should kill her, he needed to kill her… but he couldn’t.

“You need a teacher;” he said, seizing that excuse for his inability to destroy her. She was naturally talented; with the right tutelage, she could become a strong darksider. A true asset to the cause. “I can show you the ways of the Force.”

He wanted so much more than to train her, though. He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to tackle her to the ground and fuck her until she screamed in pleasure. He wanted to shove his ruined heart at her just for the privilege of watching her sneer at the black, mangled thing.

But she didn’t want a teacher, and he was too weak for the fight. She defeated him, and he was left on the icy ground with his face torn open and his vision fading, knowing he would never see her again.

Just one more regret in a lifetime full of them.

#

Rey woke to the frantic press of Ben’s lips against her throat. He kissed down to her collarbone, then shoved up the baggy shirt she’d worn to bed and put his mouth on her breast.

“What—” Her mind was still catching up with this new reality. They weren’t dreaming anymore; it was dark in their room on the Millennium Falcon, and the sheets were warm with their shared body heat. No snow, no glowing blades, and no more of Kylo Ren’s suffering tearing at her heart.

But across the bond, Ben’s mind was still screaming in agony. He sucked on her nipple hard, sending an electric pulse between her legs, but she had to stop him before lust swept them both up. “What is it?” Rey asked, pushing at his forehead to get his mouth off her skin. “Talk to me, Ben.”

His eyes were wet. “I dreamed I was him again,” he said in a broken voice, and she knew he meant Kylo Ren. “And then you left me on Starkiller Base, and it hurt more than I could bear—”

“I’m right here,” she said, tugging on him until he settled on top of her and buried his head in the crook of her neck. “It was just a dream.”

“It’s never just a dream,” he said. “It’s my punishment.”

She stroked him soothingly, but his mind kept churning with grief and regret. The way I acted—I’m a creature, I’m disgusting, how can she stand to touch me—

She needed to shake him out of this spiral of self-hatred. Rey reached down between their bodies and clasped her hand over him; despite his mental turmoil, he was still hard from the furious need the dream had unleashed. He moaned as she squeezed him through his underwear, and she felt the edge of burning hot desire slice across his mind.

Rey fumbled until she’d released his cock from the fabric, then guided him to her entrance. She’d stopped wearing underwear to bed days ago, since more often than not the garments met a tragic demise in the middle of the night, so there was nothing separating his hot flesh from hers. She
wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him closer, and he sank into her with a groan. It was
tighter than normal, since she hadn’t had time to get properly aroused, but her body quickly adjusted
to the press of him inside her.

“I’m here,” she said, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him as he began moving in
short, desperate pumps. “I need you, Ben. You could never disgust me.”

He made a noise like a wounded animal. “I was him again,” he said. “And the things I wanted to do
to you…”

“I know,” she told him. “I saw everything. It’s all right, Ben.”

He shook his head and buried his face in her neck as he thrust into her. He was rough and
uncontrolled, lacking his usual finesse, but Rey would take him however she could get him. Her
body grew slick, and she clutched him tight, glad she could offer at least this succor.

“I love you,” she murmured. He moaned into her neck, but his mind still hummed with grief and self-
loathing, so she said it again. “I love you, and nothing you show me will make me love you less. I
saw all of the dream, Ben. You were dark, but you were also lonely and hurting, and I promise you
didn’t frighten me away. I’m still here.”

He spilled into her with a groan, and then, because he would never feel satisfied if she was left
wanting, no matter his state of mental distress, he fumbled between their bodies. The strokes on her
clit were rough and clumsy, but she fell anyway, gasping as an orgasm washed over her.

“It’s all right,” she told him, cradling him close in the aftermath. He pressed his mouth to her neck,
breathing heavily into her skin. “You’re going to be all right.”

He fell asleep eventually, but Rey stayed awake for a long time, worrying about him. His past was
ugly, but it didn’t frighten her. She knew him, and seeing the weight of pain and darkness he’d
struggled out from under made her proud of how far he’d already come. But her dark knight was
suffering as he relived the memories he’d repressed for so long, and Rey’s soul ached for him. What
if this process of reconciliation with the past didn’t heal him? What if it just hurt him worse, until
eventually he slipped away from her?

Rey relied on her intuition heavily, and it had saved her life more than once. Right now it was
screaming that Ben needed to confront these demons, no matter how much he suffered while doing
so. He’d never truly killed the past, no matter what he’d told himself. If he couldn’t come to terms
with it now, that suppressed pain and regret would drag him back into the darkness.

She stroked his hair, wishing there was an easier way for him to heal. But he’d carved his way into
that deep pit of malevolence and grief, and only he could get himself back out. It was always going
to be difficult, because it was harder to climb than to fall.

While he climbed, Rey would offer him her strength. She would give him her body and her heart and
hope that would be enough to see him through the darkness.
Chapter 32

Kylo hated self-improvement.

Two weeks on this kriffing island. Two weeks of punishing dreams and turbulent meditation sessions. Two weeks of confronting exactly how terrible he’d been for the last decade.

Rey had slipped into the dark so easily—all it had taken was a lightsaber duel and a few orgasms, and she’d been greedy for the pleasure it offered. She was still greedy for it, much to Kylo’s delight, but she’d been right—her darkness was fixated entirely on passion, rather than hate. Her light remained undimmed.

Kylo couldn’t find his own light with such ease. Oh, it was there, growing stronger every time he looked inside himself—the sky above his ocean of Force energy was spattered with stars, and the water glowed with beautiful swirls of phosphorescence—but the light stung. It illuminated corners of him he’d never wanted to look into again.

How was he supposed to come to terms with what he’d done?

When he relived his time with Snoke, he could hardly believe how far he’d fallen into the dark. It had felt right then, the natural progression of a path he’d started down the moment his Force powers had manifested as a child, but now he had the distance and clarity to wince at his actions. He’d turned himself into a monster out of spite, fear, and anger, and even though he’d suffered, that pain wasn’t an excuse for what he’d done. Nothing could be. Which meant Kylo needed to acknowledge his sins…and then somehow find a way to move forward.

Rey had been the catalyst for his change in thinking, but she wasn’t the sole reason for it now. Another long-suppressed voice had risen to the forefront, protesting the bloodstained past.

Ben Solo.

Kylo didn’t feel like that boy anymore, but as he relived his time as Snoke’s personal killing machine, he realized that he didn’t feel like Kylo Ren, either. He was something in-between: no longer consumed by hate, but unable to forget the weight of his sins.

Everything needed a name, though. So one morning, as Kylo sank into a mildly successful meditative state, he made a decision.

He couldn’t be Kylo Ren anymore.

Rey hadn’t hesitated to call him Ben long before he’d deserved it, but it was harder to summon that identity himself. It felt like an echo of a past long burned down, and there were relationships and emotions tied to it that he couldn’t face just yet. Embracing the name meant even more complications as he sought the light…but if he stayed Kylo forever, he might never become the man Rey needed him to be. The man he needed to be.

Kylo was afraid, but he wasn’t a coward. He jettisoned his dark side identity on a long exhale and, on the next inhale, reassumed the mantle of the boy he’d been.

The man he could still be.

#
Ben found meditation easier after that.

It still wasn’t easy—he was too volatile and unsettled for true peace even at the best of times—but he was able to drift on currents of the Force, his mind quieter than it had ever been. He marveled at the sparkling lights that bobbed in the distance—a sea of souls, bound together by the fundamental energy of the universe. With the oppressive darkness lifting, he could finally see them again.

One beautiful golden light gleamed nearby at all times, and its steadiness gave him courage. Rey was still with him, still meditating at his side and holding him through grueling nightmares. She’d witnessed him at his worst and heard his darkest thoughts, and while it seemed impossible that anyone would stay with him after being exposed to so much horror, she had.

She was the bravest person Ben had ever known.

A surge of love for her broke him out of his meditative state, and Ben blinked at the storm-tossed ocean below. Maybe Luke would have told him that love should bring nothing but peace, but what Ben felt for Rey was too intense for that. She was the answer to every question the universe had ever asked. She was the brightest star in the sky and the first ray of dawn in the morning. She was the other half of his soul.

Rey had decided to go for a hike while he meditated, and even though she was nearby, Ben missed her. He wanted to sink into her mind and body, to worship her with his hands and mouth, but he couldn’t go after her yet. This effort at self-improvement was another form of worship, and it required his full focus.

He was determined to become the man she deserved.

Rain stung his exposed cheeks and slicked his hair to his scalp. He flexed his fingers—gloveless, because although Rey got off hard from leather-clad fingers, he needed to jettison his darksider trappings during meditation—and winced at the ache of cold-stiffened joints. Ahch-To really was miserable. Why had Luke stayed here for so long?

“I was punishing myself.”

Ben jerked forward, almost toppling over the cliff before he managed to scramble to his feet. His heart hammered at the familiar voice, and when he turned around, his worst fears were confirmed. Luke stood before him.

Not Luke in the flesh. A Force ghost, dimly glowing against the overcast sky. But kriiff, that weathered, bearded face was so familiar. So haunting.

“I withdrew from the world,” Luke said, as if it wasn’t a big deal that he was visiting Ben from beyond the grave. “I cut myself off from the Force. I told myself it was what I deserved, but…” He shrugged. “I was wrong.”

“You’re still here,” Ben said, somewhat nonsensically. He knew Force ghosts existed, of course, but somehow he’d never imagined his uncle might become one.

“I’m everywhere,” Luke said with a small chuckle. “It’s honestly way more convenient than being alive.”

“But… why are you here?” Why visit Ben, and why now?

Luke looked out across the volatile sea. “Because you’re ready for it,” he said quietly. Ben felt the
urge to leap into an argument, but Luke’s upraised hand forestalled him. “And because I need to say
some things to you.”

Seeing Luke was painful. It made Ben think of a thousand tiny moments—how Luke had helped
him tap into the energy around him; how he’d laughed at a teenage Ben’s feeble attempts at wit; how
he’d held the young boy who had cried over his absent parents. In some ways, Luke had been more
of a father to Ben than Han Solo had been.

“I’m sorry,” Ben blurted before Luke could get another word out.

It had been an impulse, but yes, that must have been the right thing to say, because the crushing
tension in Ben’s chest eased. He felt nearly dizzy with relief.

Luke’s eyes snapped back to him, and although Ben had assumed Force ghosts were preternaturally
composed and wise, this one looked startled. “You don’t need to be sorry,” Luke said.

“I tried to kill you. Twice. I betrayed your teachings.”


Ben’s throat tightened, and tears gathered behind his eyes. If this had been Jakku, he would have
been a dessicated corpse by now from all the moisture he’d lost, but on Ahch-To, he could cry as
regularly as it rained and somehow never run out of tears.

“Back then,” Luke said, “I thought there were only two paths to take. That someone was either light
in the way the Jedi meant it—passionless and calm—or they were as dark as the worst of the Sith.
Good or evil, and nothing in between.” He grimaced. “No wiggle room in the definitions of good
and evil, either.”

Ben couldn’t even respond. He just stared, dumbfounded, as his mentor’s ghost apologized to him.

“That lack of nuance was the fundamental flaw of the Jedi,” Luke continued. “The Force connects
every living creature in the galaxy—it’s a web bursting with passion and energy, yet for some reason
the Jedi thought they needed to drain themselves of that very passion. People weren’t made to live
like that.

“So when I saw anger and need in you, I tried to stifle it. Tried to force you into the mold I thought
you were supposed to fit. And it wasn’t the right choice at all. You’re alive, Ben. It could have been
your greatest strength as a Jedi, but I failed to see that.”

The image of Luke wavered, and for a moment Ben was afraid the Force ghost was about to vanish,
but it was only the blur of tears flooding his vision. He swiped them away. “How can anger be a
strength?” he asked.

“Not anger, specifically. But passion, that concept I was taught to fear and distrust—for someone
like you, who lives and feels intensely, it can make you strong. Your love and compassion are rooted
in it; just look at how you feel about Rey.”

“I’d do anything for her,” Ben admitted.

“Now imagine if I had nurtured that feeling. Imagine if I’d helped you feel love and compassion for
the entire universe. Imagine how fiercely a man like you would have fought to protect life, rather
than destroy it, if only you had been taught correctly.”

Regret washed over Ben, making his stomach clench and his heart sink. “I destroyed so much life.”

This generosity from his former mentor was too much to comprehend. “I tried to kill you,” Ben said.

Luke shrugged. “And I thought about killing you. We all have moments of weakness.”

“I had succumbed to the dark,” Ben argued, not wanting his sins dismissed so easily. “Snoke was already in my head. I craved power.”

“And you still could have been helped, had I not been too blind to see what was right in front of me.”

“I killed your students.”

“Well.” Luke’s face sank into familiar lines of grief at that blunt statement. “Yes, you did. And that was your first true step into the darkness. But Ben—”

“You can’t excuse what I did,” Ben said hotly.

“I’m not excusing it. You did an evil thing. You did many evil things after that.” Luke spoke the words as calmly and directly as Rey would have, and that brutal honesty was somehow comforting. “But you would have fared better if you’d had a teacher who believed in you. Who supported you, even though you were conflicted. Who realized that conflict itself can be a strength.”

Ben thought he understood how passion could be a strength, but conflict? “What do you mean?” He felt like a child again, confused about some fundamental lesson and repeating the same questions over and over while Luke patiently tried to help him understand.

“Conflict means you aren’t blind,” Luke said. “You see the good and the bad and the shades of gray in the middle. And if you’re conflicted… well, it means you’re living a more thoughtful and well-examined life than I ever did.”

Ben nearly staggered at the words. He’d never thought about it like that before, like his very doubt was a strength. “But I tried to kill you,” he repeated, not understanding how Luke could so easily gloss over that.

“You saw your trusted master standing over you with a lightsaber. You should have tried to kill me—although it wouldn’t have hurt to ask a few questions before knocking the building down. The only fault in your reasoning is what happened after.”

Ben had never expected such absolution and didn’t know what to do with it. He slid two hands into his rain-soaked hair and squeezed, tugging at the roots. “I started embracing the dark years before that,” he confessed, thinking of his childhood rages and Snoke’s sick whispers. “Before I even got to the temple.”

“I never thought I’d say this,” Luke said, “but there are merits to the dark side. Rey has taught you that, hasn’t she?” At Ben’s horrified look, Luke laughed. “No, I haven’t seen anything specific. Even Force ghosts know when they should make themselves scarce. But I’ve seen the darkness growing in her. It worried me at first, but she hasn’t turned. Letting passion in has made her stronger.”

“I love her,” Ben said, wanting his uncle to know that what he felt went far beyond mere passion. A rush of giddy joy swept over him at the confession. It was the first time he’d told anyone else about this precious bond—and he was getting to share the news with a man who had known Ben for as long as he’d been alive. “I love her so much.”
Luke nodded. “I’m glad. She deserves to be loved. Maker knows I was an irascible bastard when she first showed up, but she badgered me into teaching her, anyway.”

Ben’s lips quirked. That sounded like his Rey—belligerent in the face of obstacles. “She’s special.”

“She is,” Luke agreed. “Utterly unique. And it took teaching her for me to realize that a little darkness isn’t always a bad thing.” He sighed. “I just wish I could have realized that when I was teaching you.”

“I’m darker than she ever was.”

“You weren’t always. And look at you now—half light, even after everything.” Luke gestured at Ben as if that change was visible on his surface, and maybe it was. “You’re redeeming yourself without the guidance of a mentor.”

Ben didn’t want to take too much credit for the path he was on. “I’m doing it for her.”

Luke shook his head slowly. “No, Ben. You’re not.”

#

After Luke’s Force ghost wafted away on the breeze, Ben sat on the promontory for a long time, staring at the sea. He wasn’t meditating, but thinking.

Talking to Luke—apologizing to Luke—felt better than he could have imagined. The ending of their relationship had been devastating, and Ben had spent years dedicated to hating his uncle. But now…

He felt free.

If he could face his former mentor, he could face anything. Even the worst thing he’d ever done.
The dream began with Ben kneeling at Snoke’s feet.

“You have made much progress since you first came to me,” Snoke said. “Your body and mind are stronger. You’ve learned to seize power through pain.”

“Thank you, master,” Ben said, keeping his head bowed. He was still growing accustomed to the weight of his new helmet, but he liked how it disguised his voice. He didn’t sound like that weak boy anymore. He sounded the way he imagined Darth Vader had once sounded.

Why hadn’t anyone told him of that legacy? When Snoke had finally revealed that Ben was the heir apparent to Vader, everything Ben had struggled with for so long had finally made sense. Of course he had been called to the darkness. Of course his parents had feared him; they had sensed in him the potential for great and terrible things. He’d always been right about having a destiny to fulfill.

Ben was abruptly thrown back into the wall and pinned there, his limbs splayed like an insect.

“You have no parents,” Snoke hissed as he manipulated the Force to shove Ben harder against the cold metal.

“Of course, master,” Ben said through gritted teeth as his spine creaked. “My apologies for thinking of those people.”

“You apology is not accepted.” Snoke glowered at him. “I tell you you are strong, and you immediately prove to me your weakness. Must you forever disappoint me?”

Shame washed over Ben. He’d tried so hard to kill his past self, but that lost boy kept creeping through in stray thoughts and actions. Because of that fundamental weakness, his new mentor was as disappointed in him as the last one had been.

Shit. Ben hadn’t meant to think about Luke, either, even in passing. Panic rose in his throat, hot and choking. Why couldn’t he stop thinking about the past? It seemed like the moment he opened the door to any hint of the boy he’d once been, the entire weight of his former life crashed through and wrecked everything.

Snoke’s displeasure was palpable in the frigid air. “And you defy me still,” he said. “Now you think about Skywalker and his pathetic tutelage. You compare me to that useless fool. Are you so ungrateful that you cannot appreciate the gifts I have given you?”

“I appreciate them,” Ben said. “Please, master—”

“Begging is beneath a true darksider. You will take your punishment.”

The pressure on Ben’s limbs shifted, clamping his wrists and ankles in iron manacles. The Force hold began pulling out in each direction, and nauseous dread washed over Ben as he recognized which punishment he was about to endure. “I feel no emotion towards Skywalker,” he choked out as his shoulder and hip joints stretched uncomfortably. “I only wish to kill him.”

“You think to lie to me?”

Ben’s right shoulder was wrenched out of its socket. He bit down on his tongue to stop his scream, and blood flooded his mouth. It’s not a lie, he wanted to say, but he was incapable of it. Snoke had
clamped down on his jaw. Ben choked on blood, struggling to breathe through the increasing agony.

“You are a foolish boy who looks to the past with regret,” Snoke said, ripping Ben’s left shoulder out of its socket. “The only thing you should regret is not succeeding in murdering Skywalker.”

He’d felt this pain before, and although he’d gotten better at mastering his reactions, it never got any easier to bear. Yes, Master Snoke, Ben thought, knowing Snoke would hear it. I was weak. It will not happen again.

But it was too much to hope for that Snoke would take mercy on him. Ben groaned as his knees and ankles were stretched beyond their capacity. Ligaments tore, sending bright, sharp stabs of pain through him. His dislocated shoulders were tugged further away from their sockets, and it took every ounce of control he’d learned over the last years to stop from screaming.

“The next time we speak of Han Solo, Leia Organa, or Luke Skywalker,” Snoke said, “I expect them to be as strangers to you. They are your enemies.”

They will be, Ben thought. I promise.

Pain is educational, Ben reminded himself as Snoke kept pulling on his limbs. Both hips dislocated at once, and he couldn’t contain a scream of agony. With his mouth clamped shut, the noise was muffled and pathetic.

Snoke released the hold at last, and Ben plummeted to the floor. The impact sent searing agony through his body. With so many joints out of place, he wouldn’t be able to move from this spot on his own, which meant he needed to wait for Snoke to dispatch a droid or one of the Knights to find him. Given how furious his master was, he would be waiting a long time.

“Everything I do is for your benefit,” Snoke said as Ben lay shivering and nauseated before him. “Never forget that. The next time you meet those enemies, I expect you to slaughter them without mercy. Only once you’ve eliminated your past will you be able to fulfill your destiny.”

Ben lay in a broken heap after Snoke left. This dream… he’d had it before, knew it would be a long time before he was able to escape its clutches. Snoke had left him on the ground for an entire day that time, until he was so swollen and stiff it was almost impossible to pop his joints back into place.

Something was different this time, though. Soft footsteps approached him, and then Rey knelt at his side. She was dressed in her scavenger rags, and the care and concern on her face was nearly blinding.

“Goddess,” Ben whispered, sending blood dripping over his chin from his severed tongue. “You’re here.”

She stroked his cheek. “I’m always here.”

He coughed up the blood he’d inhaled, and the movement made his injuries throb. “This is a long dream,” he told her. “Not worth watching.”

“Oh, hush.” She closed her eyes and held her hands over his chest, and light began emanating from her palms. She was Force healing him.

“This isn’t how the dream goes,” he told her as his left shoulder popped back into place on a sharp burst of pain that brought immediate relief. His right shoulder followed, and then the torn ligaments began knitting themselves back together.
“Well, I’m tired of sitting back and watching. Snoke shouldn’t get to torture you twice.” Rey moved on to his legs, and Ben groaned. The hips and legs always hurt the worst after this punishment.

“Never…” He gasped as his right hip popped back into its socket. “Never thought about trying to change the dreams.”

“It’s a good thing you have me, then, isn’t it?”

Rey’s light bathed him, easing together his wounds. Once his body was restored, she brushed her fingers over his lips to heal his cut tongue. Then she dipped down and kissed him, despite the blood caked over his mouth.

“Rey…” He whispered her name against her lips, and she pulled back, looking down at him with enough love and patience to break his heart. Ben swallowed hard. “I think I know what I’m dreaming next.”

She nodded and laced her fingers with his. “You’re ready, Ben. And I’ll be there with you.”

But as the edges of the dream bled away, the scene morphing into something far worse, Ben wasn’t sure he would ever be ready.

Ben strode down a narrow walkway towards Starkiller Base’s thermal oscillator. The cavernous gray space was lit by strips of red lights, giving the surroundings a hellish glow. He needed to stop the rebels from destroying the oscillator—

“Ben!”

He froze at the sound of his dead name being shouted by a voice he’d tried hard to forget. He turned, and his stomach dropped at the sight of Han Solo standing at the end of the walkway. When had his fa—his enemy’s hair grown that gray? He looked like an old man, not the charming and maddening rogue Ben remembered. He seemed… smaller.

“Han Solo,” he said, grateful for the vocal modifier in his helmet. It disguised his quavering tone. “I’ve been waiting for this day for a long time.”

Kill your past. Slaughter your enemies without mercy. Only then will you become who you were meant to be.

Snoke had warned him this challenge was coming. He’d made it clear what Ben would be expected to do. But now that the moment had arrived… Ben felt paralyzed.

“Take off that mask,” Han said, as high-handed as ever. “You don’t need it.”

Oh, but Ben did need it. His weakness was written all over his face. “What do you think you’ll see if I do?” he asked, trying to stall for time.

“The face of my son.”

The bitterness that filled Ben then was as dark and noxious as poison. Bile rose in his throat. Han Solo hadn’t wanted a son. He’d thrown his son away like garbage. What right did he have now to demand the return of that long-dead child?

Fury gave him strength, and Ben took the mask off. Let his fa—his enemy see what had become of
Han’s eyes widened a little. What messages did the man imagine he saw imprinted on Ben’s exposed face? Did he see the dark curled up like smoke behind his eyes? Did he see the hate that had carved a troubled boy into something hard and unmoving as granite?

“Your son is gone,” Ben said. “He was weak and foolish like his father. So I destroyed him.”

“That’s what Snoke wants you to believe, but it's not true. My son is alive.”

“No. The Supreme Leader is wise.” Snoke had made Ben strong by showing him exactly where he was weakest—his emotions—and helping him channel all that useless sentiment into delicious, empowering hate.

Han persisted, continuing to approach despite the obvious danger. “Snoke is using you for your power. When he gets what he wants, he'll crush you. You know it's true.”

Ben wouldn’t mind so much being crushed. The longer this confrontation lasted, the worse he felt. His stomach knotted with pain, and his heart raced as if he’d been running for hours. He needed to end this, needed to crush the insidious voice of doubt. He needed to eviscerate the hidden affection that was struggling to rise for this pathetic old man.

He couldn’t.

Despair swamped him. Weak, he was weak. He couldn’t be what Snoke needed him to be, but he could never be that dead boy again, either. “It's too late,” he choked out, needing Han to understand that this mangled monster was all that remained. There was nothing inside Ben that anyone could possibly want.

“No, it's not,” Han said, standing so close now that Ben was torn between contradictory urges: to flee, to strike Han, to fall into his arms and cry like a lost child. “Leave here with me,” Han said, and the emotion in the smuggler’s eyes both sickened and captivated Ben. “Come home. We miss you.”

His parents had never missed him. Not enough. They had called him unnatural and sent him away, and Luke Skywalker had been the one to witness all of Ben’s milestones from that point on. When Luke had finally seen the truth Han and Leia had seen long before, even that tenuous connection had snapped. The boy had been cast off. The monster had risen in his place.

Ben felt like he’d swallowed glass. “I’m being torn apart,” he choked out, unable to stop the confession. The light was struggling to reclaim him even now, luring him in with sentiment and dreams of belonging, and even though Ben knew they were lies, he was captivated all the same. “I want to be free of this pain. I know what I have to do, but I don’t know if I have the strength to do it.”

He needed to kill his enemy. No, he realized, because Snoke had been right—he was still holding on, despite everything he’d learned over the last, brutal decade. I need to kill my father.

Only then would he be free. Only then would this agony end.

Ben took a deep breath. “Will you help me?” The question made no sense—why would Han help Ben destroy the last flickers of light inside him?—but he couldn’t help asking it. He’d once gone to this man with all his troubles; yet another instinct that needed to be rooted out and burned.

Han was staring at him with such horrifying affection—almost as if he actually meant it. “Yes,” he said. “Anything.”
Ben’s helmet dropped from nerveless fingers, and the clang as it struck the metal walkway echoed in the vast space. Time stretched, taking on surreal shapes. Was he even really standing on the walkway, or was it a hallucination? He felt dizzy, like he might topple off the edge and fall forever.

He watched his own hand extend the lightsaber. That hand didn’t feel like a part of him. It was acting on its own, and the sense of disconnect from his own body was both frightening and a profound relief. He wasn’t inside his own skin. He wasn’t truly doing this.

Han Solo tried to take the weapon, still not understanding what story he was in. He was used to playing the hero; he could never comprehend a world in which the good guys didn’t win. In which they didn’t deserve to.

It seemed like they stood there for years, joined by their hands on the lightsaber hilt as the past echoed around them and the void of the future yawned before them. One infinite moment of potential, as potent and incomprehensible as a dream.

Maybe this would be easy, after all. One little flick of a button, and it would be done.

Ben’s thumb moved.

The red blade punched up through Han’s torso. It was fast and irreversible, the kind of profound, lightning-flash change that only deities dealt in. The weathered, familiar face of a dead boy’s father gasped in agony and shock, and Ben felt a surge of relief. It was done. “Thank you,” he said, truly meaning it. Han Solo had given his life to show Ben the path to true peace.

And then Han lifted a hand to Ben’s cheek and looked at him with unflinching love and compassion, and Ben tumbled back into his own skin with the force of a meteorite striking ground. It was his hand on the blade. His father dying before him. His black heart bleeding and aching like it was the one that had just been skewered, and no, no, no, it wasn’t supposed to feel like this. Not like he’d just committed an unpardonable sin, not like he would regret this moment forever and ever and ever…

Han Solo slipped off the walkway and tumbled into the abyss.

Ben wanted to cast himself off the edge, too. Snoke had promised certainty if only he could do this one thing, and instead, something inside Ben had just cracked in half. A tempest of desolation howled through him.

There would be no peace or certainty for Ben Solo: not now, not ever. The only thing that was true was that he could never go back from this moment.

#  

A hand brushed his shoulder, and Ben shivered. Any moment now, Chewbacca would shoot his bowcaster, and the dream would roll onward—back into that snowy forest, maybe, and the girl who had cut Ben Solo open and captured his ruined heart.

“Ben,” Rey murmured, stroking that hand down his upper arm.

He squeezed his eyes shut. “Don’t want you to see this.”

“I saw it the first time. I just never saw it through your eyes.”

“Fuck, Rey.” Ben sank to his knees. He felt like a puppet whose strings had been cut. “It hurts,” he moaned, rubbing his aching chest.
“I know.” She knelt in front of him, and he’d expected to see condemnation on that beautiful face, but he only saw more horrifying compassion.

“I don’t deserve it,” he said, not even sure if she would understand what he was babbling about. The words poured out, messy and unstoppable. “Not from you and not from him. The way he looked at me…”

“He loved you,” Rey said simply.

Ben cracked apart. He leaned forward, burying his head in her shoulder as he sobbed. Her arms came around him, and she held him to her. Tiny, delicate Rey, who somehow managed to be strong and solid enough for both of them. “I’m a monster,” he gasped into her skin. “An animal. Ungrateful and cruel and evil... I don’t deserve anything. I should have died there, too—”

“No,” she said firmly. “You should not have died there. You aren’t allowed to die anywhere.”

He whimpered, because why would she say such a thing? Why care about a broken monster? “I don’t deserve to live.”

“You do,” she said, stroking his back soothingly. “You’re a good man, Ben. You did an awful thing, but you’re still a good man.”

“I killed my own father. He loved me, and I... I...” He broke off, crying even harder.

“And love forgives. You saw the way he looked at you at the end. He loved you even then.”

“I can’t make this better.” He shook his head, smearing tears and snot all over her tunic. “There’s no way to come back from it.”

“You can’t make it better for him,” Rey said, “but you can still come back. Make it better for yourself. For me. For your mother.”

His mother, fuck, how would she ever be able to look at him again, knowing what he’d done?

Because she loves you, too, Rey’s voice said in his head. And if you can accept that love, maybe it will help heal this wound for both of you.

“It’s too late,” he whispered, echoing the words he’d spoken to Han Solo.

“It’s never too late,” Rey said. “Look how far you’ve already come. I’m so proud of you, Ben.” When he would have protested, she silenced him by cupping the back of his head and pressing his face harder into her shirt, until he could barely breathe. “You are the bravest man I know,” she said. “Confronting the past is difficult for anyone, and your past is a horror. But you’ve already made amends with Luke, and you just faced the memory you were most afraid of. You’re a man, not a monster, and I love you.”

He tugged away just enough to suck in a breath. “Even after seeing this?” he asked. It was impossible that one person should be so giving.

“No matter what,” she said firmly. She kissed his forehead, and when he looked up at her, she leaned in to kiss his tear-streaked lips as well. “I told you—nothing you show me will make me love you less.”

He moaned and cradled her close, holding her as tightly as if she were a life preserver in the midst of a tempest-tossed ocean. She was his tether back to the light, the only thing keeping him afloat in this
hell of his own making. He wept into her hair, finally acknowledging and releasing the full measure of his grief. Grief for his father, mother, and uncle; grief for his countless victims. Grief for the boy who had lost everything and the man who had fallen so deeply into the darkness that he’d seen no way out. He anointed their memories in tears.

The breakdown lasted for an eternity. Ben cried until there was nothing left in him to cry, and his body shook with dry sobs long after that. When he finally pulled away from Rey again, his head ached and his eyes were so swollen he could hardly see.

It took him a long time to figure out how to talk again. “What now?” he whispered.

“Now,” Rey said, kissing away the salty tracks of his tears, “we change the dream.”
Chapter 34

Ben stood on a narrow metal walkway, falling into his father’s compassion-filled gaze. “I’m being torn apart,” he confessed. The conflict of light and dark inside him hurt so badly he almost couldn’t breathe around it. “I want to be free of this pain. I know what I have to do, but I don’t know if I have the strength to do it.”

Han Solo listened with endless patience, and Ben realized what a miracle it was that anyone had come looking for him at all, after what he’d done. That his rescuer should be the charming, mercurial smuggler Ben had both envied and idolized growing up was even more remarkable. Han cared deeply, despite everything that had happened. He still wanted to be Ben’s hero.

Ben took a deep breath. “Will you help me?” His hand shook as he held out the lightsaber.

Han smiled. “Yes. Anything.” And when Han’s hand closed over the hilt, Ben let go.

The pain eased, and light roared in through the cracks in Ben’s soul. “Thank you,” he gasped, struck by a dizzying rush of gratitude and love.

“It isn’t too late,” Han said, tucking the saber away in a pocket. “It’s never too late.”

Ben shuddered in relief. He felt reborn, the years of suffering stripped away by those cleansing words. “I’m sorry.”

“I know.” Han opened his arms, and Ben fell into them, hugging his father for the first time in more than ten years. Han felt solid and warm; he was still so strong, despite his wrinkles and gray hair. He would have been there in an instant, had Ben ever found the courage to ask for help in halting his plummet into darkness.

“I love you,” Han said gruffly in Ben’s ear.

“I know.”

Han chuckled a little at that, and Ben smiled, too, happy to have reclaimed that little piece of the past. He’d forgotten that story, somehow—the way Leia had screamed her love at Han before Darth Vader had frozen him in carbonite, and how Han had smirked back with all the confidence of a living legend.

“I love you, too,” Ben said, because despite the sweetness of that memory, he couldn’t leave the words unanswered.

“I know.” Han sighed and squeezed Ben tighter. “I should have told your mother I loved her back then. I should have told you more often when you were growing up. We both have things to be sorry for.”

“I’ll tell her,” Ben promised, pulling back. “I’ll find her and tell her I love her.”

Han cupped Ben’s cheek, and a universe of love filled his eyes. “I’m so proud of you, son.”

#

Rey watched the reunion of father and son from the shadows. This scene was what Ben’s mind had conjured up when she’d asked him to imagine the perfect outcome to the confrontation. The sweet,
simple encounter was the deepest wish of Ben’s heart, and the two men seemed so alike in that moment that it brought tears to her eyes.

Ben truly was Han Solo’s son.

The dream faded into blackness. The last thing she saw before waking was Ben clutching his father tight.

#

Rey came awake to the raspy sound of Ben’s breathing. He wasn’t asleep anymore—she could feel him burning across the bond, his mind a tumultuous mix of aching emotions. Rey turned over and wrapped herself around his back, cradling him as best she could.

His pillow was soaked. He’d been crying in his sleep, and she was glad the catharsis hadn’t been entirely mental. It had broken her heart to watch him grieve, but she’d felt how his mental burdens had lightened afterward. He still hurt, but the pain was bittersweet.

“I’m proud of you, too,” she murmured into his hair.

Ben turned his face into the pillow. “I wish it didn’t have to end,” he said into the fabric, and the ragged edge of his voice told her he was crying again.

“Oh, love.” She stroked him and kissed his upper back, then squeezed him tight as he shook. “All dreams have to end—but that doesn’t mean you can’t dream about him again.”

Ben broke into deep, shuddering sobs. Rey held him through his grief, sending him her love in an uninterrupted flow across the bond. Be at peace, she whispered into his mind. Let it all go.

When he finally stilled, Rey peeked inside his mind and found a much brighter landscape and a profound sense of relief. Ben fell into a deep and dreamless sleep shortly afterwards, but Rey stayed awake, holding him and keeping watch through the night.
Ben blinked open bleary eyes. It felt like he’d been clobbered over the head and left for dead somewhere, except minus the pain that normally accompanied being beaten into unconsciousness. Everything had been black and still behind his closed eyelids, and when consciousness had finally returned, it had crept in gently, devoid of its usual punishing anxiety.

Rey’s arms were still wrapped around him. He shifted, and she squeezed him tighter, then pressed her lips to his spine. “How are you feeling?” she asked softly.

He turned over so he could face her. Exhaustion shadowed her eyes, but her smile was more beautiful than the dawn. “I feel peaceful,” Ben said wonderingly, tracing her gorgeous profile with one finger. “It’s bizarre.”

She grinned and kissed his palm. “I’m going to make it my mission to get you used to that feeling.”

Gratitude bloomed in his chest like a rose unfurling to seek the light. “Thank you,” he told her. “For last night.” His chest still ached, but this sorrow was softer and more forgiving. It was incredible how much better he felt having revised the ending of that dream.

“Thank yourself,” she said. Her hazel eyes held an abundance of kindness. “You did all the hard work.”

He sighed and clasped her to him, turning onto his back so she could lie on top of him. He liked to feel her covering him, her slight curves the most precious weight against his skin. She nuzzled the base of his throat, and his cock twitched in interest as she wriggled on top of him, making herself comfortable. The arousal lacked its customary urgency, though. He felt warm and slow as syrup, like he would be content to lie here forever just holding her.

“I haven’t slept that well in a very long time,” he said. “Maybe ever.”

“Ever?” She peeked up at him, resting her chin on her hand where it covered his heart.

He remembered shooting awake screaming in the middle of the night as a dark, malevolent voice whispered promises and lies. “As soon as my Force powers manifested, I started having nightmares. My father used to have to stay up well past midnight with me, holding me while I screamed and trying to rock me back to sleep.”

“How old were you?”

“I don’t know. A toddler.”

Rey’s eyes widened. “So young. I wasn’t even aware of my powers until I left Jakku.”

He shrugged uncomfortably. “It’s the only way I’ve ever known how to be. Leia—” His voice broke on the name. “My mother,” he said instead, embracing the title, “said she sensed me in the womb, and that I was light and dark even then. She thought training would temper the dark.”

“It could have.”
“Maybe,” he admitted. Now that he’d confronted Luke and put the specter of his father to rest, the idea of redemption was much more believable. “Or maybe I would have slipped into the dark via a different path.”

She turned her head and sank her teeth into his pectoral, startling a laugh out of him. “None of that,” she said once she’d released the bite, leaving a pink imprint behind. “What matters is the path you’re on now.”

His fierce Rey, always willing to bite and claw for the things she loved. How he’d ended up being one of those things was a mystery, but he was unutterably grateful.

Ben sighed and closed his eyes. “I felt the light,” he said, remembering the moment when he’d handed the lightsaber to Han. “Brighter and purer than ever before.” It had felt like a benediction.

“What does your ocean look like now?”

He was almost afraid to find out, but he couldn’t resist learning if the change in him truly had been as profound as it felt. Ben slipped into the currents of the Force and gasped. What had once been a midnight scene of black water illuminated only by the faint pinpricks of stars was now a blue ocean illuminated by sunlight. The water still swirled with currents of black, and its depths were murky and unknown, but the surface glittered. Too shocked to speak, he sent Rey the image across the bond.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered. “Here’s mine.” She sent him an image of a delicate silver web dotted with light. Woven into the strands were threads of onyx, but the effect was beautiful, the whole perfectly balanced.

“You were right,” he said, marveling at the two images. “It’s possible to be both light and dark.”

“Of course I’m right,” Rey said, grinning at him. “I’m always right. I’m just glad you’re finally able to acknowledge it.”

He laughed and jokingly flicked her nose, and she responded by nipping his finger. This teasing play felt indescribably good, so he flipped her over onto her back beneath him and sent his fingers diving towards her ribs.

“Oh!” she gasped as she giggled and tried to escape him. “That tickles.”

“That’s the point,” he said, mercilessly targeting her armpits next. She laughed and laughed, wriggling under him and squeaking helpless protests, and Ben thought his heart might burst from joy.

She successfully shoved him away long enough to retaliate, and Ben yelped. “Are those fingers or knives?” he asked as her tiny, brutal fingertips tortured his ribs.

“Oh, so you can tickle me, but I can’t tickle you?” She pursued him as he rolled onto his back, straddling his waist and pinning him in place with her muscled thighs. Ben laughed helplessly, and he couldn’t remember if he’d ever been tickled before or if this was yet another of his first experiences Rey got to claim.

“Stop,” he begged.

“Do you concede?” Rey demanded, burrowing those merciless fingers deeper into his side.

“I concede! I concede!”

Her cheeks were rosy and her hair tousled from their play, and her grin was so radiant that Ben
stopped thinking or moving, too enraptured by that look of joy on her face. Then Rey dove down and seized his lips with hers, and the morning burst into a rainbow of perfection.

He’d never felt like this before, he marveled as he pulled her sleep shirt off over her head. Her chest was flushed, and her nipples were perfect pink points. He pulled her down over him so he could get his mouth on one, reveling in her shuddering sigh. Passion had never before felt so playful and peaceful all at once. It was like bathing in sunlight, even though the curtains were tightly drawn.

He needed to see her in actual sunlight.

He scooped her up in his arms, startling a gasp out of her, and headed for the ramp of the Falcon. Ahch-To was, for once, cooperating with a spectacular show of weather, and the sky was bright and clear. Ben jogged to a soft patch of clover and laid Rey down.

She glowed in sunlight, all golden skin and bright hazel eyes. He tracked the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed and thought how very lucky he was to witness this particular miracle. In all the universe, there was nothing like her.

She held her arms up to him and widened her legs. “Make love to me,” she said.

They’d never spoken of sex like that before, and Ben’s heart contracted around a painfully sweet emotion. This was a gift he never in a thousand lifetimes could have imagined deserving.

He stripped off his underwear and settled between her thighs, then rocked his erection against her slowly. They had all the time in the world, and his usual urgency was replaced by the desire to savor every second.

They were alive. They were together. They were in love.

It was more than enough.

It was everything.

He kissed her deeply, making love to her with his mouth as he dragged his cock over that slick place between her legs. She was slippery and growing wetter by the second, and little moans sounded in her throat as she undulated against him. Her breasts pressed against his chest, and her arms twined around him like ivy.

I love you, she thought across the bond as her mouth worked beneath his.

I love you, too.

Her lips were a heaven, her body the sweetest torment as she writhed against him. She was growing desperate, hungry, but he wasn’t through savoring her yet. The sun beat down on his back, and its warmth seemed to sink deep beneath his skin to wrap around his bones. He was making love to this stunning creature of the day, and for the first time, he felt like he might belong in the light with her.

“Please, Ben,” she whispered against his lips. “I need you.”

If she needed, he would give. Ben fitted himself to her and slid inside with blissful ease. She had been made for him, or he had been made for her, or maybe they had been made at the same time in some cosmic workshop, perfectly crafted to complement one another. Whatever the reason, sinking into her body felt like a homecoming. He’d found the other half of his soul, and this act was their most sacred attempt at becoming one again.
The hot clasp of her body and the rock of her hips were driving him towards culmination too quickly. Ben slowed down, pulling out of her in excruciating increments. Rey moaned, loud and long, then reached down to his ass to try to pull him more firmly into her. He chuckled and resisted, only sinking back inside once she was babbling desperate pleas against his throat. A contraction shivered through her pussy, and he knew she was close, so he began thrusting in earnest again.

“You’re my light,” he told Rey as he worked in and out of her, worshipping her with his cock and his hands and the love he poured across their wide-open mental bond. “I’ll never get enough of you.”

Rey moaned and burst into orgasm on the sweetest gasp. Her pussy rippled around him as her skin blushed pink, and Ben tumbled after her, emptying himself into her with a mix of joy and peace he’d never imagined possible.

Chapter End Notes

It's never too late for redemption! Thank you for reading and commenting. The story is far from over (we're heading into Act III wheeee), but I feel very fortunate that so many passionate readers have been sharing their enthusiasm for this story.
Rey practiced with her lightsaber on the promontory later that afternoon. She was exhausted from the sleepless night, but she moved through her forms effortlessly. The saber felt like part of her, another limb or an extension of her flickering synapses. She was hyperaware of herself as part of the cosmic web that linked the galaxy together.

She wasn’t sure she’d ever channeled the Force with such ease, and she had a feeling it had to do with Ben. The two of them were as intimately connected as a binary system, wrapped up in each other’s orbits. His peace fueled hers.

The change in him that morning had been astounding. Although grief still lingered behind his eyes, his mind had been lighter. And when she’d seen his internal sea flooded with sunshine… her heart had felt like it was floating on those glittering waves.

She finished her exercises and flicked the saber off, swiping wind-tangled hair out of her eyes. Ben was meditating on a rock just above the crashing waves—she could see his black hair and dark uniform from here. She didn’t need to check the mental bond to know meditation was easier for him today.


Rey spun around, startled even though she’d half-expected something like this to happen ever since Ben had told her about his visitation. Her old mentor’s outline was limned in light, and his grin was bright.

“Master Luke,” she said. She wasn’t sure of the protocol when dealing with dead people, so she bowed deeply.

He laughed. “Rey, you were never that deferential to me before. Please don’t start now.”

She returned his smile. “It’s good to see you again.” Then she eyed him up and down, feeling awed and a little nervous. Luke was so powerful in the Force that he had transcended death, and if she thought about that too much, she might give herself an aneurysm. “I hadn’t even realized this whole Force ghost thing was possible until Ben told me.”

“Ben.” Luke sighed his former student’s name as he looked down to where Ben was meditating. “What a remarkable man he’s turning out to be. You played no small part in that transformation.”

Rey shrugged awkwardly. “I helped, but he did the work. Is still doing the work.” And then, because she didn’t want Luke assuming either of them were going to be perfect Jedi after this, she felt the need to clarify. “He’s never going to be fully light. And I’m… well, I’m embracing the dark. A bit.”

Luke winced. “Yes, I’m aware of exactly how you’ve been embracing the dark. Is there an inch of
my sacred island the two of you haven’t defiled?”

Rey blushed furiously. “Please tell me you haven’t been watching.”

Luke recoiled. “Force, no. No. But the number of times I’ve had to abruptly vanish is staggering. It’s a wonder the two of you get anything else done.”

Rey groaned and hid her face in her hands. “This is mortifying.”

“For all of us, believe me.” Then Luke chuckled. “It’s also hilarious. Do you know how horrified Ben looked when I brought it up? I thought he was going to pitch himself over the cliff.” He sighed. “Leia would have loved that. She always enjoyed teasing him.”

The mention of Ben’s mother was sobering. Rey picked nervously at the hem of her tunic. “Do you talk to Leia? Have you told her?”

“That the two of you are together?” When Rey nodded, the mirth slipped from Luke’s face. “No, although I know how happy it would make her. She knows Ben’s alive, and that’s enough for now. But Rey… the two of you can’t hide here forever.”

“We aren’t hiding,” she protested. “At least, not much. Maybe a little. A moderate amount of hiding, at most.” Because Ben was the most-wanted man in the galaxy, and she was high on the First Order’s kill list, too. “We’re regrouping, really.”

Luke sighed heavily. “Rey, I ‘regrouped’ on this island for far too long, and in the end, it negatively affected me, my loved ones, and the galaxy. Trust me when I say that the longer you wait, the harder it will be to return.”

The wind whipped at Rey’s garments, but Luke was untouched by the weather. His robes draped elegantly around him, and his beard and hair were far neater than she had ever seen them. Rey wondered if Luke was happy like this, drifting through the universe, as insubstantial as a thought.

She didn’t think she would be happy as a disembodied spirit. She craved living too much. Feeling, Laughing. Touching. And Luke was right—she and Ben could hole up here forever, avoiding their responsibilities, but that wouldn’t be enough for either of them.

“The two of you can do so much good together,” Luke said. “It won’t be easy or safe, but you’re destined for great things.”

Rey made a face, although she was secretly flattered. “No one ever asked me if I wanted a grand destiny.”

Luke smiled, then glanced pointedly at Ben sitting on the rocks below. “Would you trade it for an ordinary life?”

“No.” Rey may have come from nothing, but she would never be nothing. Even without Ben, she wouldn’t trade that destiny for a simpler existence, although he was admittedly a massive perk—in more ways than one. She laughed, thinking of something.


“I just realized there is one place on this island we haven’t defiled yet.”

His eyes widened comically. “No. You wouldn’t.” When she just giggled, he covered his face with his hands and groaned. “I really, really wish you hadn’t told me that.”
She couldn’t resist teasing him further. “If we need to leave Ahch-To soon, I guess there’s no time like the present to complete the job.”

Luke cast his eyes to the heavens. “And that’s my cue to vanish.” A grin burst on his face, and he shook his head. “You’re a marvel, kid. May the Force be with you.”

#

Rey hiked down to Ben’s rock, but she didn’t join him in meditation. Instead, she stood near him and closed her eyes, enjoying the spray of salt water on her face as the waves came crashing in.

“You talked to Luke.”

When Rey opened her eyes, she found Ben looking up at her. His skin gleamed with moisture, and tiny drops glittered in his hair. He looked delectable.

“You saw us?” Rey asked, resisting the urge to pounce on him right then and there.

“I felt his Force signature. What did my uncle have to say?”

“Oh, the usual. We have a destiny; he’s proud of us; we’re defiling his island.”

Ben groaned. “He’s still not over that, I see.”

Rey held out her hand. “Come with me.”

Ben let her help him to his feet. He stretched, his body marking a long, elegant line against the blue-gray sky. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

She led him up and away from the shore, and they held hands as they mounted the stone staircase that wound up towards the rocky peak of the island.

“The First Jedi Temple,” Ben said when they arrived at a vast sprawl of ruins. He stopped in the stone courtyard in front of the temple, looking uneasily at the dark slash in the rock face. “I don’t think I should be here.”

“What? Of course you should be here.” Rey tugged on his hand, but Ben didn’t move.

“That place is for true Jedi,” he said. “Not me.”

“Oh, rubbish. I’m not a true Jedi, either, but I come here all the time.”

He frowned at her. “You do?”

“This is where I hike to when you’re meditating.” Rey tugged on him again, but he really didn’t seem inclined to move, so she sighed and faced him. “It’s just a building. What do you think will happen when you go inside? Do you imagine you’ll be struck with lightning?”

His jaw set mulishly. “Maybe.”

Apparently she wouldn’t be able to convince him with reason, so Rey employed her most effective weapon. “Do you know why I brought you here?” she asked, stepping closer to him. His pupils dilated a little when she placed her hand on his chest.
“To convert me further to the light?”

Rey shook her head slowly, then gave him her best attempt at a sultry smile. “Because Luke asked if there was a place on his island we hadn’t defiled yet. I told him there was, but I was going to take care of that as soon as possible.”

Ben’s eyes widened, and he let out an incoherent noise that sounded like “buuuhh.”

Rey grinned, recognizing that she had already won. She stepped close enough to press her hips against his and rocked against the growing bulge in his trousers. Then she turned around and headed into the temple. “So come on,” she threw over her shoulder. “Unless you’re scared.”

It took a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the dimness of the temple interior. By the time they did, Ben was right behind her, one hand on her hip and his breaths rasping in her ear. He started kissing down her neck, but Rey stepped away, forestalling him. “Not yet,” she said. “I want to show you something first.”

Ben groaned. “I knew there would be some sort of lesson involved.” But he followed her willingly enough, restricting his grumping to a few quiet mutters that she ignored.

She brought him to the mosaic embedded in the floor. “Look,” she said, feeling the same satisfaction she always felt upon seeing it. The stone tiles depicted a seated man with a lightsaber held in front of him. The mosaic was a study in contrasts: the background was dark in one half and light in the other, but the figure was dark on the light half and vice versa. The lightsaber glowed both white and black, and two small circles hovered to either side of the seated figure: a black circle on the white background, a white circle on the black.

“It’s an old mosaic. So what?”

Rey knelt beside it and began impatiently tracing the lines and curves that had been captivating her for weeks. “It’s the Prime Jedi. The very first of the order.”

“So?” Ben crouched beside her, eyeing the art with disdain. “It’s mediocre work.”

Rey punched his arm. “Don’t be pretentious. What do you see?”

Ben considered the mosaic while Rey studied him. How she loved his face. It was all sharp lines and restless energy, the kind of face that was transformed by emotion. He had maintained a terrifyingly still facade when Rey had first known him, although those dark eyes had always burned, but he’d grown more expressive over the past months. Now, Rey was captivated by every hint of emotion that flitted across his face.

“It’s one person who’s both light and dark,” Ben said at last.

Rey resisted the urge to punch the air in triumph. “It is,” she said. “A single Jedi who embodied both parts of the Force equally. Which means at some point in history, the two halves split.” What other message could be taken from that image? There was no white space without black, no black without white.

Ben reached out to trace the swath of dark, and she felt his curiosity rousing, flavored with a scholarly type of interest that she found absurdly attractive. “I wonder when that happened and why.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Rey said, because what was history but a bunch of dusty books that talked about a few privileged members of the population? Lived experience mattered more. “The important part is
that in the beginning, light and dark mixed. They were balanced.”

Ben kept running his fingers over the tiles. Rey stayed silent, letting him come to his own conclusion, even though she wanted to scream her certainty at him. This was proof that what they were doing was right.

“I understand why you brought me here,” Ben said at last. When he looked at her again, his eyes shone with something like hope. “We can be like that, too. It’s the way we were always meant to be.”

“Yes,” Rey said, and then, because she lacked a scholar’s patience for further discussion, she shoved him out of his crouching position. He sprawled on the floor, and she straddled him. “Now help me defile this sacred place.”

Kissing the laughter out of Ben’s mouth was the best feeling in the world. Rey took the sound into her and gave her own joy back through the bond. The feeling of their lips and bodies coming together was no longer new, but it was essential. This was the natural order of the universe; every moment they were parted was unnatural.

Ben kissed her hard and deep, his lips conveying the same sentiments that spilled across the bond. You’re mine. I’m yours. I need you.

Rey needed, too. She ground against his erection, her pussy already soaking wet just from kissing him. Like her lightsaber’s trigger, Ben was the switch that activated her body—if Ben Solo was near, Rey wanted him. She rocked over his lap, glorying in the way he sucked in a breath at the friction.

“Let’s do this on top of the mosaic,” Ben said. “We ought to be thorough in our defilement.”

That bit of blasphemy turned her on even more. Rey giggled when he picked her up bodily and planted her on top of the mosaic of the first Jedi. “This is extremely sacrilegious,” she said as Ben stripped off her clothing.

He arched an eyebrow at her. “Isn’t that the point?”

And yes, it was. The time of the Jedi and the Sith was over. Rey and Ben would find a new path—although maybe they were just returning to the oldest path of all.

Still, she felt a taboo thrill as Ben tugged his shirt off over his head. His pale, muscled chest contrasted deliciously with his black trousers. Rey sat upright and licked along the scar she’d given him. It was rough under her tongue, spanning from his chest to his forehead. Rey’s mark. “I love this,” she told him as she trailed her tongue up his cheek.

“I know,” he said. “I do, too.” He stripped off his trousers, and then they were naked together, their bodies communicating as easily as their minds.

He settled between her legs, pressing her into the cool tile. She arched her back, raking her hard nipples over his chest, and he responded by rocking his hips against her. The slide of his cock over hot, sensitized flesh made her gasp. She sucked and kissed his neck, lapping up the salty taste of the sea.

Then he was working his way down her body, sucking her nipples hard enough to make her squirm before scattering kisses over her lower belly. He pushed her thighs open and dropped his head to lick her.

Rey’s moan echoed off the stone walls of the temple. Ben was feasting on her hungrily, but the
emotion coming through the bond was almost reverential. He was paying her worship with his mouth, and despite the carnality of the act, Rey felt utterly cherished. When his tongue slicked over her clit, Rey plunged her hands into his hair, stroking his scalp.

“Let me taste you, too,” she said. Ben hummed a pleased acquiescence against her pussy, then rearranged himself so he hovered over her, his cock inches from her mouth while he continued to lap at her cunt. Rey lifted her head and sucked him in, reveling in the musky taste of his skin. Pleasure passed between them like electricity through a circuit.

It reminded her of the mosaic, in a way. Two halves connected to each other. An eternal balance.

Soon, though, she was whimpering with desperation, sliding her heels over the tiles in agitation as he focused on her clitoris. It wasn’t enough pressure to make her come, but arousal ratcheted tight in her belly, and she was going to lose her mind. She broke her suck on him just long enough to beg.

“Please, Ben. I need you inside me.”

He groaned and licked the length of her pussy one last time before shifting off her. “How do you want it?” He swiped his glistening mouth against his forearm, and her body clenched at the primal movement.

Rey considered. This encounter had begun with a suggestion of blasphemy, but this wasn’t just about getting off. Claiming the temple for themselves was their final farewell to the past and the idea of light or dark, Jedi or Sith. It needed more than a hot, urgent tumble into orgasm.

The mosaic gave her the idea. Rey pushed herself upright. “Sit cross-legged,” she ordered.

Ben eyed the mosaic, then grinned. “I like the way you think.”

He settled himself, and Rey climbed into his lap. She fitted the tip of him against her, then wrapped her legs around him in a mirror of his position. Ben supported her with both huge hands gripping her ass. When he slowly lowered her onto his erection, they sighed into each other’s mouths.

“Good?” he asked against her lips once he was fully inside.

“Perfect.” Rey wrapped her arms around his neck and used the leverage of her legs to lift slightly off him. He helped, lifting her by the ass and guiding her back down. It wasn’t a hard, deep fuck—this was gentler, like the rolling of the waves. They moved together, matching their breathing instinctively.

Rey closed her eyes and reached out to him across the bond. He met her in that golden space, his mind twining with hers with an intimacy that matched their rocking bodies. It felt like meditation as they breathed into each other, their connected bodies and souls part of the vast tapestry of life.

She settled her forehead against his and let go of everything but him.

“You’re the sun of my life,” he told her across the bond.

“You’re the stars in my sky,” she responded.

Light and dark merged within their bodies and on the currents of the Force. There, in the First Jedi Temple, Rey and Ben reclaimed the truth that had been lost over the centuries. Light and dark, good and evil... nothing was that simple. Life was found in the balance. The stars were made of fire, but they needed the night to shine.

The Jedi and Sith had been frightened by a truth that complex, but they were gone now. A new era
had begun.

Rey sank into Ben until she couldn’t tell where he ended and she began. They breathed with the same lungs, felt with the same skin, thought with the same mind. The orgasm swept up like a tidal wave, crashing over them in the space between one breath and the next. Rey gasped against Ben’s lips, catching his own cry on her tongue as their bodies jerked and shuddered in unison.

This wasn’t blasphemy at all, she realized. It was sacred communion.
“Close your eyes,” Ben said. He grinned at Rey’s scrunched nose as she begrudgingly obeyed him.

“You don’t have to close your eyes to do this,” she said, sounding put out.

“That’s because I have a lot of practice.”

It was several days after the phenomenal encounter in the temple, and they were seated cross-legged across from each other in one of the stone huts, practicing Force skills. Rey was naturally powerful, but her training with Luke had been rudimentary, and the old Jedi hadn’t shared much about the Force’s more destructive capabilities with her.

It was a weakness of lightsiders that Ben had always sneered at. The Jedi limited their effectiveness by refusing to delve into the darkness. A darksider was far more dangerous in combat, not just because of what they were willing to do, but because of the vast variety of powers they wielded.

Ben might be venturing closer to the light, but he refused to let go of his hard-won power. And now that Rey was his half-dark queen, he was going to teach her everything he knew so she would always be safe.

“Breathe in and focus on my Force signature,” he instructed her. “Try to sense my awareness of the world.”

She breathed deeply and evenly, and he felt her prodding gently at the edges of his mind. “What do you mean awareness?”

“Remember when you used a mind trick on that stormtrooper on Starkiller Base?” When she’d infuriated Ben by escaping the interrogation chamber—although now he looked back at that memory fondly.

“I remember,” Rey said.

“What did you do?”

Her forehead furrowed. “I just thought about what I wanted him to do and told him to do it.”

“You’re naturally gifted,” Ben told her. “Because of that raw talent, you get a long way with just intention, without realizing the mechanics of what you’re doing.” It was something Luke had told him once, too. “But raw talent won’t be enough for more advanced techniques.”

Rey scowled a little; he knew she didn’t like thinking of herself as ignorant. “Then enlighten me, oh wise one.”

He chuckled, as charmed by her when she was prickly and defensive as when she was open and giving. “The Force connects every living thing. You can sense your surroundings and other beings through it. You can bend the world to your intentions. What you did with the mind trick, whether or not you realized it, was examine that trooper’s mind through the Force. You sensed that his mind was weak, so you infiltrated his thoughts, similar to how I infiltrated yours during the interrogation. Your intention then shaped them into a new form.”

Her eyes opened, and she looked alarmed. “Did it hurt him?”
A stab of guilt had Ben rubbing his chest. He’d been gentler with her than he had with that hotshot pilot, but it still couldn’t have been comfortable. “No, Rey. You didn’t hurt him. What you did was near the surface of his mind—you intercepted his thoughts and briefly replaced them with yours. What I did was much more invasive.”

“I remember,” she said softly. “I must have hurt you, too. When I pushed back.”

He shrugged. “It wasn’t bad. And it forged the bond, so I can’t regret it.”

That quickly, her pensive expression lifted. She smiled, sweet as sunlight, before closing her eyes and settling back into her meditative posture. “Why is the mental probe more invasive?”

“Because I was seeking something you didn’t want to give. I had to push deep, battering through your natural mental shields, while you were completely aware of what I was doing and trying to resist it. The mind trick is more a piece of misdirection—it says ‘look over there, not over here.’ It’s quick and lacking in malice. But a probe… that’s an outright attack.”

She nodded. “I think I understand.”

A light, wonderful feeling filled Ben’s chest. He loved how teaching her felt, and not just because she was his lover. He felt like he was accomplishing something important—that his years of suffering might actually help another person. “Focus on my mind again,” he said. “Take a look at the boundaries of my thoughts. What am I fixated on?”

She smirked. “You’re staring at my breasts.”

“Exactly.” The swell of them under her gray tunic was enticing, although he was mainly leering to amuse her. “If I was an enemy who was distracted by them, I would be a good target for a sudden mental attack. What else am I thinking about?”

“How much you like teaching.” She frowned. “Is this probing yet?” She was plainly still worried about harming him, and Ben loved her unflinching compassion, although he knew it would hinder her in battle.

“No,” he said. “You’re still near the surface. These thoughts are offered up freely. Try to take something deep, now. Something you want to know, but that I don’t want you to see.”

Her mouth compressed into a thin line. “I don’t want to.”

Of course she was going to be stubborn about this. Ben shifted, trying to get more comfortable on the stone floor. He had a feeling this was going to be a long day. “Rey, you have to learn how to do this. Believe me, it won’t hurt nearly as much as what Snoke did to me.”

That only made her frown more. “I don’t want to do anything that monster did to you.”

“You at least need to learn the technique. Understanding how it works will help you guard against mental attacks. And what if probing someone’s mind is the key to saving your friends in the Resistance?” It was a cheap shot, but Ben knew that Rey would do anything for the people she loved, regardless of morals.

She slitted her eyes open and glared at him. “I know what you’re doing.”

“Of course you do. Now focus.”

She sighed and closed her eyes, and he felt the moment she started delving into his brain. It did hurt,
a little like being pierced by a thin metal spike, but he could easily bear the pain. He offered minimal resistance, gritting his teeth as she sorted through his thoughts.

Her eyes popped open. “Your mother taught you calligraphy,” she said. “You loved those lessons, because they was the only times you got to spend alone with her.”

Ben winced. That wasn’t a memory he was delighted about her dredging up, but at least it was relatively benign. “You wanted to know about my childhood?”

She shrugged. “I want to know everything about you.”

That made the sting much more tolerable. And then Rey leaned in with an impish expression on her face and said, “Ben Solo, I cannot believe you’ve been an expert calligrapher all this time and never told me,” and the last of the pain was washed away by laughter.

“You would have mocked me,” he said. And truthfully, he didn’t practice calligraphy much anymore, although he would very much like to write her name for her someday. He would anoint it with the whorls of a spiral galaxy.

“I am absolutely going to mock you forever,” Rey said, and then her eyes softened. “Did the probe hurt too badly?”

He shook his head. “You’ve got a delicate touch. That was very impressive.”

She radiated satisfaction. “What’s next?” she asked. “More memory stealing?”

One uncomfortable memory at a time was all Ben felt like handling at the moment. He’d been confronting too many memories in his sleep, as it was. “I want you to try something else. Try to knock me unconscious.”

Rey’s jaw dropped, and then she scowled at him. Her delicate features were capable of surprisingly thunderous expressions. “No,” she said, her denial so loud it practically echoed off the stone walls.

Ben had expected some resistance, but this level of vehemence was surprising. “Why not?”

“Why not?” Her eyebrows soared, and she stared at him like he was a lunatic. “Kriff, I don’t know, Ben, maybe it’s because I love you and don’t want to knock you unconscious!”


“But you didn’t love me then.”

“Maybe not, but I was certainly well on the way.” She’d witnessed that dream of his, hadn’t she? She must know the primal thrill he’d felt when she’d fallen into his arms and the way he’d obsessed over her beautiful face all the way to the shuttle. He regretted hurting her, but he couldn’t be sorry for abducting her—not when it had led them to this.

Rey crossed her arms mutinously. “I won’t do it.”

He sighed. “Rey, you have to learn. What if the Resistance was in danger and you needed to do this to save your friends?”

“You can’t use the same emotional blackmail on me every time.”

“Why not? It’s effective.” Ben’s lips twitched at her renewed scowl. Kriff, he loved when she was fierce and fiery. “That’s one difference between how the Jedi and the Sith approached training. The
Sith never refused a tool, while the Jedi often hobbled themselves by refusing to even contemplate harming another person. Knowledge is power—you know this better than most people.”

“Why do I know it better than most people?” Her tone was sulky, but at least she was asking questions. It meant he still had room to convince her. And Ben, whose patience was admittedly… not legendary, found himself perfectly willing to address any questions and doubts she had. He had been a difficult pupil himself when pushed out of his comfort zone, and Rey was like him in that way. Powerful and temperamental, ambitious but easily frustrated.

“You trained yourself to fly on a flight simulator,” Ben told her. “That knowledge saved your life and got you off Jakku. You trained yourself in the quarterstaff, which also saved your life and has made you a formidable lightsaber wielder. You accepted guidance from Luke when you would have preferred he just leave this sorry island to go save your precious Resistance.” Rey’s face was softening with every sentence, as if she’d never thought about herself quite like that, so Ben went in for the kill. “You have never in your life refused a tool, Rey. It’s what makes you a survivor, and it’s what will help you protect the people close to you.”

She swallowed hard and looked away. “What if the tool hurts someone?”

“You can’t go through life without ever hurting anyone,” he said, more gently this time. “Especially in a time of war. And think about it this way—isn’t it better to painlessly knock an enemy unconscious, rather than maiming them with your lightsaber? The tools of the dark don’t have to be wielded cruelly.”

A sigh puffed out of her. When she looked back at him, she still seemed annoyed, but her expression was tinged with amusement. “You don’t fight fair.”

“Of course I don’t. And neither should you.”

If Ben had received tutelage suited to his personality and abilities, maybe he would have learned that lesson early enough to defend himself against Luke’s doubts and Snoke’s mental attacks. But the past was gone, drifting away like smoke, and if Ben had undergone a lifetime of bitter, brutal lessons, at least he could spare Rey the pain of some of them.

Teaching her, helping her become stronger and more dangerous… it felt right. An ambition that could fill the void left behind when he’d abandoned the role of conqueror.

Rey’s eyes narrowed, and she studied him for long moments. Ben waited patiently for her to sort through her thoughts and come to the inevitable conclusion that he was right.

“Fine,” she said, closing her eyes. “I’ll do it. But it’s your own fault if I make your brain explode.”

He grinned, relishing his triumph. “You won’t make my brain explode. Now, focus on my mind again. Tell me what I’m thinking of, what I’m feeling.”

“You’re feeling smug,” she said.

“Naturally.”

Her lips quirked. “You’re thinking you should write down your wisdom so other people can see the merits of being gray.” Then she snorted. “I suppose you can do it in calligraphy.”

Ben’s cheeks burned, because thinking about teaching her had led to thinking that it might be nice to write a new text based on their combined wisdom, now that the Jedi and Sith were gone. And yes, maybe he’d envisioned the letters flowing across the page in elegant calligraphy… “Never mind
that,” he said. “I want you to focus on how awake and alert I feel.”

“Very. I don’t know if you know this, Ben, but you’re a little intense.”

He bit down a smile. Kriff, it felt good to banter with her, even though she needed to focus. “Fix your attention on that sense of alertness. Picture my consciousness as a fire, if that helps. Now, I want you to snuff it out like you’re extinguishing a candle.”

She fidgeted. “I don’t think I can.”

“Try accessing your anger. You have to want me to pass out. The anger makes it more of an attack.”

She frowned. “But I’m not mad at you.”

“I’m sure you can dredge up a little irritation over something.”

She sighed, then shifted again. She wasn’t doing a very good job of staying still and focused, and Ben had a feeling it was because something else was on her mind. He didn’t push, knowing she would eventually share whatever she was struggling with.

“If I do this,” she said abruptly, opening her eyes to fix him with a determined stare, “will you leave Ahch-To with me?”

He blinked, perplexed by the change in direction. “What?”

Her chin took on a stubborn set he recognized. “Will you come back to the Resistance with me?”

The words hit him in the chest like a blow, and he physically recoiled. “Those people want to kill me, Rey.” What in the galaxy was she thinking? The Resistance, kriff, did she want him dead?

“They won’t if you come back as an ally. With me.” And oh, yes, her chin was jutting, her shoulders stiffening in preparation for an argument.

Well, she was going to get one. Ben’s contentedness at teaching her was swiftly overwhelmed by outrage at the very idea of her dragging him back to those hopelessly outmatched idealists. “I don’t want any part in this war,” he said, his voice rising. “I left the First Order for a reason.”

“Because you didn’t agree with their plans for Myrtah. You thought it was wrong.”

“That doesn’t mean I want to fight for anyone else, either!”

Rey shot to her feet and stomped over to him, poking him hard enough in the shoulder that he had to catch himself on his hands to avoid tipping back. “So what, you’re going to be a hermit for the rest of your life? Follow Luke’s example?”

“No—”

“So you’re going to go live an anonymous life somewhere? You wouldn’t be able to use the Force, you know. No more lightsaber fights. What would you do, hm? Become a mechanic?” She was furious, he realized, her hazel eyes burning.

How had they even gotten here? His head was spinning from the abrupt change in mood and topic. “What is this about, Rey?” He pushed to his feet, feeling better once he was looming over her. She didn’t retreat in the slightest, of course, but at least the height difference gave him the illusion of being in control of this situation.
To his horror, a tear trailed down her cheek, and any idea of control vanished. “I thought you wanted to be with me,” she said in a quavering voice.

Ben had absolutely no idea what had sent this conversation spiraling into disaster. He’d lost his balance, somehow, and now it felt like she was talking about something else entirely. “Of course I want to be with you,” he said. “I am going to be with you.” Just the two of them, together. Forever.

“So what, you want me to go into hiding on some desert planet with you? Return to scavenging, forget the Force, forget my friends?” She wiped the tears away with the back of her wrist. “I can’t live like that. Luke was right—we have a responsibility to help save the galaxy.”

“I never asked for that responsibility,” he shot back. It was what he’d hated so much as a child—the fucking Skywalker-Solo legacy and all its attendant expectations. The awful, creeping sense that he was failing everyone just by being himself.

“Well, I didn’t either,” she said, “but I’m doing my best. Don’t be a coward, Ben. Come back with me. Talk to your mother. Didn’t you promise Han you’d tell her you loved her?”

He flinched at the words and actually stumbled back. He knew Rey had good intentions, but for her to bring up that dream during an argument hurt.

“You oaf!” Rey glared at him, fisting her hands at her sides. “Will you stop being defensive and just listen to what I’m proposing?”

“Make me,” he snapped.

And the lights in his head abruptly turned off.

#

When Ben roused again, he found himself lying on a pile of blankets with his head pillowed in Rey’s lap. He blinked up at her, wondering what in the world had just happened.

Her face was full of regret. “I’m so sorry, Ben,” she whispered, pushing his hair off his brow. “I just got so mad, and I lost control—”

He pushed himself up off her lap and looked around. They were still in the stone hut where they’d been arguing, and…

Clarity hit, and he barked out a disbelieving laugh. “You did it.”

Her brow furrowed. “What?”

“You channeled your anger and knocked me out.” He was perversely proud of her, even if he was still irritated. At least unconsciousness had taken the sharp edge off his temper.

“But I shouldn’t have. It was wrong.”

“It was exactly what I told you to do.” Rey still looked guilty and miserable, so Ben settled in next to her and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. Whatever had prompted that outburst, she needed to learn that she didn’t have to condemn herself for it. “They train us differently in the dark,” he explained. “Obviously you’ve seen how far it can go from my dreams, and I’m not saying we should get anywhere near that. But unleashing anger isn’t something dark Force users are ashamed of.”
“But I’m ashamed of it.” Rey turned huge, watery eyes up to him. “I didn’t even mean to do it. I was just upset and wanted you to stop talking, and I guess I was still in your mind from the exercises—”

“Rey.” He pressed a kiss to the side of her head. “That’s why you need to learn how to do these things. You’re so naturally powerful that your intentions can have devastating effects. You’re still not comfortable channeling darksider powers, but since you’re part dark, some of those abilities are going to manifest anyway. It’s just a tool, like any other, and you need to learn how to use it.”

She pressed her face into his shoulder, and the fabric grew damp. She was crying, and he couldn’t bear it. Ben pulled her into his lap so she was facing him, then pressed his forehead against hers. “It’s all right,” he whispered. “I’m fine. You didn’t hurt me.”

She sniffled. “We were fighting…”

“We’re going to do that sometimes—we’re both too passionate for anything else. But it doesn’t mean we can’t apologize and work through our issues.” He shifted uncomfortably, realizing he was going to have to live by his own words. “I’m sorry I got angry.”

She pulled back and cupped his face in her palms so she could look him in the eye. “I’m sorry I got angry, too. It wasn’t what I meant to do.”

“Why don’t you tell me what happened, then?” He needed to know where her mind had gone, because he still wasn’t sure how a fight had blossomed so quickly—or even if they’d been fighting about the same thing.

She sighed. “Luke told me we should leave Ahch-To before we ended up like him. He said we can do a lot of good for the galaxy, that we have a destiny. I agree.”

Ben clamped his jaw shut before he could make a smart retort about how hypocritical it was for hermit ghosts to wax poetic about other people’s destinies.

“It’s all I’ve been thinking about for days,” Rey continued. “How to return, and how to convince you to return, since I knew you’d be hesitant. And during the lesson…” Rey nibbled her lip. “You told me not to fight fair, so I thought—if I made returning to the Resistance a condition of me learning darksider abilities, maybe you’d give it more thought.”

He sighed. “You always do learn quickly. It was a good strategy.”

She leaned forward and kissed him. “But it was wrong. I shouldn’t have blindsided you like that. Of course you’re worried about returning to the Resistance.”

“Yes, I do feel some trepidation about turning myself over to my enemies of the last decade, all of whom know me as a heartless galactic dictator,” he said dryly. He left the more painful reason unspoken: that many of them had lost loved ones because of him.

Ben deserved their judgment, but he wasn’t sure how he would face it.

Rey studied him as if she was peering beneath his skin. And maybe she was; she was freakishly perceptive sometimes. “But it isn’t just that,” she said. “It’s Leia, too.”

Ben winced. “I am nervous about seeing her,” he admitted. “And honestly… I don’t want to be a pawn in her political games. I had enough of that as a kid.”

“How so?” Rey looped her arms around his neck, cocking her head as she looked at him with the avid curiosity she always exhibited whenever Ben mentioned his past. She liked collecting these
pieces of him, and every day it got easier to give them to her.

“Our family attended thousands of events where I was expected to perform like a trained dog,” Ben said. “Perfect manners, perfect conversation… she even told me which children were most beneficial to befriend. I hated those events so much—they were loud and chaotic, and no one actually meant what they said, and I couldn’t escape being the center of attention. At event after event, I was trotted out as some fucking symbol of hope.” His mouth twisted. “Did you know I was born on the day the Galactic Empire surrendered?”

Rey shook her head, eyes wide.

“Well, let me tell you, I never forgot. Because there I was, the son of a princess and a hero, the next Skywalker, born on the day that evil died.” He grimaced, reliving the fawning compliments from people who had only wanted to win his mother’s favor, the exclamations of how it was so perfect that Ben had arrived when he did, as if he were a package in the mail and not a child. Everyone had presumed he was going to be gifted in the Force, a symbol of light to follow in his uncle’s footsteps, with the charm of Han Solo and the political savviness of Leia Organa Solo. Before he was even in elementary school, people had talked about his future political career.

“I was supposed to be this phenomenon,” Ben said, tasting the bitterness of it even now. “The best of Han, Luke, and Leia. And instead, I was… me. Shy and overly emotional. Ugly and awkward. Bad at parties and prone to launching furniture across the room.” The fawning compliments had soon been undercut by damning whispers, and even as a child, he’d been aware of them. Aware that he was wrong on a fundamental level.

Rey’s face was full of sympathy. “I can’t imagine that kind of pressure.” She leaned in to kiss his nose. “Although I doubt you were ever ugly.”

“That’s because you didn’t see these ears when my head was half the size.” That got a little chuckle out of her, which made him feel marginally better, but honestly, reliving these memories stung. “I was the exact opposite of who everyone thought I should be. And as my Force powers strengthened… people got hurt.”

“The boy whose arm you broke,” she said.

“And others. It was rarely intentional—I just didn’t know how to control anything.” He sighed and leaned his forehead against hers again, wanting the intimacy of her touch but not the piercing clarity of her gaze. “That’s also why I don’t mind that you knocked me out by accident. It happens with people like us.”

“Oh, Ben.” Her fingers stroked through his hair. “Your childhood sounds miserable.”

“Less miserable than being orphaned on Jakku, I imagine.”

“There are a lot of different ways to be miserable.”

“Isn’t that the truth.” A sigh rushed out of him. “I guess what I’m trying to say is that I already had to be a symbol of hope for the galaxy once, and I failed at it miserably. I was much better at being the monster. If I go back to the Resistance, and if they let me live, which I’m not convinced is likely, I’m going to be a symbol again. Proof that light always wins and even monsters can be redeemed.”

Rey rested against him for long moments, still running her nails over his scalp. “I hadn’t thought about that,” she said eventually. “About the narrative Leia’s going to spin.”

Now that he was older and more stable—although how stable he would ever be was up for
debate—Ben couldn’t despise his mother for that. “She has to, Rey. It’s the only strategy that makes any sense.” Because he knew Leia would want him to live, and she also wanted the galaxy to return to democracy, and there was only one way to have both of those things be true. He shivered a little as Rey trailed her fingers down the back of his neck. “Maybe I can handle the attention better now, but there’s no way I won’t be visible. And even if the supposedly ‘redeemed’ version of me is welcomed back, there will be people who hate me, no matter what I do.”

“It won’t be easy,” Rey whispered. “I see that.”

Ben felt better now that he’d put words to his feelings, but he wasn’t the only one who had blown up during their fight. He pulled back so he could pin Rey with an assessing stare. “Now tell me what made you so upset.”

Rey puffed out a breath, stirring the loose hairs that were trailing over her forehead. “The Resistance is the only place in the galaxy where I’ve ever belonged,” she said. “Except with you, of course. It’s the only time I’ve ever felt like I mattered.”

“You matter,” he said, hating the way her shoulders slumped at those words.

“To you, yes. But I never mattered to anyone until I left Jakku and discovered my Force powers. For the first time in my life, there are people who need me and look up to me. I have a destiny.” She shook her head. “Do you know how surreal it was to hear that from the ghost of the most famous Jedi in the galaxy? That I, Rey of Jakku, a scavenger from nowhere, have a role to play?”

Ben had been raised with his destiny hanging over him like a blade, but he understood that for Rey, those expectations must represent possibility, rather than a prison. “Go on,” he encouraged her.

“I want to be with you no matter what,” she said. “But if we stay in hiding… it’ll be like I’m back on Jakku. Like I don’t matter.”

She was the most important person in the universe, and he hated that she couldn’t see it. “You’ll always matter to me.”

“And that’s wonderful,” Rey said, “but it isn’t enough.”

Her words were gentle, but Ben felt a surge of anxiety at the thought of not being enough for her. He bit down on his lip and kept listening. This, too, was something he’d learned from her—the ability to restrain his own emotional reactions while she was in the middle of what sounded like a confession.

“It isn’t enough for you, either,” Rey continued. “Can you imagine the two of us living in some wreck back on Jakku? Keeping our heads down so no one recognizes us? Pretending we aren’t Force users and that we have no role to play in the universe?”

He envisioned it... and promptly realized how dismal that life would be. “Admittedly, that doesn’t sound great.”

She took a deep breath, as if steeling herself. “I want to matter,” she said. “I want to help people with these incredible powers I’ve been gifted. I want to belong somewhere.”

“I understand.” And Ben did; if he took Rey’s future away from her, it would be the cruellest thing he’d ever done.

“But here’s the thing,” Rey said, stroking his cheek. “I want to do all of that with you. It’s only half a life otherwise.”
Ben squeezed his eyes shut. His skin flushed hot, and he felt the prickle of oncoming tears. He was only half alive without her, too. And however hard the path ahead was, he knew one fundamental truth: he would follow wherever she led.

“I’ll go with you,” he whispered. “I’ll go back to the Resistance.”

Rey lunged forward, knocking him onto his back. She covered his face with frantic kisses, so enthusiastic in her affection that it made him chuckle despite the ache in his chest. “Thank you,” she said fervently. She kissed his nose and his cheek, his forehead and his chin. “And I will protect you in every way I can. I’ll do mind tricks on anyone who hates you. I’ll yell at Leia if she tries to politicize you.”

He smiled at that, enjoying the visual. “She would probably get a kick out of that. No one ever tells her no.”

“I mean it,” Rey said, fixing him with a stern glare. “You’re not alone this time.”

And if his chest had been aching before, the pain was suddenly unbearably sweet. Because Ben had been alone, even in the midst of the political crowds, even with parents who had tried to love him in their own flawed ways. “My fierce scavenger,” he whispered, and it was more a prayer than anything else. “I pity anyone who crosses you.”

The thought of returning to the Resistance was terrifying, but as Ben held Rey against his chest, something settled into place in his head: a certainty he’d been seeking without even realizing it. The Force was whispering to him that this interlude on Ahch-To was done. It was time for the next step.

Ben would miss this island and uninterrupted days of nothing but Rey, but he knew their journey together was far from over.
Chapter 38

As Rey piloted the Millennium Falcon through the air over Luke’s island, she felt a pang of loss. The sharp green slopes had become as familiar to her as the desert back on Jakku, and it was here that she’d done some of her most profound growth as a person. This island had witnessed her training in the Force and the confrontation of her darkest fears. It had also framed her relationship with Ben, from those first arguments across the Force bond to what lay between them now.

A sense of inevitability had always permeated her interactions with Ben, whether or not Rey had been willing to admit it, but the weeks spent talking, meditating, and witnessing his dreams—not to mention having phenomenal sex—had deepened their connection. Their rough edges had been sanded down, their flaws notching neatly together to make a stronger whole.

Simply put, they had found a way to make this work.

Ben brooded in the co-pilot’s seat, staring at the swath of water far below. Rey wondered what he was thinking about. Was he sad to be leaving Ahch-To? Worried about the Resistance? Contemplating some dark memory?

Then she realized that, while the Ben of a few months ago might have shrugged off that inquiry, he would probably answer her now. “What are you thinking?”

He frowned, looking put out. “We won’t be able to have as much sex on the Resistance base.”

Rey burst into peals of laughter. What a typical man. Here she was contemplating their mutual emotional growth, and he was considering sex logistics. “Ben Solo,” she said through giggles, “you are incorrigible.”

His lips quirked. She could still feel the low buzz of his worry across the bond, but that wasn’t unusual for him, so she wouldn’t push it. “Really, though,” he said. “Are we even going to have a private room? Will I need to gag you so you don’t scream when you come?”

She shifted in her seat, not entirely hating that idea. Ben noticed the movement, and his gaze took on predatory interest. “So I should gag you,” he said. “Noted.”

Kriff, she was going to be thinking about that for a while: Ben covering her mouth, then tormenting her with pleasure while she moaned into his hand. She jerked her attention back to their present discussion. “Ben, you do realize that nothing is going to stop me from enjoying you as frequently as I want, right? I don’t care how thin the walls are.”

He chuckled. “Insatiable girl.” The tension on his face relaxed, and he kicked up his boots on the console. He looked a lot like Han Solo then, but Rey knew better than to mention it. Still, she liked the roguish look. Her eyes trailed over his muscular form and long legs. He was wearing black, which they’d have to rectify before returning to the Resistance, but for now, he was still her dark prince.

He looked at her and cocked an eyebrow. “Aren’t you supposed to be piloting this ship, rather than ogling me?”

Rey blushed and returned her attention to the controls. All right, so she hadn’t quite gotten their escape angle right, but that was easily rectified. A few adjustments, and the Millennium Falcon was punching through the atmosphere. The blue haze gave way to black as they launched into the star-spattered void.
“I always love this part,” Rey said, staring wide-eyed at the constellations.

“Why?”

“Well, the first time I saw space was when I left Jakku. Before then, it was just this distant… ideal.”

She glanced over in time to see Ben’s forehead furrow. “Sometimes I forget how new you are to all of this,” he said. “I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t shuttling around between planets.”

She felt a brief surge of envy at the thought of such freedom, but she knew Ben’s life had been constrained in other ways. “Do you remember your first time?”

He waggled his eyebrows. “Of course, don’t you?”

She laughed and slapped his arm. “In space, you pervert.”

“Yes, it was definitely in space.” At her mock glare, he grinned. “No, I don’t. What was it like for you?”

“I felt dizzy,” she said. “It was the strangest sensation. One moment we were flying over the planet’s surface and there was an up and a down, and then all of a sudden, we were just… floating. It was so black, and I couldn’t tell how fast we were going because nothing seemed to move. The stars were the same, but it felt like I could just… fall between them.” She shook her head. “I don’t know if that makes any sense.”

Ben was listening with single-minded intensity, the way he’d once listened when she’d told him about her journey into the dark below Ahch-To. That was when she’d first realized how appealing he could be. “It felt big,” Ben said. “And you felt small in comparison.”

“It was terrifying,” she admitted. “I’d spent my whole life planetbound, and then suddenly I could travel anywhere, in any direction.” She nibbled her lip, recalling that sensation of stomach-dropping awe and terror. “It was kind of like the first time I swam in the ocean on Ahch-To. I felt this gaping distance below and around me, and even though I knew I was safe, it scared me.”

She hadn’t swum much on Ahch-To, of course. Luke had only barely taught her how to paddle, but someday, Rey wanted to become a great swimmer. The stars were comfortable now, after all—surely the water would be the same.

“I’ll teach you to swim,” Ben said, picking up on her thoughts. He smiled almost shyly. “I’m pretty good at it.”

“Thank you.” She blushed for no reason she could identify, then fixed her attention on the stars. It was the stupidest thing, but when she’d first broken atmosphere upon leaving Jakku, she’d expected them to look bigger. They hadn’t, of course, but those pinpricks of light had still beckoned her, luring her in with promises of adventure.

“I wish I saw the universe like you,” Ben said unexpectedly.

She turned to look at him. He was still slouching in that roguish Han position, but the way his black hair fell over his forehead as if to conceal his expression was all him. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“I saw everything when I was young,” he said. “By the time I was really aware of it, it wasn’t special anymore. But you…” He trailed off and glanced at her with a half-smile that spoke simultaneously of fondness and regret. “You see the beauty in everything. You feel everything.”
It was an ironic comment coming from Ben Solo, who was possibly the most emotional person in the galaxy. “You feel things, too.”

He shrugged and crossed his arms over his chest. “Yes, but not the same way. You feel wonder.”

Rey considered the word, turning it over in her mind. Yes, that was exactly how she felt about the stars and every new planet. Pure wonder illuminated every new experience, from her first time touching the Force to the first feel of rain against her skin. “You don’t feel wonder?” she asked.

“Only about you, Rey.”

She rolled her eyes, then engaged autopilot before getting up and shifting over until she was straddling him in the co-pilot’s seat. “I think you’re a liar, Ben Solo,” she whispered, kissing from his nose to his ear. “I think you’re just afraid to admit that the universe is extremely interesting.”

He chuckled a little, then gasped as she sucked on his neck right over his pulse point. “Maybe I just need someone to show me how interesting it is.”

“Oh, I’ll show you.” And as the Falcon drifted through the star-dotted darkness, Rey dropped to her knees in front of Ben.

He groaned as she fished his cock out of his trousers. “Minx.” He was stiffening fast under her fingers.

“Hush,” she said, licking his shaft from base to tip. “Look at the stars.”

Then she set in to work, enjoying his gasp when she opened her lips and took him as deep as she could. Kriff, she loved doing this. His erection was warm and so hard, and the salty, musky taste of his skin was addictive. Best of all, though, was the way he shifted and sighed under her ministrations. She was tearing this huge man’s self-control down with nothing but her lips and tongue.

He was definitely not looking at the stars, though. Instead, his expression registered pure awe as he stared down at her. When he fisted a hand in her hair, she felt pure triumph. She bobbed more urgently, slobbering over him with unbridled enthusiasm as he guided her movements.

“Oh, shit,” he swore, then tried to pull her away. “Rey, I’m going to—”

She hummed around him and kept sucking, resisting the pressure in her hair as she squeezed the base of his cock and moved more urgently. She wanted to taste his cum.

Ben actually whimpered as his hips strained upwards, shoving his cock even deeper. He twitched and shook, and a flood of bitter liquid filled Rey’s mouth. She swallowed it eagerly, reveling in the primal taste of his pleasure.

When he collapsed back into the chair, she finally released his cock. She licked it gently, cleaning up whatever cum was left, and Ben twitched with every swipe of her tongue. “Fuck, Rey,” he said, sounding like he’d been running for hours.

She grinned up at him, loving the drunk look on his face. His eyes were glazed, and his jaw sagged slightly. “Were the stars interesting?” she asked.

He chuckled a little. “I definitely saw stars, but I doubt they were the ones you meant.”

#
Shortly afterward, Ben hefted her in his arms and carried her to the cabin. He tossed her down sideways on the bed, and Rey barely had time to prop herself up on her elbows before he was kneeling in front of her to strip her trousers off. He didn’t bother removing them all the way before diving between her legs, his tongue burning a hot line over her pussy.

“Oh,” she gasped as he worked her clit mercilessly. He brought his fingers into the action, giving her the pressure she needed against that sensitive bud.

“How are the stars?” he asked against her cunt as he worked those fingers over her.

“Make me come and I’ll tell you.”

Ben chuckled and set back in. His fingers stroked, then delved deep, and when he crooked them inside her, she nearly levitated off the mattress. She keened, caught between the hungry swipes of his tongue and the clever press of his fingers. Tension coiled in her belly, making her desperate, and soon all she could think was now now now.

“Please,” she begged, totally abandoned to the pleasure. “I need to come.”

In response, Ben pressed even harder against her inner wall with the tips of those fingers. “Orgasm for me,” he commanded. His words vibrated over her clit. “Get my face wet. I want to smell you for days.”

It was a strange and slightly gross sentiment, but Rey couldn’t care less. She gripped his luscious hair in both fists and tugged his mouth hard against her pussy. “Ah… ah…”

All at once, the coiled tension burst, sending a wash of heat through her body and making her limbs shake. She rode the orgasm out, grinding against his mouth with urgent desperation.

When she came down at last, it was to the sight of Ben grinning at her from between her legs. “So?” he asked. “How were the stars?”

She giggled and stroked his hair. “Extremely interesting.”
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Twoooo chapters today because I love you! And I also love Ben and Rey and want them to be happy forever and gahhhh

Ben glowered at the shirt Rey held out to him. “No.”

Rey had insisted that they needed to ‘reprovision’ before joining the Resistance, so they had landed at an isolated asteroid settlement that served long-haul travelers. Unfortunately for him, Rey had actually meant that they needed to go clothes shopping.

“Why not?” she asked, peering at the long tunic as if the flaws of the garment weren’t obvious.

“It’s brown.” Just like the trousers and cloak she’d already tried to foist on him.

She rolled her eyes. “And as I’ve told you, we need to work on your image before we meet the Resistance. You can’t show up looking like darkness personified.” She stroked the dirt-colored fabric. “Besides, it’s a dignified color.”

“It’s the color of shit.”

Rey scowled, then shoved the tunic at him. He refused to take it, and it fell on the floor between their feet. “You are being a child,” she told him in a heated whisper. “Wearing brown isn’t going to make you any less impressive, you know.”

“It’s the principle of the thing.” He hadn’t liked wearing colors even when he’d been a boy, and brown definitely qualified as a color.

“I wear brown all the time.”

“Well, maybe you should wear black.”

Rey narrowed her eyes at him, then spun on her heel and stormed back to the nearest clothing rack. The shop owner, a blue-skinned Twi’lek, met Ben’s eyes and winced. The not-so-subtle drag of the Twi’lek’s finger across his throat was completely unnecessary.

Ben followed Rey, perversely enjoying her hostility. He caged her hips in his hands, ignoring her efforts to shake him off. “I’d love to see you in black,” he whispered in her ear before catching the lobe between his teeth. “You’d look like my dark queen.”

She shivered, but before he could feel any triumph at that small sign of appreciation, she turned in his arms and jabbed her finger into his chest. “You’d look like my dark queen.”

He scowled at this reminder that she was dragging him across the galaxy to confront a base full of his enemies. “Do you honestly think wearing brown will make a difference?”
Instead of answering, she started rummaging through the piles of clothing again. She hurled a series of garments at him, and he caught them reflexively. At least these weren’t shit-colored; she’d chosen a deep blue, a forest green, and a sandy tan that still counted as brown but reminded him of Jakku and therefore Rey, which meant he would consider it. A pair of gray trousers landed on top of the pile, followed by another muddy-colored garment, Maker, why was she so obsessed with brown—

She glared at him murderously when he opened his mouth, and Ben wisely chose to shut it.

“Try those on,” she ordered. “And then let me see.”

He rolled his eyes. As he headed for the curtained dressing area, he met the shopkeeper’s sympathetic gaze. He shrugged in a *What can you do?* sort of way, and the shopkeeper grinned in response.

Ben ruminated on that smile while he tried on outfits. When was the last time someone besides Rey had smiled at him? Fuck, it had been years. It was such a small gesture of camaraderie, but Ben felt the impact of it like a bowcaster bolt to the chest.

That shopkeeper wouldn’t smile if he knew who Ben truly was.

That thought twisted up his insides again, and Ben lost the urge to fight with Rey about the clothing. This rendezvous with the Resistance was going to be a disaster, anyway. No one would ever trust or welcome him. They would probably just shoot him on sight, so what did it matter what clothes he wore? Once he bled out, it would all look dark, anyway.

The curtain swished aside, and Ben yelped, attempting to shield himself, since his trousers were around his ankles. But it was just Rey, who tugged the curtain closed behind her, then stood on her toes to deliver a bruising kiss against his lips.

Before he could respond to the kiss, she pulled back and glared at him. “Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“Ruminating,” She crossed her arms. “People will come to care for you. It will just take time.”

His sweet, hopeful Rey. Ben’s heart squeezed with a mix of affection and grief. “Rey, not everyone is like you. Even in the Resistance. You care about me because you can see into my head, but they can’t.”

“I also see your actions,” she said. “And they will, too.” Her chin was jutting stubbornly; she wasn’t going to listen to him.

Ben sighed. When they got to… wherever they were going… Rey would see. The Resistance would clap him in chains and drag him away, if they didn’t kill him immediately, and maybe then she would understand that most of the universe didn’t have her sense of forgiveness or hope. “It’s going to go badly.”

“Maybe,” she said, looking as militant as ever. “But we’re a package deal, Ben. If they want the supposed last Jedi, they have to accept you, too.”

It ought to be illegal to feel such contradictory and profound emotions in a semi-public space while his pants were around his ankles. Ben closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose to stave off tears. These feelings were stupid and useless, as stupid and useless as trying to dress a murderer in softer hues to make him appear less threatening.
Rey’s arms slid around him, and she rested her cheek against his sternum. “It’s going to be hard,” she whispered. “But no matter what, you have me. I won’t abandon you.”

Kriff, he didn’t deserve her. Ben held her close, wishing he were a better man. A man whose past matched the future he wanted to have with her. He was half-light now, but nothing would erase who he had been and what he had done, no matter how he might wish otherwise.

He was still broken, still undeserving in so many ways, but Rey’s promise meant the universe to him. His scavenger had been abandoned on Jakku; he knew exactly how significant that promise was to her. “I won’t abandon you, either,” he said hoarsely.

She pressed a kiss over his heart, and when she pulled back, her eyes glittered with unshed tears. “Good,” she said. “Now try on the fucking clothes.”

#

Ben fisted his hands on his thighs as the Millennium Falcon descended towards the surface of Durkteel. The planet was pretty in a benign sort of way, with its patchwork fields separated by irrigation canals that glinted in the dawn light, but dread crawled over his skin.

His death probably waited on the surface.

Leia would want him to live—he had no doubt about that—but she wasn’t the sole voice of the Resistance. Others would want him exterminated, and whether they went about it the old-fashioned way, with a public trial, or attempted to slip a knife between his ribs in the dark, some sort of reckoning was coming.

Rey guided them in, her hands confident on the controls. Her outward facade showed no hint of the anxiety that bubbled below the surface. She was trying to shield that from him, but he knew her too well now. She was as scared as he was.

“It’ll be fine,” she said, although whether she was talking to him or herself was unclear. “You have a cloak, and no one will know it’s you. The general will tell us what to do.”

“The general” likely already knew they were coming, since she was Force-sensitive, but Leia probably had no idea what to do. How did anyone prepare for the arrival of their reformed enemy and estranged son? Even without the familial relationship, this would have been a difficult situation.

Ben could have reached out along the long-dimmed thread that bound him to Leia to sense her feelings, but he was too afraid. That connection had flickered to life on occasion over the last decade, like when he’d been unable to launch a missile at her ship, but it was an ephemeral thing, fraught with pain. Moments of love and hate intermingled, swiftly giving way to emptiness.

If Leia hated him still…

Kriff, she should hate him still. Ben had murdered her husband, and the First Order had slaughtered almost the entire Resistance. Ben himself had wanted the Millennium Falcon destroyed and had ordered his forces to fire on the mine on Crait where the Resistance had sheltered. He had wanted to see the rebels dead at his feet.

Not Rey, though, even then. And not Leia, either. But what did that matter to an idealist like his mother? She cared so much about other people that she’d crafted her life around helping others.

She didn’t help me, though, he thought bitterly. But that neglect was a wound of the past, and Ben knew he had to let it go. The scale between him and Leia was severely unbalanced, and the majority
of the crimes were on his side.

Rey steered them into a hangar near a series of low buildings. Ben distracted himself by admiring her flying. She’d been made for this, just as she’d been made to wield a lightsaber. And seeing his father’s legacy being steered by her hands…

Well. Something about that made all of this easier to bear.

They settled into place on the landing pad, and Rey cut the engines. Already, a few deckhands were approaching, waving cheerily at the cockpit. Ben was wearing a cloak—brown, because of course Rey had gotten her way—but he couldn’t help but feel like some gruesome jack-in-the-box. *Surprise!* he ought to shout when popping out of the cockpit. *It’s me, your worst nightmare.*

Rey gripped his wrist in her hand. He could tell she was trying to look calm, but her eyes were wide, and her mental signature roiled with anxiety. “Don’t say anything,” she said. “And keep your head down.”

“I will,” he promised. And then, because Maker knew if they’d get another chance, he leaned in and kissed her. “I love you, Rey. No matter what happens, I want you to know that.”

She hitched a sobbing breath and kissed him back. “I love you, too. And it’s going to be fine.”

Then they were grabbing their bags and heading towards the ramp, and it was time for Ben Solo to face whatever destiny had in store for him.
Chapter 40

Rey was nervous.

Scratch that, she was terrified.

She made idle conversation with the deckhands, implying that she had been on a secret mission for the general. Ben loomed silently beside her, the hood of his cloak drawn up and his face downturned. The deckhands looked at him curiously, but at least they didn’t ask any prying questions.

Rey knew better than to assume that would last.

She squeezed Ben’s hand before setting out for the Tak-Beam complex. The low buildings were still heavily damaged from the Galactic Civil War, but below the surface, the Resistance had reclaimed any rooms that had survived the bombardment. The guard at the entrance eyed Ben suspiciously, but being the sole Force user in the Resistance had made Rey a bit of a celebrity, and when she claimed Ben as her guest, the guard nodded and stepped aside.

It was still early, just after dawn. She’d wanted to arrive when the halls weren’t congested with people. Ideally, no one would realize exactly who she’d brought here until later, once she and Leia had crafted a strategy for reintroducing Ben Solo to the world. Kylo Ren was supposedly dead—they’d learned that on the asteroid outpost, although who had taken his place as Supreme Leader was unclear—and his resurrection and new identity would be a shock. Better to ease into it, even if Rey had faith in her allies’ capacity for forgiveness.

Does anyone know who I am to the general? Ben asked across the bond as they descended a narrow metal staircase.

No, but they’ll recognize you as Kylo Ren. Your image was captured when you fought Luke on Crait. It wasn’t high quality, but she’d seen Poe and others poring over it for hours, memorizing everything they could of Kylo Ren’s black hair, distinctive facial features, and long scar.

Should have kept the mask. But he didn’t sound upset, merely resigned.

What happened to it, anyway?

He sent her a memory of him smashing it against the turbolift wall after Snoke had called him a child in a mask. The violence was alarming, but Rey had to admit that his sheer strength was a little thrilling.

He caught her response, and she felt a hint of amusement across the bond. Pervert, he said.

That fond accusation was now a tradition between them, and it made her feel a little better. She would have teased him back, but just then they emerged in the main corridor that ran beneath the complex. The doors lining it were mostly shut, and although a few people were wandering towards the mess hall, no one looked back at them.

Leia will be in the command center, Rey said. Leia was almost always in the command center, no matter the hour.

They hurried down the corridor, Ben’s cloak swishing against his legs. Rey wished she’d thought to wear a cloak, too, although on second thought, that might just look more suspicious. But the ten
meters between her and the command center might as well have been ten kilometers. Her heart raced so fast, she was nearly dizzy.

Poe Dameron stepped out of the command center, talking in a low voice with Finn. Rey placed a hand on Ben’s forearm, freezing him in place. Poe was probably the worst person here for Ben to run into, since Leia had practically adopted the pilot as a son over the last few years. Oh, and there was the small issue of Ben torturing Poe by ripping his mind apart...

She felt Ben’s disdain for him across the bond, undercut by something she thought might be jealousy. **Dameron is an arrogant prick**, Ben said.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Rey had to bite her lip to keep from smiling. Of all the people to judge Poe for arrogance…

Poe and Finn started to head towards the mess hall, but then Poe glanced over his shoulder and froze. “Rey?” he said incredulously. A smile spread over his face, and he jogged towards them. “You’re back!”

**Do not say anything**, Rey warned Ben. She plastered a smile on her face. “Good to see you again, captain.”

“Oh, please. I’m always Poe for you, sweetheart.”

Ben stiffened, and Rey hurriedly intervened. **He’s like this with everyone**, she said.

See? **Arrogant prick.** But Ben settled a little, that rush of protective anger melting into wariness.

Finn was hot on Poe’s heels, and his wide grin made a sunshiney warmth blossom in the center of Rey’s chest. “Hey, Rey!” Finn looked like he wanted to hug her, but his eyes flickered to Ben, and he hesitated. “Who’s this?”

“A... friend,” she said, trying not to blush.

Finn’s brows rose. “You have other friends?”

Rey winced. “Yes, Finn, it turns out I do.”

“Oh, kriff, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that…” At her mock glare, he adopted a sheepish expression. “All right, maybe I did.” He turned to Ben with a grin and stuck out his hand. “Hey, Rey’s friend. I’m Finn.”

Ben didn’t move. To the others he probably seemed rude, but Rey knew he was wrestling with a complicated range of emotions, from resentment to regret. She sensed his thoughts— **the traitor, FN-2187… but I suppose I’m a traitor, too—** and flinched as Ben relived the moment when he had sliced a lightsaber down Finn’s back on Starkiller Base.

“All right, never mind,” Finn said, his grin dying. He started to pull his hand away, but then Ben’s hand shot out and grabbed it. Finn jumped a little, then smiled at the firm handshake. “You, uh, got a name, Rey’s friend?”

Ben shook his head.

Finn’s face lit up. “That’s all right—I didn’t have a name, either! We’ll give you one.”

That sent a stab of guilt through Ben, and Rey winced in sympathy. Here was evidence of the
stormtrooper program’s dehumanizing brutality—yet another crime that could be partially laid at Ben’s door.

Poe stepped up next, eyeing Ben’s cloaked figure with more suspicion. “What’s with the getup?” he asked.

“Skin condition,” Rey blurted out. “A very bad one.”

Ben’s head turned towards her, and although his face was still tilted down and concealed by the hood’s shadow, she knew he was struggling not to laugh. *Really?* he asked, and Rey had to press her lips together to keep from smiling.

Poe looked between them. His eyes were narrowed, and Rey wondered if he’d always been this wary, or if the war had hardened him. “Does your friend talk?” he asked Rey.

“No.”

“No ID?”

“No.”

Poe stepped a little closer to Ben and bent as if to peer under his hood. In response, Ben tilted his head further down. “So let me get this straight. You brought a cloaked man with no name who doesn’t talk into the base, and the guards just… let you? Without identification?”

“Come on, Poe,” Rey said, wishing he would just get out of the way. “You know me. Would I bring anyone here I hadn’t vetted myself?”

There was an awful hilarity to those words, despite how anxious this interaction was making her. Rey was, in fact, bringing the Resistance’s worst enemy into their midst. But it would take time to explain how and why Ben Solo had reformed, and this hallway was not the place to do it. Other people were starting to emerge from the barracks, and they eyed the gathering with curiosity.

Poe’s hand hovered near his blaster. Rey could tell Ben had noticed it, too—he shifted his posture slightly, readying for a fight. Poe mirrored the movement, and a crackling tension filled the air.

“We’re going to see the general,” Rey said, grabbing hold of Ben’s elbow. “Talk to you later—”

“Rey.” It was the general’s voice, coming from the entrance to the command center a few meters away. Leia was staring at them with a mix of hope and trepidation. “You did it.” Her throat worked as she stared at Ben, and Rey could tell from here that her eyes were shining with unshed tears.

Ben’s arm trembled under Rey’s fingers, and she felt the pain he experienced at the sight of Leia. He was anxious and guilt-stricken, wanting both to run to his mother and to flee.

Poe sidestepped to block their progress when Rey tried to guide Ben around him. “Take the hood off,” he ordered. “I’m not going to risk the general’s safety with someone who doesn’t even have ID.”

“It’s fine, Poe,” Leia said, but Poe wasn’t listening. His eyes darted up and down Ben’s form, measuring his dimensions, and kriff, this wasn’t going well. Poe was sharp enough to recognize a threat, and he’d been close to Ben before.

“Take the hood off,” Poe said again, drawing his blaster. “I don’t care if you have a skin condition. I’m responsible for the general’s safety.”
“Captain Dameron,” Leia snapped. “Stand down.”

“No can do, general,” he said, keeping his eyes on Ben. “You’re all we have left.”

Ben’s cloak rippled as he shifted, preparing for a fight. Rey stepped in front of him, only for Ben to grab her by the arm and tug her aside. He’d lifted his head a little to better assess the threat, and in the bright lights of the corridor, his nose and chin—and the scar—were visible.

Poe abruptly lunged forward and ripped Ben’s hood off. Rey shouted at him to stop, but it was too late—Ben’s face was fully exposed, his dark hair and scar unmistakable. “What the fuck?” Poe shouted, stumbling back. Then he raised the blaster and fired three shots in quick succession.

Rey screamed, but Ben had already lifted a hand, freezing the vicious red bolts in midair. Down the corridor, someone shrieked.

“It’s Kylo Ren!”

“He’s supposed to be dead.”

“It’s him, I know it’s him.”

Shouts rose, followed by running footsteps as the more cowardly fled and the bravest advanced with weapons drawn. Oh, Maker, there was no coming back from this.

Finn pulled his blaster out and leveled it at Ben. What if Ben wasn’t strong enough to freeze all the bolts about to fly his way? Rey didn’t know how to wield that level of telekinesis yet, so she lunged in front of Ben to shield him with her body.

“No!” Finn and Ben shouted at the same time. But Finn had already compressed the trigger, and the bolt launched straight towards Rey.

A blast of concussive force burst from Ben, sending the blaster bolts ricocheting and launching Finn and Poe against opposite walls. He pinned them there, both hands stretched wide and murder on his face. Rey activated her lightsaber, deflecting the next few bolts that streaked towards them from the gathering crowd of Resistance members.

“Stop it,” Leia shouted, hurrying towards them. “Stop this at once! All of you!”

The order was enough to get most of the people filling the corridor to lower their weapons, but hate emanated from the faces turned towards them. Rey ignored the crowd’s collective revulsion as she stood protectively in front of Ben, her purple saberstaff still ignited in his defense. “Traitor,” someone muttered.

“You could have killed her,” Ben shouted at the imprisoned men. Rey glanced over her shoulder at the standoff. Poe and Finn looked terrified in the grip of Ben’s overwhelming power, and Ben was burning with fury. His emotions roiled, the dark tugging at him, and Rey needed to defuse this situation before it got any worse.

She flicked the saber off and stepped towards Ben, approaching him as cautiously as if he were a wounded animal. She pressed a hand to his chest, drawing his attention. “Hey,” she whispered. “I’m here. They didn’t hurt me.”

His jaw clenched. “I couldn’t have borne it,” he said in a raspy voice. “I would have gone with you.”

Killed himself, he meant. Rey’s eyes filled with tears. “Don’t say that,” she said, thumping him on
the chest. But if he was gone, could she honestly say she would ever be a whole person again? And
the bond felt essential—most likely, if one of them died, the other would, too.

“What is this, Rey?” Poe demanded. The rest of his body didn’t move, but Ben had at least refrained
from Force-choking him. The pilot looked utterly betrayed. “Why did you do this?”

She glared at Poe. “He isn’t our enemy. Not anymore.”

“He’s, uh, kinda acting like he is,” Finn said.

“Because you tried to shoot Rey,” Ben snarled, and Finn’s eyes widened.

“I didn’t mean to! I’m so sorry, Rey.” Finn looked at her beseechingly.

“Will you let him down?” Rey whispered to Ben. “He won’t shoot at me again.”

He shook his head. “I can’t risk your safety.”

“Ben.” The voice came from Leia, who had approached to just within arm’s reach. “Don’t hurt
them.”

He growled. “I wasn’t planning on it, but your pilot apparently likes to shoot first and ask questions
later.”

Leia glared at Poe. “Yes, that’s a bad habit of his. But this isn’t going to help matters. Please, let
them down. Then we’ll talk.”

“General, you can’t—” Poe started to say.

“Poe Dameron, don’t you dare tell me what I can and cannot do.” Leia’s voice lashed like a whip.
“You defied a direct order and risked the safety of everyone in this base. For once in your life, just
shut the hell up.”

Poe gaped at her, then closed his jaw with a snap.

“That’s better.” Leia turned to Ben. “Now. Will you let them down?”

A muscle flickered in Ben’s clenched jaw, but he nodded tightly and lowered his hands. Finn and
Poe dropped to the floor, staggering to balance themselves against the wall.

“General Organa.” A compact man in a neat khaki uniform stepped out of the crowd. He had long,
graying hair and a face marked by frown lines. “I will take Kylo Ren into custody.”

Rey stiffened. “Absolutely not,” she snapped.

“Will everyone just stop talking?” Leia rubbed her temples and took a deep breath. “Rey—it’s good
to see you again. And… Kylo Ren. I’m glad you joined us.”

Ben winced at the sound of his old name on her lips, and Rey wanted to slap the general for
switching back to it. Was Leia hoping no one had heard her slip and wondered who ‘Ben’ was? Was
she truly so ashamed of acknowledging her son?

It’s political, Ben said tiredly in her head. She needs to be in control of the message.

Rey glared daggers at Leia. Well, I think she’s being a coward. It’s not like people won’t find out
who you are to her.
They might not. It’s up to her.

Fuck that.

Rey. He sighed and nudged his hand against hers. *I’ve done enough to hurt her. She can at least choose whether or not to let me taint her reputation.*

“Now,” Leia said, addressing the entire assembly, “I understand that this turn of events is… alarming, to say the least. I promise the situation is under control and no one is in any danger.”

“That’s Kylo *fucking* Ren,” Poe said, apparently unable to shut the hell up, after all. He gesticulated wildly. “And your pet Jedi smuggled him in here.”

Ben took a menacing step towards Poe, but Rey restrained him with a hand on his arm. “I’m no one’s pet,” she said, glaring at Poe and wishing she could punch him in the face.

“We’ve reached an… agreement with Kylo Ren,” Leia said. “Which I will share with you at a more appropriate time.”

An agreement? Rey was outraged at Leia’s bold-faced lie. The general was trying to gain control of the situation, and maybe that declaration would prevent further violence, but she was also speaking for Ben. Ben, who had risked everything to come here. Ben, who had gone through more in his lifetime than anyone in this hallway would ever understand.

“General,” the gray-haired man said, “I must insist that we either detain Kylo Ren or, better yet, execute him outright.”

“Commander Kerelle, I understand your reluctance to allow this man in our base. Nevertheless…”

“It’s not just reluctance,” the man said, his posture growing even stiffer. “That monster destroyed my home planet. He is dangerous, and it is unacceptable for him to walk free among us. He’ll betray us to the First Order—if he doesn’t kill us all himself.”

Ben’s emotional agony was like a live coal across the bond, and just the echo of it nearly put Rey to her knees. *I’m so sorry*, she told him. *I didn’t realize…* She trailed off, because she felt like an idiot for not guessing exactly how badly this would go. She’d known the Resistance would be angry and afraid, but she somehow hadn’t imagined the virulence of their hatred. It had been foolish of her to imagine they would give him a chance to repent.

*Not everyone hopes or forgives like you*, Ben said sadly. *Even in the Resistance.*

Ben had known all along what awaited him. He’d tried to tell her, but Rey hadn’t wanted to listen. She knew her friends and their capacity for love. She’d imagined that once everything was explained, she could introduce Ben to them, and they’d gradually come to see him for the remarkable man he was.

Instead, every single person in this hallway was staring at the pair of them as if they were vermin.

“I surrender myself to the Resistance,” Ben announced, startling Rey. The look he sent Leia was ironic. “By all means, lock me up until we can discuss the terms of our *agreement*.”

“No,” Rey said, grabbing his hand. The gesture drew attention, and she saw disgust wash over once-friendly faces.

*Go join them*, Ben said, disentangling his hand from hers. *I’ll be fine.*
He wouldn’t be, though, and neither would Rey, and she had sworn never to abandon him. Rey lifted her chin and stepped forward. “If you imprison him, I insist I be locked up with him.”

A clamor rose at the declaration. She only heard a few comments. “Rey, no!” from Finn, and a sneering “So that’s how it is,” from Poe. Rey ignored them, keeping her posture erect and proud.

Leia sighed. “Are you sure, child?”

Rey met Leia’s eyes and let her see every bit of the contempt she felt for the general at the moment. “I’m not a child,” she said. “I brought him here. Whatever happens to him is my responsibility.”

“You’re responsibility, but it needn’t be a punishment,” the general said softly. “The detainment is just for a short time, until we can settle everyone down and have a proper discussion.”

“You’re right,” Rey said, damning Poe and Kerelle and everyone else for making this encounter so much worse than it needed to be. “It needn’t be a punishment. But since you have turned it into one, I will bear it with him.”

“Rey,” Ben murmured, but it wasn’t an admonishment. He said her name reverently, the way he did whenever he called her ‘goddess.’

She looked at him and nodded once. “Together, then.”

“Together,” he repeated.

They were ordered to lay down their weapons, and then Ben and Rey were led at blasterpoint towards the holding cell.
Ben was distinctly not impressed by the Resistance’s holding cell.

This plain box of a room looked like it had once been a large storage closet. The door locked from the outside, but there were only two locks, and the metal of the door wouldn’t withstand a true assault from a strong Force user. There weren’t cameras or windows, either—no way to keep an eye on prisoners.

“I don’t think they were ready for us,” he said as he finished his scrutiny of the room.

Rey’s lips twitched, but she still looked miserable as she sat on the single cot that was the only available furnishing. Ben could feel her guilt and self-recrimination boiling on the other end of the bond, so he sat next to her and slipped an arm around her.

“Hey,” he said. “It’s all right.”

She made a face. “It isn’t all right. I was an idiot.”

He squeezed her close and was gratified when she shifted to turn her head into his chest and sling her legs over his. He liked how easily she turned to him for comfort. “You aren’t an idiot,” he said against her hair. “You just think the best of people. It’s understandable.”

She drew back and looked at him incredulously.

Ben chuckled. “All right, maybe it isn’t understandable from my perspective. But honestly, Rey, I don’t know why you’re so compassionate, but I love it.” You’re good enough for both of us, he thought.

She sighed and rested against his chest again. “I just thought we’d have time to figure out how to reintroduce you. Poe ruined everything.”

“Dameron always ruins everything,” Ben said darkly. Fuck, he hated that posing flyboy.

“He was nice before, you know,” Rey said. “And Finn loves him—sometimes I think he loves him a lot—but he seemed like a completely different person today.”

“Dameron is a vain, conceited hothead who always thinks he’s the smartest person in the room but rarely is.” Ben scowled. “I don’t know what my mother was thinking, raising him so high.”

“She thinks he has leadership potential, if he can stop being so rash.”

Ben snorted. “Rash is in his DNA. I’ve been in his head—trust me, I know.”

He felt Rey’s discomfort at the reminder of the Force interrogation. She shifted against him, and her mind was open, so he skimmed it for memories of Poe Dameron. In every single one of them, the handsome pilot was cheerful and suave, possessed of an easy-going yet potent charisma. The exact opposite of Ben.

Of course Leia had gravitated towards him. It was her chance to be a mother to the kind of son she’d always wanted.

He sighed, slipping deeper into melancholy. “Dameron will undoubtedly petition to execute me.”
Rey jerked upright. Fury shone in her eyes and flamed across the bond. “I won’t let him,” she vowed, and she was so vehement that Ben believed her. Besides, if this was the Resistance’s idea of a jail cell, he doubted their attempts at a public execution would be particularly impressive.

“Leia will try to negotiate a different outcome,” he said. “I know her—if she can keep the Resistance alive and have me returned to her as Ben Solo, she’ll do it.” And while his mother’s endless political maneuvering was still upsetting, he was admittedly touched that her ideal outcome involved having him back in her life.

“I’m mad at her,” Rey said.

He knew it was because Rey had gotten to know the general, not the politician. She wasn’t familiar with Leia’s more subtle maneuverings.

Ben wanted to get comfortable for this explanation, so he lay back on the cot and pulled Rey down with him. It was extremely narrow and far too short for him, but they managed to squeeze in with Rey resting half on top of his chest. “There are a few things you need to know about Leia,” he said, still feeling odd about calling Leia his mother. “She was raised as a princess of Alderaan, which meant she was immersed in politics from a young age. Negotiation and manipulation come naturally to her.”

“Hmph,” Rey groused against his chest.

“She fought during the Galactic Civil War, but she returned to a political career afterwards. Her political ambitions and her belief in democracy are the two things that have stayed constant over the years.” He had to pause to clear his throat before the next part. “Han was completely different from her, but she loved him. And me. In her own way.”

That last part still hurt, because the way Leia’s love had demonstrated itself had been antithetical to who he was as a person. But he would give her this—even decades later, after Ben had committed atrocities, she still loved him. It was more generous than most people would ever be—the kind of loyalty Rey herself showed the people she cared about.

“Love is never the issue with Leia,” Ben said. His throat ached at that admission. “The problem is that she will always be a politician first. It’s the tool she knows how to use best, but sometimes her intentions and her methods conflict.”

Rey traced little circles over his chest, and the scratch of her nails against the fabric of his shirt was pleasant. “It irritates me that she pretended we have an agreement with her.”

“We?” He arched a brow and looked down at her. “Aren’t you on the side of the rebels?”

“I’m allied with you first and foremost,” she said. “You know that.”

Warmth bloomed over his skin, and a little bubble of joy made its way up through the gloom. “These are your friends, though. You believe in their cause. I wouldn’t blame you if you left this cell and joined them.”

Part of him had been afraid of that, Ben realized. That for all Rey’s words of loyalty, when it came down to the choice between him and the rebels, she would choose them. Ahch-To had felt like a dream—it had been easy to fall into each other there, with no distractions. But he’d half-believed that Rey’s love wouldn’t last once they were among people again and navigating these complicated political waters.

Rey looked up at him with hurt in her eyes. “How could you think I didn’t mean what I said?” She’d
been listening in on his thoughts.

“It isn’t doubt in you,” Ben said, stroking her hair. “It’s just…”

“What?”

“It’s me,” he confessed. “I just… can’t believe that anyone would choose me. No one ever has before.”

“Oh, Ben.” She resumed her soothing strokes over his chest. “No one’s ever chosen me, either.”

“Which is completely baffling, since you’re the best person in the universe.”

She giggled a little. “Flatterer. But don’t think you can distract me with compliments. Did you really think I would abandon you?”

“No.” He bit his lip. “Maybe. I don’t know. I just thought… you were pretty much forced to love me because of the bond. You didn’t get to choose whether or not to have me in your head. And you haven’t seen what other options are out there…”

It was an insecurity he hadn’t admitted out loud before. She didn’t have much experience with men, and he’d basically bludgeoned his way into her head and heart. Without the Force bond, would she have wanted him?

It was partially why he despised Dameron so much, if he was being honest with himself. He’d hated that the man who had stolen his mother’s affection had gotten to be near Rey every day, too. The thought of Dameron turning his legendary charm on Rey had tormented Ben at night. Even now, the thought of it made him grit his teeth.

Rey huffed and scrambled further onto him until she was straddling his hips and glaring down at him. Ben knew that look—he was about to get chastised, and he was looking forward to it. No one had ever berated him quite so sweetly.

She gripped his chin in one hand. “I wasn’t forced to love you, you idiot. In fact, I distinctly did not love you during the first months of the Force bond. I fell in love with you over time, the same way everyone else does.” He raised a skeptical brow, and she smiled a little. “Well, maybe not the same way everyone else does. There was a lot of attempted murder.”

“But it was just the two of us on Ahch-To. We didn’t have to face the reality of what it’s like being together in the real world.”

“Let me ask you this,” Rey said, cocking her head like a bird wondering how best to crack open a nut. “Do you still love me now that we’re in the real world?”

“Of course I do.” He was offended she even had to ask.

“Then shut the fuck up and believe that I love you, too.” The firm grip on his chin gentled, and she stroked his cheek. “I think it’s going to take time for both of us to get used to being valued.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. As usual, Rey had sliced directly to the heart of the issue. “How did you get so wise, anyway?” he asked past the lump in his throat.

She leaned down to kiss him. “I don’t think I’m wise. Honestly, you’ve taught me more about being human than I learned during all my time on Jakku.” She ended the kiss but didn’t pull away, resting her forehead against his. “I don’t know if how intensely we feel for each other is normal,” she
admitted. “I just know that I’d do anything for you.”

He sighed against her lips. “I don’t want to be normal. I want to love you and protect you and fight for you as insanely as possible.”

“You said that about the dark once: that it was about feeling something beyond what’s acceptable or sane.” Although Ben’s eyes were closed, he knew Rey was smiling. “I like that part of the dark.”

“Me, too,” he murmured, squeezing her close. “Thank you for fighting for me, Rey.”

#

They didn’t cuddle for long after that. As nice as it felt, whatever interaction—or more likely interrogation—awaited them would go better if they presented a formidable, united front. And while cuddling certainly united them, it hardly painted either of them as intimidating.

Ben paced impatiently while Rey stretched. It was strange to see her without a lightsaber, but not as strange as it was not to have his own clipped to his belt. That sputtering blade was the symbol of Ben Solo’s fall into darkness, but it was also a marker of his power and self-sufficiency. He had learned how to make the cracked kyber crystal work. He had crafted the weapon from his old, blue saber, and messy as it was, it meant something to him.

Now it was in the rebels’ hands. Dameron was probably playing with it at this very moment—a thought that made Ben grimace. If that blade wasn’t returned to him in pristine condition…

The locks clicked, and Ben spun to face the door. Rey, too, adopted a combat stance. But when the door swung open, no one was there but Leia Organa. She was dressed in a simple brown gown with her gray-streaked hair pinned back in a coiled braid, and she appeared to be unarmed.

She took in their aggressive postures, and a smile flitted across her lips. “It’s just me,” she said. He was struck again by how much older she sounded, her voice raspy and tired. “And I’m hardly in prime physical condition, so I think you can stand down.”

Ben didn’t relax until the door swung shut behind her. He blinked at it for a few moments, feeling an odd surge of outrage. “They’re letting you come in here alone?” he asked. “They should at least assign you a guard.”

Leia leveled him with an ironic look he was intimately familiar with. “Are you planning on murdering me?”

“Well, no, but it’s the principle of the thing.”

She shook her head. “You sound like your father.”

Ben was actually thinking he sounded like her, but the mention of his father made his brain short-circuit. Fuck, he needed to address Han’s murder first. He took a deep breath. “I’m so sorry,” he began, but Leia waved a hand at him, cutting him off.

“That conversation needs to happen later.” There was pain in her eyes, but she drew herself up into the regal posture that told Ben he was dealing with the politician, not his mother. “Right now, we need to talk about how to get you out of this cell.”

“General,” Rey said with acid in her tone, “with all due respect, you can get him out of this cell with a single command.”
“Yes, but that would make me a dictator, not a leader. I’m invested in finding a long-term solution that will be agreeable to everyone.”

Ben suppressed a flinch at the word ‘dictator,’ which had described him as of very recently. “So what’s your proposal, general?” he asked, hating that this reunion was shrouded in the guise of politics.

Leia took a while to respond, and he realized it was because she was making prolonged eye contact with Rey. When he looked over, he saw that Rey was glaring at Leia. The two women appeared to be having some sort of wordless conversation, but whatever it was was beyond Ben’s ability to interpret.

Finally, Leia’s gaze softened. She returned her attention to Ben. “I’m glad you’re back, Ben. I should have said that first. I’m sorry I jumped straight into business.”

The apology was as unexpected as a punch to the gut. Ben gaped at her, unable to formulate a response.

Leia sighed heavily. “The last three decades have taught me more than I ever wanted to know, and I’m still learning. I don’t entirely know how to deal with this—with our history—and I suspect it’s something we’re going to have to figure out together. But there are a few things I do know.” She fixed him with the firm, affectionate stare he remembered from childhood. “I am so happy you’re back. I want you here, near me, while we figure out how to move forward. And that means that right now, we need to play politics until you’re safe. I don’t mean to seem callous or distant—I’m just anxious to make sure you don’t get hurt.”

His eyes watered, and his throat was tight. Ben nodded. “I understand. And… thank you.” That honest acknowledgment of her motivations—and her affection—was more than he’d ever expected to get from her.

“Good. So right now, I’m going to be General Organa, and you’re going to be Kylo Ren, defected Supreme Leader of the First Order.” She turned her glance to Rey. “And you’re going to be… well. I suppose you’ll have to tell me what role you want to play.” Her lips took on an amused tilt. “Although clearly Ben’s protector is one of them.”

Rey’s chin lifted. “It isn’t a role,” she said with blunt conviction. “I’m dedicated to the Resistance and believe in the cause, but my first loyalty is to Ben. I love him.”

Leia’s eyes widened, and Ben choked down an embarrassing whimper at hearing her claim him in front of his mother. He hadn’t imagined that Rey would state it so boldly… but perhaps he should have. His lovely girl always spoke her mind, and she was fierce in her convictions.

To Ben’s surprise, Leia lost her famed composure. Her face crumpled, and tears slid down her cheeks. “Oh,” she said, clapping a hand to her mouth. “Oh, I’m so glad. And that’s the mother talking, not the general.” She sniffled and wiped her eyes. “Just so you know, I’m going to hug both of you as soon as this negotiation is over.”

Ben was pretty sure he was blushing. He shifted, looking down at his feet.

He wasn’t the only one feeling awkward. Leia cleared her throat before straightening up and resuming her tone of command. “Now. The issue at hand is that the vast majority of the Resistance wants to see you dead, Ben. The remainder want me to torture you for information.”

He grimaced. “Naturally.”
“I’m not going to do either, obviously. But for you to ever be accepted here, you will need to give up some of the First Order’s secrets.”

Ben had expected this. While the idea of being used for information had rankled at first, he had no loyalty to that cause anymore. No loyalty to anyone but Rey, really, and she wanted the First Order gone. After Snoke’s torture, after the betrayal of the generals, after nearly dying, Ben was petty enough to want that, too. “Fine,” he said. “I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

Leia’s brows lifted. “I hadn’t expected it to be so easy.”

He scoffed. “If you think this has been easy, you’re entirely mistaken.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Leia’s compassionate look made Ben feel itchy. “I know this has been the hardest journey of your life, and I’m so glad you undertook it.”

He was definitely blushing now. “We’re playing politics, remember?” he said gruffly. Rey sidled closer to him and entwined her hand with his, and he spared a grateful glance for her. She was his shield and his anchor, both guarding him and keeping him grounded.

Leia’s gaze flicked down to their joined hands, and she smiled again. “Right. Politics. So here’s my deal: if you testify in front of Resistance leadership and share everything you know about the First Order, we’ll be able to promote the narrative that you’ve had a change of heart. We can say the dark side of the Force overwhelmed you—no one really knows how it works, so they’ll believe it. You’ll have to act suitably guilty about your previous actions, of course.”

“Of course.” It would be half-truth, half-lie, but Ben didn’t care much about honesty.

“I’ll publicly welcome you to the Resistance, and we’ll start integrating you into the group from there. A few members of leadership are eager to see you put on trial, but with your information and my endorsement, I think we can avoid that.”

Rey spoke up again. “Are you going to publicly claim him as your son?”

Ben braced himself, fully expecting a denial. It would be lunacy for Leia to undermine her own authority by claiming him.

“Yes,” the general said. “That’s how I will reintroduce him.”

Ben felt like he was falling. He met his mother’s eyes, hardly able to believe it. She looked so determined, so certain. It was the kind of certainty he’d only ever seen in Rey before—the desire to do the right thing, whether or not it was convenient. “People will condemn you,” he said. “You’ll be judged for lying about me for so long, and judged even more harshly for welcoming me back.”

Leia nodded. “I will, but judgment fades eventually. I have the power to weather that storm. And for you, Ben, it’s worth it.”

It was too much. Ben staggered back and sat on the cot with his head in his hands. His eyes burned with unshed tears, and his gut churned. “Why do you want me back?” he asked hoarsely.

There was a rustle of fabric, and Leia settled onto the cot next to him. She put her arm around him hesitantly, and that simple contact was one of the most profound things to happen to Ben in the last decade. He leaned into her slightly, enough so she would know he reciprocated her awkward affection.

“No more politics for now,” Leia said. “I’m your mother, Ben. Being a mother means loving your
child even when you’re frustrated, even when you don’t understand them.” Tears clogged her voice, but Ben didn’t dare look up to see them on her face. “You and I have so much to work through, but for now, I’m just happy that you’re alive and well. Happy that someone else loves you, too. Happy that you’re coming back from the dark.”

Nearby, Rey stirred, ready to interject, but Ben sent her a soothing rejection across the bond. *Let me say it.*

“I’m not light,” he said. “I’m somewhere in-between and always will be. Rey is, too. It makes us better. Stronger.”

Leia nodded. “I can’t say I entirely understand, but that’s something else we can talk through later. For now, let’s get you free.”

Ben swallowed hard. “All right,” he said. “Let’s get through the next few days, and we’ll go from there.”

They stared at each other for a few moments, and then Leia uttered a particularly foul Huttese expletive and wrapped both arms around Ben, clutching him close. He curled himself around her, hunching to rest his head against her shoulder. “I love you,” Leia said, and now her tears poured freely, soaking into his hair. “I’m sorry I don’t always know the right things to say. I’m sorry your arrival ended up being a disaster.”

“Letting me kill Dameron would be a wonderful way to make amends,” Ben said, then winced. Would she realize it was a joke?

Luckily, Leia laughed. “Oh, Ben. I’ll give you anything but that. It wouldn’t fit the redemption narrative… and besides, I’m probably going to kill him myself.”

He chuckled and squeezed her tightly. They were both crying, their torsos tilted awkwardly as they embraced on a cot in a half-rate jail cell, but it was possibly the best hug of Ben’s life.

And then Rey settled behind him and wrapped her slim arms around his torso, and it was officially the best embrace he’d ever experienced.
Rey sat anxiously in the back of a conference room on the base, watching as Ben was led in by armed guards. Four men with blasters wouldn’t stop him from destroying the room, and everyone knew it, but the display apparently made Resistance leadership feel better.

Twenty men, women, and aliens of indeterminate gender sat in two rows facing a battered metal table and chair. Leia and Commander Kerelle sat at another table slightly to the side. As Ben was led to the central table, the council members muttered and shifted in their seats, eyeing him with expressions that ranged from trepidation to outright hatred.

Ben met their glares with composure. He looked good. His black hair was neatly combed, and he was wearing brown trousers—the color of shit, Rey remembered with some amusement—and a long-sleeved tan tunic. They’d tried to make him appear as harmless as possible, although considering his size and reputation, there was only so much that could be done.

He didn’t look nervous, although Rey could feel his anxiety thrumming across the bond. He met her eyes and smiled a little before returning his attention to the base commanders.

Leia stood up and faced the council. “Thank you for meeting with us today. I know this situation is extremely unusual and alarming for many of you. You know the man before you as Kylo Ren, Supreme Leader of the First Order, and you cannot imagine him as anything other than an enemy. Nevertheless, he has come to us with a desire to join the Resistance.”

Rey felt Ben’s faint contempt for that. The desire to join you, more like, he said across the bond. I don’t give a shit about politics.

Try not to say that during your testimony, she replied, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. His tetchiness made her feel better, strangely enough. Whatever happened today, the two of them would continue on unchanged, as familiar to each other as their own selves.

Leia swept the assembly with a stern look that made Rey want to sit straighter in her chair. Maybe the mother and general personas were closer to each other than Rey had guessed. “I vouch for this man,” Leia continued. “I’m telling you that right away. I believe he has reformed and that his intentions to join us are genuine, but I understand that many of you do not have my… history with Kylo Ren, nor my faith in him. Today I will rectify that.”

The word ‘history’ sent another ripple through the room. Commander Kerelle frowned at Leia. “With all due respect, general, we all share your history with Kylo Ren. You nearly died under the bombardment of his forces.”

Leia shook her head. “And this is why I should have shared my connection to Ren far sooner. Concealing it was a decision made out of pride and fear that my allies would no longer respect me if they knew the truth. I knew Kylo Ren long before he turned to the dark side and became the killer
you know him as.”

Rey eyed Ben, concerned about how tightly he was gripping the arms of his chair. Leia’s speech was affecting him: his face was placid, but that unemotional mask concealed a howling tempest. He was afraid of this revelation. She dug into his emotions and found many facets to that fear: that these people would learn too much of his heart and his weaknesses, that they would judge Leia, that this would result in the ruination of everyone he cared about.

*It’s all right,* she said soothingly. *Let her do this. Let her stand up for you.*

“Kylo Ren is an assumed name,” Leia said. “He took it upon leaving the Jedi Temple where my brother, Luke, taught Force-sensitive children. He was one of Luke’s pupils.”

Commander Kerelle looked taken aback. “You knew him while he was at this school?” he asked. “That would have been more than a decade ago.”

Leia smiled wryly. “I knew him long before that. His original name, and the name he has now re-assumed, is Ben Solo. He’s my son.”

The room exploded into an uproar. Some of the commanders stood and pounded on their desks, shouting accusations or demanding explanations. Kerelle blanched and recoiled, looking at Leia with undisguised horror. “Your son?” Kerelle asked. “I thought he was dead, killed when the temple burned.”

Leia lifted a hand for silence, and her authority was such that the room settled back down. “I lied,” Leia said simply. “I didn’t know how to explain to my allies what had happened: that my son had turned to the dark side and taken up with the First Order and that vile being, Snoke. Being revealed as the daughter of Darth Vader nearly destroyed my political career—in my foolish pride and my desire to remain an asset to the Resistance, I chose not to risk further damage to my reputation.”

Ben’s pain vibrated over the bond, and Rey wanted to weep for him. His mother was confessing what Ben had felt all along—that she had always put her career first, rather than the wellbeing of her own child.

“I am ashamed of myself,” Leia said. Her voice thickened, and a tear trailed down one cheek. “It is my greatest regret in life that I abandoned my son—not once, but twice. First when I made him feel unwanted because of his Force abilities, and secondly when I didn’t do everything I could to find him and bring him back to the light.” Leia bowed her head. “I have failed as a mother and as a human being.”

The room was deathly still. Rey held her breath, hardly able to believe that Leia was stripping her own soul bare like this. She had expected the general to claim Ben as her son, then quickly and efficiently move past the objections with some well-plotted excuses. She hadn’t expected this emotional self-excoriation.

Ben was crying, too, although Rey knew he was trying desperately not to. Tears trailed silently down his cheeks, and Rey could tell by scanning the Force signatures in the room that the sight of Ben crying was accomplishing just as much as Leia’s words.

“I ask your forgiveness for my silence,” Leia told the committee, “but that is not where the bulk of my apology must go. I reserve that for Ben.” She turned to him and clasped her hands to her chest. “Please forgive me, Ben. I’m so sorry for all the ways in which I failed you.” She was openly weeping now, and through the Force, Rey knew it wasn’t just a ploy to garner sympathy. The general was coming unraveled.
Ben clenched his jaw tight and nodded once, brusquely. Having these vulnerabilities exposed in front of others was hard for him, but Rey recognized that it would inspire more trust than any secrets he might reveal about the First Order. *Hug her,* she said across the bond. *And not just for appearances. She needs it.*

Ben swallowed hard, then rose from his chair and crossed to Leia. He wrapped her in his arms, burying his face in her hair. Mother and son clasped each other tight, shaking. The assembled commanders stared in silence, horrified and touched all at once.

When Ben and Leia finally drew apart, Leia pressed her hand against Ben’s cheek and murmured something to him. He nodded and wiped his eyes before resuming his seat.

Leia turned to face the group again. Unlike Ben, she left the tears glistening on her cheeks, letting her allies see her vulnerability as they had so often seen her strength. Maybe it was a bit of a ploy, but Rey wouldn’t judge her for that. She wouldn’t judge Leia for anything that might save Ben’s life.

“So as you see,” Leia said, “this situation is more complicated than it initially appeared. I ask that you let Ben prove both his moral reformation and his sincere desire to join us. Ask him your questions about the First Order—he has offered to provide any information we might seek. And you may ask either of us about the Force—I cannot overestimate the role of Snoke and the dark side in what happened to my son. He has battled his way back to the light, but he was young and vulnerable when Snoke recruited him.”

Rey sensed Ben’s conflict at blaming the dark for his actions. He didn’t want his sins excused or laid at someone else’s door, but Leia had been right to suggest emphasizing the effect of the dark side of the Force. There was so much nuance in what had happened over the last thirty years, but nuance didn’t lend itself well to tribunals.

The questions began flying fast. How many dreadnoughts did the First Order currently command, and where were they located? What were the greatest weaknesses of the fleet? Which systems had been deemed most vulnerable to revolt? How was the establishment of local governments going, and would any governors be open to rebelling against the First Order?

Ben answered all of them calmly and in detail. He seemed to have no compunctions about betraying his former allies, and the way he spoke about the generals and officers of the First Order made his contempt for them clear. “They were short-sighted warmongers,” he said. “They had little idea of how to actually rule.”

“What happened on the Domination?” Commander Kerelle asked. The gray-haired man did not look impressed with Ben's testimony so far. “All our sources can determine is that there was a confrontation of some kind and that many of the generals were killed—and you, supposedly. The Resistance was blamed for it, of course.”

Ben tapped his fingers on the desk, the only sign of his internal agitation. He was reliving the furious violence of that day, and while it wasn’t a positive memory overall, there were definitely parts of it he looked back on with fondness—stabbing Hux, cutting down the generals, proving his mettle as he made his way back to Rey.

Rey ducked her head, not wanting anyone to see the smile tugging at her lips. Her dark knight was still bloodthirsty, and she ought to have been appalled that he had enjoyed some of that bloody coup... but she wasn’t.

“The generals wanted to destroy Myrtah,” Ben said.
Kerelle gasped. “Is there a new superweapon in development?”

“No,” Ben said, his tone indicating his irritation at being interrupted. “They wanted to bomb the major settlements and make an example of the planet. My position was that Myrta’s declaration of war was symbolic and unlikely to present any sort of challenge to the First Order, and that it would be better for galactic stability if we disregarded it. The generals disagreed and initiated a coup. I killed them and escaped.”

Kerelle looked surprised, then furious. “And yet you didn’t hesitate to obliterate the Hosnian System. You murdered billions of people, including—” He choked on the words, then pressed forward. “Including my family.”

Ben’s mouth twisted, and regret flickered across the bond. “I’m sorry for your loss and for the loss of so many other lives. The planet was destroyed by General Armitage Hux on the orders of Supreme Leader Snoke. I was not involved.” Then he hesitated, glancing at Rey, and she flashed back to one of their earliest conversations, when she’d railed at him across the galaxy from an abandoned ship on Jakku. “Although that is not an excuse. I was allied with the First Order at the time—I acknowledge this and can only offer my sincere regret for supporting a regime capable of such a monstrous crime.”

“How prettily you apologize,” Kerelle sneered. “Do think we have forgotten that you personally led troops into battle against the Resistance? You have killed countless of our members. You hunted us across the galaxy and attempted to destroy us on Crait. And now you show up here and expect us to believe you’ve reformed?” He shook his head. “I cannot believe anyone capable of such a change.”

“Perhaps that is a failure of your imagination, rather than my character,” Ben said acidly.

Ben. Behave.

He didn’t acknowledge her mental command, but Rey saw frustration flash across his face. She knew he hated being accused and doubted after such a long, difficult journey to redemption. He isn’t listening, Ben said.

*He just doesn’t understand your journey—he can’t see it the way we do. Tell the council about the Force.*

Ben took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment as he wrestled himself back under control. “I apologize for snapping, Commander Kerelle,” he said after a few moments. “This confession is painful to me. I hate the man I was, and reliving those sins is hard.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Kerelle said in a tone that made it clear he was anything but. “I hadn’t considered how difficult it would be for you to be held accountable for your actions.”

“Commander,” Leia interjected, but Ben looked at her and shook his head.

“Commander Kerelle is right,” Ben said. “I committed heinous deeds. I tortured and murdered without remorse—or with some remorse that I tried to ignore. I betrayed my own family.” His voice grew hoarse. “I killed my own father. There is nothing I can say that will ever make up for those atrocities.”

He stood up, and the guards immediately leveled their blasters at him. He gave the soldiers an exasperated look, then faced Leia. “General Organa, I need to share more about my experiences with Snoke. I ask your permission to remove my shirt.”

Rey’s eyes widened. He wasn’t seriously going to…
Leia’s brow furrowed; she clearly didn’t understand what the request had to do with Snoke. “If it will help this council understand your actions, then I will allow it,” she said.

Ben nodded and stripped off his tunic without further preamble, revealing the chest that Rey was now intimately familiar with. She trailed her eyes lovingly over the pale skin spattered with moles, the heavy slabs of his pectorals, the corrugated ridges of his abdomen. He was beautiful, but something about the sight made a gasp go through the room. Rey frowned and focused on Force signatures, trying to determine what had caught everyone’s attention.

Ben’s scars.

There were dozens, maybe hundreds, marring his skin. Rey no longer viewed them with alarm or thought much about them at all—they were just part of him—but she, too, had been appalled when he’d first revealed them.

Ben shifted from foot to foot, obviously uncomfortable at baring himself like this. “Snoke first began whispering in my mind when I was a young child,” he said. “I can’t remember a time when he wasn’t speaking to me. He told me my parents despised me and that no one understood me. He promised me I had a great destiny to fulfill.”

Leia made a pained noise; she must not have realized how early Snoke had begun corrupting her son.

“I know now that his goal was to destroy the Skywalker legacy and seize power for the dark,” Ben continued, “but at the time, he was the only person who understood that my powers came from emotion. They were hard to control, and the traditional teachings of the Jedi did little to tame them. It was only through Snoke’s guidance that I learned to channel my emotions into purpose.”

He turned to show the muscled expanse of his back, then lifted a hand to point to a rough scar on his shoulder. “My uncle, Luke Skywalker, tried to kill me when he realized Snoke was in my head and that I was drawing strength from the dark side of the Force. I brought the building down on top of us, then fled to Snoke, who had promised to help me.”

He turned around again and lifted one hand. “When I arrived, Snoke taught me his first lesson: that pain was educational. He ripped open my mind, then broke my arm and each of my fingers, one by one.”

Rey knew this from witnessing his dreams, but she still nearly drowned in rage every time she thought about what Ben had experienced. She glanced at Leia and saw that the general had her hands pressed to her mouth.

“He knocked me unconscious afterwards,” Ben said. “The second lesson began as soon as I woke up. For me to claim my destiny and truly come into my power, I had to kill the boy I had been. Destroy Ben Solo entirely. Snoke ripped memories out of my mind and tainted them with his poisonous words. Everyone I’d ever known hated me. My family had abandoned me. No one in the galaxy would ever value me… except for him.”

He gestured to more scars on his pectorals and side. “When he wasn’t breaking my bones with the Force, he made me spar with fellow pupils. They were allowed to wear armor; I was not. If I ever grew so injured that I couldn’t fight, he would have me dragged before him so he could inflict even deeper wounds. If I screamed or cried, the punishment grew worse. He would continue until I either blacked out or found a way to hold perfectly still.”

“Ben,” Leia said. “You don’t have to—”
“I do,” he said. “For you to understand the monster I became, you need to know what happened.” He gestured to his knees next. “I’ll spare you me taking my trousers off, but trust me when I say the scars continue. He made me kneel on broken glass for a week at a time, meditating on Darth Vader’s ruined helmet. He starved me and denied me water. He tortured me mentally and physically every single day that I was with him, and he told me every punishment made me stronger.”

The commanders stared at him with abject horror. They hadn’t imagined that he might be a victim, just as Rey hadn’t understood it at first. It was easier to imagine Kylo Ren as a violent, vindictive fiend with no desire save to burn the galaxy to ashes. The reality—that he was a human being, someone’s son, who had been tortured worse than any of them could imagine—was harder to accept.

“This went on for nearly a decade,” Ben said. His voice was empty now, chill as death. He was disassociating, Rey realized, finding solace in a factual recitation of the pain he’d been subjected to. She would need to pull him back to himself later, when they were alone, but for now, she supported anything that helped him get through this. “Snoke tortured me every day while teaching me about the dark side of the Force. The dark side thrives on anger and pain, and my skills grew exponentially. Soon I believed Snoke was hurting me for my own good.”

Ben touched his face next. “He gave me the mask I used to wear. It was meant to bring me closer to Darth Vader, who he had shaped into my idol. On the day I received it, I accidentally thought about my family, so Snoke ripped my arms and legs out of their sockets. He left me on the floor of his throne room for an entire day before sending a medic.”

Leia buried her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking as she wept. She wasn’t the only one; a few sniffles sounded around the room.

Ben took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “I cannot relate everything he did to me, but that was just the beginning. My body shows many of the scars, but a lot of the damage was internal. Sometimes the old injuries ache so much I struggle to sleep.” He glanced at Rey then, and she felt a tendril of fondness creep through the icy detachment he had cloaked himself with.

“You help me sleep,” he said across the bond. “Nothing hurts when you’re around.”

Even Commander Kerelle looked shaken at the recitation. “You’re saying Snoke tortured you into becoming… what?” he asked.

“His weapon,” Ben said bluntly. “A tool to use in order to subjugate the galaxy. I was a blunter instrument than he preferred, but all I knew was hate and anger. I couldn’t control my temper, couldn’t think past my impulses. I was wretched and evil and wrong.” He shook his head. “And none of this is an excuse meant to wipe away my past. It is simply meant to help you understand how I became Kylo Ren—and how I came back.”

“How did you come back?” Kerelle asked.

Finally, Ben’s icy mask cracked. He smiled a little and looked at Rey again. “You have a remarkable asset in Rey. I got to know her through… admittedly not ideal circumstances. I abducted and interrogated her in an attempt to find Luke Skywalker. I fought with her, and she gave me this scar.” He trailed his finger over it. “It’s the only one I wear with pride.”

She smiled at that, hardly caring that some of the commanders were looking at her askance. “You are an incredible man,” she said across the bond.

His cheeks flushed a little. “But while I began our acquaintance with hate in my heart, as we kept speaking with each other, she called to the light in me.” His eyes softened further, and Rey’s heart fluttered at the adoring look he cast her. “When I escaped from the Domination, Rey rescued me.
She helped me process what had happened to me and what I had done. She heard me confess all my crimes and helped me meditate to center myself. And slowly, over weeks, I learned how to be Ben Solo again. I found the light.

Quiet fell over the room. Rey couldn’t look away from Ben, not even to see how everyone was processing these revelations. She only had eyes for her dark knight, who had displayed more courage over the last weeks than anyone she had ever known. *You’re my universe*, she told him.

*And you’re mine.*

“And what, precisely, is your relationship with Rey now?” Kerelle asked, shattering the moment. Rey stiffened, not liking the question. What she had with Ben was theirs and theirs alone.

Ben didn’t hesitate to answer, though. “I am dedicated to her, body and soul, for as long as she will have me.”

Rey sucked in a little breath. It was the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to her, the words like poetry. An incredulous murmur went around the room, and a few of the observers twisted in their seats to look at her. Rey couldn’t conceal her radiant smile.

“It is well known,” Leia said, drawing the room’s attention, “that adherents to the dark side of the Force cannot know love. They believe it weakens them. If Ben feels this way about Rey, it is the clearest sign that he truly has reformed.”

Leia didn’t say that the Jedi hadn’t believed in love, either, Rey noticed, but that omission hardly mattered. A lie for the sake of the greater good was something Rey might not have understood a few months ago, but she understood it now.

Ben slipped his tunic back on and sat down. “I have told you what happened to me and how I came back to the light,” he said. “I’m happy to provide any additional information about the First Order you may require. My only request is that you treat Rey with the respect she deserves. She is, quite simply, the best person I’ve ever known.”

Rey couldn’t avoid crying at that point. She hiccuped a little as tears dripped onto her shirt. *I love you*, she told him. *I’m so proud of you.*

Leia stood up again to face the room. She looked years older than she had when this trial had begun, and while Rey didn’t like seeing the general so haunted, she was glad Leia finally understood the horrors her son had suffered. “Thank you for your honesty, Ben,” Leia said. “If you and Rey wish to leave the room, I believe it’s time for the council to discuss what we’ve learned today and how to move forward.”

Ben nodded and stood. Rey hurried to his side and entwined her fingers with his as they left. She didn’t care if it made her look silly or sentimental; she couldn’t go another minute without touching him. The guards still held them at blasterpoint, but the tension that had filled their first walk to the cell had dissipated. The hard part was over; all they had to do now was wait for the council’s verdict.
Chapter 43

As soon as the cell door closed behind them, Ben sank to the floor. He rested his elbows on his knees and dropped his head into his hands. “That was awful,” he said.

Rey sat next to him, sliding one arm around his waist. “You were wonderful,” she said, nosing at his shoulder. “Ben, you’re so brave.”

He made a dismissive noise. If he were truly brave, would he be shaking right now? Tremors raced over his limbs, and his stomach churned with nausea. He’d ripped open his past for those vultures, and he felt bare and exposed, like some hapless crustacean stripped of its shell.

He rubbed his eyes hard, trying to dispel the lingering afterimages of Snoke’s torture. He hated thinking about those years. It was bad enough that he’d confessed what had happened to him, but fuck, why had he shown the Resistance leaders his scars? In a moment of sheer lunacy, he’d imagined it might help them understand the depths of his darkness, but nothing could ever do that, and now he felt like he’d given up something precious.

No one but Rey, Snoke, and a few medical droids had ever seen the extent of the damage done to his body. Now his own mother had seen the scars, and while the guilt on Leia’s face had been briefly gratifying, now Ben felt sick. He wanted to scrape his skin off.

“Hey,” Rey said, rubbing his back. “What’s going on in your head?”

He was blocking her out, he realized. It hadn’t been intentional, just part of his intense desire to crawl into a dark hole and never be seen again. He shook his head, unable to drop those shields just yet.

She didn’t push. She just stroked his back and cuddled close to him, offering her silent support.

Fuck. There ought to be a fundamental law of the universe that paired good, kind, patient people with the paragons of virtue they deserved. Rey was freakishly accepting of his angst, and Ben wished he could say that there would be an end to it someday, but he honestly doubted it. “What are you doing here?” he asked, unable to restrain the outburst. “You’re locked in a dismal cell with a scarred, fucked-up murderer when you could be with your friends.”

She sat up and glared at him. “We went over this earlier.”

He groaned and leaned his head back against the wall. “I just… Rey, I have no idea what I’m doing.”

She scrambled until she was kneeling facing him, placing her hands on his knees as she studied him. Her gaze was penetrating, and Ben shifted uncomfortably. He didn’t even understand the whirlwind of emotion currently ripping him to shreds; how could she possibly figure him out?

“You have no idea what you’re doing with the Resistance?” she asked. “Or right now?”

“I have to pick?”

Her lips twitched at that, but she kept staring at him with that eerie, ages-old wisdom in her eyes. Maybe Rey didn’t consider herself wise, but her perceptiveness was downright unsettling. “You either have to use your words or let me in your head,” she said. “If you want me to understand, that is. Which I hope you do.”
He sighed. He did want her to understand. He always wanted her to understand. But he felt raw and exposed and generally terrible, and how could he share his muddled thoughts with her? “I hate that I showed them my scars,” he said. It was only a tiny piece of a larger picture, but at least it was one feeling he had a handle on. “Those are private.”

Her brow furrowed, but not in judgment—Rey was just concentrating very, very hard. And because Ben found her adorable and never wanted her to struggle too much, he opened his shields the tiniest bit and let her in.

Rey’s brow cleared. “Oh,” she said. “You feel vulnerable.”

“I don’t know if that’s quite the right word,” he groused, not liking how weak it made him sound.

“You don’t like anyone knowing your weaknesses. And you’re right—those memories are painful and private. Of course it’s upsetting to share them.”

“Will you stop with the validation?” The words burst out of him, and kriff, he had no idea where this outrage had come from, either. He’d veered wildly off course over the last hour, and he had no idea how to become stable again. “I’m a bad man who did terrible things, and whatever they wanted to see or know was their right, but I’m selfish and terrible and I hated it—”

Rey clapped her hand over his mouth. Normally her brute force attempts to shut him up were endearing, but he was upset and angry and spiraling into… something… and it just made him madder. He protested, but naturally, she couldn’t understand a word he said, muffled as it was by her palm.

“It isn’t validation,” she said. “Ben—” He nipped her finger, and she jerked and then glowered at him. “No, Ben, seriously. Shut the fuck up.”

He was pissed, but he was also… panicking? Was that a thing Ben did? He stared at her with wide eyes, unable to come up with anything to say. Not that Rey had actually uncovered his mouth so he could speak.

Rey leaned in and kissed the top of the scar she’d given him.

The press of her lips stilled Ben. He inhaled raggedly, attention torn between the press of her mouth on his forehead and his nausea at having exposed his deepest traumas to a room full of strangers who despised him.

Rey kept kissing his scar, working her way down with gentle pressure. She moved from his cheek to his neck, tracing the line all the way down to the collar of his shirt. The garment was fucking brown, of course, because he had agreed to soften himself for these Resistance idiots, not that he had kept the stupid shirt on for long, anyway. At least it was Rey-brown, like sand.

Rey drew back and gripped his face in her hands in the way she did when she had an important point to make. “I’m proud of you,” she said. When Ben started to protest, she leaned in and kissed his nose, cutting him off. “This isn’t validation. Or it is, but not out of obligation or something. You told everyone in that room what happened to you. Of course it’s upsetting.”

“I’m not fragile—”

“Have I mentioned recently that you should shut the fuck up? Because seriously, Ben, just let me say my piece. Then you can say whatever you want.”

He glared at her. His high-handed pseudo-Jedi. Luke had been like this, too, perpetually confident in
his rightness.

So are you, she shot back across the mental bond. Strangely, she didn’t seem upset with him—just determined. And you can rail at me all you like later.

He didn’t rail. He merely expressed his opinions—forcibly. “This is my experience, you know,” he said, embracing the energy that irritation provided. It was better than feeling wretched and sick. “Surely I should be the one talking.”

Rey muttered something, then attacked his shirt. He blinked at her, startled as she stripped it off. Did she seriously want sex right now? Because Ben felt fucking terrible, but the heat of the argument was getting to him, and Rey could seduce him anywhere and anytime with very little effort and he would accept whatever she gave gladly…

Instead of mauling him, Rey gently resumed kissing the scar where it had been hidden by his clothes before. Her lips worked a soft, damp path down his chest, and Ben gritted his teeth, struggling to keep his head. Was this a distraction? Some kind of manipulation? What was even happening right now? Why wasn’t she letting him pick a fight with her?

“What’s happening,” Rey said, glancing up at him from where she was flicking her tongue over his nipple, “is that you feel vulnerable and humiliated that your enemies witnessed your trauma. That’s normal, and if you would just listen to me instead of launching into some self-recriminatory tirade, you would understand that.”

“Nothing about this is normal.”

“I haven’t told anyone in the Resistance what my life was like on Jakku.” She breathed the words against his skin between kisses, moving to other, thinner scars on his chest. “Some of it, yes, but not the beatings I got from Plutt, not all the times I was terrified that someone was going to break in and rob or rape me. Not my friend who got caught in the sandstorm or how dead I always felt inside. Those are things only you know.”

Ben was honored by the trust implied by her confession, but she continued talking before he could say so. “If I had to stand in front of a crowd and tell them everything I’ve suffered and all my fears…” Rey shook her head. “I would feel violated, too.”

Ben made a strange noise then, half-whimper and half-outraged exclamation. Violated sounded too extreme… but was it? That confession had made him want to vomit, which was the way he felt whenever he thought about what Snoke had done to him. The same way he’d felt while Snoke was torturing him.

He wished he could take the last hour back so he could limit his testimony to details about the First Order, rather than diving into his own pain. Ben didn’t need to be emotionally… all right, shit, vulnerable… in order to be valuable to the Resistance, but he’d chosen to do it anyway. For Rey and for his mother.

“These scars are yours,” Rey said, kissing over another thick line that marked where Miriash’s mandalorian iron sword had flayed open the skin over his ribs. “They will always be yours. Your trauma isn’t public property.”

The breath rushed out of him. “Kriff, Rey, I’m so tangled up inside.”

She nodded against his chest as she licked another scar. “Of course you are.”

“I don’t even know what I’m feeling.” Whatever this potent mix of emotions was, it still howled
through him, a weird mix of vulnerability and hate and resentment and fear and Maker only knew what else. He was glad he’d seen Leia express regret in front of her allies, but he also wanted to run a million kilometers away and pretend no one in the universe knew what Snoke had done to him.

No one except Rey, of course. Rey was the exception to every rule.

“You don’t have to know what you’re feeling,” Rey said, nibbling the jagged scar on his arm where the broken end of his humerus had once jutted through his skin after Snoke had thrown him into a wall. “You can just feel it.”

The universe was fundamentally unfair to saddle this dream of a girl with an asshole like him, but Ben wasn’t going to protest. He lifted a hand to stroke her hair. “I’m sorry.”

She shook her head and kept kissing all the way down to the fingers of his other hand. “There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

“I’m barely making sense, and I tried to pick a fight with you because I’m uncomfortable.”

Her lips curved against his skin, and she looked up at him mischievously. “Yes, I’m familiar with you.”

He smiled despite himself. “Brat.”

Rey tugged on him, rearranging him until he was lying on his back on the floor, and he let her, even though the concrete was rough and cold. It didn’t matter what she wanted to do to his body—

Rey tugged on him, rearranging him until he was lying on his back on the floor, and he let her, even though the concrete was rough and cold. It didn’t matter what she wanted to do to his body—

he would cede control of it to her gladly.

“It’s still yours, Ben,” she said, nuzzling against a cluster of shrapnel marks near his hip. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. You shared your body and your pain with the council, but they don’t own you. No one owns you but yourself.”

He sighed. “You own me, too.”

“All right,” she acknowledged as she nosed through the trail of hair below his navel. His cock stirred at her proximity. “If you insist, but I’ll say it the way you said it to me when you showed me the dark. You belong to me. You’re mine to protect and fight and fuck and worship.”

Those hot, dirty words coming from her soft lips sent his arousal spiking. He jerked as she nibbled his other hipbone. “What do you want, Rey?” he asked softly.

She smiled up at him. “I want you to take off your clothes and get on the bed, and then I want to kiss every single scar on your body. We’re going to reclaim them.”

He groaned, and the churning anger, fear, and vulnerability were pushed aside by a tide of gratitude and want. His clever scavenger—she truly did understand what he needed, even though he hadn’t had a clue. “Yes,” he said, already painfully hard at the thought. “Yes, those scars belong to us.”

They moved to the bed, and Rey followed through on her promise. She kissed each and every scar, from his forehead to his toes, turning him over so she could get the ones on his back. As she did, she whispered endearments against his skin, telling him he was beautiful and strong, that she’d never met anyone so brave, that she wanted to worship his body, scars and all. “This is just for us,” she said, sliding her tongue down his spine. “They don’t get to have this.”

“Never,” he vowed, and this was giving him back the power he felt like he’d lost in that conference room. He had ceded nothing but stories and the sight of his scars to those hostile strangers—only he
and Rey knew the feel of his marred flesh or would ever experience his most private memories.

Piece by piece, Rey built him back up. By the time she got to the last stretch of skin she hadn’t kissed—a patch on his calf—Ben was sweating and desperate to have her. He didn’t feel weak anymore. He was a man who belonged to a woman, and she belonged to him in return, and he had no obligation to anyone or anything beyond that.

When her lips caressed the final scar—the one he’d stitched up while she’d watched through the Force bond—he surged upright, tugging her up with him. He slammed his mouth down over hers, wanting to eat her alive, wanting to show her the force of his need, hunger, and gratitude. Rey let him in, opening her mouth eagerly and sending her pleasure across the bond to him. She was melting for him, and he caught little, thrilling snatches of thought—how proud she was to belong to such a powerful man, how aroused she had become while kissing his skin.

“You’re mine,” he said against her lips. She nodded, and he promptly began ripping her clothes off. This was Rey, his savior and the other half of his soul, and he needed to be inside her now.

Once she was nude, he lifted her in his arms and staggered towards the wall. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and when her back hit the wall a little more forcefully than Ben had intended, she moaned. Her molten arousal poured across the bond.

“Yes,” she said as Ben reached between their bodies to line his cock up with her entrance. “Yes, fuck me like this. Maker, you’re so strong—”

He slid inside, gritting his teeth at the tight, wet, perfect fit. She whimpered and clutched her inner muscles around him. “Say it again,” he ordered as he began fucking her with deep, jerky strokes.

“You’re so strong.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his neck, gasping with each sharp thrust. “You’re so powerful, Ben. It turns me on so much.”

He felt powerful in that moment, fucking up into this good, patient, understanding woman until she couldn’t form coherent sentences anymore. She had dragged him back from a place of vulnerability, and now she was giving him her own vulnerability in exchange. Letting him take her body as hard as he needed to and reveling in every punishing thrust.

The lock clicked, and the door swung open a few inches.

Rey flung a hand out, and the door slammed shut on a wave of Force energy. “I’m busy,” she growled, and Ben stifled a laugh against her shoulder.

“Busy? What could they possibly be busy with… oh.”

“That’s—Lord, that’s twisted. What do we do?”

The panicked voices outside weren’t familiar, which meant they probably belonged to the soldiers who had escorted them to this cell. Ben didn’t care if they knew what he was doing with Rey. He felt like screaming his triumph at being inside her to the entire world. He thrust harder, and Rey make a sexy little choking noise. “Come back later,” Ben ordered loudly, and the soldiers made matching noises of alarm before he heard the patter of retreating footsteps.

Rey laughed a little breathlessly, then groaned. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. Ben—”

He knew that tone. Rey was on the edge, about to come. “Touch yourself,” he ordered. His hands were too busy supporting her as he rammed into her.
Rey squeezed a hand between their bodies to press against her clitoris. She orgasmed almost immediately, her pussy fluttering around him as she gasped and clutched him closer. Her cheeks burned red, and sweat trickled down her brow. When she opened her eyes again, they were dazed and filled with bliss.

Ben had gone from abject misery to the pinnacle of triumph in just a few minutes. He felt like he could take on an army by himself, like he could stand in front of that room of Resistance leaders and tell them anything without flinching. He was strong enough to take care of Rey, and no matter what had been done to him, he had never truly broken.

He never would.

He came hard, jerking up into her as the cum pulsed out of him. The orgasm was mind-scrabling, so dizzying he took a few steps back and sank down onto the cot with Rey still wrapped around him. She clutched him tight, burying her face in the crook of his neck. “Thank you,” she moaned against his skin. “That was amazing, thank you…”

He squeezed her, reveling in the quivers that raced over her sweat-slick skin. “You’re the one who deserves thanking,” he said. “I feel about a million times better—and not just because of the sex.”

She giggled. “What can I say? Since this is how you process emotions, I’m particularly incentivized to help. It’s very selfish of me, really.”

He brushed his lips against her temple. “Oh yes, very selfish.”

“It’s all that dark in me.”

“Mhm.”

“Ben?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think we’ll have time for another round before those soldiers come back?”

“I think it’s safe to say they’re operating on our schedule now, Rey.”

#

Ben was grateful for his relatively short refractory period, which had allowed him to bend Rey over the cot for a slow, deep fuck before they returned to the council room forty minutes later. Seeing the irritation on the Resistance leader’s faces, though, he wished they had taken even longer.

“Kyl—Ben Solo,” Commander Kerelle said, glaring at him. “I see you have finally deigned to join us.” His cheeks were a little pink, and oh, this prudish discomfort was delicious. It almost made up for Ben having to literally bare himself before them.

“I was unaware there was a schedule,” he said coolly. “Perhaps you should have shared it with us.”

Rey was seated in the back of the room again, and he felt the bubble of her mirth across the bond as she pressed a hand over her mouth, undoubtedly covering a smile.

“I was unaware prisoners led such… busy lives.”

“Commander,” Leia said, sounding exasperated. When Ben and Rey had first walked in, looking rather disheveled, she had lifted her eyes to the heavens before shaking her head—an expression that
had reminded Ben strongly of Luke—but she seemed to have recovered her composure. “Let’s move on to the business at hand.”

“Very well.” Commander Kerelle cleared his throat. “We have discussed the information you shared with us and verified it against our sources wherever possible. It seems you were telling the truth.”

Ben raised a brow to convey his disdain that the council had considered any other possibility.

“Considering the value of your information about the First Order, and with the perspective of the… other information you shared, it’s this council’s decision that you may stay with the Resistance.”

Ben’s lips parted, and a flush of heat passed over his skin. They were truly going to let him stay? “As a prisoner?” he asked, wondering what the catch was.

“No,” Leia said. “As a member.”

A member of the Resistance. It wasn’t a title Ben had ever aspired to, and he was still wary about tying himself to yet another militant group, but Rey’s wide grin made up for any misgivings. She was ecstatic at the news, and that was good enough for Ben.

He inclined his head. “Thank you all for your generosity.”

“There are conditions,” Kerelle said, and that, at least, was familiar to Ben. It was lunacy to allow him to stay with them in the first place, but at least they were placing conditions on him. “You will continue to provide us with information about the First Order. You will not harm anyone on this base, and at the first hint of misbehavior, you will be jailed again.”

Ben nodded. “That’s fair.”

“And…” Kerelle sighed. “I’m not convinced this will be particularly useful, considering the delay we just experienced, but the Jedi Rey will be responsible for keeping an eye on you, since she’s the only person who can match you in power.”

Ben stifled a laugh. “I submit to the will of the council,” he said, bowing his head. And I look forward to your eyes all over me, he sent across the bond to Rey. Be very thorough in your duties. Her amusement rippled back towards him.

“Of course, your lightsaber will be kept elsewhere unless you are granted permission to use it.”

Ben’s head snapped up at this, and he narrowed his eyes. “That’s my personal property.”

“It’s temporary,” Leia interjected before the conversation could escalate into an argument. “Think of this as a probationary period. Let’s get you settled in before we arm you again.”

He chafed at that restriction, but they were being far more lenient than they ought to be—no wonder the Resistance had dwindled to almost nothing, if they were this trusting of any supposedly reformed wolf that showed up on the sheep’s doorstep—so he refrained from arguing further. “Very well,” he said. “Although I would like to spar with Rey. It wouldn’t do for her lightsaber skills to get rusty.”

“That’s fine,” the general said. “Now, as to accommodations—there’s room for both of you in the barracks, but we’ll have to address the rest of our members to let them know the situation—”

“No,” Ben said. He absolutely was not going to bunk down with hundreds of Resistance fighters. “I want a private room.”
Kerelle’s dark brows crashed together. “You’re being very demanding for a prisoner—”

“Former prisoner. Now I’m a member of the Resistance and your best source for valuable
information about the First Order.”

“We don’t have enough rooms,” Leia said.

“Then I’ll take the cell.” Ben met her gaze calmly. “We all know it wouldn’t have held me anyway.”

His mother muttered something under her breath. “Fine,” she said more audibly. “You may sleep in
the cell.”

“And I want some furnishings. And a bigger bed.”

Rey made a little choking noise, and Leia rubbed her temples. “Fine,” she said again, cutting over
Kerelle’s outraged splutter. “We can make it more comfortable for you. The other members probably
wouldn’t have wanted you bunking with them, anyway.”

He could just imagine it—taking the top bunk while Finn or some other poor lackey quivered below,
unable to sleep for fear of the evil Kylo Ren. It was an amusing image, even though it was oddly sad
to know he would never truly be accepted.

He’d never been accepted anywhere, though. This was nothing new.

“Thank you for your flexibility,” Ben said. He swept a glance over the assembled council, who still
looked wary of him. “I’m grateful for your generous invitation to join the Resistance, and I look
forward to providing you with whatever information you need about the First Order.” Not about his
scars, though. Not now that they’d invited him in. Ben would do anything for Rey, but he had his
pride, and he didn’t owe them that.

Leia sighed heavily. “Then let’s hope none of us regret this.”
Chapter 44

Ben stood just outside the entrance to the hangar bay, listening as Leia addressed her underlings. It was the only place large enough to contain all of the several hundred Resistance members at once, but he had a feeling the space was about to get much tighter. He was supposed to make an appearance at some point, which would probably send the nearest bystanders into a scrambling panic.

This was his official “introduction” to the Resistance. Leia, being Leia, had decided to make a spectacle of it, with speeches and everything. To “ease her people into it,” as if that made any sense. Ben couldn’t help but think that if Rey was in charge, she probably would have gone ahead and talked to her allies directly, easing their fears before introducing him to small groups of people at a time. Giving them a chance to question him and assess his motivations.

But Rey wasn’t a general, a politician, or a princess. She didn’t scheme on a grand scale. Ben believed that to be one of her greatest strengths—that she cared about individuals so desperately—but he acknowledged that Leia had her own strengths. No other person could stand where she was now with such confidence, looking every inch the general as she prepared to tell her troops that she’d been lying to them for a decade.

“I know rumors have been flying around the base since the arrival of Kylo Ren,” Leia said, “and that many of you feel uneasy about his presence among us. The leadership council met with him earlier today, and we feel confident that his desire to defect from the First Order and join the Resistance is genuine. He has already provided us with vital information about our enemies.”

A murmur swept through the hangar. Ben peered around the doorway, taking note of the shaking heads and uneasy expressions. It would take more than Leia’s assurances to win these people to his side.

Not that he particularly cared about winning them to his side. He hadn’t been executed; that was enough for him.

“He will be staying with us,” Leia said, “so don’t be alarmed if you see him around the base. He’ll be closely watched, and Rey has taken personal responsibility for him.”

Rey stood in the row of officers behind Leia, along with Commander Kerelle and the other members of the council. Poe Dameron stood off to the side with his arms crossed. At the announcement that Rey would be Ben’s guard, Dameron sneered.

Ben wanted to punch that obnoxious look off his face.

Dameron wasn’t important enough to be a member of the leadership council—the news of his demotion to captain after getting the Resistance bombers destroyed was delicious—so he wouldn’t know anything that had been revealed behind those doors. Ben was grateful for it. He would rather jab his own eyes out than have Dameron know his weaknesses. Besides, there was a certain satisfaction to be had in mutual antagonism. Now that Hux was gone, Ben wouldn’t mind having someone to hate.

“I have a more important announcement to make,” Leia said. Ben tilted his head, wondering if she was actually going to go through with what she’d promised—to admit who Ben really was. She’d seemed earnest enough, but Leia had an eerie ability to channel her emotions into whatever course of action best suited her ambitions. He knew she felt deeply—he’d gotten that trait from
somewhere—but she’d always been able to wield those feelings with precision.

Except when it had come to Han. For Leia, Han had been the exception to everything, just like Rey was for Ben.

His heart ached at the thought of his father. If someone took Rey away from him…

He would never forgive them.

“Kylo Ren’s real name is Ben Solo. He’s my son.”

Leia’s announcement hit like a grenade, sending shockwaves through the room. Ben braced himself against the relief and surprise that slammed into him. She had done it; she had claimed him in front of everyone.

Everyone was not happy about it, though.

The room filled with shouts and agitated questions. It was the scene in the council chamber all over again, except magnified exponentially. Dameron was snarling like a rabid beast, and some of the Resistance fighters looked downright nauseated at the news. Lovely.

He fixed his gaze on Rey and his mother. Their calm expressions gave him something to focus on besides the tumult of hatred currently filling the hangar. Ben had never sought to experience the emotions of others using the Force—he had enough of his own, thank you very much—but this outrage was raw and intense enough that there was no way to ignore it. He winced as hundreds of Force signatures flared bright with fury and horror.

Once the room had settled a bit, Leia launched into the story. It was much more practiced and polished than it had been in front of the leadership council. She spoke about Ben’s early manifestations of power and the lure of the dark side, informing everyone that a dark Force user named Snoke had been responsible for turning him. Thankfully, the torture was glossed over, but Leia’s narrative painted Ben as a victim in his own right, brainwashed and caught in thrall to a powerful overlord. Only now, with the clarity of time and distance, and with help from Rey, had he recovered the path to the light.

Ben glowered. He hated having his sins excused away. He wanted to scream at all of them: It wasn’t just Snoke. It was me. I did those things. Sometimes I even liked them.

I know, Rey told him across the bond. She was still staring calmly out over the crowd, but he knew her attention was largely fixed on him. But they won’t understand. Not right away.

Not ever, you mean.

Give them time, Ben. Maybe you’ll make a few friends you can confide in.

He sneered to cover up his discomfort with the idea of friendship. Unlikely.

If I could roll my eyes right now, I would. Of course, Rey’s face remained stoically serene.

Ben couldn’t think of an appropriate rebuttal, so he just bared his teeth. Her laughter danced in his head.

“And now,” Leia said, sweeping her arm out in a grand gesture, “Ben will join us to say a few words.”
Oh, fuck. He’d known he would have to show his face and make some sort of apology, but now that the moment was upon him, dread curdled in his stomach. He stepped into the hangar, feeling awkward and large and unwelcome as the nearest Resistance members recoiled with cries of alarm. Every step he took sent people scattering like startled porgs, and he couldn’t decide if it was sad or funny.

Maybe both.

It only got worse once he was standing in front of the gathering, beside his mother. A sea of hostile and fearful faces stared at him, and there was nothing he could possibly say that would win them over. “Hello,” he started, lifting a hand in an awkward half-wave he immediately wanted to die over. “I’m sorry about… well, everything.”

_Sorry I was an evil dictator_, he didn’t say. _Really regret all the murder_. Those sentiments worked about as well in a public speech as they would in a greeting card.

Leia stared at him expectantly, and Ben sighed. Apparently more was required. “I’m truly horrified by who I became,” he said, forcing the words past the constriction in his throat. “No apology will ever be adequate, and I don’t expect you to understand why I became Kylo Ren. I just ask that you offer me the chance to prove myself as Ben Solo.”

This was horrible. The air practically stank with mistrust and hostility, and Ben felt naked in this brown getup, with his face exposed and no mantle of intimidation to protect him. These people were repulsed by him, and he honestly couldn’t blame them.

“I’m going to do my best to be a good ally,” he said. “I realize it will take time to earn your trust, and that for many of you, trust will never be an option. That’s fine. Just… give me a chance to prove myself.”

It was a terrible, redundant speech, but Ben wasn’t capable of great feats of oration at the best of times, which this decidedly was not. He could be eloquent in private, especially when it came to poetry or dirty talk, but this was a skill set he had never developed. Another reason for the mask: it had covered up his excruciating discomfort with human interaction.

He wouldn’t wear a mask again, though. For better or worse—and really, he knew it was for better—this was the path he’d chosen. Ben Solo, prodigal son and Resistance fighter.

“Wow.” The sarcastic word was followed by a few agonizingly slow claps as Poe Dameron stepped forward. “Great speech. Really makes up for the genocide.”

Ben gritted his teeth and focused on a spot on the wall. He would not look at the flyboy. He would not Force choke the flyboy.

“Captain Dameron.” Leia’s voice was quiet but lashed like a whip. “You’re risking another demotion.”

“With all due respect, general, you just admitted to lying to all of us for years and then asked us to welcome our worst enemy with open arms. Forgive me for thinking that requires more than a three-second apology from Kylo Ren.” He didn’t just sound angry—he sounded hurt. It was enough to drag Ben’s gaze to him. Dameron’s face was twisted with an array of emotion Ben unfortunately knew well: grief, fury, betrayal.

Dameron had been like a son to Leia after Ben’s departure. How fitting that the pilot should now experience what it felt like for a mother to disappoint him.
“I understand, Poe,” Leia said, more gently this time. “And I deeply regret failing to tell any of you about Ben. Coming to terms with this is going to take time. All I ask is that you listen and give Ben—and me—a chance to earn your trust.”

Dameron’s eyes flicked to Ben, and the sneer reasserted itself on his lips. “I’ll never trust a monster.”

Ben could feel Rey seething across the bond. She was about two seconds from leaping forward to defend him, but as gratifying as her protectiveness was, that would only cause more problems. *Let him be angry,* he told her.

*He’s being an ass.*

*Yes, I’m familiar with Captain Dameron.*

It was an echo of how she’d teased him in the cell, and it was enough to send a small spike of humor through her rage. *I want to hit him upside the head with my quarterstaff,* she said.

His girl had grown even more bloodthirsty since embracing the dark, and Ben loved it. *Patience,* he soothed. *There will likely be many more opportunities.*

“I have been a monster,” Ben said out loud, addressing Dameron directly. “I’m not going to claim otherwise. But people change—I have changed—and whether or not you ever trust me, I can only prove my sincerity through my actions from this point forward.”

He wondered if he sounded sincere. He didn’t care if Dameron trusted him, but he did care if his own monstrous reputation prevented him from being with Rey. And, admittedly, he felt more than a twinge of discomfort at seeing how much these people feared and hated him. Knowing exactly what he had done to earn that hate and fear.

“The Resistance is founded on hope,” Leia said before the pilot could open his mouth again. “Our ideals sustain us, and ultimately, they will lead us to victory. Let us exercise that idealism and hope now. Together, we can take down the First Order and restore peace to the galaxy.”

It was surreal how closely that speech echoed what Ben had heard from Snoke and the generals who ran the First Order. *Our cause is just, our mission clear. Together, we will restore order to the galaxy.*

Heavy silence fell over the gathering. Ben’s skin prickled with the weight of all those accusatory stares.

“I know this won’t be easy,” Leia said, “but I have faith in our ability to weather these changes together.” She lifted her hand in a gesture of dismissal—or maybe benediction, since she seemed practically deified here. “You may return to your duties.”

The Resistance members filed out of the hangar, muttering to themselves. Ben stayed behind, ignoring Dameron’s murderous glare as he left. Eventually, only Leia and Rey remained.

“What now?” Ben asked.

Leia lifted one shoulder in an elegant shrug. “That’s up to you. The council would like to meet with you again tomorrow morning, but for now, your time is your own.” She rested a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you for speaking in front of them today. I know it wasn’t easy for you.”

His mouth twisted. “Dameron was right about it being a terrible speech.”
“Dameron needs to keep his mouth shut,” Rey muttered. “Or I’ll shut it for him.”

Leia looked at Rey askance, seeming startled by her Jedi’s vehemence. “Go easy on Poe, please,” she said. “This came as a shock to him; he needs time to adjust. You know it takes time for his rational mind to catch up with his mouth.”

Ben huffed. *What rational mind?* he asked acidly across the bond.

Rey was amused, but he knew she was reliving the time she’d spent with Dameron before all of this, when the man had been charming and kind. She was actually fond of the pilot, even though she was angry now. *He’ll come around,* she said.

A familiar jealousy bubbled up at her defense of Dameron, but Ben breathed through it, trying to keep it from Rey’s attention. She didn’t need to know how irrational he got over the fucking flyboy. But given the quirk of her eyebrow, he hadn’t particularly succeeded in concealing his feelings.

Leia shook her head. “I’m not sure what’s going on between the two of you, but I feel like a third wheel, so I’ll leave you alone.” She cupped Ben’s cheek. “Thank you again. We’ll talk soon.”

Then the general swept out of the hangar, her elegant brown gown rustling over the concrete, and Ben was left with Rey.

“So.” He stared at his lover, a little terrified and a lot lost. What was he supposed to do now that the Resistance had officially sort-of welcomed him?

Luckily, her stomach chose that moment to gurgle. Rey made a face and clapped a hand over it, and Ben chuckled. His scavenger loved eating, and he considered it his solemn duty to keep her fed. “The mess hall it is,” he said.

#

Rey made a beeline straight for the stack of trays at the end of the food line, but Ben lingered in the doorway to the mess hall, immediately regretting the choice. Rey was garnering uneasy stares, which she seemed blissfully unaware of with the promise of food before her, but in a moment he would be the recipient of all those stares.

It was dinnertime, and the mess hall was mostly full. There weren’t any empty tables, which meant he and Rey would have to sit with someone. *Wonderful.*

Rey looked over her shoulder at him and widened her eyes as if to ask why he was dawdling when there was perfectly good food to eat. Ben took a deep breath, pushed his shoulders back, and walked into the mess hall.

He made it about ten steps before the first person screamed and flung their tray to the floor as they ran away from him. He winced as some gray, pudding-like substance splattered over his boots.

Pretend it’s blood, he told himself. *Pretend this is a battle.*

It was a sign of his poor moral fiber, but the imagery helped. He stiffened his shoulders and walked through the mess hall as if he were striding across a battlefield. More Resistance fighters cringed away from him or bussed their trays before fleeing from the room, but people always scattered in front of him; that was nothing new, nothing to feel hurt by. He kept his eyes focused on his true objective: Rey, who was watching the unfolding chaos with dismay.

By the time he reached her at the end of the food line, a fine sweat beaded on his brow. He took the
tray she offered wordlessly.

The line ahead of them shortened with alarming rapidity, and when they got to the head of it, none of the kitchen workers remained to serve them, either. Rey huffed something furious under her breath but immediately started scooping globs of various unknown substances on her plate.

Ben stared blankly at the tubs of so-called food. One thing was clear—the First Order’s kitchens were as superior as their firepower. Ben had dined on delicacies many nights on the Finalizer and thought nothing of it. It was how Leia and Han had dined, too, most nights. Ben had always thought Luke’s insistence on bland fare was some sort of Jedi self-denial, but maybe this was just how most people lived.

It was an unsettling thought. Ben had grown up wealthy and privileged, and for all that Snoke had hurt him, he’d never been denied the best technology or amenities (excluding the forced starvation periods, of course). Rey was actually excited about this slop— so much better than veg-meat and polystarch, she was thinking with glee—and he felt ashamed at his own immediate derision for the Resistance’s offerings.

He ladled up a scoop of brown-something and one of gray-something, then followed Rey towards an empty table. Of course, most of the tables were empty now. The few that were still occupied held what must have been the Resistance’s bravest heroes, although all of them were stiff-shouldered and completely silent.

Despite his hunger, Ben couldn’t manage to eat. The few people left in the room were watching him from the corners of their eyes, and it made him feel both exposed and horrible. He sighed and stood up, grabbing his tray. “I’m eating in the room.”

Rey was halfway through slurping down an enormous scoop of brown-something, and she looked up at him with wide eyes. I’ll join you, she said across the bond, her cheeks too stuffed with food for audible speech.

Ben shook his head. “No, you stay here. I just… I just want to be alone.” It wasn’t entirely true, because Rey would always be welcome wherever he was, but Ben didn’t want to deprive her of her first meal back at the Resistance base. And besides, he was exhausted and confused and oddly upset over the rapid emptying of the mess hall. A calculated retreat would give him time to recover his balance.

Rey swallowed, then nodded, accepting his words even though her concern prickled across the bond. “I’ll see you soon.”

“You…” Ben trailed off, because he really didn’t want to offer this, but he knew he ought to. “You can stay in the barracks if you like. If you want to be near your friends.”

Outrage lit up her face. “Absolutely not. I’m staying with you.”

Her loyalty to him was as miraculous as it was endearing. Ben would fling himself into a fiery pit for this woman and relish every second of agony if it meant she was happy and whole. He ducked in to kiss her, then thought better of it and retreated. There were prying eyes here, and Rey didn’t need more gossip impacting her return to her friends.

“I’ll see you in the room,” he said, then turned and left before she could say anything else.
Chapter 45

When Rey woke up the next morning, Ben was still sleeping soundly beside her. They were in their new bed, which had been delivered with surprising promptness, along with a dresser and a desk and chair. The room was nearly crammed full with even that small amount of furniture, but at least it felt like a bedroom, rather than a prison cell.

She took a few minutes to stare at Ben, admiring his handsome face and the dark tangle of his hair. His expression was soft in repose, emphasizing the plushness of his lips and the strangely boyish quality she suspected he would always have.

Rey sighed and slipped silently out of bed. She was hungry again, and besides, she wanted to talk to her friends. She missed them, but she also wanted to make them understand that Ben wasn’t Kylo Ren anymore. The way the mess hall had emptied last night had been alarming, and she hadn’t missed the way Ben’s jaw had tensed as he’d marched towards her like a soldier on a mission. The rejection had hurt him, even if he hadn’t wanted to acknowledge it.

Rey was his protector. She would fix this for him somehow.

But when she got to the mess hall, Finn and Poe weren’t there, and no one else would make eye contact with her. They sat nearly as stiffly as they had the previous night.

All right, so this would take time, too. Rey got in line and smiled at the woman serving lunch. “Hello,” she said. The woman didn’t respond, just threw a serving of vegetables onto her tray with unnecessary force.

Rey’s smile wavered as she faced the sea of tables. Most of them were half-full. She recognized a few pilots nearby, and she felt relief as she hurried towards them. “Good morning,” she said, sliding onto the bench. “How are—”

All four of them grabbed their trays and left, joining a group of maintenance workers at the next table. The brawniest pilot, a brash redhead named Davo Acylar who had a cocksure attitude and a crude sense of humor, shot Rey an angry glance over his shoulder.

Rey felt abruptly too ill to eat. She set her fork down carefully, staring at the pile of greens while she willed the heat in her cheeks to recede. Davo wasn’t a close friend, but she’d rescued him from Crait, damn it, and she’d had long conversations about ship maintenance with most of the other people at that table. She’d risked her safety for the Resistance more times than she could count; was this her reward?

A hand pressed onto her shoulder, and Rey jumped. She looked up into Rose Tico’s startled eyes.
“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you,” the raven-haired tech said with a hesitant smile. “I was hoping to catch up with you last night in the barracks, but you weren’t there.”

A rush of relief went through Rey. She still had one friend, at least. “Yeah, sorry, I’m not sleeping there.”

“Oh,” Rose’s brows drew together, and then her expression cleared. “Ooh, did they salvage another room? If you have your own space, we are absolutely going to have a party in there—”

“No,” Davo interjected, loudly enough to draw the attention of the entire mess hall. “She’s staying with Kylo Ren.” He sneered the name, then spat on the floor. A cleaning droid immediately hurried over to sanitize the space, but his casual disrespect of his surroundings angered Rey almost as much as his clear disdain for Ben did.

“His name’s Ben Solo, not Kylo Ren,” she snapped.

“You’re staying with him?” Rose asked, glancing nervously between the two of them. “Like as a guard?”

Davo laughed, and the sound had a mean edge to it. “She’s not a guard. It seems Rey here got a taste for the dark side while she was away.”

Rose’s eyes widened. “Rey, what is he saying?”

“I’m saying she’s Kylo Ren’s whore.”

The words exploded into the room like a bomb. For a moment Rey’s ears rang with the cruel accusation, and then silence rushed in to fill the space left behind. No one moved or spoke, but dozens of eyes were fixed on their table.

“Watch your mouth, Davo,” Rey said, low and deadly. Rage beat red-hot behind her eyes.

The man looked her up and down contemptuously. “I bet Kylo Ren’s watching your mouth real good. You like sucking First Order cock, huh?”

Rose gasped. “Davo!”

Rey cut her off by shooting to her feet and slamming her hands down on the table. The silverware rattled with the force of the impact… then kept rattling as her anger hummed in tune with the Force. As dishes levitated, the nearest diners edged away. “No one speaks to me like that,” Rey said. The dark side of the Force was screaming at her, telling her to gut this worthless cretin, and it took everything in her to resist. She wouldn’t fall into violence; it would only make everything worse.

One of the other techs, a woman Rey didn’t recognize, gripped Rose’s arm. “Come on, Rose. Let’s get out of here.”

“But—” Rose looked wildly between Rey and Davo. “Did you hear that awful thing he said?”

“It’s none of our business. Now come on, I need an engine consultation.” The woman didn’t even meet Rey’s eyes as she tugged Rose away, ignoring the tech’s protests.

Then it was just Rey, Davo, and a room full of hostile onlookers. The silverware shivered against the table, sending a ringing chatter through the room. As violence thickened in the air, most of the people watching retreated.
Rey closed her eyes and breathed deeply. *This isn’t you*, she told herself, even as she imagined driving a butter knife into Davo’s eye. *Find your peace.*

When she’d mastered herself enough to open her eyes again, she lifted her hands and sent the hovering plates clattering back to the tables. “You’re a weak, loathsome coward,” she told Davo. “And you aren’t half the man Ben Solo is.”

She stalked away before he could respond, leaving her untouched meal behind. She doubted she could have stomached food, anyway. Her feet took her back to the cell, where Ben was still sleeping peacefully, unaware of the confrontation.

Rey slipped into bed beside him and soothed her temper by counting his breaths. All that mattered was that Ben was here with her and that he was safe.

Of the two of them, he was going to face the hardest challenges in the coming weeks as the Resistance grew accustomed to his presence. Rey could deal with ill-mannered cretins like Davo just fine; she’d heard similar accusations growing up on Jakku, after all, and they’d made even less sense then. Insecure men loved to ridicule and demean independent women.

Well, it wouldn’t work. Rey would stand strong against idiocy and misogyny.

She nibbled her lip, coming to a decision. Ben didn’t need to know what had happened this morning. It would only distract him from his own difficult journey, and she didn’t want him to commit violence in her defense. As validating as the sight of him Force choking Davo would be, it would only make Ben’s assimilation into the group more difficult.

Rey breathed deeply, sinking into a light meditative state as she pushed her anger down. She slipped the memory away somewhere deep, where Ben wouldn’t find it unless he went digging.

The meditation was soothing, and soon Rey felt herself growing drowsy again. *It’ll get better,* she told herself before succumbing to the lure of sleep. *It has to.*

#

It didn’t.

No one was as aggressive as Davo had been, but the whispers followed her everywhere she went over the next few days. Accusing eyes watched her at all times, and whenever she reached for the Force signatures around her, she found them burning with distrust.

It seemed Kylo Ren had committed too many sins to be forgiven, and now Rey had been tainted by association.

She knew the hostility was wearing Ben down, too. He didn’t talk about it, but his eyes were shadowed, and his face had taken on the stoic stillness she remembered from the early days of their acquaintance. “It’s fine,” he said shortly the one time she brought it up. “They’re justified in hating me. It’ll take time to build trust.”

Rey should have pressed more, but she was lost in her own insecurity and sadness. She didn’t regret loving Ben—would *never* regret that—but the cold judgment of her allies was churning up bitter emotions she’d thought buried beneath the sands of Jakku.

*Am I so unlovable?* she thought more than once—quietly, when Ben wouldn’t hear her self-doubt. *What’s wrong with me that makes people abandon me at the first sign of trouble?*
Rey had fought and bled for these people. She’d joined their kriffing war, leaving behind any hope of her family ever returning for her. She’d become a killer for them. And now…

Now they saw her as a traitor. The woman who had brought the Supreme Leader of the First Order into their safe place, where eventually he might wreak some terrible vengeance on them. The woman who was having sex with a monster and had chosen him over her allies.

*I chose him*, she wanted to scream at them, *but I also chose you!* She’d dragged Ben here, subjected him to interrogation and discomfort, all because she’d cared about her friends and because she’d known Ben could help them save the galaxy. She’d wanted to unite everyone she cared about, not divide them further.

But the First Order had brutally destroyed far too many people. Commander Kerelle wasn’t the only one who had lost loved ones during the destruction of the Hosnian system, and most of the other people on the base had lost someone they cared about during the awful days leading up to Crait. The rebels were still licking their wounds; they were emotionally and physically traumatized from warfare, which meant they were incapable of accepting Ben right away.

It would take time. Rey told herself that over and over again, but even though she knew the words were true, she couldn’t find any comfort in them.

#

Finn, Poe, and Rose were avoiding her.

Rey had suspected it after the first time she’d joined them in the hallway, only for all three to realize they had pressing maintenance issues to address. After a week, she was sure of it. Finn gave her a pained smile once across the room, and Rose had hesitantly waved a few times, but their meal times rarely intersected anymore. When they did, her friends sat with other Resistance members who glared at Rey any time she drew too near.

Rey ate her meals alone in a corner of the dining hall or in her room with Ben, who still elicited screams whenever he appeared in public.

“This is ridiculous,” he said the third time a maintenance tech dropped valuable equipment in his presence. He stubbornly insisted on walking through the base at least once a day, and he met with leadership every morning, but prolonged exposure apparently hadn’t made his presence any easier to take.

“I agree,” Rey said, glaring at the young tech who crouched red-faced and trembling over the shattered remains of his tablet. Had her allies always been such cowards?

Ben sighed. “How much longer do you think this will go on?”

“No idea, but it's making me want to beat some sense into a few people.” Rey was furious, hurt, and ashamed that she’d brought her lover somewhere so hostile. Ashamed that her allies were weak. And, honestly, ashamed that she was too caught up in her own insecurities to know how to fix the situation.

Ben knelt down to help clean up the scattered pieces. The tech squeaked in alarm, then stared at Ben with wide eyes. “Th-thank you, uh…”

“Ben,” he said with remarkable patience. “My name is Ben.”

“Right.” The tech accepted the fragments Ben dumped into his palm, although his stillness held the
quivering tension of a trapped prey animal. “Thanks, B-B-Ben.” Then the young man darted away with remarkable speed.

Ben stood, brushing his hands off. He looked good but somehow…wrong in his simple brown clothing. Rey wrinkled her nose. It really was shit-colored.

“Is anyone giving you a hard time?” Ben asked abruptly. His perceptive eyes pinned her in place.

Rey shored up her mental defenses. She wasn't an insecure child anymore, and her troubles paled in comparison to his. Her role right now was to be Ben’s protector—even if that meant protecting him from her own emotional pain. “No,” she lied. “People have been a bit wary, but it's fine.”

Ben nodded but didn't release her from his gaze, and she knew he suspected something was wrong. “You can tell me anything, Rey,” he said softly. “I'm strong enough to handle it.”

She bit her lip. “When there's something to tell, you'll be the first to know.”

#

Rey ate in silence in a corner of the mess hall. Ben was still meeting with the leadership council, so she’d been forced to eat lunch in public. No one came near her table or acknowledged her. The few people that looked at her did so from the corners of their eyes.

Across the room, Poe was telling some joke to a circle of pilots while Rose and Finn beamed at him. They were happy without her.

Loneliness yawned within Rey’s heart, wide as a meteor crater and twice as deep. She was destined to be ignored, overlooked, and abandoned, doomed to give all her desperate longing to the universe and find it unreciprocated. Ben cared, and that was marvelous, but apparently having more than one person care about her was impossible.

No one else would ever need Rey as much as she needed them.

With tears burning the back of her eyes and clogging her throat, she got up to bus her tray.

“Hey, Jedi,” Davo called across the room. “Still spreading your legs for the First Order?”

Rey froze.

There was a moment of silence, and then both Finn and Rose burst into outraged protests. They were overridden by the whipcrack of Poe’s voice. “Davo. You will never speak that way to anyone in my hearing again, is that clear?”


“I don't give a shit who she’s sleeping with. What you just said was inappropriate and ungentlemanly. Apologize to Rey. Right now.” Poe’s voice was hard and menacing in a way it rarely got, and now he was acting like the Poe she remembered, defending her honor despite his personal feelings about Ben.

Rey was glad to see that hint of her old friend, but the defense was too little, too late. She'd endured a week of ostracization and innuendo, and where had he been then? Where had Finn and Rose been?

They’d abandoned her, just like everyone else. Everyone would always abandon her, because Rey was nothing and no one.
Before she could register what she was doing, Rey’s feet were carrying her across the room. “Everyone get out of my way,” she ordered as she advanced on the pilots. People scattered, leaving Davo standing alone, still sneering, although a hint of unease brushed his face as she approached.

Rey’s skin prickled. The energy surging through her was dark and bloody, and it perfectly matched the way she felt inside. She’d been flayed raw by the betrayal of her friends and allies. She was bleeding internally, lost and abandoned and alone, but the Force would never abandon her. The Force wanted her to punish whoever stood against her.

_Hurt him_, it seemed to whisper, but the voice it used was Rey’s own.

She flung out a hand, freezing Davo in place. When she lifted him a few inches off the floor, a few spectators shrieked and ran.

“Rey.” Poe stepped into her path, hands held upright as if he was soothing a wild animal. "Let's take a moment to think about this."

“Shut up, Dameron,” she said in a voice that didn’t even sound like hers anymore. It rippled with power, and she hadn’t even realized she’d infused the words with a Force command until she saw Poe struggling to open his jaw.

She fixed her attention on Davo. “Apologize to me,” she ordered, seeding the command with stinging tendrils of compulsion. She used more brute force than the mind trick normally required—she wanted him to _know_ what she was doing.

“I’m sorry, Rey,” he said.

“What are you sorry for? Be specific.”

“I’m sorry I asked if you were spreading your legs for the First Order.” Davo’s cheeks were bright red, and sweat rolled down his temples.

“Say you’re sorry for the other things you said this week.”

Poe was making distressed sounds through his clenched teeth. They irritated her, so Rey released his jaw with a thought.

“I’m sorry I called you a whore,” Davo said. “I’m sorry I asked if you like sucking First Order cock.”

Both Finn and Poe flinched. “He really said that to you?” Finn demanded.

Rey ignored him. “I wonder what you’re most afraid of, Davo.” She sent her tendrils deeper into the pilot’s mind. She was going to dig up every last one of his insecurities and fears and force him to face them. She was going to make him cry, make him _suffer_—

“Rey.” The voice came from behind her and was followed by a familiar hand on her shoulder. It was Ben, who must have finished his meeting with the leadership council.

She smiled, although it was more like a baring of her teeth. “I’m teaching this cretin a lesson.”

“I can see that,” Ben said calmly. “But I think you’ll regret it afterward. Why don’t you let him go?”

She frowned, and the dark side of the Force pulsed in mirrored irritation. Why would Ben take away her vengeance? “He called me a whore.”
“I know.” Ben’s voice was tight. “And believe me, I will be having words with him later.” The promise made Davo gulp. “You already made him apologize. You don’t need to take this further.”

She could feel Davo’s vulnerable mind before her. It was weak, as she’d known it would be. It was so easy to sink her hooks into him, to pry open his mind and pull up his insecurities. They were pedestrian: *No one will ever want me. I’m so afraid of dying.* Davo writhed and made a pained sound; Rey wasn’t being as gentle as she’d been with Ben.

“Rey,” Ben repeated, moving to stand in front of her. He laid both hands on her shoulders and bent down until she met his gaze. “This isn’t what you really want. Don’t let the dark win.” His brown eyes were full of compassion, and his mind stroked along the bond soothingly. She was roiling with dark energy, and the light in that gentle touch burned at first, but soon it started sinking into her like sunlight.

“He hurt me,” she said, tears pricking her eyes. “They all hurt me.”

“I know.” Ben shot a vicious glance towards Finn and Poe. “And I know how easy it is to succumb to rage to cover up your pain. But this is a step down a path you don’t want to take.”

“You taught me to do it,” she said, outraged at his hypocrisy.

“To save lives if you needed to,” he shot back. “Not to punish insignificant bullies. It’s a tool, remember? The only thing that matters is how you use it.” *A blade can defend or cut,* he told her across the bond. *You can use a spanner to fix something or to bash someone over the head. The tool itself isn’t good or evil.*

This isn’t evil, she said. This is justice.

*You’re a long way from evil, but small slips lead to bigger ones in the future. You’re digging into this man’s mind because he insulted you. That sets a precedent, and it becomes easier and easier to justify doing it, until eventually you do it because you feel like it—because it feels good.* He took a deep breath and rested his forehead against hers. *Let him go, sweetheart. Don’t let him hurt you any more than he already has.*

Tears welled and overflowed. She closed her eyes, breathing raggedly as Ben poured his love and understanding into her. *It’s all right,* he soothed. *I see you. I have you. It’s going to be okay.*

She dropped her hand, releasing Davo. He staggered back, and Rey was aware of Poe and Finn confronting the pilot and escorting him away, but she kept her eyes closed and her attention fixed on Ben.

“That’s it, love,” he murmured. He kissed her forehead, then pulled her into a hug. “That’s it. I have you now. You’re not alone.”

The words demolished the wall she’d built to hide her loneliness and fear from him. Rey sagged against him, accepting his warmth and stability. He was so strong and solid, the only thing capable of keeping her anchored through this storm.

He murmured the same promise over and over against her hair: “You’re not alone. I’m here. You’re not alone.”

The dark energy dissipated, and Rey wept.
Ben was furious.

Not with Rey. Never with Rey.

He was furious at that crass pilot, who now had the unfortunate distinction of being Ben’s least favorite person in the universe. He was angry at her so-called friends, who had clearly seen Rey’s isolation building and neglected to intervene. Wasn’t the Resistance supposed to be about hope and idealism? Human connection? The ‘greater good’?

Rey was a war heroine and the best person in the fucking universe, and they’d shunned her like she was nothing.

He held her against his chest as she cried, letting her emotions wash over him. People were staring at them, but he didn’t give a fuck. He met the confused or hostile looks with his own glare, letting every single person who had watched this confrontation without intervening know that he saw them and was memorizing their face.

Dameron and Finn returned from whatever they’d done with Davo, and Ben was gratified to see that Dameron’s knuckles were split and bloody. Still, that didn’t make up for the pilot’s callous mistreatment of Rey.

The goddess in his arms sobbed and clutched him tighter. “I’m sorry,” she gasped. “I was so lonely.”

Finn flinched at the words, looking sick to his stomach. That’s right, Ben thought as he stared at the former stormtrooper. You did this.

But there would be time for vengeance later. Right now, he needed to comfort Rey. “There’s nothing to be sorry for,” he murmured against her hair. “You’re not alone.”

Realizing that she wasn’t going to stop crying anytime soon, Ben hefted her into his arms and strode out of the mess hall so she could have privacy for the rest of her breakdown. The rebels backed out of his path, either too ashamed or too afraid to meet his eyes.

Ben hadn’t realized how bad it had gotten. Rey had been shielding her experiences and emotions from him for some reason he was absolutely going to pry out of her, but her defenses had finally fallen when that ass—Davo, who was fucking lucky he hadn’t met Ben a few months ago—had humiliated her in front of everyone. The surge of dark energy had burned away the leash she’d kept on her emotions, and Ben had felt the full force of her loneliness, grief, and fury across the bond. He’d bolted out of the council room mid-sentence, following the boiling signature of her pain.

His goddess, his precious girl, was hurting, and she hadn’t told him.

He laid her on the bed, then climbed in after her, drawing the blankets over them. “I’m here,” he murmured, stroking her back as she cried into a pillow. “I’ll always be here.”
“But they won’t,” she said, and it didn’t take the Force bond to know who she meant. Her supposed friends.

“Rey,” he said, leaning in to kiss her forehead. “People are complicated. I’m sorry they failed you.”

She hiccuped and pressed her face deeper into the pillow. “I don’t think it’s them,” she said, her voice muffled. “I think it’s me.”

*I’m not lovable,* she was thinking, although it wasn’t directed at him.

Ben wanted to punch a hole in the wall, but that wouldn’t be productive. “It isn’t you,” he said. “You’re lovable, I promise.”

She mumbled into the pillow, and he felt her bone-deep exhaustion. She hadn’t been sleeping well lately—he’d known that, even if he hadn’t understood all the reasons behind it.

“Rest here,” he said, sending soothing thoughts along the bond. “Take a nap. I’m going to take care of a few things.”

#

Ben stormed through the base, ignoring the alarmed Resistance members who plastered themselves against the wall as he passed. He was a man on a mission, and it didn’t matter if these idiots were afraid of him.

He’d cornered a terrified-looking pilot in the hallway to ask where his targets would be, and the man had told him they’d likely be in the hangar. Poe, Rose, and Finn liked hanging out with the few ships the Resistance had managed to salvage so far.

The guards outside the base didn’t say anything as he swept past, although he felt their alarm through the Force. He didn’t bother engaging with them. If the Resistance hadn’t welcomed Rey back, why would they accept him? And, more importantly, why would he speak with anyone who didn’t hold Rey in high esteem?

He heard voices before he entered the hangar, and he paused outside to eavesdrop.

“Did you hear what he said to her?” The words came from Finn.

“Yeah, that was weird,” Rose agreed.

“He’s still Kylo Ren,” Dameron said, but there was less heat in the man’s voice than Ben would have expected.

“He helped Paul clean up his broken tablet,” Rose said, “and he introduced himself as Ben then. What if Leia’s right? What if he really has changed?”

Dameron snorted. “It would be a mighty big change.” The pilot sighed. “Still, Rey was… really frightening. If he hadn’t stopped her, I honestly don’t know what she would have done.”

“You really think she would have hurt Davo?” Finn asked.

“I do. And Lord knows he deserved it, but the way she looked… Kriff, I don’t know. She seemed extra powerful. And she did something to stop me from talking. It was fucking scary.”

Ben had had enough of them talking about his lover as if she were a weapon, not a person. He stalked into the room and immediately spotted the trio some five meters away, seated at a
maintenance station.

“Enough,” he said, letting his voice resonate through the space.

Finn actually levitated in his seat. “Ohmylord,” the former stormtrooper said. “It’s him, isn’t it?”

“Sure looks like it,” Rose said, eyeing Ben’s advancing form with trepidation. “And he doesn’t look happy.”

Dameron got to his feet and sauntered in front of the others, taking up a protective position. “Ren,” he said, hooking his thumbs into his belt. “Can I help you?”

Ben wanted to punch the flyboy so badly. “The name is Ben Solo,” he gritted out, “and I’m not the one you need to help.”

Dameron’s brows drew together. “I’m not sure why you’re here—”

“You know exactly why I’m here,” Ben said, unleashing the vitriol that had been burning in him ever since he’d glimpsed Rey’s thoughts. “All three of you abandoned Rey. You left her alone. Do you know what that did to her?”

He hadn’t necessarily expected an answer, but Finn lowered his head. “Yes,” the former stormtrooper said, sounding ashamed. “I know she gets lonely easily.”

“It isn’t just that.” Fuck, Ben wanted to throttle her friends. Rey had shared bits of her past with all three of them, yet they still didn’t understand the harm they’d done. “She was abandoned by her parents, abused by the creature she was sold to, and forced to live in isolation. She’s never belonged anywhere, so she thinks she doesn’t deserve to belong. She gave you fucking everything, hoping she would finally be loved… and the three of you betrayed her.”

Dameron looked uneasy, but Finn looked downright horrified. “I love Rey,” he protested. Ben clenched his fists in outrage, but Finn thankfully clarified. “She’s my best friend.”

“You didn’t show it,” Ben said. “You avoided her. You made her feel like she was nothing.”

Dameron stepped further into Ben’s space, risking violence. “It’s complicated,” the pilot said. “It isn’t.” Ben glared at them all. “Rey is better than any of us. She’s the best person in the entire galaxy, but you made her feel like she didn’t have worth.”

Silence fell over the small gathering.

“I’m sorry,” Rose offered, surprising Ben. “I didn’t want to make a fuss. I thought maybe it would all blow over and then we could go back to normal.”

He eyed the tech, whose earnestness was palpable. “Rey deserves to be fussed over,” he said. She deserved to have the galaxy laid at her feet, really, but Ben acknowledged that other people didn’t think in such extremes. Still, she deserved far more than they’d offered her.

“She does.” Finn leapt into the conversation. “And we were wrong to avoid her this week.”

Ben just stared at him.

The former stormtrooper fidgeted. “Um, I’m sorry?”

Ben wanted to put his fist through the wall—or maybe Finn’s face—but he restrained himself. “Why
“Are you apologizing to me?” he asked.

“Oh.” Finn ducked his head. When Ben opened himself to the Force to test what these three were thinking, he found a mixture of shame and fear. The shame was for Rey; the fear was all for him.

He sighed. “Look, I don’t care if you ever forgive me. What I do care about is how you treat Rey.”

Dameron was still standing in front of him, but the pilot’s militant expression had faded into something almost confused. “You’re Kylo Ren,” the pilot said. “You kill people without mercy. Why do you care how we treat Rey?”

Ben would not punch the flyboy. “I’m Ben Solo,” he said, gritting out the words. “And I love her.”

Dameron’s eyes widened, and the others made startled sounds. Then Dameron nodded slowly. “All right. We’ll make it better with Rey.”

“Good.” Ben felt a little better, but there was still one pressing errand he needed to take care of. “Now tell me where to find Davo.”

Ben entered the barracks. It was the first time he’d done so—he hadn’t wanted to frighten the Resistance members too terribly—but he was tired of tiptoeing around like he had something to be ashamed of.

A few people were seated on their bunks, chatting or relaxing. They stopped talking immediately, watching his progress through the room with wide eyes. The young tech whose tablet Ben had helped recover—Paul was his name—was seated on a top bunk, and Ben stopped in front of him. “Davo?” he asked.

The tech immediately pointed towards the end of the row of bunks. “Bottom bunk at the end.”

“Thank you.”

“Are—” The tech cleared his throat. “Are you going to kill him?”

“No.” The word burst from Ben on a growl: not because the question offended him, but because he desperately wanted to kill Davo. A month ago he would have killed him. But murder would violate the agreement he’d made with the leadership council, and it might disappoint Rey—although maybe not.

Davo sat cross-legged on his bunk, holding a small mirror up to his face. He was studying the bruises and cuts that marred his skin, wincing as he prodded them. Dameron had given him a bloody beating; for once, Ben approved of the pilot’s actions.

Dameron had also provided Davo’s location instantly when Ben had asked. An understanding had passed between the two men in that moment—unlike Finn or Rose, Ben and Dameron both spoke the language of violence and consequences. Maybe when this confrontation was over, Ben could convince Dameron to beat Davo again for him.

Davo spotted Ben’s advancing form in the reflection. He gasped and scrambled off the bed, and the mirror shattered on the floor. The pilot backed away, staring at Ben with horror.

“That’s right, Ben thought, sneering at the pathetic worm. I’m your worst nightmare.
Davo tensed as if to flee, and Ben froze him in place with a wave of his hand. “Davo Acylar,” he said. “We need to have a conversation.”

The pilot actually whimpered, and Ben wondered if he was going to wet himself.

“You insulted Rey,” he continued, aware that behind him, a few of the bolder Resistance members had crept closer to eavesdrop. “You called her a whore.”

“Because she’s fucking you,” Davo said, mustering a bit of defiance from somewhere, although his voice shook.

“Be silent,” Ben ordered. He didn’t use the Force to enhance the command; he didn’t need to. Davo’s jaw snapped shut. “You are a pitiful excuse for a man, and now everyone on this base knows it. Most importantly, I now know it.” He bared his teeth at the pilot. “If I’d known what you’d said to her, we would have had this conversation much earlier.”

Davo quivered, still unable to move. Ben stepped closer, relishing the stink of the man’s fear and the way his pupils dilated. There was a heady power to be had in instilling terror in his enemies. Righteous rage rolled through him, and the dark side of the Force burned and whispered all around him. It wasn’t overwhelming, though; Ben knew he wouldn’t lose control.

“You know who I am,” he said. “You know what I’m capable of.” He took another step forward, until he stood nearly on top of the man. “I may be reformed, but my tolerance has limits, and I will do anything to ensure Rey’s happiness.” He lifted a hand, relishing the man’s full body flinch. “I could rip your mind open right now. I could tear you apart limb from limb. Do you want that?”

Davo’s eyes glistened with tears. “No,” he whispered.

Ben dropped his hand and stepped back. “Then you will apologize to Rey and never insult her again. If you do, I will find out, and our next conversation won’t be so cordial.”

He released the man from the Force hold and turned away, striding back through the barracks, hardly caring about the stares and whispers the confrontation had provoked. He wasn’t the Resistance’s tame pet; they should all know that if Rey needed help, he would happily become the monster again.

When Ben returned to the room, Rey was fast asleep. She looked peaceful, but he knew better than to assume it would last once she woke. He sighed, staring down at her and wondering how to approach this situation.

She had lied to him.

Or if not outright lied, at least omitted. She’d been suffering for a week, and he couldn’t understand why she hadn’t felt comfortable sharing those experiences with him. Ben belonged to her; surely she knew that meant he wanted to help her through any emotional crises.

Then again, maybe she didn’t know. Ben considered everything he knew about Rey. She was open and giving, eager to love even when the objects of her affection didn’t deserve it, although she hid the wounds that scarred her sensitive heart. She flung herself into new ventures with reckless abandon. Rey was hungry in more ways than one: hungry for experience, emotion, and belonging.

She gave of herself endlessly, without expectation of receiving such care in return.

Ben thought he’d shown her how much he wanted to care for her, but that knowledge clearly hadn’t
settled in her mind. She was hiding her suffering from him, and he had a feeling it was because of her giving nature. Rey wanted to help him cope with this new reality—so much so that she hadn’t confessed her own needs.

Ben slid into bed beside her, watching her sleep-softened face with worshipful attention. Rey wasn’t perfect in a cosmic sense, but she was perfect to him. Even her foibles and flaws were precious, so Ben would do his best to understand her… and then let her know exactly how valuable she was.

He settled in to wait.
Rey woke and was briefly confused about where she was. A heavy ache throbbed behind her eyes. She hated napping; it always left her feeling worse afterwards.

She pushed up into a sitting position, then realized that Ben was sprawled out beside her. His eyelids fluttered open. He looked dazed and soft, his cheeks pinkened from his own nap, and Rey couldn’t restrain the hand that reached out to stroke his cheek. She loved seeing him vulnerable, as much as she loved seeing him strong.

“How are you feeling?” Ben propped himself up on an elbow, driving his free hand through his hair. Rey followed the movement with her eyes, wanting to tangle her fingers in those dark strands.


His mouth quirked. “I don’t, either. It always seems like a waste of time.”

Rey’s heaviness wasn’t all due to exhaustion. She focused on her memories of the time before the nap—then winced. “Oh no,” she said, burying her head in her hands. “Oh, kriff. I’m so sorry—”

“No apologies,” he said, surging up into a sitting position. He gripped her face between his hands and stared at her intently, the way she did to him when she wanted to convey an important message. “Let’s talk about what happened.”

She grimaced. “I lost control. I went dark.” She’d torn open another person’s mind because she’d wanted him to suffer. Her cheeks heated with shame.

Ben nodded. “You did, but that’s all right. We all lose control sometimes. I want you to tell me what’s been going on this week.”

She shifted uncomfortably, not wanting to drag him into her mess. It was too late for that, she supposed. “People have been ignoring me,” she whispered, feeling childish as she said it. It was such a minor complaint; he had far more important things to worry about—

“Stop it,” he said, and she realized he’d been skimming her thoughts. “You are the most important thing for me to worry about. Tell me more.”

“There’s gossip that I’m a traitor or… or a whore.” She swallowed hard. She wasn’t ashamed of being with Ben, but she hated the sick way that word made her feel. “No one will talk to me or sit with me at mealtimes. Even Finn and Poe.” Her throat was getting tight, and her chest ached. “Rose tried once, but then she went away, and since then I’ve just been alone.” Not wanting to offend him, she put a hand on his forearm. “I have you, of course, it’s just—”

“Rey.” He covered her hand with his own. “I’m not fragile, and I’m not self-centered enough to believe I’m the only thing you need.” The corner of his mouth twitched up. “Although I will admit to
occasionally trying to convince myself otherwise. Of course you want your friends to acknowledge you.” That half-smile slipped into a scowl. “They’re terrible friends.”

At the moment, she was inclined to agree, but she still felt the urge to defend them. “It’s hard for them. Poe and Rose have known everyone on the base for far longer than I have, and Finn is basically in love with Poe…”

He shook his head. “Stop making excuses for them and tell me more about what you’ve been feeling.”

She sighed, looking down at her lap and picking at the bedsheet. “I’ve been sad. And lonely.”

“More than lonely, I think,” he said softly.

She nodded, and her eyes burned with unshed tears. “I felt like I was nothing,” she confessed. “Like no one cared about me or would ever have my back. Besides you, of course. It was just so… I don’t know.” She shook her head. “I’m bad at saying it.” She could talk about his problems all day, but it was strangely hard to confess her own.

“You felt the way you did on Jakku.” His mind stroked hers over the bond, and she let him in, willing him to see her pain. It was easier than speaking it out loud.

“It made me feel small,” she said. “Like I’m worthless. And I know I shouldn’t have let it get to me, but it did.”

Ben lifted her face to his. The sympathy shining from his brown eyes made her heart clench. “Why shouldn’t you let it get to you? It’s okay to have feelings, Rey.”

Not when those feelings almost made her torture someone in the mess hall. Not when they reduced her to this pathetic wreck. “I want to be strong,” she told him. “You’re having a much harder time than I am right now, and it doesn’t seem fair for me to burden you…”

He placed a finger over her lips, silencing her. “We’re partners. That means we share the burdens equally. Besides, I don’t think I have been having a harder time than you. I’m used to being feared and avoided.” His lips quirked, although the expression was a little sad. “It’s annoying more than anything. But these are your friends, and you aren’t used to them treating you like garbage. Of course it’s upsetting.”

She swiped away a tear that trailed over her cheek. “It feels like such a childish thing to worry about: whether or not people like me.”

“It isn’t childish. It’s human.” As another tear came loose, Ben leaned in to lick it off her cheek. “You’ve been so tough and brave for me these last few weeks. Let me do the same for you.”

“I worried that if you knew what Davo said—”

“I would kill him? Succumb to the dark side?” He huffed. “I was tempted, believe me. But no, I just threatened him a little. Dameron is the one who beat him up.”

She blinked at that, feeling a foolish surge of hope in her chest. “Poe beat him up? And wait, you threatened him?”

He nudged a memory towards her across the bond, and Rey watched the scene unfold. The dark timbre of Ben’s voice made her shiver, and as he delivered his threat—you know who I am, you know what I’m capable of—her belly clenched in appreciation. Kriff, she liked his darkness
sometimes.

Ben grinned at her. “Bloodthirsty girl. I’m always happy to threaten your enemies.”

She bit her lip, feeling flattered and a little aroused. “Why do I like it when you’re bad?”

He leaned in to nibble the side of her neck, and Rey tilted her head to the side, granting him more access. “Because you’re a little bad, too,” he murmured against her skin.

The words unfortunately reminded her of what she’d done to Davo’s mind, and dismay fell like a rock through her gathering arousal. “I went too far,” she said, her gut twisting into knots. “I hurt him.”

Ben shrugged, still kissing a path up to her ear. “He deserved it. And like I told you before, people like us lose control sometimes. It just means we’ll have to practice Force skills more.” He took the lobe between his teeth and bit, and Rey’s pussy throbbed at the sharp sting.

She sighed and relaxed into him, pressing her fingertips into his chest and kneading his firm muscles like a cat. “When did you get so understanding?”

“When you taught me how.” He pulled back to look into her eyes. His expression was intent, and Rey stilled under that determined stare as if he’d frozen her in place with the Force. She was enraptured by him, completely in his thrall.

“Rey,” Ben said after a few moments of silently watching her, “I’m going to fuck you now.”

Her skin flushed, and a whimper climbed out of her throat. “You are?”

He nodded slowly, never breaking eye contact. “You’re not alone. You’ll never be alone, and I’m going to prove it to you.”

Her headache, the guilt, her memories of the past week—everything faded under the intensity of his gaze and his words. Rey sat breathlessly, waiting for him to make his move. “Please,” she whispered.

It was all the encouragement Ben needed. His mouth dropped to hers, and he kissed her with devastating slowness. His lips were soft, although the kiss wasn’t quite gentle—there was too much intensity behind it for that. His tongue sank into her mouth, and she accepted it greedily, twining her own around it.

Ben slid his hands into her hair and cupped her head, tilting it back to give him greater access. The kiss grew more forceful, and Rey fisted her hands in his shirt as she submitted to him. She wanted to be overwhelmed by him, to lose herself beneath him.

“Beautiful girl,” he whispered against her lips. “I liked it, you know.”

“What?” she asked, too dazed to follow his train of thought.

He nipped her bottom lip. “Seeing you take vengeance on someone who hurt you. I’m glad you stopped for your own sake, but you’re beautiful even like that. Everything you do is beautiful to me.”

She gasped as his lips moved to her neck. He sucked on the sensitive skin over her pulse, and her nipples tightened. The edge of his teeth pressing into her skin made her jerk and moan.

“That’s it, darling,” he said, trailing his lips down to her collarbone. “Let me take care of you.”
He stripped her shirt off and unwound her breastband, and then his mouth fastened over one nipple. Rey whimpered as he sucked hard, then groaned loudly when he bit the straining tip. His free hand came up to work her other breast, and soon she was panting from the sensual onslaught. She was wet for him, and her lower belly thrummed with delicious tension.

Ben abruptly pulled away and stood up next to the bed. Rey reached for him, wanting him back, but he shook his head. His eyes burned as he ran his gaze over her body. “Take off the rest of your clothes,” he ordered.

Rey unfastened her trousers with trembling fingers, then slid both them and her underwear down her thighs. She tossed them into a corner with her socks, then sat naked before him at the edge of the bed, waiting for instructions.

He grinned and ran a finger down her sternum. “You’re being so good for me,” he said in that dark, honeyed voice. “How shall I reward you?”

Rey bit back a moan and widened her legs a tiny bit, hoping he would take the hint.

His gaze zeroed in on the spot between her thighs. “My good girl wants my mouth on her, hm?” His eyes snapped up to hers again. “I’m happy to oblige.”

He went to his knees in front of her, and Rey whimpered as he licked his lips. He looked ravenous, and she was already burning for him, her pussy quivering. He laid a hand on her chest and pressed her flat on the bed, then gripped her hips and jerked her closer to him, slinging her legs over his shoulders. His mouth covered her cunt, and Rey gasped, her back arching as his tongue explored her wet folds. He moved with confidence, licking all over as if he was collecting tastes of her. His nose brushed her clit, and then his tongue dipped inside her opening, and he groaned. “You taste so good,” he said, his words vibrating through her intimate flesh.

Rey reached up to pinch her nipples, relishing the sharp sting and the way it sent a bolt of electricity down between her legs. Ben worked his mouth up to her clitoris, licking and sucking. She writhed and gasped under the assault, her heels digging into his back. He gripped her hips tighter, stilling her frantic movements, and the pressure on her clit intensified as he drove her higher with firm, rhythmic strokes. He made a sound that actually sounded like a growl, and oh, fuck, Rey wasn’t going to last long. She gasped for air, pressing her head back against the bed and squeezing her eyes shut.

“Come for me,” he ordered against her clit. “I want to taste it. I want your wetness all over my face. I want to eat you up and drink you down.”

Rey shivered at the filthy words. He was so good at this, too good, she was going to explode…

The edge of his teeth brushed her clit, and Rey burst into a shuddering orgasm. Her torso lifted off the bed, and she curled herself around his head, gripping his hair as she ground herself against his mouth. Pleasure reverberated through her, washing her in scalding heat.

When it dissipated, she collapsed back onto the bed and stared blindly at the ceiling. She expected Ben to get up then, but he didn’t. He kept licking, and then his fingers stroked over her, and she realized he wasn’t nearly done with her.

She whimpered. “It’s sensitive…”

“Shh.” He drew back to blow on her wet skin, and the cool air sent shivers racing over her. “You can take it.”

Then he set back in, working his fingers into her as he licked her clit. He was gentle at first, letting
her settle back into her skin, but soon the heat and tension started building again. Rey twitched, unable to tell if she wanted him to lick harder or if she wanted to scramble away from the devastating sensations. Then he crooked his fingers inside her, pressing that spot that made her see stars, and Rey keened.

“Good girl,” he said, curving his fingers again and again. “You’re going to come for me again, Rey.”

She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. “It’s too much…”

“It isn’t enough,” he said, then began sucking at her clit with a vengeance. “Not yet.”

Rey whimpered as tension wrapped her limbs tight. She was climbing back up, nearly at the peak, and fuck, how did he reduce her to this sobbing, shivering mess so easily?

He sent her images and sensations across the bond: the way her wetness slicked over his tongue, the feel of her body clenching around his fingers, his delight in her taste. His bottomless, endless hunger that would never be satiated, never, because he was an animal when it came to her. He would eat her pussy, then fuck her raw, until she was screaming, until she couldn’t take it anymore, and then he would start at the beginning and do it all over again.

Rey seized up. The tension released, sending shockwaves through her body. She shook around him, her thighs clamping around his head as he licked her through a second, even more devastating orgasm.

When it passed, she could barely think. She pushed at Ben’s forehead, and thankfully, he backed away from her hypersensitized flesh. He rested a head against her thigh, his own breathing harsh in the small room.

“Thank you,” she murmured, feeling boneless and replete. “That was incredible.”

He kissed her inner thigh. “Oh, sweetheart, we aren’t nearly done yet.”

Rey quivered with both desire and apprehension. It was already so much; her cunt was sore and sensitive, she was lightheaded, and sweat trailed over her skin. “What are you going to do?” she whispered.

“I told you.” He stood and looked down at her with dark, burning eyes. “I’m going to prove to you that you’re not alone.”

She giggled a little drunkenly. “I think you just did.”

He shook his head. “No. I’m going to take you apart, Rey. I’m going to break you down and make a mess of you, and then I’m going to put you back together. That’s what you get for hiding your feelings from me this week.”

Rey moaned as goosebumps chased each other over her skin. “Ben—”

“Hear,” he said. The Force stirred around him, and then her jaw was sealed shut, the same way she’d sealed Poe’s. Her limbs froze next; she couldn’t move, although Ben was able to arrange her to his liking. He splayed her out on the bed, her legs bent and spread wide for him. She whimpered behind her closed teeth, somehow even more aroused by her helplessness.

He took off his clothes, revealing the pale, sculpted body that never failed to astound her and his thick, precum-slicked erection. He climbed on top of her, settling his hips between her legs. “I’m going to fuck you now,” he said.
Rey couldn’t nod, but she sent her frantic agreement across the bond. Yes, yes.

He pushed inside of her slowly, stretching her wide. It hurt a little as he made a space for himself inside her swollen, orgasm-drenched tissues, but it was the kind of pain Rey would gladly take before begging for more. He slid all the way home, and the hot press of his cock against her inner walls jolted the breath out through her nose.

Ben braced his forearms on either side of her head. He pulled out, then rolled his hips, surging back in. Rey made a choked sound. She couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, couldn’t do anything but take his deep, relentless thrusts.

“You’re mine,” he growled against her Force-sealed lips. “And you’re never going to hide anything from me ever again.”

He shifted her legs up, pressing them against her chest. The angle was merciless, allowing him to go even deeper. He nudged a nearly painful spot within her, and spots filled Rey’s vision. Kriff, he was overwhelming. He devastated her.

“Do you like this?” he asked as he kept thrusting. “Being helpless for me, spread wide and vulnerable? I can do whatever I want to you right now. I can take whatever I want.” It was an echo of his thinly veiled threat in the interrogation chamber—you know, I can take whatever I want—and the dark promise in his voice aroused Rey even more. She was his prisoner again, helpless and unable to deny him anything.

This time, though, she wanted to be his captive.

Pinned like this by the Force, she couldn’t do anything but accept the pleasure he was forcing on her. The relentless thrusts were winding her up again, tightening knots in her lower belly. She whimpered, certain that when this ended, there wouldn’t be anything left of her.

“I know you’re thinking about the interrogation. Do you want to know a secret?” He paused as if expecting her to give an answer, although obviously she couldn’t with her jaw clamped shut. Then he chuckled darkly. “Sometimes I think about it when I jerk off. I fantasize about having you restrained for me, bound in cuffs, helpless. You were so angry with me then, but if I did it now…” He bucked into her hard enough to jostle a muffled cry from her throat. “Now, I think you’d love every minute of it. I could open up your pretty little cunt and fuck you into that chair, and you would beg me for more.”

Yes. She sent the thought to him, desperate and unashamed of her desire. I want that.

“I haven’t been Kylo for you in a while,” he mused, still maintaining his even, punishing pace. “I’ll have to rectify that.”

Her pussy squeezed around his cock at the thought of him resuming that dark identity while he fucked her. Oh, Maker, she was going to come…

Catching the thought, Ben reached between them to press her clit. “Do it, beautiful girl. Come on my cock.”

Rey’s long, loud moan sounded obscene through her clenched jaw. Her body tightened around him, and the pleasure broke. Her inner walls quivered, caressing the length of him. Normally she would have twisted and writhed with the sensation, but he still hadn’t released her from the Force hold, and orgasming this hard was devastating when she couldn’t move to expel the energy racing through her. Her cunt clenched in near-agonizing waves, and stuttered noises poured from her throat.
“Good girl,” Ben murmured at her ear. He pulled out, then released the Force hold. Rey couldn’t move anyway, though. Her arms were leaden, and she could barely keep her eyes open. With her jaw finally free, she was panting like she’d run a marathon, and her cheeks stung with heat.

Ben grinned at her. “We still aren’t done, you know.”

Rey groaned. *I can’t*. She said the words mentally, because she didn’t think she could manage actual speech after three devastating orgasms.

“You can,” Ben said, flipping her over to position her on hands and knees. “You will.” He gripped her arms and pulled them behind her, chaining them in one fist as he used the other hand to position his cock against her. He pushed in, slow and inexorable, and Rey made a high-pitched sound at the deep penetration.

Ben brought his other hand up to grip her arms, too. He eased her off his cock, then wrenched her back, using his hold on her as leverage. Every thrust was hard, making her breasts bounce, and although Rey wasn’t frozen by the Force anymore, she was just as helpless as she’d been before. He was manipulating her with his strength, controlling every aspect of this encounter with his hands and his muscles and his devastatingly perfect cock, and all she could do was take it. Take him.

She surrendered herself utterly to him, and more wetness poured out of her as she let go of reason and thought. Animal noises clawed their way out of her throat. She was babbling, although she wasn’t entirely sure what she was saying.

“There you go,” Ben said, wrenching her back over his cock again. “Let go, goddess. Give it all to me.”

Tears gathered in Rey’s eyes and spilled over, tracking down her cheeks. She sobbed, but it wasn’t out of grief—it was catharsis again, the desperate and profound unraveling of her control. She opened her mind to Ben, letting him in fully. He owned her body, her heart, and her soul—there was nothing she would hold back from him.

“Yes,” he agreed. “You’ll never hold anything back again.” His thrusts grew tighter, faster, and she could hear the great gulps of air he was sucking in. He wasn’t going to last long, either. “You spend so much time caring about other people that you don’t care about yourself,” he said hoarsely. “It’s okay to fall, Rey. Let me catch you.”

Rey lost it then. She screamed, her body clenching furiously around him. Her vision darkened, and her skin flushed and tingled as the final orgasm tore her apart. Ben followed with a shout, digging his cock in one last time before the hot surge of his cum filled her.

He’d kept his promise, Rey thought as she shuddered and choked on nonsensical words. He had broken her apart entirely, and now she was his to build up again.
Woof, this one gave me some feelings. As always, your comments and kudos are much appreciated! Thank you for reading!

The shared refresher down the hallway wasn’t as private as Ben wanted, but there was thankfully no one inside when he carried Rey into it. He locked the door, not caring if it inconvenienced anyone else. His goddess needed tending.

He’d pulled on trousers and covered her in one of his shirts before leaving the room, just in case anyone was nearby. By now, everyone on the base knew what his relationship with Rey was, but he didn’t want to cause her more discomfort. Now that they were ensconced in the simplistic toilet and shower facility, he lowered Rey to the tile floor, supporting her while he stripped off the shirt.

She nuzzled into his chest, humming contentedly. Fuck, he loved seeing her like this. He hadn’t broken her down with pain this time—not like the time he’d spanked her and then fucked her into oblivion—but the effect was the same. Rey was blissful and dizzy, her eyes hazy when she looked at him. Her mouth kept tugging up into a smile, and every time it did, his heart squeezed extra hard.

It seemed impossible how well they worked together, the kind of mythic connection that was reserved for fairy tales. He’d never imagined he would understand another person this well, or that she would understand him. Everything between them, from their arguments to the sexual dance of dominance and surrender, was an exchange. She gave herself to him gladly, and he gave himself to her in return.

He smiled against her hair as she unfastened his trousers. As exhausted as she was, she wanted to be a participant in her own aftercare. He indulged her because he knew it made her happy. She pushed his pants to the floor, then tenderly stroked his flaccid cock. He groaned. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, but that’s all tapped out for now.” He’d come so hard it had practically been a religious experience.

She mouthed a few kisses against his skin. “I know. I just like touching you.”

It was insane that a few simple words could make him giddy, but they did. He could fly to the stars on Rey’s praise. “Let’s get you in the shower,” he said roughly.

Thirty minutes later, she was washed and wrapped in a white robe. The fabric was coarser than he would have liked, but she nestled into it as if it was the most comfortable thing in the universe. “Mmmm,” she said, nuzzling her face into the collar. “I feel so decadent.”

Now Ben’s heart clenched in a different way, because the truth was that Rey had never known true comfort or decadence. She thought a clean robe and a simple cot were luxuries. Ben had grown up with silk sheets, whatever food he felt like sampling, and an entire wardrobe of outfits. It had felt suffocating at the time, but now…

Now he realized exactly how much he had been given, even if there had been drawbacks. He’d hated his childhood, but he hadn’t been alone in the desert, scrapping for food—
“I can hear you thinking,” Rey mumbled against him.

That wasn’t what Ben wanted, so he pushed his thoughts aside and focused on his lover again. “Everything’s going to be all right,” he told her as he guided her back to their room. “We’re together, and that’s what matters most.”

Once they were in bed, she settled against him with a sigh and fell asleep almost instantly. As always, he marveled at her trust in him. “My goddess,” he whispered, stroking the hair from her forehead. “You make life worth living.”

Ben joined her in the mess hall the next morning.

Both of them had skipped dinner the previous night, which was a compelling reason to go, but Ben had also decided he would never eat a meal alone in his room again. Rey’s torment had happened while he hadn't been there to see or stop it, and honestly, hiding himself from the Resistance members wasn’t helping matters. They still saw him as a nightmare, no matter how carefully he trod.

So fuck them. He was here, and so was Rey, and if anyone wanted to judge their relationship, they would suffer the consequences.

It was admittedly disheartening to know that any consequences he dealt would be minimal, but Ben believed in the power of intimidation—and honestly, he wouldn’t mind seeing Rey go dark again, so long as it didn’t require her own emotional pain. She’d been so beautiful, holding her hand out and baring her teeth as she’d dug into Davo’s mind, and the only thing Ben regretted was that she had felt guilty afterwards.

Maybe another person would have felt conflicted at wanting both a woman’s bloodthirstiness and her caring, but by now, Ben was well acquainted with what it meant to love Rey.

The women serving lunch at least didn’t flee this time, although they winced as they plopped strange yellow squares onto his plate. A few strips of dried meat followed.

Rey led him to an empty table at the back of the room, and Ben tried to ignore the stares and whispers. At least this time only a few people scurried away from the mess hall at the sight of him.

“Is this egg?” Ben asked as he poked the distressing square on his plate. It wobbled a little.

Rey was already stuffing her face with the substance, her cheeks bulging out as she looked up at him. “Of course,” she said around a mouthful of food. “It’s really good.”

“Hm.” Ben sliced off a tiny corner of the… egg… and put it in his mouth. Unsurprisingly, it tasted terrible. He swallowed with a wince. “It’s like if you described an egg to someone who had never eaten one before, then asked them to construct a facsimile out of dirt and plaster.”

Rey snorted and rolled her eyes. “Snob.”

“Seriously. Why is it a square?”

“Because it was dehydrated and packaged, the same as most of our food. Honestly, Ben, sometimes it’s like talking to an alien unfamiliar with human customs.”

Rey was looking at him like he was a dunce, which pricked his pride, so Ben forced himself to shovel more of the egg into his mouth. “I’m familiar with human customs,” he muttered. “I’m just
accustomed to a higher culinary standard.”

She made a choked sound, and he prepared to leap into action to save her, but no, she was absolutely laughing at him. “Such a snob,” she said, gasping around a mouthful of egg.

His lips quirked, because even though he was the target of her mockery, he liked seeing her laugh. The exchange had drawn a few curious stares; he supposed darksiders weren’t particularly known for lighthearted banter.

“Hey, guys!” The cheerful voice came from behind Ben. He looked over his shoulder to see Finn standing there with a tray in his hands, wearing an overly animated expression. Rose was with him. “Can we join you?”

Ben looked at Rey, whose mirth had stilled a little at the sight of her friends. He felt her indecision across the bond—she was still upset at them, but a little spark of joy had risen in her breast at feeling included again. He knew what she would say before she said it.

“Sure,” Rey said, nodding at the bench. “Why don’t you sit next to Ben?”

Finn’s smile froze in place, his eyes comically wide. Ben hid the twitch of his lips with a sip of his—also terrible—coffee. But the former stormtrooper recovered admirably, nodding and setting his tray next to Ben’s. “Sure. That sounds great.”

Rose settled next to Rey, and for a moment they all stared at each other. Then Finn shattered the awkward silence by blurting, “I’m sorry I was an ass.”

“Me, too,” Rose said. “We really messed up. We should have stood by you from the beginning.”

Rey’s expression softened. “Thank you for apologizing. It did hurt, though.”

Finn looked down in remorse. “I know. And I’m going to try to make it up to you. I wasn’t a good friend.”

“The gang’s all here, huh?”

Ben stiffened as Dameron slid into the open space next to Rey. He eyed the pilot suspiciously, wondering exactly how terribly this breakfast was going to go.

“Sorry for ignoring you, kid,” Dameron said to Rey. “I let my temper get the best of me.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not a kid, Poe.”

The pilot worked his jaw as if remembering what she’d done to him the previous day. “Yeah, I know. Sorry.”

She nudged him with her shoulder, and Ben gripped his fork tightly, then forced his hand to relax. He’d never really had any friends, but he was fairly sure this was normal friend behavior. “Thanks for beating up Davo,” Rey said.

Dameron grimaced and shook out his hand. The knuckles were scabbed over. “Believe me, it was a pleasure. He has a hard face, though.”

Rey smiled and tucked into her food again, and a little of the tension at the table lifted. Finn shrugged and started eating, too. Ben eyed Dameron warily, but the pilot just gave him a tight nod and started cutting up his eggs. So. A tentative peace—at least for breakfast.
To Ben’s surprise, Paul the technician joined them shortly afterwards, only hesitating for a few seconds before sitting to Ben’s right. He blinked at the young man, baffled by this gesture from someone who had recently shattered sensitive electronics out of sheer terror at seeing him. “It was a good speech,” Paul said, as if that explained his presence at the table. “Or good threat, I guess. I never liked Davo.”

Rey looked ecstatic at this small sign of welcome, so Ben shrugged and accepted that he wasn’t always going to understand the ways of these odd idealists. “Let me know if he gives you any trouble,” he said, feeling unaccountably flustered by the attention.

That earned him a shy smile from the tech, which made Ben feel even more embarrassed. He fixed his attention on the strips of meat. These, at least, tasted good.

“So,” Finn said after a few moments of silence. “What were you laughing about when we walked up?”

Rey’s face split into a huge grin. “What a terrible snob Ben is.”

“Is that so?” Finn eyed Ben nervously. “I guess I could see that…”

“He didn’t know what eggs were.”

“Hey,” Ben protested. “I know what eggs are. I just maintain that this is not an egg. This is a piece of moldy cardboard masquerading as sustenance.”

“Ben likes to tease me,” Rey confided to Dameron in a low voice. “He’s actually very funny.”

Dameron’s eyebrows arched towards his hairline, and he looked at Ben skeptically. “If you say so.”

The opportunity to make Rey laugh again was too much to resist. “I have lots of practice,” he deadpanned, cutting off another slice of pseudo-egg.

“You do?”

He nodded. “I was a regular at First Order comedy nights on the Finalizer. Every Friday night, or whenever we blew up a new planet.”

Rey spat food over the table, then started coughing. Rose clapped her on the back a few times. “Ben,” Rey gasped. “Too soon.”

But her Force signature was bubbling with golden mirth, so Ben didn’t feel too bad about referencing the destruction of the Hosnian system. The corner of his mouth curled up, and he looked at her fondly.

“This is so weird,” Finn muttered.

Ben was in a surprisingly good mood when he joined the Resistance leaders for their normal morning conference. They sat around a long table, discussing supplies, recruits, and First Order movements, and Ben fielded a few questions about the old leadership hierarchy.

“Do we know who is in charge now?” he asked. “The last I heard, no one knew who took over after I, ah, killed everyone.”

Leia looked solemn. “That’s actually what I wanted to share today. The first official message from
the new Supreme Leader went out.” She nodded to her aide, who set up the holoprojector.

To Ben’s shock, the sneering face of Armitage Hux beamed out over the table in shades of blue. “Citizens of the galaxy,” he said, “I am Supreme Leader Armitage Hux.”

“Impossible,” Ben said flatly. “I put a lightsaber through his chest.”

“Well, apparently it didn’t take,” Commander Kerelle said dryly. The man still didn’t particularly like Ben, but at least some of his hostility had faded over the past week.

“Former Supreme Leader Kylo Ren is dead after committing a grave betrayal of our cause,” Hux continued. “He was unworthy of his position, and his name is not to be referenced again by anyone under First Order rule, under penalty of death.”

Ben scowled. He wasn’t Kylo Ren anymore, but the complete erasure of that identity stung. It was exactly what he should have expected from Hux, though, because it was what Snoke had decreed once before. Ironically, it was the name Ben Solo that had been taboo then, and the prohibition had only been known to Hux and the Knights of Ren. Everyone else assumed Kylo Ren had been spawned with that name, already a servant to darkness.

“Rest assured that I will be an effective ruler. My emissaries are already traveling through the galaxy to seek out any remaining pockets of unrest. If you value your lives, you will submit wholly and completely to my rule. Together, we will bring order and justice to the galaxy.”

The hologram flickered out.

“Well,” Leia said after a moment of stunned silence. “If anyone doubted your sincerity before, Ben, they certainly shouldn’t now.”

He carefully unclenched his fists. “I don’t understand how he’s still alive,” he said. “I ran my blade from the base of his spine into his chest. It ought to have killed him.”

“There are rumors he’s paralyzed.”

Ben smiled savagely at that, then fixed his face back into a neutral expression when he realized his glee over that fact likely wasn’t a reaction the Resistance would appreciate. “I must have just missed his heart, and someone got him to a bacta tank in time to fix some of the damage.”

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Leia said. “He’s having his coronation in a month.”

Ben’s eyebrows shot up. “Coronation? I didn’t get one of those.”

She rolled her eyes. “Try not to sound so disappointed.”

“Hux is a sniveling worm. Why should he get a coronation when—”

“Ben.” Leia’s voice was firm. “The point is that this is a perfect opportunity to target Hux and the officers of the First Order. Everyone important is going to be there.”

“Where will it be?” Kerelle asked.

Leia sighed and rubbed her forehead. “On Myrtah.”

Ben blinked at her. “Myrtah? Why?”

“They rescinded their declaration of war, thanks to your warning to Rey, but the First Order still took
affront. There are more soldiers on the ground, which, as you may expect, has come with a host of problems. Beatings, riots, extrajudicial killings. The prisons are overflowing, and the entire planet is under a curfew.”

“That doesn’t sound like an ideal environment for a coronation,” Kerelle said.

“I assume it’s a symbolic gesture. Hux is proving that he can do whatever he wants, wherever he wants. He can even crown himself Supreme Leader on the planet most hostile to him.”

Ben tapped his fingers on the table, considering. “Hux’s hubris has always been one of his greatest failings. He likely believes himself untouchable now that I’m not around.” A hot rush of anticipation rose in his chest. “It’ll be perfect when I show up and kill him.”

“Ben…” Leia looked uneasy. “I’m not sure you should get near the First Order again.”

“Why? Afraid I’ll join up again?” The words lashed out of him, carried on a familiar wave of hurt. She had never particularly believed in him.

“No,” Leia said firmly. “But right now, they think you’re dead. If you’re seen on Myrtah, you’ll become the most wanted man in the galaxy. There are already massive bounties on both Rey’s head and mine—we don’t need one on yours, too.”

“So I won’t be seen.”

“The general is right,” Commander Kerelle said. “We can send in a strike team, led by Captain Dameron—”

“No.” Ben shot to his feet and slammed his hands onto the table, making a few council members jump. “This is my responsibility.”

Leia looked at him with something unsettlingly like compassion. “I know you want to make things better,” she said, “but you’ve done enough.”

“I haven’t.” He ran a hand through his hair in agitation, tugging on the long strands. “It’ll never be enough. I know Hux; I know how he thinks. Let me do this.”

“You’re too valuable to the Resistance,” Leia said in a tone that indicated she wouldn’t be moved from her position. “We need your expertise and knowledge here.”

He wanted to scream at the unfairness of it. He’d been trained to war, raised on destruction and darkness. He was good at it. Why should anyone else risk their lives when Ben was more powerful than a dozen Resistance members combined?

“I’m not a politician,” he said curtly. “And you’re not going to turn me into one.”

“Ben—”

“I’m not your lapdog, either.” He turned and strode out of the room, his gut already churning with misery and regret.

#

Rey found him seated under a tree outside the base. He was watching the six-legged cows amble by, wondering if there would ever come a time when his temper wasn’t the first weapon he used against his mother. It was too easy to fall back into old habits.
“You’re upset,” Rey said, leaning on the pasture fence.

He told her what had happened in the council room. Rey listened patiently, wincing a little when he told her how he’d stormed out. “She needs to learn that she can’t control me,” Ben muttered.

Rey looked torn between pity and exasperation. “Ben, she wasn’t saying those things as your mother. She was saying it as the leader of the Resistance. Technically, she does give the orders.”

“Well, the orders are stupid.”

She crossed her arms, staring down at him. “Are they? Because it seems to me that she’s trying to protect the Resistance’s most valuable source of information about the First Order.”

He scowled and yanked a few clumps of grass out of the soil. “I’m a fighter, Rey. Not a fucking diplomat.”

A trace of humor crossed her face. “I don’t think they’re going to assign you a diplomatic position anytime soon.” Then she sighed. “But think about it. If you were the one making that decision, would you send your best source to hostile terrain where he’s likely to be recognized?”

He frowned harder and kept ripping out plants. “I stand a better chance of killing Hux than anyone else.”

“I don’t know, Poe’s pretty competent at killing people.” She scuffed her toe in the dirt, looking down at the patterns she made. “I’m glad you’re staying here,” she said softly. “Maybe that’s selfish, but I would be devastated if something happened to you.”

Just like that, his pique faded. He groaned and got to his feet. “Come here.” He tugged her into his arms, stroking her back soothingly. “Nothing’s going to happen to me,” he whispered into her hair.

“You can’t promise that. What if you left and didn’t come back?” There was an uncharacteristically childlike uncertainty in her voice, and he knew it was because she was confessing her deepest fear.

“I’ll always come back,” he promised. “Always.”

He held her in the warm morning sunlight, inhaling the sweet scent of her hair and feeling tangled up inside. He wanted to fight, wanted to make amends for his evil deeds by using the skills he’d won through a decade of darkness, but he didn’t want to hurt Rey.

“What if it was me wanting to go?” she whispered, and it was the nail on the coffin of Ben’s hopes for joining the mission to Myrtah. If Rey had proposed marching straight into enemy territory where countless people would recognize her, he would have had an aneurysm.

“Fine,” he muttered sullenly. “You win.”

She smiled and lifted on her toes to kiss his cheek. “We both win,” she said. “This gives us more time for sex.”

He groaned and laughed a little. “You don’t play fair, scavenger. I yield.”

“Good,” she murmured. “Now take off your clothes.”

#

After an extremely enjoyable interlude with Rey, marred only by the bemused attention of the herd of six-legged cows, Ben returned inside to find his mother.
Leia was in the command center, naturally. When she noticed him hovering in the doorway, she said a few words to her aide before joining him. “Walk with me,” she said.

He obliged, shortening his strides to accommodate her slower pace. She moved more stiffly than she had in his youth, and he felt a pang of grief at having missed so many years with her.

“Sorry I lost my temper,” he finally said once they had emerged outside again. She was leading him towards the paddock: it seemed he was going to spend the entire day hanging around those cows.

“I understand why this is hard for you,” Leia said. If she was surprised he had apologized, she didn’t show it—a mercy Ben was grateful for. He wanted people to expect at least the bare minimum of decent behavior from him. “You see Hux as your responsibility.”

“He is.” The red-haired bane of Ben’s existence should be dead right now, but he’d reappeared like a particularly sour-faced boogeyman. “It’s my fault he’s Supreme Leader now.”

“Better him than you,” Leia said. “And honestly, I suspect he’ll be much easier to kill.”

The dry humor was an echo of his own, and he smirked a bit. “You certainly gave it your best try, though.”

She cast him a fond, if annoyed, look, and his heart ached as he realized it was a look she’d often given Han. “I never wanted to kill you,” she said. “But you were in the way of our objectives an awful lot.”

She brought him to the same tree he’d just debauched Rey against, and he blushed as she invited him to take a seat with her on the grass. They stared at the cows together, breathing into the awkward silence that stretched between them.

“I’ve always wanted you here with me,” she finally said. “That’s why I sent Han to bring you back.”

Ben winced as if he’d been struck, the mention of his father’s name sending him spinning as it always did. He’d never known for sure why Han had tried to help him, but of course he’d done it for Leia. For all their fights and all their troubles, Han had always done whatever he could to help her. All she’d ever needed to do was ask.

Usually, she’d been too proud to ask.

“I’m sorry.” It was all he could say. How did one even discuss a wound of this magnitude? What words would ever be enough to articulate the black, gnawing ache at the pit of his soul?

The wind lifted a strand of Leia’s graying hair. She tilted her face up to the sunlight and closed her eyes. “He never understood you,” she said. “I guess I didn’t, either. But he always loved you, Ben.”

Ben’s eyes stung. “I know,” he choked out. And it was so similar to what he’d said to Han in his dreams that the dam holding his tears back burst. He sobbed loud enough to startle the cows, and then he was weeping outright, his shoulders shuddering under the force of his grief. “I’m so sorry,” he gasped, rocking back and forth. “I’m so sorry, mom.”

Her arm slipped around him, and he turned his head into her shoulder, giving himself up to the sorrow and the comfort she offered. “I know you are,” she murmured, kissing the top of his head. Her own voice was choked with tears, and soon he felt the cool trickle of them over his forehead. “I know you are.”

They cried together for what felt like an eternity. When he finally pulled back, Ben’s eyes were
swollen, and his throat was sore. Leia didn’t look much better. Her normally neat braids were falling down, and her nose and cheeks were reddened. Her mouth trembled as she smiled a little at Ben. “I needed that,” she said, wiping away the moisture on her cheeks.

He nodded, sniffing back snot from the fit of weeping. He rubbed his face and took a deep breath. “I can’t ever atone for what I did,” he said. “I was a different man then, someone horrible. I thought it would erase my conflict, that I might find… peace. But it just made everything worse.”

She nodded. “I’m glad to hear that. Maybe that’s awful of me, but I’m glad it hurt you.”

He understood what she meant. She’d loved Han deeply, even if their marriage hadn’t worked out. Of course she wanted his killer to suffer. “He helped bring me back,” Ben confessed. “Doing that—it was the worst thing I’d ever done. The conflict between light and dark got worse.” He sucked in a trembling breath. “At the end, he looked at me with such love.”

Leia made a pained noise. “I don’t think I want to know details.”

“No, of course, I’m so sorry. Just—he touched my cheek. And it changed everything.” The gesture had cracked Ben’s soul open so profoundly that light had finally been able to get in.

More tears slipped from Leia’s eyes, but her lips curved in a fond smile. “Han was always like that. All gruff and argumentative, but when it counted, he had so much love to give.”

“He was brave.” Ben swallowed a lump in his throat. It was a strange relief to talk openly about his father after all this time. “Braver than I ever could be.”

Leia lifted a hand, hesitated for a moment, and then placed it on Ben’s cheek. It was the exact spot where Han had once touched him. “I think you’re very brave,” she murmured. “You came back from the dark. And for what it’s worth… I’m so glad you’re finally here with me.”

Ben leaned into her touch, wondering how it was possible that he had earned this benediction from the woman he’d hurt worst of all.

They spent the rest of the morning sitting together, talking softly of the past and future. As the sun climbed into the sky, filling Ben with warmth, the knots in his chest unraveled.

Redemption was a process, not an outcome. There would be pain again, and regret, and many more tears to come, but moments like this were proof that every step of the difficult journey was worth it.
Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

Happy trailer drop day! That clip of Kylo slamming someone into the ground may have inspired this chapter...

Also, I wrote a smutty one-shot based on the trailer because I cannot help myself. If you want TIE fighter sex with some glove kink, check out First Touch! https://archiveofourown.org/works/18448580

Rey watched as Ben ran a group of Resistance members through a combat drill. At Leia’s suggestion, he’d commandeered the hangar bay to serve as a training space for anyone interested in improving their hand-to-hand combat. At first it had been difficult to find any volunteers willing to spar with a former galactic dictator, but once Finn, Rose, Poe, and Paul had joined, a few others had, as well.

Ben looked good today. He’d apparently decided he’d had enough of wearing brown, because he was back in his black sparring clothes. He moved with easy grace, showing remarkable patience as he corrected a young mechanic’s form.

He was a good teacher. It made Rey smile, remembering how he’d offered to teach her in the snowy forest on Starkiller Base. The offer had seemed like sheer lunacy at the time, but now she knew he really had meant it. Whether or not he’d acknowledged it to himself, he’d wanted someone to share his knowledge with.

Rose applied one of the grappling moves to Finn, sending him flying onto his back. Finn wheezed. “Ouch.”

Poe laughed and clapped. “Well done, Rose.”

Ben, too, was smiling as he looked on. “An excellent throw,” he said. “Rose, would you mind demonstrating that again so everyone can watch?”

Rey could tell Ben was taking a certain petty glee in seeing her friends tossed around. He hadn’t forgiven them for their neglect as easily as Rey had.

Not that everything was entirely forgiven. It would take time for the sting of their betrayal to fade, but so far, they really did seem contrite.

Finn groaned but got up and gamely resumed a fighting stance. Rose got into position and slowly demonstrated the moves she’d used. She went through the sequence once at half-speed, then did it at full speed, slamming Finn back onto the ground.

“Excellent,” Ben said as Finn sucked in desperate breaths.

Rey hid a smile. Part of her was a little gratified by the demonstration, too.

Ben finished the lesson, then answered questions. A few pupils actually smiled at him, which was substantial progress from a couple of days ago, when his presence had made Resistance members
scatter like startled geese.

His eyes flicked up to hers, and she sensed a restless excitement under his composed exterior. When he gestured to the lightsaber strapped to his belt, she understood why. He'd only just regained the privilege of carrying that weapon around the base. “Would you like to see a lightsaber demonstration?” he asked the students.

She grinned, unhooking her own saber. A thrill coursed through her. It had been a while since she’d sparred with him. She strode forward, moving into position across from him. “Whenever you’re ready,” she said, engaging both ends of the saberstaff.

Ben smirked, and then he did the sneakiest, most underhanded thing possible. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of black leather gloves. As he slid the fabric over his pale hands, Rey went instantly wet.

_Cheater_, she said across the bond.

*How is this cheating? I just want to be properly equipped for the fight.*

His faux-innocent tone didn’t fool her. _You know your gloves distract me._

His lips curved. _That sounds like something you should work on, then._

Her nipples stiffened as he finished working his fingers into the tight gloves. She knew without a doubt that as soon as this bout was over, those fingers would be working their way inside her, instead.

She was tempted to jump on him right then and there, but they were surrounded by about a dozen curious Resistance members, including her friends. She breathed in deeply, trying to settle her racing pulse. “Same rules as last time?” she asked.

His smile widened. “Oh, yes.”

Then his red blade sprouted from his fist, crackling with dark promise. A few students jumped back, alarmed by the sight, but it only aroused Rey more. The last time this had happened, that blade had sliced through her clothes.

He started circling her, twirling his saber in the dramatic, flourishing way he preferred. Rey kept pace with him, spinning the staff a few times to show off for their audience. Gasps rose as she made the first attack, lunging at him with a knee-level strike. He deflected the hit away with a downstroke, then whipped the blade back up, swinging for her extended arm.

Rey laughed as she danced back. She loved the raw, reckless feel of their fights. “Is that the best you can do?” she taunted.

Ben advanced on her with a series of heavy blows, driving her back towards the wall. She knew this tactic of his: to overwhelm her with brute strength in the hopes that it would weaken her quickly. She indulged the ravenous part of her that craved the fight, blocking hits that were hard enough to send jarring pain up her arms. Then, wanting to prolong the bout, she danced and darted away, sending her blade nipping towards his exposed side as she did.

“Are they going to kill each other?” Finn asked somewhere off to the side. “This seems dangerous.”

Rey grinned at the question and sent her staff spinning in a disorienting blur. She advanced behind it, pushing him back towards the group of watching students. He let her drive the fight for a few
minutes, mostly blocking as she practiced her showiest moves. It was flattering to have so many people watching her exercise this skill, which no one but Ben had ever seen before.

His next counterattack sliced close enough to her face that she felt the heat of it against her cheek. She shivered as tingles raced over her entire body.

“Hey,” Poe said. “Watch it—”

“It’s fine, Poe,” she called out. “This is normal for us.”

The red saber came screaming towards her neck, and she ducked and rolled out of the way. When she popped back up, she lashed out ferociously enough to send Ben stumbling back.

“I mean, I prefer dinner and drinks, but you do you,” Finn muttered, and Rose choked on a laugh.

Rey ignored their teasing. Her skin was slick with sweat already, her muscles burning pleasantly as she pursued Ben across the floor. He wasn’t unleashing the full force of his furious power on her—probably wanting to spare their onlookers—so Rey decided she would have to escalate things.

She opened her mind to the Force, reveling in the currents of darkness that floated around them. She tipped back her head and laughed as a wave of fury and lust washed over her. “Your ass is mine, Solo,” she said, advancing on him with a series of brutal cuts, alternating which end of the staff she sent flying towards him.

He blocked every hit, far faster than a man that size had any right to be, and she felt the moment he opened himself to the Force, too. Suddenly he was in her head, huge and dark and all-encompassing.

“My queen,” he murmured as their blades locked, his voice too quiet for their watchers to hear. “How should I fuck you this time?”

Rey whimpered, her pussy throbbing as she strained against him. She sidestepped, letting him knock one end of her staff down. The other end darted up in the perfect counterbalance, burning through his sleeve.

She felt the burst of pain on her own upper arm, but Ben just laughed, and it was the same dark, nigh-maniacal sound she remembered from their battle on Ahch-To. “Yes,” he hissed as he stalked back towards her. “Do that again, goddess.”

“Um, guys?” Finn’s voice was faint. “Anyone else feel a little uncomfortable?”

Rey flung out her left hand, enclosing Kylo’s saber in currents of the Force. She yanked the weapon out of his hands and towards her, and to her surprise, he let her do it. She had one moment to enjoy the victory of holding the saberstaff in her right hand and his red saber in her left, but then he extended a hand—those gloves, kriff—and seized her saberstaff with his power. Surprised and intrigued, she let him take it.

He gave a few experimental swings with the weapon, moving his body elegantly from side to side as he completed a figure-eight pattern. His knees were loose, his movements confident, and even though it wasn’t his weapon of choice, he looked fully capable of wielding her staff with deadly intent.

Not wanting to be outdone, Rey twirled his saber. Then she took up the stance she’d learned from him across the Force bond, with the blade passing horizontally in front of her body. He mirrored her, adopting one of her own combat stances. The tension stretched one agonizing moment longer as their minds stroked each other over the bond, and then he was moving to engage her, and she was moving to meet him.
It was as close as she would ever get to fighting herself. He was in her mind, utilizing her experiences with the weapon to power his attacks. She seized his memories in exchange, hacking and chopping as she tried to break through his defenses. The purple staff was, in fact, disorienting, she was pleased to notice—the constant blur of it, and the omnipresent threat that the second blade would snap forward at any moment, more than made up for any drawbacks in precision.

Dimly, she realized that some of their audience had filtered out of the room. It didn’t matter—she was panting and hot, burning up for Ben. Her universe narrowed to the two of them and the rhythmic dance of their bodies. The Force screamed through her in a complex, violent symphony.

Their swords and bodies came together, and Rey moaned at the explosive intensity that coiled behind her straining muscles. She felt like she could burst into flames at any moment.

“I feel it, too,” Ben said, staring at her over their crossed blades with dark, hungry eyes. “It’s like foreplay.”

Someone in the crowd of watchers made a choking sound. “Well, that’s our cue to go.”

Rey didn’t even care which one of her friends had commented. All that mattered was that she and Ben were locked together, sweating and staring and throbbing, and the hangar bay was now empty of anyone but them.

She broke away and tossed the saber in the air over his head, then darted behind him and called the hilt to her with the Force. It was a mirror of his trick on Ahch-To, and it almost worked. Her saber was at his throat in less than a second, but he’d spun just enough to bring one end of the saberstaff up to hover between her thighs. The heat of it radiated through her leggings.

They stared at each other, sucking in harsh breaths. Ben was half turned against her, her saber arm wrapped around his neck like a deadly promise.

“We seem to have reached an impasse,” Ben commented, moving the blade a centimeter closer to her sensitive flesh. Rey had been wet throughout the fight, but the scalding heat and the palpable sense of danger brought forth a fresh gush of moisture between her thighs. She was soaking through her underwear and leggings.

She inched the red saber closer to his neck. “I don’t know. Seems to me like I’ve won.”

To her shock, he leaned into the weapon, just lightly enough to scald a line on the side of his throat. Rey moaned as the pain echoed in her own neck, followed by a rush of arousal so strong it nearly knocked her over. Her skin tightened with Ben’s reflected pleasure.

He grinned at her, the flash of his teeth nearly feral. “The fight isn’t over, goddess.” Then he flicked the blade off and tossed the hilt aside.

Rey followed suit and settled into a sparring stance. She wasn’t ready for this delicious violence to end, either.

He struck first, lashing out with a strike towards her middle. She blocked, sweeping his arm across her body with her right forearm and moving in behind it to chop at his neck with her left hand. She hit the saber burn, and she had a feeling he had allowed her to, because the fresh hurt in her neck was echoed by a throb of excruciating pleasure across the bond.

He retaliated by knocking her arm back, sending her spinning away from him. His arms closed around her middle, and this wasn’t a move Rey had ever learned, but as his erection pressed against her ass, she couldn’t complain. She moaned and ground back against him, and his arms tightened to
the point of pain as he rubbed his cock against her.

He released her abruptly, and Rey stumbled forward, turning just in time to duck his next punch. She lashed out with her foot, booting him in the gut hard enough to make him grunt and stagger back a few paces.

He laughed. “Is that the best you can do?” he asked, mimicking her mockery from earlier.

The dark side of the Force surged around them, pitch-black tendrils that coiled around them and soaked into the golden bond connecting them. A familiar rush of angerpowerlustcontrolneeddomination rolled through Rey, and this time it wasn’t entirely due to Ben. She wanted to dominate him, to hurt and then pleasure him. She wanted him to do the same to her.

With a scream, she ran at him, striking hard with hands and feet, anywhere she could find an opening. He blocked capably, but she could tell when he chose to let her through his guard so he could revel in the throb of bruises blooming on his skin. His black attire protected him, but Rey could hit hard, and she relished the sting in her hands as she pummeled him.

Ben lashed out with a gloved fist, catching her cheekbone. Rey shook the hit off and grinned at him. He was tempering his strength for her, but the pain was enough to drive her lust higher.

She ran towards him, slotting her shoulder under his armpit and using her momentum and the strategic placement of her leg behind his to take him to the ground. He gripped her shoulders as he crashed to the floor, bringing her down on top of him. Then his mouth was on hers, and she was kissing him back greedily. She was done hitting him; she just wanted to devour him whole.

They rolled on the floor, their movements half-caresses, half-grappling holds. It was an echo of the first time they’d ever had sex, when she’d punched him bloody and then taken him deep inside her body on the floor of his personal cruiser. Now, though, her rage at him had been replaced by deep, overwhelming need.

This was a fight, but it was also an exaltation: the purest, most animal expression of a connection so profound it resonated in her soul. The two of them had been forged in pain; now they used that pain for a sweeter purpose.

He flipped her to her back, nearly knocking the wind out of her. His mouth dropped to her throat, and he bit hard. Rey moaned and arched up beneath him, clutching his shoulders like she was drowning and he was her only means of survival. His cock dug between her thighs, pressing her sodden leggings and panties hard against her sensitive pussy.

He broke away, gasping. “Too rough?”

“Never,” she said. And then, because he was still hesitating, she sank her hands into his hair and tugged at the roots, earning a groan from him. “Gentle later. Rough now.”

He crushed his mouth against hers again, biting and sucking at her swollen lips. The heavy press of his cock between her legs was making her see stars.

He swore and broke away again. “Don’t want you lying on the dirty floor.”

Rey felt a rush of affection for this contradictory man, who would happily fight her until they were both bruised but didn’t want her skin to get dirty. He stood up, pulling her to her feet after him, and Rey leapt onto him, wrapping her legs around his waist.
There was no way they were going to make it back to the base, but thankfully, the Falcon was right there. Ben carried her towards it, kissing her soundly as the ramp lowered. His fingers dug bruises into her ass as he strode inside.

Ben slammed her into the first bulkhead they reached. Rey clawed at his back and clenched her legs around him, pulling him even tighter against her. They kissed frantically, tangling tongues, and it didn’t matter that their teeth were clacking together or that this kiss lacked any finesse. She was starving for him.

He pulled them slightly away from the bulkhead, and she smacked his shoulder until he let her down to her feet. Then she planted her hands on his chest and shoved, knocking him back against the opposite wall. The sound of his broad shoulders hitting metal was loud in the enclosed space, and it was followed by the rumble of his surprised laugh.

Rey fisted the collar of his shirt in her hands, stood on her toes, and slammed her mouth against his, cutting off the sound. She bit hard enough to draw blood, and Ben’s hips jerked against her. She reeled at the taste of him, overwhelmed by memories of the first, coppery burst of him in her mouth so many months ago. She licked his wounded lip, feeling more animal than human. Was she going insane?

*Probably,* he murmured in her mind. *But I’m insane, too, and you can make me bleed as much as you want.*

She didn’t want to make him bleed, not really. She just wanted to consume him, to take every part of him inside her until there was no distinction between their bodies and minds anymore.

The Force swirled around Ben, and the next thing she knew, her clothes were being ripped from her skin. Storage cabinets slammed open, and supplies and tools rocketed through the air. The Falcon’s hull groaned as kinetic energy shot through the interior of the ship. It was like being at the center of a cyclone, safe in the circle of Ben’s arms while a tempest shredded the world around them.

He pushed her away from him, sending her stumbling. She expected him to rip off his own clothes then, but he didn’t. He just stared at her nude body, his eyes sparking with a dangerous light. Then he lifted a gloved hand to her breast and squeezed, and Rey shivered.

“You can make me bleed all you want,” he repeated out loud, caressing her taut nipple with those smooth leather fingertips. “But we both know what you really want right now.” He pinched the nipple, making Rey cry out. “You want me to win this fight.”

Rey shuddered all over, because *yes,* that was what she wanted. She wanted to fight him, to give as good as she got and leave her mark on him, but ultimately, she wanted him to win and claim his prize. She nodded frantically, her knees buckling as he pinched the other nipple.

“Then you know what to call me,” he said. His eyes held a storm of passion so intense it might have frightened anyone else, but Rey wasn’t afraid of him. She never would be again.

She lifted her chin and told him what he wanted to hear. “Take what you want, Kylo Ren.”
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

Welp this is just straight filth and I'm not even remotely sorry.

Ben wanted to howl in triumph.

Rey had provoked him into this violently aroused state. She’d drawn his darkness out with her own, pushing and striking and taunting him, searing him with both her saber and her lips. She wanted all of him, and she wasn’t afraid of getting it.

He wasn’t afraid of her, either. She could claw him bloody and bite more scars into him, and he would revel in each mark of her desire. The two of them were combustible, their chemistry as likely to explode into violence as it was to leave them rocking slowly together.

Rey was right: there would be time for gentle later. Right now, she wanted Kylo Ren’s furious passion.

Ben would give it to her.

He advanced on her, savoring the way her chin lifted defiantly. His beautiful girl liked the struggle as much as the surrender. He grabbed her throat in one gloved fist and squeezed, impeding her air supply just enough to make her wheeze and scrabble at his hand. She wasn’t trying to remove his hand, though—she just gripped his wrist and held on, daring him with her eyes to do his worst.

Ben trailed his other hand up her side, chasing a shiver across her skin. He stopped when he reached her breast, plucking one nipple with his leather-clad fingers. Rey made a breathy sound and leaned into the choke hold, willingly cutting off her own air flow.

Ben held the choke just long enough to feel the flicker of her delicious, involuntary panic across the bond, then released her. Rey gasped and staggered back, her shoulders smacking against the bulkhead. He followed, planting his hands on either side of her head before ducking down to take her lips in a bruising kiss. She met him eagerly, her tongue lapping against his, and when he pulled away, he saw the red shine of his blood on her parted lips.

To a darksider, that was the sexiest sight imaginable.

Rey grinned, quick and fierce. Then her head snapped forward, her forehead catching him in the throat. Ben swore and retreated, and Rey followed the maneuver with a lightning fast turning kick that slammed into his ribs. She was unarmed and completely nude, but she attacked with the confidence of a man three times her size. Ben grinned, lovingly running his gaze over the golden lines of her body. He was so distracted by a glimpse of the pink slickness between her thighs that her next kick nearly knocked him over.

As a fighting strategy, nudity was shockingly effective. Then again, Rey could be covered head-to-toe in armor and he would still find her desirable.

He settled into a combat stance and held his hand out with the palm up, crooking two fingers back in invitation. She advanced in a flurry of fists, and he blocked her blows, knocking them aside with his
forearms. He didn’t retaliate, instead letting her work herself up into an even more intense state of arousal. The next time he got his hands on her, he wasn’t going to let go.

She unleashed a push kick aimed straight for his gut, and Ben was finally ready to end the bout. He caught her ankle and yanked, pulling her off her feet. She crashed to the floor on her back, and he followed her down, settling between her thighs and caging her wrists above her head. She rocked up against him, smearing her wetness over the front of his black trousers. Her eyes glittered with excitement, and her gleeful, greedy desire roared across the bond, matching his own.

“You like fighting me,” he purred as he rolled his hips, dragging the length of his erection over her. “My fierce scavenger, winning my heart with violence.”

She laughed. “It isn’t your heart I’m trying to win.”

He bit back a smile. She was fiery today, all tempestuous defiance, and he knew exactly what she was trying to do: provoke him into utter madness. “No,” he agreed, rubbing his cock over her again. “But you have it, anyway.”

It was too earnest a confession for the dangerous passion play they were engaged in, but he couldn’t have held the truth back if he’d tried. It was all one with them: the anger, the need, the love. Their connection had as many facets as a jewel, and it was impossible to separate one shining portion from the greater whole.

He rolled off her, provoking a dismayed whine from Rey. She clearly wanted him to fuck her right there on the floor, but Ben had other plans for her. He knelt and scooped her into his arms, then carried her into the captain’s quarters.

He sat on the bed, but rather than release her, he turned her over until she was lying face down over his lap, her arms braced on the mattress and her ass in the air. He brought one hand down hard on her left ass cheek, making her squeak and lurch forward. He spanked her again on the right, then repeated the sequence until she was gasping and trying to wriggle away from the blows.

“This is what happens to greedy little scavengers who don’t know when to stop fighting,” he said as he smacked stinging redness into her skin. “They get punished.”

Rey moaned. “No. Please, no.”

He stilled for a moment, then nudged her across the bond. You know what to say if you want this to stop, don’t you?

She nodded. Jakku. But I don’t want it to stop. Her hips lifted as she offered him her ass again.

He grinned and rubbed one cheek in gentle circles. So—she craved more than just pain. “You were very bad,” he told her, slipping two fingers down between her cheeks. She widened her legs for him, moaning as he brushed over her tightly puckered hole on the way to her pussy. He stroked her cunt a few times, and when he brought his hand back up, the black glove was slick. Unable to resist, he dipped the fingers into his mouth, sucking her taste off the leather and shuddering in bliss. “Do you know why?” he asked as he returned his hand to her skin.

She shook her head.

“You weren’t bad for fighting me.” He followed the words with a series of hard, stinging blows. “You were bad for actually thinking you could beat me.”

“I can beat you,” she said, and of course she could, but Kylo Ren would never have admitted it, so
Ben didn’t, either.

Without warning, he slid two fingers deep inside her pussy, and Rey choked on a moan. He pumped them, fast and rough. “You didn’t win, Rey. Not this time, and not last time, either.”

“But I can,” she repeated mutinously. She was gripping the sheets so hard that her knuckles were white.

He chuckled indulgently, then pulled his fingers out of her and slapped them lightly over her pussy. “Maybe, but I think you enjoy losing to me. You like being conquered, admit it.”

She shook her head, so he smacked her pussy harder, striking her sensitive flesh with two fingers. She moaned and tried to crawl off his lap, but he gripped her hips and jerked her back, punishing her with a brutal series of spanks. With her legs spread wide for him, he could see a fresh trickle of moisture seeping out of her swollen pussy. This hot, violent encounter was turning Rey on hard.

“You like being debased by Kylo Ren,” he told her, raking his gloved fingers from her upper back down her spine. “Tell me, Jedi, where does that desire come from?”

She choked and slipped a hand between her legs, and Ben thrilled at the knowledge that she was masturbating to this scene. He let her stroke herself for a second, then grabbed her arm and forced it back in front of her. “You don’t get to come until I say so.”

“I’ll never surrender to you,” she snarled, pumping her hips over him. Her lower belly brushed against his erection where it strained against his trousers, and Ben was going to lose it if she did much more of that.

He slapped her ass in punishment, then shifted her off him, settling her on hands and knees on the bed. “Oh, I think you will.” Somehow they’d moved from rough sex straight into roleplay, and maybe it was twisted, but Ben didn’t give a fuck. There were no limits to what he would do if she wanted it.

Before she could look back to see what he was doing, he dipped down and sealed his mouth over her pussy. She was sopping wet, and as he lapped greedily at her sensitive flesh, her juices covered his mouth and chin. Rey groaned loud and long, pillowing her head on her arms as she submitted to his ministrations.

She tasted like heaven, tart and sweet and indescribably good. When Ben gently scraped his teeth over her clitoris, she yelped, then immediately shoved her hips back for more. “Greedy,” he said as he gripped both reddened ass cheeks, splitting her apart even further for him. “I always wondered if Jedi pussy would be sweet.”

“Kylo,” she gasped. “Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck—”

Her pussy quivered against his mouth, and Ben knew she was going to come soon. “You’re not allowed to come,” he told her, even as he started licking her clitoris with firm, determined strokes. “Don’t you dare come, Jedi.”

“Kylo, Kylo…” Rey screamed and orgasmed, trembling beneath his tongue. The sharp burst of her pleasure across the bond made his balls tighten sympathetically, and Ben gritted his jaw, willing himself not to join her.

He pulled away and looked down at her, grinning at her flushed cheeks and slack mouth. Her eyes were squeezed shut, but they soon fluttered open, and Ben quickly rearranged his expression back into the forbidding mask of Kylo Ren. “What did I just say?” he asked in deadly quiet tones.
She swallowed and looked back at him. “You told me not to come.”

“And what did you do?”

She exhaled raggedly. “I came.”

“You did,” he confirmed. He planted a hand on her lower back, not missing the way she shivered at the touch. “I’m going to punish you again. Ten strikes, and I want you to count them for me.”

“No,” she moaned, even as she rocked her hips towards him. “I can’t take it.”

“Too bad.” He laid a palm against the top of her right thigh, letting her feel the threat of it before he brought his hand cracking against the skin there. Rey gasped and jolted forward.

“Well?” Ben asked when she didn’t say anything.

“One,” she gritted out.

He slapped a spot a few inches up.

“Three.”

He stifled a laugh at her disobedience and swatted her hard enough to make her squeal. “Start over at one.”

He peppered her ass and upper thighs with hard strikes, relishing the pink glow of her skin and the little whimpers she made with every hit. She counted diligently, although by the end, her voice was strained. When the tenth and final strike cracked through the room, Rey sagged, the tension leaving her body.

He reached across the bond to check in on her mental state. She was flying high, giddy and dizzy from the orgasm and the burning ache he’d smacked into her skin. It was almost enough for him to take mercy on her and fuck her into the mattress.

Almost.

He flipped her over onto her back. She went willingly, gazing at him with dazed eyes. She hitched her knees up and spread her legs wide.

Ben would never get tired of seeing her like this. Unable to resist touching all that wetness, he bit the fingertips of his left glove and slowly dragged it off. Rey’s eyes were riveted to the motion, and she whimpered a little when he dropped the glove to the floor. He knelt between her legs, sliding his bare left hand up until he was cupping her pussy in his palm. She was hot and soft, a tender slice of paradise offered up for the taking.

Ben gripped her jaw with his gloved right hand, squeezing tight and pulling her head up off the mattress to force her to look at what he was doing to her. He showed her three of his fingers before sliding them between her legs. He worked them inside, reveling in the tight stretch of her body around him.

“So much,” Rey whispered, closing her eyes.

He squeezed her jaw tighter, jostling her a little to get her attention. “Watch,” he commanded.

Her eyes instantly opened, and she looked back down between her legs. He slid his fingers in and out in a steady rhythm, periodically stopping to show her the shine of her moisture coating them. The
third time he slipped them out of her, he sucked them, flicking his tongue to collect every last drop of her taste. She moaned at the sight, working her hips in frantic little jerks.

“I won the fight, Rey. Do you know what that means?”

Wide-eyed, she nodded.

Ben plunged his fingers back into her, holding them still and deep as he rubbed her clit roughly with his thumb. “Say it,” he ordered. “Tell me what it means, little Jedi.”

She swallowed hard, and the movement of her throat was too tempting to resist, so Ben moved his hand back down to cage it with firm pressure. Rey’s eyes slid half-closed, and her cunt pulsed around him. “It means I’m yours,” she whispered past his hold on her throat.

The words were enough to make Ben want to come on the spot. He grunted and kept rubbing her clit. “It means I get to take what I want.”

“Yes,” Rey moaned. Her feet slid on the bed, and she twisted under the pressure of his thumb. Ben tracked the flush spreading across her chest with rapt attention. She was about to come for him again, his incredible girl, but he didn’t want her to do it without him, so he stopped rubbing and pulled his fingers out.

“Wait,” Rey said, grabbing his hand and trying to force it back between her thighs. “I need—”

He squeezed her throat tighter, cutting off her next words. “If I were you, I would be very careful about making demands right now.”

It was a bluff of the most ludicrous variety, because truthfully, Rey could demand anything from him and he would happily comply. He would probably beg for the privilege of fulfilling her every need. But today she’d demanded Kylo Ren’s domination in the bedroom, and Ben was more than happy to deliver.

Rey whimpered and released his wrist, staring up at him with pleading eyes. Ben bit back a smile and resumed his attentions to her clit. He drove her up and up, rubbing in the hard circles he knew would get her to the peak fastest. Once she was moaning near-constantly and rocking against his hand, he stopped again.

“Fuck!” She spat the word out with more than a hint of her earlier fire, and this time Ben did laugh.

“What’s wrong?” he asked innocently as he trailed the backs of his fingers over her sensitive flesh. She shivered and twitched at even that small pressure.

“You know what’s wrong,” she gasped as she tried to push against him.

“Mmm. But I want you to say it.”

“I need you,” she said, looking nearly lost. Her eyes were huge and glassy, her hair tangled, her skin flushed and glistening with sweat.

He stroked her clit again as a reward for the confession. “Do you surrender to me?”

She didn’t answer, mulishly holding on to this one last symbol of defiance, but Ben knew it wouldn’t last for long. He felt positively diabolical as he worked her up to yet another peak—and stopped her once more at the precipice.
At the third denied orgasm, Rey broke. “Please, Ben,” she babbled, forgetting their roleplay under the intensity of her need. “I surrender, I need you inside me, please, please.” She writhed beneath him, all sleek muscles and golden skin, utterly lacking in self-consciousness as she begged for what she wanted. “Please take me.”

He touched her thoughts and felt the collapse of any remaining combativeness. Rey was lost to instinct and sensation, the clever workings of her mind subsumed by a wave of animal hunger. She was hurting for him, so empty and aching she felt like she might die if she went another second without him.

He released her throat and fumbled at the fastenings of his trousers. The button ripped off in his urgency, and he ended up half-shredding the fabric as he tugged the garment down to his upper thighs. He was impossibly hard, as desperate for her as she was for him, and he couldn’t leave her for even as long as it would take to undress fully.

He took his erection in hand and lined himself up with her entrance. “It’s all right,” he soothed as she continued making desperate, distressed sounds. “I’m here.” He pushed inside her with a few jerky thrusts, his burning need making finesse impossible. He lifted one of her legs to rest on his shoulder and leaned over her to deepen the penetration.

Rey sighed in pleasure, her eyelids fluttering closed. Ben gripped her jaw again. “Watch,” he said, but the command came out hoarse this time. He was losing the battle to stay in control; pretty soon he was going to start thrusting, and once he started, there would be no stopping until he spilled himself inside her.

Rey opened her eyes and stared at him with an expression akin to awe. Ben’s heart squeezed at the look. He felt like the most powerful man in the galaxy, like the luckiest bastard alive. He felt like hero and villain all at once as he started moving inside her, stroking deep and making her whimper every time he bottomed out.

“Fuck,” he said, panting as pleasure zinged up his spine. “Look at you, Rey. Just look at you. I can’t—you’re just—kriff, perfect, yes.” He wasn’t making any sense, but Rey didn’t seem to care. She was breathing hard, sweat streaking down her temples and pooling in the dip of her collarbones. She dipped a hand down to rub her clit, and this time he didn’t stop her. He was going to orgasm so hard he might never recover, and he needed her there with him when it happened.

Rey clenched around him, and the battle was lost. Ben slammed into her hard and fast, swearing constantly as his balls tightened and a tingle built at the base of his spine. Then he was shouting and jerking and pumping her full of his cum, and as she rippled around him, her pleasured scream was drowned out by the roaring in his ears.

When he was spent, Ben collapsed on top of her, utterly defeated.

They cared for each other with shaking hands, washing and caressing with incredible delicacy, considering the violence that had just passed between them. Ben leaned on her in the shower, and she nestled into his chest as he carried her to the galley afterwards to find food.

Once she was fed and hydrated, Ben brought her back to the cabin. He was too shaky to do more than strip the soaked sheets, so he laid Rey down on the bare mattress to work bacta gel into her bruised ass. Her cheekbone was purpling from his punch, and guilt stabbed him as he rubbed gel into that, too.
She grabbed his wrist. “Don’t feel guilty,” she said, fixing him with those heartbreakingly beautiful eyes. “We were sparring—injuries are inevitable. And I hurt you, too.”

He shook his head. “I know, but I don’t have to like it.”

She smiled softly at him and grabbed the tube of bacta gel. “I’m glad you don’t treat me like I’m fragile. You treat me like a warrior.”

“You are a warrior.” He sighed in pleasure as she stroked the gel down the lightsaber burns on his neck and arm. They had felt good during the fight, but now that his adrenaline had burned away, he could admit they stung. She dabbed some on his split lip, too, then hunted down additional bruises from the bout, and he did the same for her.

When they were done, Ben looked down at their nude bodies and laughed. The two of them were shiny from the gel and spotted with bruises, their skin well and truly marked by each other.

“What?” Rey asked, tracing a fingertip over his smiling lips.

“That was intense,” he admitted.

She giggled, and the sweet sound nearly sent Ben into the stratosphere, he was so high on her. “It was. And it was exactly what I wanted.” She leaned in to kiss his cheek. “Thank you, Ben.”

He kissed her back, lingering for long moments even though the bacta on his lip tasted unpleasantly medicinal. He would never get enough of her soft mouth.

She drew him down to the bed beside her. “Just a short nap,” she said as her eyes fluttered shut. “And then we’ll go back inside.”

Ben chuckled and closed his eyes. “Your friends are going to be appalled at the sight of us.”

“Who cares?”

It was an excellent question. Ben certainly didn’t. Rey drifted into sleep, and he nuzzled into her damp hair, wishing they could stay like this forever.

#

They made love again a few hours later, and this time it was as slow and gentle as the previous time had been intense and rough. Ben kissed Rey throughout, unable to pull away for even a second. He whispered soft sentiments against her lips, words of love and adoration that she reciprocated just as quietly.

The moment felt as fragile as spun sugar and as eternal as the stars. Ben had been born needing her, he thought. She was as essential to his existence as the electric flicker of his thoughts and the steady pump of his heart. It had taken three decades, but Ben would have waited even longer, undergone even more pain, to earn the perfection of this moment.

She was his, and he was hers, and of all the varied truths of the universe, there was none so fundamental as that.
Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

You may have noticed I’ve added an estimated chapter count! A very, very loose estimate. But in case you were wondering if this will be 60 chapters or 200, it will be much closer to the 60 end of things.

Thank you for reading! As always, comments and kudos bring me joy.

Rey tightened a final nut on the speeder bike she was refurbishing, then wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of one grimy hand. She’d been hard at work for hours, and it felt amazing. Her muscles ached, her nose burned with the scent of oil and machinery, and she felt both filthy and proud of the work she’d done.

Rey hadn’t gotten to exercise this particular skill set in a while, and she was surprised to realize how much she’d missed it. Her familiarity with machines was so ingrained by now that doing maintenance work was almost like channeling the Force, but while her Force abilities had been gifted to her, she’d earned these through years of hard, painful work. Every vehicle she fixed was proof of the tenacity and willpower that had gotten her through her childhood.

She slid out from beneath the speeder and stood, stretching out her back. Next to her, Rose was hard at work on her own speeder. “How’s it going?” Rey asked.

Rose grunted. “Almost there.”

“Good.” Rey looked around the hangar bay. It was full of people doing ship maintenance and inventorying supplies. A team was heading to Myrtah shortly, and the Resistance had just received another delivery of donated equipment. Their fleet was tiny but growing; they’d recently spilled out into a second hangar.

The Myrtah team would be taking a long-range freighter rather than the Falcon, since the ship was too recognizable at this point. Rey was secretly glad. If she and Ben weren’t allowed to join the Myrtah strike team, she didn’t want anyone else commandeering what she now considered their ship.

Finn and Poe would both be joining the attempt to assassinate Supreme Leader Hux, and Rey tried not to be jealous. Leia was right—she and Ben were too recognizable and too valuable to the Resistance to risk. Still, Rey felt useless staying behind, and she knew she would be anxious the entire time her friends were away.

Rose got to her feet and dusted off her hands. “Perfect,” the tech said, patting the bike fondly. “She’s beautiful.”

Rey appreciated anyone who found beauty in metal and engines. She cocked her head. “Why do you suppose ships and vehicles are always gendered female?”

Rose shrugged. “Because they’re badass?”

Rey grinned. “I like the way you think.”
“So,” Rose said, petting the speeder bike again. “What do you think? Should we take them for a spin?”

Rey glanced around to see if anyone was listening. There weren’t exactly any restrictions on going off-base, but the leadership council would probably see it as an unnecessary risk. Still, this part of Durkteel was peaceful and sparsely occupied, and Rey was a trained sort-of-Jedi. Besides, she was tired of spending most of her time underground.

She grinned and leaned in, lowering her voice conspiratorially. “Let’s do it.”

Twenty minutes later, they both wore helmets and green camouflage flight suits. They walked the bikes out into the sunshine, and when Rey straddled hers, a familiar joy burst through her. This was a smaller model than her speeder back on Jakku, but it would feel just as freeing to ride it over Durkteel’s verdant fields.

Rose looked over at her. “You ready?” Her voice crackled over the speaker in Rey’s helmet. Their comms were linked so they didn’t have to scream over the rush of air.

Before Rey answered, she sent a thought across the bond to Ben.


He was in a meeting with the leadership council, but he responded instantly.

I’m so jealous. Have fun. Love you, too.

She smiled like the besotted idiot she was, then fired up the bike. “Let’s go.”

Rey whooped with joy as she blasted forward. The speeder’s acceleration was magnificent. Wind whipped at her sleeves as she kept throttling up, wanting to test the vehicle’s limits.

“Slow down, danger lady,” Rose said over the headset. “You’re leaving me behind.”

“You’ll just have to catch up.”

She rocketed past the paddock, and the herd of six-legged creatures startled and danced away. Rey laughed, giddy at the sense of pure freedom. Wanting to share her exhilaration with Ben, she sent him wordless impressions of her journey over the bond. She felt his contentment at experiencing the flight with her.

She was hopelessly, catastrophically in love with him, and she’d never been happier.

Taking mercy on Rose, Rey dialed back the speed and allowed the tech to catch up. “I’m not great at this,” Rose panted. “Not many speeders in space.”

Rose had spent most of her life on ships; it made sense she wouldn’t be adept at handling the bike yet. Rey gave her a few tips, then guided her towards a copse of trees where they could practicing maneuvering around obstacles. They drove merry circles for the better part of an hour, until Rose was confident in her driving skills. Then they blasted back out over the fields together, and this time Rose easily kept up.

“Where do you want to go?” Rey asked as they zipped over a patchwork quilt of pastures and fields. They passed a few farmers who either ignored them or waved cheerfully. Anyone in this area who wasn’t an idiot knew what was happening over at the abandoned base, but the local community was extremely sympathetic to the Resistance, so there was no danger of being reported to the First Order.

“I want to head to the nearest settlement, if that’s okay,” Rose said. “I want to get something for Poe
and Finn so they don’t forget me while they’re away on Myrtah. Matching necklaces or something.”

Behind her helmet’s face shield, Rey’s eyebrows climbed. “So they don’t forget you?”

Rose giggled. “Yeah.”

The tone of her voice instantly snagged Rey’s attention. Rose sounded like a woman with a secret. “Wait,” Rey said. “Are you—”

The tech giggled again. “Yeah.”

“All three of you?” Rey wasn’t exactly sexually unadventurous, but she’d honestly never contemplated that sort of arrangement before.

“All three of us,” Rose confirmed.

“Wow.” Rey blinked, trying to wrap her mind around the fact that her three closest friends were apparently together together. “Is it an official thing?”

“Official to us,” Rose said. “It isn’t just sex, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Now it was Rey’s turn to laugh. “I do not need to think about my best friends naked.”

“Well, I do it enough for both of us, so it’s all good,” Rose said cheekily.

Although now that Rey knew what was going on, she was weirdly curious. “Um, how are they?”

Rose’s laugh was a sharp crack through the speakers. “I knew you were a dirty girl, Jedi. They’re amazing. Poe is a sex god, obviously, since he’s been sleeping his way around the galaxy since he was a teenager. He was the one who started it late one night when we’d all been drinking. And Finn isn’t that experienced, but he’s so tender, and sometimes he gets a little rough, like he can’t control himself—”

“Okay, okay,” Rey interjected hastily. “I take it back. I don’t need to know the details.”

Rose laughed, then sighed dreamily. “It’s amazing. I’m so happy.”

“Me, too,” Rey confessed.

There was a long, awkward pause. It was the first time Rey had told anyone about the romantic aspect of her relationship with Ben, and her cheeks burned with embarrassment. If Rose was horrified by the turn in the conversation, though, she didn’t indicate it. “Yeah? What’s he like?”

“So loving,” Rey said, relieved that Rose was open to hearing about Ben. “He takes care of me, but he also treats me like an equal. He’s shared all his darkest secrets with me, and he knows all of mine, and he never judges me even a little bit. He’s just so strong and emotionally open, and maybe that sounds weird, but I’ve never met anyone so aware of who he is as a person and who he wants to be. He doesn’t make excuses for what he’s done, but he tries every single day to be a better man.”

“I mean, that sounds pretty great,” Rose said. “But I actually meant what is he like in bed.”

Rey burst into girlish giggles. “Oh. Of course. Um…” Her cheeks flushed even more, and her heart tapped a happy little rhythm as she thought about all the things Ben was in bed. “He’s powerful. Intense. Totally focused on giving me as much pleasure as I can handle. He can be domineering, but only when I want it like that. And believe me, I do want it like that.”
“Wow, I see now what you meant about not actually needing the details.” But Rose was obviously lying, because a second later, she spoke again. “How big is it?”

Rey nearly crashed her speeder at the question. “Rose!”

“Can’t blame a girl for asking.” Rose didn’t sound even a little ashamed. “Come on, he’s built like a brick wall. Even when I was worried he was still totally evil, I could appreciate those muscles. And he’s so tall! And his hands are huge.”

“So huge,” Rey agreed dreamily.

“Wait, the hands or the…”

“Both.”

“Wow.” Now Rose’s tone was almost reverent. “I think I get it now. Why you fell for him.”

Rey couldn’t stop smiling. She’d never experienced this sort of girl talk before. “I fell for him for other reasons. I fell in love with his heart and his soul.”

“That is disgustingly romantic.”

“Although the giant cock certainly didn’t hurt.”

And then both of them were screeching with laughter, and as they zipped onwards through the fields, Rey discovered a new shade of belonging.

#

“Wait, wait, wait,” Rose slurred. “He cut through your underwear… with a lightsaber? Damn, Jedi, you really are a freak.”

Rey laughed into her cocktail. The nearest settlement to the Resistance base was small and orderly, full of white stuccoed homes and small shops, but it happily boasted one very grimy dive bar. Exactly the perfect place for Rey and Rose to get day-drunk and bond over their sex lives.

Rey had learned that Poe was particularly gifted with his tongue and that it was, indeed, possible to have sex with two men simultaneously. “Where... where do they... go?” Rey had asked, blushing so hard she thought her ears must be bright red.

Rose had just laughed. “Oh, there are so many options.”

That hadn’t cleared things up at all, but Rey had been too afraid to ask for more details.

“We call it going dark,” Rey said now, blinking past the haze of alcohol. “When we commune with the dark side a little.”

“Isn’t that dangerous? Doesn’t that lead to mass murder or something?”

“Only if you take it too far. Darksiders believe in passion above everything else. In our case, that’s just sex and fighting, but for the Sith it was more about anger and pain.”

“Fighting—like that ‘lightsaber demonstration’ the other day?” Rose used her fingers to indicate air quotes around the words. “Because damn, girl, that was hot. Finn actually tried to cover my eyes at one point.”
Rey laughed. “Yeah, like that. It’s all consensual. It’s just that fighting is kind of... sexy.”

“It ended in fucking, right?”

Rey just gave Rose a look, and the tech laughed. “I guess you won, then.”

“Not technically.” Rey hid her smile in her drink.

“Okay, so he won and manhandled you a bit and you probably had a million orgasms. Sounds like victory to me.”

“It was only two orgasms, actually.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “Whatever you say, Jedi.” She tossed back her drink and stood. “I’m going to the bathroom. Want to grab us refills while I’m gone?”

Rey considered her half-empty drink. “How are we going to get back to the base?”

“On the speeders, duh. We have time to sober up before dinner.”

Rey grinned. “Then why not? Let’s have another.”

She hadn’t had this much irresponsible fun in a while. After so much stress, and with the looming mission to Myrtah a constant worry, surely she deserved a day off.

Rose staggered away, and Rey took advantage of the moment alone to fumble along the bond, wanting to give Ben a mental caress. Hey, sweetheart.

What the fuck, he replied after a shocked moment. Are you drunk?

Yep. She stifled a burp in her fist. We’re having girl talk. Did you know Rose, Poe, and Finn are an item?

Rey, I can feel your dizziness from here. For fuck’s sake, I almost just fell over in front of Kerelle—wait, did you say they’re an item?

They are absolutely, one-hundred percent fucking, Rose says she can take both of them at the same time, but I can’t even imagine how that would work—

Oh no, I do not need to hear this. I can’t believe women talk about things like that. She felt a bolt of trepidation lance through him. Wait. Are you telling her about—

I have to go now, Rey interrupted. Bye!

You aren’t fooling me, scavenger. But he seemed amused, and there was a hint of pride underneath that. He was imagining her giving him a glowing performance review. She had, of course, but Rey still rolled her eyes at his cockiness.

I’m grabbing refills, Rey said. We’ll sober up here, and I’ll see you tonight.

Sounds good. Be safe, all right?

Rey’s cheeks hurt from smiling. I will.

With the bond quiet once more, she stood from the table and made her way to the bar. There were a few other groups of humans and aliens drinking, a mix of locals and the travelers who passed
through the nearby spaceport. Rey caught the bartender’s attention and held up two fingers, and the tusked alien nodded in confirmation.

Someone jostled into her from the side, and Rey stumbled. “Hey,” she protested. Her shoulder stung a little from the hit.

A rough-looking man with a blond beard cocked his head at her. He was wearing leather under battered, lightweight armor—probably a mercenary or hired security for a private transport. “Sorry,” he said. “I tripped.”

“Sure you did,” Rey muttered. Men came up with the stupidest, most transparent excuses for their boorish behavior. He’d probably just wanted to introduce himself to a pretty girl and figured violence would break the ice as well as anything else.

Her head spun, and Rey took a deep breath. She was drunker than she’d realized.

“Where’d your friend go?” the man asked.

The question made Rey uneasy, and she edged away from him, nearly tripping as a fresh wave of dizziness washed over her. “Not far. She’ll be back soon.”

The stranger’s face split into a nasty-looking grin. “Not soon enough.”

Before Rey could process the words, he clamped a set of metal cuffs around her wrists. Her connection to the Force was abruptly cut off, and Rey cried out in alarm and pain. Her head ached, and everything grew fuzzy and dull. When she tried to grab the golden rope binding her to Ben, she couldn’t find it. There was nothing in her mind but fog.

Panic flooded her at the loss of her connection to Ben. It wasn’t just gone, was it? The cuffs must have done something to her, neutralized her Force powers somehow.

The man grabbed the chain binding the cuffs together and started dragging her away from the bar. When the bartender protested, the bearded man pulled out a blaster and shot him. After that, no one tried to intervene.

“Rose,” Rey shouted, but even her voice was weak. Blackness encroached on the edges of her vision; it was like standing at the end of a long, dark tunnel. Her sight was dimming so quickly that she could barely tell when they left the bar and emerged into the sunlight.

“I can hardly believe it,” the man said as he dragged her after him. “The biggest bounty in the galaxy, just sitting in a bar.” He laughed. “I was just here to collect on a loan. Fuck, I’m going to be made for life.”

Oh, Maker. The First Order’s bounty. It had never seemed entirely real, since no one had ever tried to capture her, at least not that Rey had been aware of, and somehow in the chaos of the last few months, she’d almost... forgotten. She hadn’t seen any “Wanted Criminal” holograms of her face in a while, and with the generals dead and Ben by her side, it had been easy to get careless.

Fuck, she was an idiot.

Rey’s legs buckled, and she crashed to the street. Everything was going numb. What was happening to her? Where was the Force? Why couldn’t she move or speak or think?

Distantly, her upper arm throbbed, and she realized what had happened. The mercenary had injected
her with something.

“Come on, Jedi,” the man muttered, yanking on the cuffs hard enough to bruise her wrists. “I know someone who’s going to be very happy to see you.”

Rey’s feet couldn’t find purchase; it was like she was a puppet with cut strings, her limbs flopping uselessly. The blackness covering her vision expanded, and soon she couldn’t see anything at all.

She felt the man pick her up and heave her over his shoulder, but that was the last thing her nerves registered. She was reduced to almost nothing, just one tiny spark in the all-encompassing night. Her consciousness dimmed, and her thoughts distilled to a single plea: Help me, Ben.

Then that, too, was gone.
Ben screamed and fell to his knees in the middle of the mess hall, dropping his lunch tray. His head hurt unbearably, a sharp, shredding pain, as if something inside him had been ripped in half.

“Whoa, are you all right?”

The words sounded distant and strange. Who was talking to him? What was happening? Ben’s body was screaming that something was wrong wrong wrong, but his mind couldn’t catch up to figure out what it was.

Finn crouched in front of him, looking concerned. Behind him, a crowd of watchers was gathering.

“What’s going on?”

“I... don’t know.” Ben clutched his head in his hands. “Hurts.”

It was something in his mind, a disturbance in the Force, but what could cause pain of that magnitude? Blindly, he fumbled along the bond for Rey, wondering if she’d felt it, too.

She wasn’t there.

The shining connection between them terminated in blackness.

Ben had thought he’d known true horror before, but it was nothing compared to what filled him now. “No, no, no,” he moaned, rocking back and forth in the spilled remains of his food, frantically tugging on his end of the bond. She had to be there, she couldn’t be gone, if she was gone he would die—

A hand brushed his shoulder, and then Leia’s concerned face was in front of him. Ben was so dizzy—the world was spinning and warping, and he wanted to vomit. He focused on his mother’s brown eyes, desperate for anything that might anchor him. “Tell me it isn’t true,” he begged, unable to say anything else. “Mom, please.” He was a little boy again, asking her to make the monsters go away.

“Tell me what’s happening,” Leia ordered, gripping his face between her palms.

“Rey.” Just saying her name made the agony worse. He was crying now, heaving massive sobs as his heart tore open and his universe shattered.

“Is she hurt?”

“She’s gone. I can’t—I can’t feel her anymore—” Ben turned aside and vomited all over the mess hall floor.

“Finn. Poe.” Leia said the names sharply. “Help me get him out of here.”

Arms slid under his, dragging him to his feet, but Ben couldn’t see anything. He closed his eyes,
searching the Force again. Maybe he’d made a mistake. Maybe she was just sleeping or passed out after drinking too much or *something*—

But no. The golden bond between them had gleamed even when she was unconscious. Now it just… ended. In the space where her mind had once been, there was nothing.

Finn and Dameron supported him on either side, half-carrying him out of the room. He didn’t care where they took him. Wherever it was, he didn’t plan to be there long.

If Rey was no longer in this world, he didn’t want to be, either.

They dumped him onto a soft surface: the bed in his cell. It smelled like her, and Ben cried even harder, curling around her pillow like a wounded animal.

The bed dipped next to him, and Leia’s cool hand brushed his forehead. “Ben, I need to know what you’re sensing.” Her voice was calm, giving him an anchor in the stormy sea of despair. “Please tell me.”

“The bond,” he choked out. “It connects our minds. Normally she’s there, I can see her and sense her, all light and beautiful, and now she’s gone and it’s just black—”

He heard matching gasps from Poe and Finn, who were apparently still in the room. Ben couldn’t even care that they were witnessing the utter destruction of his world.

“Oh, Ben.” Leia’s voice shook. “You think she’s dead?”

He let out an inhuman groan. “She can’t be gone, she can’t be, I can’t bear it—”

Leia stroked his hair back from his forehead. “Ben, look at me.”

He forced his tear-swollen eyes open. Leia was crying, too, although she also looked fiercely determined, like she would do anything to fix this. “Maybe it’s something else. Take a few deep breaths and then tell me exactly what happened. We’ll figure this out.”

He sat up, still clutching Rey’s pillow as he tried to follow her instructions. It was hard to unlock his chest, but as his mother ran a soothing hand over his upper back, Ben was able to suck in a few breaths. The screaming despair didn’t dissipate, but the panic diminished just enough to let him speak. “She went out with Rose,” he said. “They took two bike speeders for a joyride.”

“Rose was with her?” The demand came from Dameron, who stepped forward, looking even more upset than he had a second ago.


“They went to a bar—when I last talked to her, she was drunk but really happy.” He ran a hand over his face, remembering her giddy joy and the love he’d felt bubbling through her. If that was the last conversation they’d ever have—

“Hey.” The word snapped him back to reality. He didn’t know how long he’d been sitting there, staring at nothing and spiraling back into agonized panic, but apparently it had been long enough for Finn to leave the room and come back. The former stormtrooper was crouching in front of him, a glass of water in his outstretched hand.

Ben accepted it, his fingers trembling on the glass. Water slopped onto his trousers. Leia helped him steady the glass to take a sip.
“So they went to a bar.” If Leia was upset about that, she gave no indication. “And then what happened?”

Ben swallowed hard. “Rey told me they’d sober up there and come home for dinner.” He racked his brain, trying to remember her exact words. “She said she was grabbing refills. Less than a minute later, it was like my brain was torn open. I couldn’t tell what was wrong, just that it was happening in the Force. When I looked inside my head, she wasn’t there anymore.” More tears poured down his cheeks.

“So the bond entirely gone?” Leia asked.

He shook his head. “I can see my half of it. It’s like this golden rope that connects us. And if I focus on her mind, normally it’s like looking at this ball of light. But now the rope just… ends.”

“Like it’s been cut?” When Ben winced, Leia pressed her hand to his arm. “I’m sorry, Ben. I don’t know anything about Force bonds—I’m just trying to figure out if there’s something you’ve missed because you were panicking. Can you look again?”

He didn’t want to. If he looked inside his mind again and Rey still wasn’t there…

Ben had no illusions about what his life was worth without her. No one could keep living without the other half of their heart.

Then he frowned, remembering something Rey had told him once. When he’d been dying after deserting the First Order, she’d felt like she would die with him. They were so intimately connected that Rey hadn’t thought either of them would be capable of continuing without the other.

If that was the case, why was he still alive?

He closed his eyes and focused. There was the golden rope, and there a patch of inky blackness where her light had once been. He focused intently on the bond, sliding his awareness down it an increment at a time. When he reached the darkness, it was like hitting a wall. He simply couldn’t go any further.

“It’s still taut,” he said, feeling a terrifying surge of hope. “The rope between us—it hasn’t been cut. There’s something in the way.” Oh, but if he was wrong, if he allowed himself to believe and then lost her again… he would never recover.

“Luke told me there are objects that can dampen or cut off someone’s connection to the Force,” Leia said. Her hand kept rubbing Ben’s back, giving him enough strength to keep looking, keep prodding at the black wall that separated him from where Rey had been. “Collars and cages, things like that.”

“A cage?” The thought made him furious. If someone had trapped his beautiful girl in a cage, separating her from the life-giving energy of the Force, separating her from him, he would rain blood and death on them.

“The Sith used them on each other sometimes. Force users are hard to imprison by conventional means.” Leia sighed. “I’m not saying that’s what this is. It might be... she might really be gone. But we need to find out what happened at the bar.”

Ben’s eyes snapped open. Finn was back across the room with Dameron, well out of arm’s reach, but the man still recoiled at whatever he saw on Ben’s face. Probably pure, murderous fury.

Ben launched to his feet, running his hands through his hair in agitation. “I’ll go to the bar. Interrogate whoever’s there. Rip it out of their heads if I need to.” His voice was more snarl than
speech. The dark side of the Force pumped hate and fury through him. *They took what was yours,* it seemed to hiss. *Find them hurt them make them pay.*

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Leia started, but Ben wouldn’t hear any objections. He grabbed his cloak, then turned on her.

“I need my lightsaber.” He held out a hand, as if she might produce the weapon right then and there. Leia had allowed him to wield it during combat training sessions, but otherwise she’d continued to keep it locked up for the comfort of the other Resistance members.

Never again.

“Ben, you’re upset right now. Is that really a good idea?”

“Yes,” he snapped. “If Rey’s hurt, I’m going to murder whoever did it.” He would make it slow and painful. He would carve them up piece by piece.

“Not the best argument, buddy,” Dameron muttered.

Ben turned on him with teeth bared. “No one keeps me from her. *No one.*”

Leia stepped between the two men, drawing Ben’s attention back to her. “You’re upset,” she said. “If you lose control now, you might undo all the progress you’ve made towards the light.”

He growled and tugged at his hair again. Why didn’t she see? “I’m not going to blow up a planet,” he said acidly. “I’m going to fight to protect the woman I love.”

“I can send someone else—”

“General Organa,” Dameron said, interrupting the growing argument. He was looking at Ben with an intent expression Ben didn’t know how to interpret—like something had come clear for him. “I’ll go with him. To the bar.”

Ben blinked, taken aback. “I don’t want—”

“Send me with him,” Dameron repeated, fixing his attention on Leia. “And give him his lightsaber. I’ll make sure it doesn’t get out of hand.”

Leia’s jaw actually dropped. “Captain Dameron, if you’re trying to position yourself as some sort of voice of reason, let me remind you of the many times you yourself have gotten out of hand.”

Dameron shrugged, looking unrepentant. “He’s going to go whether or not you give him permission. Might as well send him with someone who isn’t afraid to challenge him.”

Ben glared at the pilot, despising the idea of joining Dameron on any sort of mission, but he held his tongue. He could put up with anything if it got him to Rey faster.

“We’re wasting time,” Dameron said. “Rey and Rose are out there somewhere. Let us bring them home.”

Leia sighed, then shook her head. Ben was about to start shouting, but her next words cut him off. “Fine,” she said. “The two of you can go.” She fixed Ben with a fierce glare. “But *no* unnecessary murder.”

“All right, *mom,*” he said, unable to resist the sarcastic comment. “Only necessary murders.”
Finn wheezed a little, then turned it into a cough when both Ben and Leia glared at him.

When Leia looked at Ben again, her expression was softer. She lifted a hand to cup his cheek. “I believe in you,” she said. “Now go find Rey.”

Whatever Dameron’s personal failings—and in Ben’s opinion there were many, starting with that chiseled jaw and ending with that annoying sense of superiority—he had one very clear strength.

Dameron drove fast.

The pilot had slid into the driver’s seat of the two-seater landspeeder without even asking, and when Ben had started to protest, Dameron had just fixed him with an annoyed look. “Are we finding our girls or not?”

That had snapped Ben’s jaw shut. He’d huffed and settled into the passenger’s seat and had barely had time to buckle himself in before Dameron launched them out of the hangar fast enough to crush their bodies back into the seats.

They maintained an uneasy silence almost the entire way to the settlement. Ben kept prodding at the mental bond with Rey, hoping to stir some kind of response, but the space where she had been remained dark and still.

“So,” Dameron said when they were a few minutes away. “How serious are you about killing people?”

Ben cast him an annoyed look. “Very serious, if it’s needed. Is that a problem?”

The pilot shrugged. “If it’s needed, I’ll be the first to shoot.”

Ben blinked, a little taken aback by the man’s easy acceptance of violence. “Why did you offer to come with me?”

“Because I care about Rey and Rose.” He sighed. “I would have gone, anyway. Leia doesn’t always understand these things.”

Ben narrowed his eyes, feeling the urge to snap back and defend his mother, but for once, he was in complete agreement with the pilot. “You aren’t concerned I’m going to turn to the dark side again?”

Dameron’s mouth kicked up at the corner. “I see the way you look at Rey, Solo. I figure anyone who loves someone that much can’t be pure evil.”

It was the first time Dameron had called him anything but “Kylo Ren,” and Ben was strangely touched by the gesture. He thought then about Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala and Anakin’s fall to evil. Love was no guarantee of a happy ending.

Although maybe that wasn’t entirely true. Anakin had also tried to kill Padmé in a fit of jealous rage, and Ben would never in a million years be capable of that. It made him sick to even imagine it.

Obsession, lust, possessiveness—those were of the dark, and Ben knew them well, but his feelings for Rey encompassed far more than that. Love, reverence, respect—he had all that and more to offer her.

He wasn’t his grandfather—not even remotely. A year ago that had caused him grief, but Ben was
now glad that he was his own man.

“Besides,” Dameron said, startling Ben out of his reverie. “If you went dark again, Rey would kick your ass.”

Ben barked out a startled laugh. “She would,” he confirmed. “And I would let her.”

After that, the silence between them felt less hostile.

They passed over a few more fields, and then the white buildings of the settlement rose in a cluster ahead of them. Ben tensed, readying himself for combat. Dameron apparently knew where he was going, because he took a series of breakneck turns through the narrow streets, sending pedestrians scattering. He brought the landspeeder to an abrupt halt in front of a dingy-looking cantina.

Ben was out of the vehicle before the engine was off. He stormed inside, his unlit lightsaber in his hand and his cloak billowing behind him. A group of patrons were clustered around something on the bar. He pushed his way in, stopping when he realized a tusked alien lay dead on the scarred wood, a blaster hole burned through his chest.

“Where is she?” he demanded of the nearest patron.

The purple alien made a few shrieking sounds in a language Ben didn’t speak, so he ignored it and moved on the next person. “There was a woman here—brown hair, very beautiful. Have you seen her?”

The elderly man’s eyes widened. “Are you with the man who took her? We don’t want any trouble.”

“What. Man.” Ben’s voice was blistering, the pitch even deeper than normal.

The patron backed away with his hands up. “Never mind, I—”

Ben froze him in place with the Force. He didn’t have time for this nonsense. Ignoring the customers now screaming and fleeing at the sight of a Force user in their bar, he reached for the man’s mind, slipping tendrils of power into it. “Either tell me what I want to know, or I’ll take the information.”

“Hey.” Dameron’s angry voice came from near Ben’s elbow. “You don’t need to torture him.”

“It isn’t torture,” Ben gritted out, trying to keep his prodding as gentle as possible as he called up the man’s recent memories. He caught a glimpse of Rey and Rose giggling over their drinks, and his heart squeezed.

“It sure felt like torture when you did it to me!”

“That was different. I wanted to hurt you.”

He could feel Dameron’s glare against the side of his face. “Why don’t we just ask nicely and go from there?” the pilot asked through clenched teeth.

Ben grumbled but withdrew the Force from the man’s mind. “Well?” he demanded. “What did you see?”

“That wasn’t particularly nice.”

“Shut the fuck up, Dameron.”

The story spilled out in disjointed fragments. A man had shot the bartender and dragged a woman
away, and there was a second woman who had shouted at everyone, and no one had known what was happening…

Ben held up a hand to stop the useless rambling. “I won’t invade your mind again,” he said with forced patience, “but I really need to see everything you remember. If you focus on it, I can glean the information from the surface without going deep.” When Dameron cleared his throat, Ben glared at him. This was as much of a concession as he was willing to make.

The man whimpered. “Are you going to kill me?”

“No,” Ben said with all the patience he could manage. “But the woman you saw taken away is my… the woman I love. I’m worried about her.” He waited for a few seconds, wrestling against the urge to just seize what he wanted. “Please.”

The old man’s face relaxed a bit at the confession, and he nodded. “Just make it quick.” He squeezed his eyes shut, leaving his mind wide open for Ben to examine. It was a gesture of trust Ben certainly didn’t deserve, and he reluctantly acknowledged that Dameron might have been right.

The man was thinking very hard about the scene that had transpired. Ben caught flashes of irrelevant drunks and snippets of mundane conversation before he saw Rey standing at the bar. She signaled to the bartender, and then an armor-clad giant with blond hair came up and jammed his hand against her shoulder. The glint of metal told Ben everything he needed to know: Rey had been drugged.

His rage howled and tore through him like a pack of feral wolves, but Ben restrained it, not wanting to poison the man’s already alcohol-blurred memories with his own fury.

The bounty hunter—because what else could the man be—spoke to Rey, who edged away from him. She was moving sluggishly, the drug already taking effect. Then the man clamped metal cuffs around her wrists and dragged her stumbling out of the bar. After a blaster shot to the bartender’s chest, who, unlike the other useless idiots here, had actually tried to intervene, they were gone.

Ben sighed and released the man’s mind. “Thank you,” he said, then turned to Dameron. “A bounty hunter grabbed her. Injected her with something and got her in cuffs.” Despite his fury, Ben was a little relieved. Considering the time that had elapsed between their brief mental conversation and Rey’s capture, he was willing to bet either the injection or the application of the cuffs had been responsible for the dampening of the Force bond. Besides, a bounty hunter would want to keep her alive long enough to claim his reward.

“And Rose?” Dameron asked, face taut with concern.

Kriff, Ben had forgotten all about Rose. He turned back to the man whose brain he’d just crawled around in. “There was another woman—short, with black hair that curls at the ends. She would have been with my… the woman who was taken.”

Ben didn’t know how to describe what Rey was to him to a complete stranger. My heart. My goddess. My true north. My reason for being.

The man nodded. “She came out of the toilets screaming and threatening everyone with a blaster. We told her what happened, and she ran straight out.”

Ben looked at Dameron, who of the two of them was far more familiar with Rose’s thought processes. “Where do you think she would have gone?”
The pilot’s mouth pressed into a grim line. “The spaceport.”

It was exactly where Ben would have gone, too. A bounty hunter who had just captured the most valuable woman in the galaxy would want to deliver her to the First Order as fast as possible. “Then let’s go.”

#

They found Rose wandering disconsolately outside the spaceport. Her cheeks shone with tears, and when she saw the landspeeder pull up, she ran towards them with a cry. She launched herself at Dameron, who cradled her close, rocking her a little as Rose sobbed out her regret.

“I’m so sorry. I was in the restroom for a few minutes, and when I got back—”

“I know,” Dameron soothed. “You couldn’t have prevented it.”

Ben didn’t feel quite so charitable, but there was an odd ache in his chest at watching the two of them together. They touched each other with the same unrestrained warmth he had enjoyed with Rey. “Where is she now?” he asked.

Dameron glared at him, but Rose seemed unfazed by his sharp demand. She pulled away from the pilot’s arms and wiped her eyes before setting her shoulders and facing him like a soldier giving a report. “They’re gone. I checked the flight logs and interrogated the controllers, and apparently the bounty hunter took off right before I got here.”

“Fuck!” Ben turned and punched the landspeeder, needing the sharp burst of pain over his knuckles. He expected Dameron to chastise him, but the pilot was strangely quiet, and when they locked eyes again, Ben thought he saw sympathy in the other man’s gaze.

“We’ll find her,” Dameron said. “I promise.”

No one could promise anything. Certainty was a lie. But since there was no other option for Ben that didn’t involve falling on his own lightsaber, he nodded. “We will.”
Chapter 53

Ben stormed into the council chamber, knowing Leia and the Resistance leadership would already be there. Dameron followed close behind. On the way back to the base, the pilot had tried to convince him that marching in and making demands wasn’t the best way to achieve his aims, but Ben wasn’t going to waste another second humbling himself by asking nicely when Rey was in danger.

“A bounty hunter has her,” he said without preamble, striding towards Leia. “He’ll be taking her to the First Order. I need to leave immediately.”

Leia’s mouth tightened. “And go where, exactly?”

Wasn’t she listening? “To Myrtah. That’s where Hux is; that’s where they’ll take her.”

She sighed and looked over at the other council members as if seeking help, and Ben had the sudden sinking feeling that this wasn’t going to go the way he wanted it to. “What if they take her to Coruscant?” Leia asked, returning her attention to him. “It’s the First Order’s capital—that makes more sense than taking her to Myrtah.”

Ben shook his head. “The bounty was clear that her delivery needed to be overseen by the Supreme Leader himself. I know Hux—he won’t want to wait a second once he knows she’s in his possession. He’ll demand she be delivered straight to him.”

The words sent fresh anger pumping through him, and Ben slammed his hand down on the table. A few councilors jumped at the violent noise.

“I understand your… urgency to find her,” Commander Kerelle said in a faintly condescending tone that raised Ben’s hackles. “But we need to consider what the proper allocation of resources is. We already have a strike team traveling to Myrtah—they’ll be leaving first thing tomorrow.”

Ben glared fiercely at the gray-haired commander. “I don’t care about the strike team’s schedule. I care about getting to Rey as soon as possible.”

“You and Rey are the most powerful weapons the Resistance has,” Kerelle continued stubbornly. “We can’t risk losing both of you.”

Leia winced, undoubtedly suspecting that Ben’s response to that disgusting little sentiment wasn’t going to be favorable.

She was right.

“Rey isn’t a weapon,” Ben said, stalking towards Kerelle. The commander, to his credit, didn’t back up, even when Ben stopped close enough that the forward momentum made his cloak brush the commander’s boots. “She’s a person. A person who has risked her safety for you over and over again, despite a glaring lack of benefit.”

Kerelle’s jaw dropped. “Everyone benefits from a free galaxy… but obviously you don’t know that, since you spent a decade trying to enslave it—”

“Commander,” Leia interjected, but Ben wasn’t going to back down.

“Ah, yes. You’ve benefited so many people, haven’t you, commander? All those starry-eyed optimists you sent off to die, while you stayed in the command center and played with their lives like
a game of Dejarik.” His lip lifted in a scornful sneer. “And you have the gall to call Rey a weapon and a resource, when she’s a better person than all of you combined.”

Dameron had stepped closer. “Hey, Solo,” he murmured. “Maybe back off a bit.” Ben glared at him, and the pilot’s mouth twisted in an expression that managed to convey both distaste and sympathy. “I don’t like it, either,” he said even more quietly. “But this won’t help.”

Ben was taken aback enough by the pilot’s support that he forgot the next few sentences of his tirade. He stepped back a pace.

Commander Kerelle, though, seemed disinclined to de-escalate the conflict. His cheeks were red over his neatly-trimmed beard, and so much hatred filled his eyes that Ben would have nominated him as a candidate for the Sith, had the commander demonstrated a talent at anything besides being an utter ass. “How dare you come in here and accuse me of trading in lives,” he said through clenched teeth. “You, who until a month ago reveled in corruption, violence, and debasement.”

“Commander Kerelle.” Leia’s voice was even sharper this time. “Ben has repented, and he showed great trust in turning himself over to us. Now is not the time to bring up past sins.”

“Oh, yes,” the commander sneered. “I’m sure his few weeks of repentance are entirely genuine.”

“Do you have reason to doubt me?” Ben asked softly. It wasn’t a gentle sort of softness—it was the unnatural quiet that heralded an oncoming storm.

Kerelle blazed forward, heedless of the danger. “Everyone knows you’re obsessed with the Jedi. You were probably willing to say anything to get her—”

Ben stopped the commander’s voice with a flick of his fingers. “Be very careful how you finish that sentence.”

“Stop this,” Leia said. “Let him go, Ben.”

Ben smiled, sharp and nasty, then released the choke hold. “The commander is unharmed,” he told Leia. “It was just a warning.”

Kerelle’s eyes nearly bugged out. “You tried to choke me!”

“No, I merely reminded you that some things are better left unsaid.” He leaned in a little. “If I’d tried to choke you, you wouldn’t be capable of speech right now.”

Leia slammed her hand down on the table even harder than Ben had when he’d first walked in. “Enough!” The shout was loud enough to draw the attention of everyone in the room. She pointed at Kerelle. “You. Sit down.” The accusing finger turned to Ben. “You, too. We’re going to discuss this like reasonable adults.”

Ben inclined his head, perversely pleased to see his mother’s ferocious anger. It made him feel close to her in a strange way. “As you wish.”

When the two men were seated and silent, albeit still glaring daggers at each other, Leia sighed and rubbed her forehead as if she had a headache. “These are the facts. Rey has been abducted, and we need to rescue her. Not because she’s a resource or a weapon—Ben is right that she’s a human being, and one we owe quite a lot to.”

The acknowledgement eased some of Ben’s pique. He nodded at his mother in a silent expression of gratitude.
“We also,” Leia said, “can’t afford to risk the safety of both of our Force users. An impulsive rescue mission to Myrtah could very easily get both of you killed.”

Ben’s jaw dropped in outrage, but for some reason he looked at Dameron again, and since the pilot was slowly shaking his head, Ben closed his mouth. The flyboy had been annoyingly right about a few things so far, and since he also seemed oddly sympathetic, Ben would give his methods a chance.

Just this once, though.

“What do you propose?” Ben gritted out. It wouldn’t matter, but he could at least pretend to listen for a few minutes before continuing with his plans.

“Let the strike team rescue Rey.” His mother’s gaze was sympathetic. “I know how much she means to you, but if you go to Myrtah, you will probably be recognized. Both of you will be in much more danger then. Even if you save her, the First Order will do its best to hunt you both down.”

He focused on breathing in and out evenly, rather than jumping to his feet and overturning the table. “No one on the strike team knows how the First Order treats prisoners. I do. And my Force abilities are going to be mandatory in a rescue like this. Hux won’t risk her escaping—it’s going to take a lot to free her.”

“I think you’d be surprised at how many of us know how the First Order treats prisoners,” Leia said dryly.

“I don’t mean it like that,” Ben said, annoyed that she would willfully misunderstand him. “I mean where and how they’re kept. Protocols. Security features in cell blocks.”

“So give us that information today, and we’ll make sure the team is briefed.”

Ben gripped the edge of the table hard, trying not to lose his mind. He glanced at Dameron again, and some wordless communication passed between them. It wasn’t anything like how Ben interacted with other Force sensitives—it was more like a feeling of recognition, the shared instinct of two men who would do just about anything to protect their loved ones.

Wait, Dameron’s expression seemed to say. We’ll figure it out later.

It was a camaraderie Ben had never expected and frankly didn’t particularly want, but it was a relief to know someone else understood the burning, furious urgency pumping through him. He nodded shortly and returned his attention to his whitened knuckles. “I’ll share the information,” Ben said, “but we will be revisiting this conversation.”

Leia sighed, but her shoulders slumped in relief. “Of course we will,” she said a little dryly. “Never let it be said that the Solo men give up a fight easily.”

That casual linking of him with his father spiked Ben’s guns more effectively than anything else could have, which was probably exactly why she had said it. Ben narrowed his eyes at her, even though his heart tapped out a stupid, soft, grateful rhythm.

“Is that it?” Kerelle asked after a few seconds of silence. “He gets to come in here and insult me, and that’s it?”

Leia’s face hardened again as she turned on the general. “You insulted him, too. And honestly, commander, I’m not happy about how you talked about Rey, either. She’s more than just an item to be inventoried.”
“I didn’t say—”

“Enough.” Leia glared so ferociously that the commander lapsed into silence. “This is an emotional situation, which is the only reason either of you are getting a pass from me for that little display. But this conversation is over.”

Ben acknowledged the order with a tight nod and stood, sweeping out of the room with a billow of his cape. The conversation might be over, but Ben’s plotting had just begun.

#

True to his word, Ben detailed everything he knew about the First Order's detention cells, although he already knew it wouldn’t be enough. Rey was a powerful Force user—Hux had probably invested in serious technology in anticipation of her capture. Or, barring that, in preparation for restraining Ben himself.

Ben harbored no delusions that the general had been nearly as tame as he’d seemed. Hux’s mind was sharp and suspicious, and he possessed a capacity for long-term planning that Ben admittedly did not share—like Han Solo, Ben trusted his instincts and was more inclined towards poorly considered but enthusiastically executed plans. There was no way Hux hadn’t anticipated a scenario in which he would need to restrain or murder Kylo Ren.

Knowing Hux, there was probably an entire facility dedicated to his capture, torture, and eventual execution.

All of which to say, it was extremely unlikely that a few Resistance fighters with no Force abilities would be able to accomplish the combined objectives of sneaking into the Supreme Leader’s coronation, assassinating said Supreme Leader, finding and releasing Rey from whatever high-tech restraints Hux had prepared, and making it off-planet with everyone accounted for.

There was only one acceptable solution: Ben was going to Myrtah.

It would likely mean having to break ties with the Resistance once he’d rescued Rey. The plot involved defying direct orders, risking the objectives of the strike team, and stealing a ship—although honestly, the ship was more his than theirs. Regardless, he doubted Kerelle or the other members of the leadership council would be particularly sympathetic.

It turned out Ben didn’t particularly care.

He was still boiling over how dismissively Kerelle had spoken about Rey, and he hadn’t even gotten around to being mad about the commander claiming that Ben himself was a weapon for the Resistance. It was presumptuous and the exact thing he’d wanted to avoid. Ben had had enough of being someone else’s weapon.

So. His path was set. His motives were his own, free from the taint of a military unit’s impersonal arithmetic. It didn’t matter what anyone else thought or said—he was going in.

“Fuck the odds,” he said out loud, startling the tech passing him in the hallway. He laughed.

Snoke had been right. He had too much of his father’s heart in him.

#

There seemed to be an inordinate number of soldiers on watch that night. Luckily for Ben, that wasn’t a concern.
“I was never here,” he told the first one he passed, waving a hand in front of the man’s face.

“You were never here,” the trooper repeated.

“You noticed nothing unusual tonight,” he told the next.

“I noticed nothing unusual tonight.”

By the time he reached the eight—both a hysterically high and insultingly low number—guards stationed outside the hangar bay, he was too impatient to use the mind trick anymore. Besides, it took time, and one of them might sound an alarm while he was mesmerizing another. Instead, Ben took hold of all eight minds at once and willed them into unconsciousness.

He felt a little bad as they crumpled to the ground, since some of them had been taking his combat classes—but only a little.

He hurried to the Falcon, his cloak whispering around him. He wasn’t entirely sure why he was now wearing the cloak everywhere again, but he couldn’t imagine undertaking a vengeance mission without it. Rey would probably call him dramatic and then point out the vast impracticality of the garment—but she would also then probably call him Kylo Ren and ask him to take what he wanted, so he couldn’t regret a little drama.

Rey. He sent the thought across the bond, even though he knew it couldn’t get to her through the impenetrable wall of whatever Force-suppressing bindings she was restrained in. *I’m coming for you.*

She had to know he was. If she didn’t, if she feared that once again she had been abandoned, it would break his heart.

He typed in the unlocking sequence into the entry console, and the ramp lowered. Strangely, though, the lights were already on inside.

When he stepped into the cockpit, he had the uncomfortable sensation of being a guest at a surprise party he would never in a million years have wanted. Dameron, Finn, and Rose stared at him from where they were clustered over the instrument panel.

“Oh,” he said. “Uh…”

Rose stepped forward with her chin jutting. “We’re going with you,” she said.

His mouth worked soundlessly for a few seconds as he tried to process this development. “What makes you think I’m going somewhere?”

“Solo, you’re carrying a traveling bag and breaking into a ship in the middle of the night,” Dameron said dryly. “It seems likely.”

“It isn’t breaking in if it’s basically my ship,” he responded hotly.

The pilot raised one infuriating eyebrow. Ben hated how cool he looked when he did that. “Well, regardless of ownership, the point is that you are clearly about to set off on a rescue mission, and we’re going with you.”

The bag slid out of Ben’s fingers and thumped to the floor. “But… why?”

“Because you’re right,” Dameron said.

Ben was fundamentally incapable of resisting that bait. “I’m sorry,” he said, cupping a hand to his
ear. “I didn’t hear you.”

Dameron rolled his eyes. “You’re right that we need a Force user on this trip. The leadership council is being overly cautious, and it’s going to cost lives. The strike squad is good, but even killing Hux is going to take a miracle, and it’s idiotic that they’re restricting the certified miracle workers to the base.”

Ben blinked a few times, hardly able to process the fact that something so reasonable had come from the mouth of a man he quite frankly despised. “So that’s it? We all just… go to Myrta together?”

Rose grinned and nodded. “That’s it.”

“The Resistance leadership won’t be happy.”

“Are they ever?” Dameron asked scornfully. “They’ll get over it. They need us too much.”

Ben felt both alarmed and strangely touched by this show of solidarity. He didn’t know how to work with other people, but he was also glad someone else cared about Rey enough to break the rules. “All right,” he said eventually. “Let’s go save her. And kill Hux. If the opportunity arises.”

Ben would make sure it arose.

“There’s something else,” Finn said, shifting from foot to foot. “Another… um, someone is joining us.”

Ben’s brows crashed down. “Who?” He didn’t know anyone else who would be sympathetic, except maybe that maintenance tech, Paul, who had taken to following him around like a lost and infatuated puppy, and Ben certainly wouldn’t risk someone that innocent on a mission like this.

A grumbling huff sounded from behind him, and the hairs on Ben’s neck rose. He turned slowly, already knowing who he would see.

Chewbacca.

Ben just gaped at the Wookiee. He looked the same as ever—which he would, having basically four times the lifespan of a human—and yet so much between them had changed. Ben stifled a whimper at the sight of his childhood friend.

The last time he’d seen Chewie had been on Starkiller Base, when Ben had killed Han. Ben’s hand reflexively rose to the scar on his side that had been left by Chewie’s bowcaster.

He couldn’t speak.

Chewie roared again, asking whether Ben was just going to stand there forever or if they could finally get a move on.

“Why are you here?” Ben asked, feeling disoriented and confused.

Chewie said he’d been on a supply-gathering mission for Leia and had only just gotten back, and was Ben ready to fly yet?

To his supreme embarrassment, Ben’s eyes filled with tears. “I’m sorry,” he choked out.

He couldn’t have said anything else. Chewie was basically… was Ben’s closest connection to Han, as well as the only being Ben had felt even marginally close to in childhood. Chewie had been there through everything—the nightmares and the arguments, the pain and the betrayal.
Chewie informed him in Shyriiwook that he was a fucking idiot. Then the Wookiee opened his arms and stepped forward, and Ben couldn’t resist the urge to rush into them.

He clutched Chewie tight, burying his face in the Wookiee’s shoulder. It wasn’t often that Ben was the shortest person in an encounter, but he strangely liked it. For all that he’d felt emotionally small, he hadn’t felt physically small in a long time, and he’d never felt deserving of comfort. “How can you forgive me?” Ben gasped through the tears that were soaking Chewie’s fur.

Chewie patted his back and growled a bit, letting him know that it was because Han had.

And *fuck*, that was the end of any composure Ben had hoped to maintain. He broke down and wept like a baby, pouring his grief, regret, and relief into Chewie’s fur.

Chewie clutched him tightly, patting Ben’s head with a massive paw. Eventually, when the tears abated, Chewie pushed Ben back to arm’s distance and informed him that sentiment was all well and good, but if he really wanted to abscond with a ship in the middle of the night, he’d better get on with it.

It was exactly what Ben needed to hear. He hiccuped and nodded, then turned to his ragtag crew, trying to ignore their shocked looks at how he’d just broken down. Ben wiped the tears from his cheeks. “All right,” he said. “Let’s go find Rey.”
Chapter 54

Everything hurt.

Rey moaned and shifted in her bonds. The cuffs that apparently cut her off from the Force were a constant, but now that she’d arrived… wherever she was… she hated the restraints even more. When she’d been on the bounty hunter’s ship, at least she’d had some limited range of motion, although he’d kept her too drugged up to utilize it. Now, though, her wrists were attached to a chain above her head, and her ankles were cuffed to the floor. She couldn’t move or fight, and it made her crazy.

She’d only been conscious of her surroundings for a few minutes, the drugged haze lifting just enough to provide flashes of being manhandled by stormtroopers and forced into the center of this sterile gray cell. A transparisteel door separated her from the corridor outside. Durasteel and red track lighting, the hum of a distant engine beneath her feet—she was on a First Order ship.

She swayed, still woozy, and the cuffs bit into her wrists with each movement. The skin there was already abraded and raw from her captivity.

How long had it been?

It felt like forever—a blur of needles and swift backhands when she mouthed off. Her right eye was swollen nearly shut, and her muscles trembled. The bounty hunter hadn’t fed her well—maybe a tube or two of some unknown substance, a few sips of tepid water.

Definitely days, then—maybe a week. Rey had spent most of her life in a state of near-starvation; it took a lot of deprivation to reduce her to this weakened state, although the drugs had surely helped.

The worst thing of all was the emptiness in her head where the Force—and Ben—had once been. The warm glow of love and power had been extinguished, leaving nothing but gray fog behind. Somehow she knew this was weakening her, too—that her body had been crafted to contain all that light, and without it, she was slowly dying.

Too slowly, probably, considering who she’d been delivered to.

A rhythmic sound echoed down the corridor. She closed her eyes and listened, trying to determine what it was. It was regimented, like the orderly stomp of stormtroopers, but something about the cadence of the steps was… wrong. It didn’t sound like boots, either, but something more metallic.

The sound was getting louder, and now she caught the echo of boots behind it. What, exactly, was heading her way?

Rey might be half-delirious, mostly starved, bruised, chained, and cut off from the Force, but she refused to acknowledge that weakness. She loosened her knees enough to keep from passing out, straightened her spine, and lifted her chin. Then she waited.

She didn’t have to wait long.

The thing came into sight one segmented leg at a time. The limbs were metal and tangled wire, and as the first two punched sharp echoes out of the floor, she was distressingly certain there would be eight legs in total. Some kind of torture droid, maybe.

But then the center of the creature came into view, and Rey abruptly revised her theory. Because at the center of the tangle of legs... was a very familiar red-headed general.
“Hux,” she said, gaping at him. At first it seemed like his torso just ended in the spider legs, but when she looked closer, she could see that there was actually a chair of sorts built on top of the contraption. His legs were strapped down, and he appeared to be moving the vehicle via a joystick and a series of buttons.

Because Ben had paralyzed him, she thought with a very un-Jedi-like stab of satisfaction.

The cell door hissed open, and Hux scuttled in, followed by two stormtroopers. He looked as sour as ever, his black uniform fastened up to the chin, his red hair brushed unattractively flat. It was a bizarre contrast—the military precision above, the monstrous legs below.

“That’s Supreme Leader to you,” he sneered, lifting a hand and beckoning one of the stormtroopers forward.

The man stepped up and swung the butt of his rifle into Rey’s stomach. The breath wheezed out of her—she hadn’t expected the sudden hit and so hadn’t tensed her abdominals. Her body caved in involuntarily, causing skin at her wrists to shred as she strained against the cuffs.

Rey glared up at Hux. “What an interesting new look, Supreme Leader. Are arachnids currently in fashion?”

That earned her another jab to the belly, but this time she was able to flex through it. It still hurt, but the fury on Hux’s face had been worth it.

“If you know what’s best for you, Jedi, you’ll cease this pointless defiance and answer my questions.”

Rey never found defiance pointless. The hot rush of anger was clearing away the cobwebs from the drugs, and she knew she would need it in the days to come. Rey wasn’t about to give up any information about the Resistance, which meant there was torture in store for her.

Rey had never truly been tortured. Ben had poked around in her mind, certainly, and she’d been attacked and beaten and bruised, but somehow she thought Hux’s version of torture would be far more unpleasant.

Rey had been raised in pain, though, and Force powers or not, her determination was unfaltering. She would pull her anger and defiance around her like a shield.

“Where is the Resistance?” he asked.

Rey just stared at him, jaw clenched shut.

“What were you doing on Durkteeel?”

Silence.

Hux sighed, then motioned to the stormtrooper again. This time the rifle butt hit her face, almost certainly cracking her cheekbone. The sharp burst of pain made Rey moan, but she kept her teeth clenched and said nothing.

“We’ve sent scouts to search the neighboring area, you know,” Hux informed her almost casually. “If your pitiful friends are holed up there like the rats they are, we’ll find them.”

Rey’s heart thumped in fear, but she breathed steadily through her nose, telling herself to remain calm. Leia was extremely intelligent, and there were several contingencies in place in case of First
Order presence in the area. There was a safe room beneath the old base where people could hunker down, and several local families had offered to hide Resistance fighters if needed. There were also finally enough ships for a total evacuation. Once news of Rey’s abduction reached the Resistance, the general would undoubtedly start preparing for the worst-case scenario.

“Where is General Organa?” Hux demanded.

Rey cocked a brow at him, even knowing it would earn her nothing but pain. “Why do you ask, Supreme Leader? Don’t tell me you have a crush.”

Hux backhanded her hard enough to make her spit blood. Rey looked at the red spatters with grim satisfaction. They were proof of her resilience. She’d bled on Jakku, too, had watered the sands so liberally with her blood that it was a wonder a garden hadn’t bloomed in her wake. Blood from salvaging mishaps, blood from beatings, blood from never knowing her limits—or knowing her limits but pressing on, anyway.

She’d given her hopes and dreams to that barren wasteland, too. Nearly died there multiple times. Nearly died other places, for that matter.

And she’d pressed on anyway, building new dreams along the way.

So, no. Hux could spill her blood, but he would never reach her soul. He would never take away her dignity.

She was a scavenger, and the Resistance was hers, and she was going to cling to it tight and never let go.

Hux scowled and nodded to the second trooper. Rey braced herself for another hit, but instead, the trooper turned and left the room. When he returned, a medical droid bearing two long needles came with him.

Rey breathed deeply, practicing as much meditation as her anger and pain would allow as the droid approached. She knew chemical torture and mind alteration was a First Order technique. It had been the Empire’s technique before theirs, and General Organa herself had suffered through it.

The key to surviving truth drugs, Leia had told everyone in the Resistance, was to speak different truths. The compulsion to honesty was almost impossible to overcome, but one could speak indirectly or respond to the wrong part of the sentence or just start babbling every random, nonessential fact that came to mind. If they asked where the Resistance base was, name a long-abandoned one. Or maybe say it rested in the shade of the trees, near a river. Maybe list every single place the Resistance had ever based its operations, disguising the truth within the flood of nonessential information.

Rey could do this. Even without the Force, she could do this.

The needle sank into her arm, and she winced. It was thick and painful, and her muscles were taut from being pulled above her head, so she could feel the cold rush of the serum under her skin.

“Something to loosen your tongue,” Hux said with a creepy smile.

The needle was followed by a second, deeper jab, and this one burned at the injection site. Rey writhed in the chains, unable to restrain a helpless moan as liquid fire spread through her arm.

“And this is to make it hurt.”
Sweat beaded on her brow, and Rey sucked in desperate breaths, trying to cling to her scraps of meditation. So—Hux intended to drive her insane with pain, then force truth out of her until he got the answers he wanted.

That was fine. Rey had been hurt before. She could do this.

But at that moment, the second poison hit her bloodstream, and the true agony began.
Chapter 55

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for reading! We're nearing the end of this story, and it's making me surprisingly emotional. Know that I cherish every single one of your comments, and I'm glad you're as invested in these characters as I am❤️

Ben paced back and forth in the Millennium Falcon’s lounge, running his hands through his hair in agitation.

“Pacing a hole in the floor won’t help,” Dameron said as he made a Dejarik move that had Finn swearing.

“Shut it, Dameron.” But Ben’s voice held little heat. Over the last three days of the journey, he’d found himself almost **enjoying** the pilot’s constant snark. Dameron wasn’t afraid of him, and there was a rash sort of aggression to his ideals and tactics that appealed to Ben.

Not that he was actually enjoying Dameron’s company. Just almost.

Chewbacca entered the room, followed by BB-8, a surprise stowaway they’d only discovered once they’d broken atmosphere. Another thing for Resistance leadership to get upset about, but the droid could be useful.

Chewie roared, letting them know that they’d successfully evaded the notice of a First Order patrol. Ben had tried to serve as his copilot for the encounter, but Chewie had just growled irritatedly at him, informing him that the cockpit was full enough without Ben adding his angst to the mix.

The cockpit had, indeed, been full, but not of people. Of porgs. Apparently they’d taken a liking to Chewie and now followed him on all his missions. It was a strange sight, seeing them waddling in a plaintive-eyed line after the enormous Wookiee, but Ben could tell Chewie secretly enjoyed it.

Ben and Chewie had had several painful and uncomfortable discussions over the last few days, and it was still astounding that the Wookiee had extended his forgiveness so easily. But Chewie had just huffed when Ben had expressed that shock late the previous night, letting him know that he had seen a lot of human idiocy in his two centuries of life, and that while Ben’s idiocy was on the extreme end of the scale, so, too, was his remorse, and that helped a little.

And Han had been his best friend, Chewie had elaborated, but Han had also been an idiot on a frequently galactic scale, which was part of the charm. But because Han had been flawed, he had found it easy to forgive others for their flaws, and Chewie knew that his best friend would have wanted him to forgive Ben, too.

And forgiveness was maybe a tiny bit easier since Chewie had gotten to shoot Ben with the bowcaster. He hoped it had hurt.

“It did,” Ben had told him, wincing as he passed a hand over the old scar. “It still does, worse than any of them.”

Good, Chewie had said, although he’d also patted Ben’s shoulder in the soft way that said he didn’t
totally mean it.

Now the Wookiee roared a few grumpy comments about First Order pilots being near-sighted fools and stormed back to the cockpit, trailing a line of porgs.

Rose looked up from the schematics she was studying. “You’re sure Hux will use the *Domination* as his flagship?”

Ben nodded. “It’s the newest, biggest ship. He wouldn’t have wanted to downgrade from what I had.”

Rose shrugged. “Well, it’s certainly big. But sometimes that’s a good thing. It’s easier to slip in unnoticed when so many people are coming and going.”

“Ah… yes,” Ben said awkwardly. “Yes, that will be an advantage.”

Dameron’s head immediately snapped up, and his eyes narrowed. “We are slipping in, right, Solo? Not doing something more… dramatic?”

Ben shifted uncomfortably. “Nothing too dramatic.” Admittedly, he had been harboring a fantasy of striding down the ramp of the Falcon with his cloak billowing and his lightsaber blazing, sending stormtroopers screaming as he sliced his way into the detention block… “Although I faced down hundreds of stormtroopers when I deserted the First Order, and that worked out fine.”

Finn glared at him. “Maybe for you, but not for those troopers.”

Ben winced. “Wow. I am an ass.”

“Yeah, you are.” But Finn rolled his eyes and let the comment go, having grown accustomed to Ben’s more thoughtless moments.

“And to be honest,” Ben said, because fucking Dameron did have a point, “it didn’t entirely end up fine for me, either. I crash-landed my TIE fighter and almost bled out.”

Dameron made another move that had Finn swearing at the holographic creatures. “So,” the pilot drawled, winking at Finn. “I think we’re all agreed that a dramatic entry is not the right approach.”

“You love being dramatic,” Ben grumbled.

“I do,” Dameron admitted. “But it’s easier to do on the way out than the way in.”

Ben considered. “Fair enough.”

Rose waved her hand to grab their attention. “Um, hello, let’s please remember that not all of us are crack pilots or giant wizards with laser swords. If we can skip the drama both coming and going, I’ll be happy.”

Ben bit back a smile. It was impossible that he should feel any sort of pleasure at a moment like this, but as agonizing as the last few days of waiting had been, he’d also experienced a sense of camaraderie he’d never felt before. Rose, Poe, Finn, and Chewie included him in their dynamic, even though they didn’t need to. He probably would have brooded in a darkened room the entire way, but they’d forced him to converse and interact, and it was making the stress a little easier to manage.

Not that it was in any way easy. His chest ached constantly, and he rubbed his palm over it now,
knowing that particular pain would never ease until Rey was safe in his arms again. He felt hollow without her on the other end of the Force bond. He wasn’t sleeping well, too consumed by thoughts of what might be happening to her.

When those thoughts grew too dark and tangled, he sometimes went to the cargo bay and punched the wall until his knuckles bled. He’d even demolished a few crates with his lightsaber one time until Chewie had stormed in and put an immediate stop to that.

“So,” Finn said as the Dejarik game ended in his defeat. He leaned back on the bench. “Let’s talk about Rey. About what to expect when we find her.” He swallowed audibly. “You know, what they might do to her.”

Ben’s stomach instantly plummeted. The thought of what they might do to her had been haunting him for days, and rage blasted through him as awful images swirled in his head. He lowered into a crouch, abruptly too dizzy to stand.

He gasped a little, trying to get himself under control. A few moments later, a soft hand touched his shoulder. “Hey,” Rose said. “Why don’t you come sit down?”

She helped him stand, although he didn’t put much weight on her for fear of knocking her over. He sank onto the lounge seat near Dameron and pressed his palms into his eyes. “Sorry,” he rasped, trying to push down the agonized fury Finn’s comment had provoked. “I just… I don’t like thinking about it.”

Dameron clapped him on the shoulder, and the gesture didn’t make Ben feel nearly as uncomfortable as it should have. “I hear you.”

Ben wanted to scream out his rage and destroy a bulkhead with his lightsaber, but that wouldn’t get them any closer to saving Rey, so he breathed and focused on what was necessary.

Her friends needed to know how bad it could get.

“Hux will torture her,” he said without preamble. “Repeatedly. He’ll use both chemical and physical methods.” His fists clenched, and he struggled to suck in another deep breath, rather than smashing the Dejarik table. “And since Rey’s cut off from the Force, it’s going to be harder for her to withstand it. She’s strong, but I’ve seen what Hux can do.”

“You think Hux will torture her himself?” Dameron asked. “It’s only a few days before the coronation—surely he has other things to focus on.”

Ben was grateful for the calm, even tone of the pilot’s voice. He was about half a second from an explosion, and any little thing might set him off. “He will. He likes to get… hands-on with high-profile prisoners.” He grimaced. “If I hadn’t interrogated Rey when I first captured her, I’m certain he would have wanted to.”

He couldn’t help it—at the thought of Hux making his darling Rey bleed or cry, he turned and punched the wall, leaving a dent in the metal. “Sorry,” he said when Finn and Rose jumped. “I need… what I’m feeling needs venting.” He took a deep breath, trying to settle the seething rage. He wasn’t Kylo Ren anymore, but the urge to act out his aggression was almost impossible to resist.

He shot to his feet and started pacing, because otherwise he was going to batter more dents into the ship. “He’ll use truth serums first, but Rey knows the trick to dealing with those. The problem is that he’ll pair it with something else—an opiate, a hallucinogen, or something to cause extreme pain. Anything to disorient her and make her training easier to break.”
Finn looked nauseated. “I want to kill him.”

“Get in line,” Dameron replied, then turned his attention back to Ben. “So our girl is going to be in bad shape.”

A stupid part of him was already correcting that—she’s my girl, mine—but Ben knew it was an impulse of the darkness that had been nipping at him since Rey’s abduction. Rey could belong to multiple people—it didn’t diminish his claim.

“Hux uses torture droids, too,” he said. “Things that cut or burn.” Or peel or drill, he didn’t add, because there was such a thing as knowing too much. Besides, the worst torture was normally used only after more basic methods had failed, and hopefully they would get there in time to prevent that. “But he likes to deliver some of the pain himself, so he’ll beat her.”

“That sick fuck.” Dameron eyed him appraisingly. “You know, when you tortured me—"

“Is this really a good idea?” Ben snapped, about to start punching things again. “I’ve already apologized.” Several times, in fact. And apologized for putting Finn in a coma. And for trying to kill them on Takodana. And on Starkiller Base. And on Crait. And… well. Suffice it to say that many apologies had been required.

The pilot lifted a hand. “Hear me out. What you did hurt—a lot—but it was quick. It wasn’t anything like what you’re describing.”

“The benefits of being a Force user, I suppose.” His mouth twisted bitterly. “I am an extremely efficient torturer.”

Dameron shook his head. “Somehow, I don’t think it’s just that. I’m just saying I appreciate that you didn’t take it further. You could have, and I’m just now realizing that.”

Ben rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably, because he didn’t deserve that much credit. He had never taken as much sadistic glee in hurting people as Hux had, but he’d certainly wanted to. Everything would have been so much easier.

“The point is,” Ben said, redirecting the conversation, “Rey might be very, very hurt when we see her. Not just physically, but mentally. She may have given up crucial information and feel devastated about it. She might…” He swallowed hard. “She might not be the same person she was a few days ago.”

If Rey had been broken, Ben would just have to put her back together again. A step at a time, a kiss at a time, until she was whole again. He would take her back to Ahch-To and hold her through whatever miseries she suffered on her way to recovery, the way she had for him.

“And her Force powers?” Dameron asked. “Once we get the cuffs off her?”

Ben blew out a breath. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “She might not have the control required to use them. Or she might lash out. It could get ugly.” He met each of their eyes, wanting them to understand exactly what he meant. “It could get dark.”

Which could be good or bad, depending on how those powers were unleashed. Rey was a force of nature, and her training, unlike his, hadn’t revolved around torture. Ben had learned to maintain a semblance of control during extreme physical duress—eventually—but Rey was new to it. “If she does go dark,” he said, “I want you to know that it isn’t her fault, and I don’t want you condemning her for it.”
Rose looked desperately unhappy, but she sat up straighter at that. “We won’t,” she promised.

Ben nodded. “Good. And whatever happens, I’ll help her through it. She won’t fall to the dark side.” He wouldn’t let her. His goddess had been made to walk in the light.

“And you?” Dameron asked.

“Me, what?” Ben asked, even though he knew where the pilot was heading.

“Any danger of you going back to the dark side when you see what they’ve done to her?” Dameron’s gaze was calm and unflinching, but Ben knew exactly how important this question was to him. If Ben fell to the dark side, everything the pilot loved would be in danger—and Dameron wasn’t the kind of man to sit back and watch. He would take immediate action.

Ben started pacing again. “I’ll draw on the dark side for power—there’s no way to avoid that in a situation like this. But you don’t have to worry. I have control over it now; it doesn’t control me.”

He just hoped he was telling the truth.

#

By Ben’s calculations, they had left Durkteel fourteen hours after the bounty hunter. The problem was that the bounty hunter had undoubtedly traveled through First Order-controlled hyperspace lanes—whatever route would get him to Hux the fastest, and probably with an official escort to clear his path—and the Millennium Falcon had to be more careful than that. With every hour that passed as Chewie navigated between lesser trafficked hyperspace lanes and rogue space, Ben felt that gap widening. He spent hours staring at the white blur of stars, until he felt nauseated.

At this rate, they would arrive at Myrtah on the morning of Hux’s coronation. It was ideal in some ways: Ben was confident Rey would be kept on the Domination, and Hux and most of the crew would likely be planetside at that time. With only a skeleton staff on the Star Dreadnought, it would be much easier to sneak in and out.

But Ben desperately wanted to kill Hux or, barring that, to let Rey kill Hux in retaliation for whatever she’d suffered. Luke would probably have conniptions at the thought of Ben offering Rey Hux’s murder as a gift, but some pasts really did need to be killed to move forward. At any rate, he at least wanted to have it as an option.

There wouldn’t be time, though. And rationally, Ben understood that this was the prudent choice. They would slip in and out, retrieve Rey, and let the strike team focus on assassinating Hux on the surface. The team would likely fail, but at least Rey would be safe, and Ben could always kill Hux later.

“You’re thinking about murdering someone,” Finn said, joining Ben at the window. “I recognize that look.”

It was the kind of thing Rey would have said, and Ben’s mouth quirked even as his heart clenched. “Yes.”

Finn slid a glance sideways up at him. “Hux, I hope?”

“Who else?”

They watched the starfield for a few long moments. The silence wasn’t comfortable, precisely, but it wasn’t as uneasy as it could have been.
“I’m glad you love her,” Finn said abruptly. “I mean, it’s still a little weird, but you make her happy.”

Ben swallowed hard, trying not to tear up at the words of acceptance. Finn was Rey’s oldest friend—and fuck, how tragic was that, since they’d only barely met, although maybe less tragic than Ben having no friends—and he was also one of the people Ben had hurt the most. Ben had been part of the machine that had brainwashed and used Finn. He’d cut him down with a lightsaber and sent him into a coma. And yet here the former stormtrooper stood, extending gratitude to the murderer who had decided to woo his friend.

“I’m glad she has friends,” Ben said, his voice sounding a little rough. “She needs you. It’s—good for her.”

Finn sighed and pressed his forehead against the transparisteel. “Everything’s just so messed up. It’s strange—the Falcon is kind of how it all began, and here we are on another dangerous mission, but this time she isn’t here. Instead it’s you.”

Ben tried not to flinch. “Sorry. She’s definitely better company.”

Finn shook his head. “I don’t mean it like that. More like—how did we even get here? I used to think you were this monster, and now you’re one of the only people willing to risk everything to save my best friend. And you’re...”

“I’m what?” Ben asked when Finn trailed off.

The former stormtrooper pulled his forehead away from the window and finally met Ben’s gaze. “Well, you’re all right, Solo.” He suddenly grinned a little. “A little ominous and murder-y still, but generally a pretty solid guy.”

Ben felt embarrassingly touched by the compliment. He scrubbed agitatedly at his hair. “You’re, ah, all right, too. Solid. You know. Less ominous, but—yeah.” He was a babbling idiot who was definitely turning bright red, and when Finn chuckled, his cheeks only grew hotter.

“Now I know something else about you,” Finn said.

“What’s that?”

“Hey everyone,” Finn shouted over his shoulder. “Former Supreme Leader Kylo Ren is blushing.”

“No way!” Ben’s mortification grew worse as Rose skidded around the corner. She looked at his face and giggled. “Look at his ears!”

And yes, the tips of his ears were burning, too, but with Finn and Rose smiling at him like that, he suddenly didn’t mind it so much.

#

The rest of the day passed in a mix of conversation and planning. They’d made their final calculations—at this rate, they were probably twenty-four hours behind Rey. Twenty-four hours during which she would be suffering. Twenty-four hours she would spend alone, not knowing if anyone was coming for her. If Ben could have murdered time itself to make up for that gap, he would have.

Instead, he hammered out the final details of their only-slightly-dramatic plan, then took time to meditate, centering himself in the light. This mission was going to test his resolve—he would be among enemies, confronted with endless reminders of his foul past, struggling to save the woman he
loved from the corruption he’d helped bring about. It would be infuriating and horrible, and people were almost certainly going to die, and if he found Rey broken, there would be no limit to his rage. He would want to tear the ship apart, to rip the stars from the sky, to raze worlds in her name.

But Rey needed him. Ben Solo, not Kylo Ren. The man who had come back from that bloody edge somehow still capable of love. For her, he would embrace the powers of the dark—but also the protection of the light. He would be exactly the man she needed.

So he meditated and worried and sent all the love he possessed towards the darkened half of their disrupted bond, hoping it would be enough. That at the end of it, neither one of them would stand at the edge of that abyss, broken and falling to pieces.

The next morning, they finally reached Myrtah.
Rey didn’t know how long she’d been suffering.

Time had a strange way of warping under the attentions of the torture droids. She’d stopped feeling the needles eventually, too caught up in the stinging cuts lacerating her arms and torso and the swelling in her face, but she knew she had been injected repeatedly with various cocktails. When the burning pain caused by the first injection had finally dwindled to a flicker, it had quickly been augmented by another drug. That one had plunged her into nightmares and memories so visceral she’d wept.

Hiding in her AT-AT. Plutt’s heavy fists. The shredded corpse of her only childhood friend. Snoke torturing Ben—no, her—no, Ben—and Rey weeping and screaming for it to stop.

And then more things that didn’t make sense but hurt all the same. A pit of dark fire filled with monsters that wanted to wrap tendrils around her legs and tug her to her death. Ben’s eyes flooding black as he stabbed her through the heart. Rey clawing her way up through a pile of corpses—her friends, the combined weight of their bodies stealing her air.

The questions were relentless.

“What is the Resistance headquartered?”

“What is General Organa?”

“What are your resources?”

“What are the Resistance’s current objectives?”

Rey wasn’t certain if she answered all of them or not, or even what she said. Some part of her mind had clung to the only instruction she could remember anymore: *Speak different truths*. Rey had done that—or at least, she was pretty sure she had.

*The Resistance is in the hearts and minds of citizens across the galaxy.*

*General Organa is with the Resistance.*

*The Resistance has food and water.*

*The Resistance’s current objective is to defeat the First Order, obviously, you ass.* (That one had earned her a blow from Hux’s fist, but it hadn’t really hurt compared to how the torture droid was meticulously burrowing into her bicep.)

On and on it went.

The only breaks Rey got were when her delirium grew too extreme for her to even form sentences. Then the metal tendrils would withdraw, and Hux would retreat to have hushed discussions at the far edge of the room, and Rey was able to close her eyes and slip into better memories.

She thought of Ben making love to her in the sunlight on Ahch-To, his eyes blazing with passion. She thought of her friends laughing with her on the base. She thought of tender showers and Ben
feeding her by hand after he’d broken down her defenses in the sweetest possible way.

Those moments of relief gave her the strength to build her shields again. Not her Force shields—those were lost to her—but the ones she’d crafted through years of hard living. Rey survived, no matter what.

A voice kept whispering in her head. It wasn’t the same one that had haunted her childhood, although it spoke the same words: “I’ll come back for you, sweetheart. I promise.”

Rey would believe it.

Eventually, though, the overwhelming pain and terror grew to be too much. Rey stopped understanding that there was a world before and a world after. She forgot that there were people who loved her. She forgot everything but whichever moment she had the misfortune of currently inhabiting.

Her words didn’t make sense, even to her. Bolstered by the truth drug, she spilled out nonsense.

You never understood, you never will—

The Resistance didn’t understand either, how could they, it doesn’t make sense—

It wasn’t supposed to end like this—

I scavenge, that’s it, that’s my great skill, but it doesn’t matter, nothing matters but—

What? Yes, I take what I want and I keep it—

The Resistance is the thing you couldn’t kill, you won’t kill me either, you won’t—

Please stop, please—

Can you hear me? Does he hear me? Does anyone?—

No one hears me, I’m nothing, I’m no one—

Please stop—

I’ll kill all of you, nothing keeps me from him, nothing—

Make it stop make it stop—

Kill me then, just do it—

He’s coming for you—

But she didn’t remember who he was, not anymore.

Rey retreated into the shell of her body, and then even deeper beyond that, because her body was a flawed vessel now, no longer fit for any use. She pulled back until her soul had the density of a neutron star.

Or maybe she was a black hole, instead, sucking and consuming and taking. Maybe every scattered image flitting through her mind, the piecemeal recordings of her life, were just scraps of a universe
she’d always been destined to crush into dust.

Rey grew small and dark and alone, and then there were no more voices.

Chapter End Notes
The launch would need to be impeccably timed.

If the Millennium Falcon lingered in the area too long, someone might examine it closely and realize exactly which ship was approaching the *Domination*, but they had to get close enough to launch an escape pod.

The escape pod would be programmed with the proper coordinates to get it to the hanger bay, but the area was heavily trafficked, full of ships on their way to the coronation, and the Falcon would essentially be jettisoning Ben in a flying sarcophagus and hoping the First Order picked him up.

This plan had caused great concern from Rose and Finn, but Ben knew from experience that it would work. While he’d anticipated Rey’s appearance on the *Supremacy* because of their bond, the First Order also had a tendency to suck in any detritus that might be potentially useful. The policy was seize first, ask questions at blaster point, then terminate at will.

Ben wouldn’t let them get to the point of asking questions.

He shifted inside the pod, which had looked cramped when Rey was in it and was downright uncomfortable for a man of Ben’s size. He’d never thought himself particularly claustrophobic, but his heart raced as he comprehended exactly how helpless he would be during the journey to the *Domination*. He could contact the Falcon over the radio if something went wrong, but how likely was it that they would get to him in time to save him?

The panel covering him was still open, and the team clustered around the pod, peering down at him: Rose, Finn, Dameron, Chewie, and the two porgs currently perched on Chewie’s shoulders. “Are you sure about this?” Finn asked again.

“Since Dameron doesn’t want to go in with guns blazing, yes.”

The pilot smirked. “Don’t worry, I’m sure our guns will be blazing at some point.” Then his smile softened, turning more genuine. “Good luck, Ben.”

It was the first time he’d called Ben by his proper name. Ben swallowed and nodded in acknowledgement. “You, too, Poe.”

“Aww,” Rose said, breaking the awkward moment. “They’re making friends!”

Ben and Poe fixed her with identical glares as Finn guffawed and Chewie whuffed in amusement. “All right,” Poe said, stepping back. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Ben slipped on the battered bounty hunter helmet that would disguise his identity upon arrival. The capsule door closed, and for a few minutes he lay still, trying to even out his breathing. Then he felt the familiar surge of launch, and he was hurtling feet-first through space. The round porthole was his only connection to reality, and he watched with a sense of vertigo as ships passed in the distance, silhouetted against the white and unflinching stars.

Some cultures bade farewell to their dead just like this: a coffin with a view of infinity, so their loved ones could undertake a final journey. There were countless corpses drifting through the dust of the universe; at the moment, Ben felt like one of them.

But he wasn’t untethered or alone. His crew lay behind, and the love of his life waited ahead. This
was just the space between, that strange, weightless moment between an object’s rise and fall.

Soon enough, the escape pod shuddered as the First Order’s tractor beam latched on to it. It needn’t have—the pod was programmed with exactly this intent in mind—but the First Order was used to seizing, rather than receiving, the objects that caught their interest.

He was pulled towards one of the smallest hangar bays, which was used to house maintenance and salvage ships. They had deliberately targeted this bay, since it would have the fewest people around and the workers there weren’t as highly trained in combat as those in the larger bays that housed visiting ships.

The escape pod settled against the floor, and a stormtrooper peered through the porthole. When he saw the pod was occupied, he trained his blaster on it and nodded at another stormtrooper to open the hatch.

Ben’s arms were crossed over his chest, giving the appearance that he was unarmed. He lifted the fingers of one hand and used Force compulsion on the two troopers. “There’s nothing in this pod.”

“There’s nothing in this pod,” one of the stormtroopers announced.

“The two of you will take it to the salvage pile.”

“We’ll take it to the salvage pile.”

“No one needs to help.”

“No one needs to help.”

The two troopers connected the pod to a hoverlift and guided it to the side of the room where scrap salvage was stored. As they went, Ben focused his attention on the fire alarm. With a flick of telekinesis, it began beeping and flashing red. The stormtroopers set the pod down, then joined the other maintenance workers and guards as they filed in an orderly manner out of the hangar bay. First Order protocol required them to relocate for thirty minutes while fire-suppressing droids went over the space.

The First Order was an efficient machine, indeed—sometimes to its own detriment.

As soon as the final trooper left and the door hissed shut, Ben silenced the alarm. “I’m in,” he spoke into the radio. Then he scrambled out of the pod and manually locked the doors leading into the bay so no one could enter.

Droids were already sweeping the space, and Ben crushed each of them with a few twists of his fingers, dropping their mangled remains on the scrap pile. Then he hurried to the manual controls that would allow him to bring the Falcon in.

Ten minutes later, the Falcon was docked. Chewie, Finn, Poe, Rose, and BB-8 descended the boarding ramp. Finn, Rose, and Poe were dressed in salvaged First Order uniforms that had been used during previous Resistance missions.

Poe looked around. “Impressive. I don’t see a single corpse.”

Ben was too tense to acknowledge the pilot’s snark. “We have twenty minutes. Let’s go.”

Rose led the charge, a tablet with schematics of the Domination tucked into her belt and a spanner in her hands. “This maintenance panel will get us into the nearest corridor,” she said, loosening the
bolts that held the panel in place, “and then it’ll be about five minutes to the detention block.”

Five minutes to the block, five minutes back, which left ten minutes to find Rey, remove the cuffs, and do whatever he could to heal her wounds. Ben’s pulse rocketed into overdrive as he clambered into the narrow shaft. They crawled down the claustrophobic corridor until they reached another panel, and Rose slipped out first to investigate.

While they waited, Finn clasped a pair of restraints around Ben’s wrists, loosely enough that Ben could easily get out of them, then applied similar cuffs to Chewie. When Rose gave the all clear, they emerged into the empty corridor.

It was strange to be back on a First Order ship after so much time away. It was familiar yet repulsive at the same time—the clean lines, the mirror-polished floors, the stark shades of gray, white, black, and red. Ben had grown accustomed to color and chaos since joining Rey—it was hard to believe that a few months ago, he had thought he belonged here.

No, that wasn’t it; a few months ago, he had thought it was what he deserved.

BB-8 rolled ahead to scout, and Finn, Rose, and Poe held Ben and Chewie at blasterpoint while they marched down the hallway. Stormtroopers were normally in charge of escorting prisoners, but since the Resistance didn’t own any stormtrooper uniforms, they had no choice but to forge ahead and hope no one asked any questions.

Ben’s skin prickled, and his gut churned with nausea. It was all he could do to stop himself from sprinting down the corridor towards the turbolift that would take them to the detention block. Rey was here, just five minutes away, but those five minutes felt impossibly long.

He didn’t realize how heavily he was breathing until Rose nudged him, nearly making him jump out of his skin. “Hey. Almost there.”

Almost wasn’t good enough.

They made it to the turbolift unchallenged, although a few people looked askance at the sight of a Wookiee being escorted through the ship. Ben drew fewer stares—bounty hunters were a common enough sight, since the First Order utilized them for sensitive missions that needed to remain anonymous.

The turbolift doors sealed them in, and Ben worked at his cuffs in preparation for shedding them. His lightsaber was a comforting weight in the side pocket of his drab brown trousers; soon he would be able to wield it against whoever was guarding Rey. Fresh anger washed over him at the thought, winding his muscles tight.

The tension only worsened as the lift stopped at nearly every floor. Various officers and stormtroopers got on and off, eyeing the prison delegation with restrained alarm. Another strength and weakness of the First Order—no one made a fuss about unusual sights unless they were damn sure they wouldn’t be penalized for it.

Ben’s anger rose with each pause. He was going to kill the next person that stopped this turbolift—

The doors slid open, and he finally saw a face he recognized: Major Alotru, an ambitious underling who thought the way to power was to insist on protocol above all else. Ben had never given him much thought before, but now he cursed the coincidence.

The major fixed his eyes on their party. “Captain,” he barked, addressing Finn, whose insignia marked him the superior officer in the group. “Who are these prisoners, and why are you escorting
them yourself?"

"Just some stowaways, major," Finn said, and Ben winced.

Alotru’s eyes widened. “Stowaways? Is there a security breach we should be aware of?”

"Um…"

Ben had no patience for this. He flicked his fingers and turned the major’s consciousness off, and Alotru slumped to the floor of the turbolift.

“What are you doing?” Rose demanded. “We’ll have to do something with him—”

“I don’t care.” Ben’s voice was venomous. “He’s an obstacle. Would you rather I killed him?” Ben was absolutely willing to and more than tempted, but he also knew his dark side needed to be leashed as much as possible in preparation for seeing Rey.

No one was willing to engage in that argument with him, so they continued down in silence.

At last, the doors opened on the detention block. They left Alotru behind in the lift, since dragging him out in front of the guards would be highly suspicious.

Not that Ben expected the guards to remain conscious for long, either.

He clenched his jaw as they approached the guard post. There were two stormtroopers and an officer on watch, and they looked up at the approaching delegation. The officer frowned at the same moment as the stormtroopers lifted their blasters.

“Identify yourselves,” the officer said.

In response, Poe shot him.

Well, that was unexpected, but Ben wasn’t going to complain. Ben shed his cuffs, then ripped the blasters out of the stormtroopers’ hands with the Force and launched the men into the wall hard enough to knock both of them out.

He surged past them, looking frantically from left to right as he sprinted down the row of cells. Most were unoccupied, but those that were held a variety of creatures who looked much the worse for wear. Distantly, he realized that Rose was typing in the bypass codes he’d given her and freeing them. He could have told her that some of them probably should be locked up, but it was the kind of impulsive, poorly-thought-out altruism the Resistance delighted in, and Ben had more pressing concerns, anyway.

His pounding footsteps echoed off the durasteel walls as he made his way deeper into the detention block. Rey would likely be held at the end, in one of the largest cells, but he checked every room he passed, just in case.

At last, he neared the end. Only two more cells to go, and one of them would have his sweetheart in it, and he would open the door and take her into her arms and heal her…

Both cells were empty.

Ben skidded to a stop, staring blankly at the nearest empty room. “No,” he said, unable to believe what he was seeing. “No, no, no!” His voice rose with every protest, until he was shouting.

Poe appeared at his side. “What is it?”
“She isn’t here.” Ben swore and pulled out his lightsaber, igniting it and starting to hack at the nearest control panel. “She isn’t here!” His voice was more scream than shout, and anger blurred his vision as he vented scarlet fury on the walls of the detention block. He was going to rip this ship apart—

“Where is she, then?”

Rose’s voice somehow cut through the devastating haze of rage. Ben shuddered and came to a stop, extinguishing his lightsaber with one press of his thumb. Despair washed over him, threatening to suck him under like a riptide and tug him somewhere dark and terrible. “I don’t know,” he said, shutting his eyes and resting his forehead against the transparisteel shielding the last cell. He banged his head on it. “I don’t know.”

“Solo.” It was Poe, hovering near his elbow, and the man’s voice was tenser than it had been before. “Look at the floor.”

Ben opened his eyes and looked.

Red-brown stains painted the gray floor in concentric circles, slashed through by occasional arcs of blood and dotted with spatters. There were two small, foot-shaped patches of clean floor at the metal ankle cuffs.

Ben frantically typed in the override code to open the cell, then rushed in. He sank to his knees in front of the stains, reaching for them with trembling fingers.

One patch was still damp.

He knew then—absolutely knew on a level that defied reason—that this blood was Rey’s.

Ben’s scream echoed in the narrow cell. He bent over, clutching his stomach as pain ripped through him. Then he stood and engaged the saber again, ready to rip apart anyone who might have had something to do with the suffering painted all over that cell floor.

He stormed back to the guard station. The air hummed around him, alive and as furious as he was. The two stormtroopers were still unconscious, but Ben didn’t care. He seized one of their minds, prodding it hard, stinging it with jolts of energy until the trooper twitched and groaned.

“Wake up,” he ordered, ripping the stormtrooper helmet off to reveal an unremarkable-looking man. He flooded the man with energy fueled by desperation and hate. The trooper’s mind was foggy through the Force but not unreachable, and as Ben laid siege to it, the trooper regained awareness.

“Where is she?” Ben demanded the moment he sensed the trooper was conscious again. “Where is the Jedi?”

The trooper whimpered a little as he looked up at Ben. “Who—who are you?”

Ben still wore the bounty hunter helmet. Fuck it—that wouldn’t intimidate as well as his natural face would. He stripped off his helmet, and when the stormtrooper cringed and recoiled, he knew he’d been recognized. “You know who I am,” he said in deadly tones. “Where. Is. The. Jedi.”

“Gone,” the man said. “He took her, he—”

“Who took her?”

“The Supreme Leader—er, Hux. Not even thirty minutes ago.” The trooper’s eyes were wide and
terrified, and he was gasping desperate breaths. “She’s secure, sir, I promise. She’s in cuffs—”

Ben howled and swung his saber into the wall next to the man’s head. Sparks flew, and the man whimpered and curled further in on himself. “Where are the keys to those cuffs?”

“H-Hux, sir.”

This wasn’t giving him the level of detail he wanted, so Ben slid sharp tendrils into the trooper’s mind, taking what he wanted to see. A pair of silver keys on a chain, the chain looped around Hux’s neck. Hux’s… spider legs?

Then he saw something else—Rey strung up, bruised and bloody, and this trooper’s fist connecting with her stomach.

Ben yanked the man to his feet with the Force, then punched him hard in the gut.

“Whoa, Solo,” Poe said. “Let’s ask some more questions.”

“It’s what he did to her,” he gritted out. This man was dead; he just didn’t know it yet. He rifled through more memories, fresh agony infusing his heart at every terrible image. They had hit her and shocked her, cut her and drugged her. She’d been bleeding and rambling hysterically, and they’d kept going, and then they’d brought the droids and oh—

She’d screamed for Ben, although she’d never said his name, just “please, love” and “help me.” She’d sworn that he would take vengeance on them, even if she hadn’t specified who he was. Eventually, though, she’d passed even that point of lucidity, and a light in her eyes had died.

Ben was going to tear this man apart with his bare hands. “I saw everything you did,” he said in a voice that sounded eerily calm, distanced as it was from the roiling tumult of his mind. “Your death is going to be slow and agonizing.”

“I was just following orders!” The trooper was crying outright now. “I thought—she’s the enemy. She deserved it—”

Ben punched him again, then again, battering his hate into the man’s skin. He drew back only with great effort, leaving the man gasping and shuddering. “You’re going to die now,” he said.

“Where did Hux take her?” The question came from Poe, who, against all sense or reason, had stepped up to stand at Ben’s side.

Ben wrestled his rage down. Yes, he hadn’t pried that information out of the trooper’s brain yet. They needed to know it before they could leave, but Ben had been so lost to hate that he’d nearly forgotten.

“Will you spare me if I tell you?” the trooper asked in a quavering voice.

Ben opened his mouth, but Poe got there first. “We’ll consider it.”

Ben whipped his head around to glare at the man, but Poe’s stoic face gave nothing away. It didn’t matter, though. No one was going to stop Ben from crushing this worm into oblivion with his bare hands. Maybe he’d slice him open first, just to let him know how it felt.

“He took her to the coronation.” The words tumbled out of the trooper’s mouth. “The interrogation—it didn’t work, and the doctors didn’t think we could go further without—without killing her. So he’s making her a symbol.”
“Of what?” Poe asked, still damnably calm even though Ben was seconds away from putting his fist through this man’s face.

“Of the First Order’s victory. It’s supposed to be—after the coronation—”

“Yes?” Poe prompted, excruciatingly patient.

“He’s going to execute her in front of everyone.”
He’s going to execute her in front of everyone.

Terror seized Ben’s muscles, freezing him in place even as he was swallowed by pure, unthinking hate. He needed to unlock his body, needed to crush the stormtrooper in front of him into oblivion. He raised his lightsaber, ready to start cutting—

Poe lifted his blaster and shot the man between the eyes. The stormtrooper slumped dead to the floor. Ben howled and turned on the pilot. “That kill was mine.”

Poe stepped up, meeting him toe-to-toe. “Rey’s my friend, too, Solo,” he said with a fair amount of heat, “and I’ll be damned before I let you risk falling back to the dark side. Now hurry up; we’re wasting time.”

With that, Poe stormed away. Rose and Finn followed, casting wide-eyed glances back at Ben. Even BB-8 seemed subdued as the droid rolled silently after them.

Chewie alone remained near Ben. The Wookiee knocked him in the shoulder, making Ben flinch, but the hit helped jolt him out of the blinding rage he’d fallen into. Ben disengaged his saber, albeit with some difficulty.

Chewie roared, telling Ben that Dameron was right: they needed to hurry. Although maybe Ben should check to see if the other stormtrooper had hurt Rey, too.

It was a targeted outlet for his anger, and Ben was more than happy to channel some of his overwhelming fury into productive action. He dug into the unconscious man’s mind, even though it was a practice he disliked. Luke had infiltrated Ben’s mind once while he’d been sleeping, too, with famously disastrous consequences. But this was for Rey, so Ben tugged at the low hum of memory until he saw what the trooper had been doing for the past few days. Rey wasn’t in any of those images, so Ben pulled back and left the trooper alone.

The return to the hangar bay was shrouded in silence. Ben had recovered enough of his wits to put the bounty hunter helmet on again, although he left the cuffs and just clasped his wrists in front of him. They dumped Major Alotru in the detention block, then took the lift back up. Thankfully, no one challenged them this time, and soon enough they were crawling back through the narrow passageway to the hangar.

They emerged with three minutes to spare before the stormtroopers would return to their positions. Rose and Finn immediately moved to retrieve the escape pod while the rest of them prepared the Falcon for takeoff. When Chewie waved him out of the cockpit, Ben was left staring at Poe. The man looked wary, but his jaw was clenched with familiar determination.
Ben pulled the helmet off. As furious as he was, the time away from the immediate confrontation had given him a little space to recover his sanity. “Thank you,” he said before Poe could speak.

Poe’s eyes widened.

Ben dug a hand through his hair, expelling a frustrated breath. “I wanted to kill that stormtrooper, but you were right. I was indulging the hate and fear, and that’s dangerous for someone like me. It’s just—” Tears stung his eyes, and he looked away. “I saw,” he whispered. “In his mind. I saw what they did to her.”

“Hey.” The word drew Ben’s attention back to Poe, and he was startled by the sympathy apparent on the other man’s face. Poe clapped a hand on his shoulder. “I know. I mean, I don’t know what you saw or what it feels like with all the dark side stuff, but I know what it means to be so angry you feel like you’ll explode.” His mouth tilted a little. “It’s how I’ve felt about you more than once.”

Rose and Finn hurried up the ramp and closed it after them, and the rumble of the engines intensified as Chewie launched them away from the *Domination*. Ben stayed where he was, though, feeling like he needed this conversation. That he needed to speak with someone who understood the furious impulses that could lead a man to do unconscionable things.

“I would have torn him apart,” Ben admitted. “It would have been ugly.”

Poe shrugged. “Maybe don’t tell Rose and Finn that, but honestly, do you know how many people I’ve killed for the Resistance? I don’t even feel bad about it most of the time. The world needs people like them, but it also needs people like us.”

Ben nodded, and it felt like something clicked into place. He did have a place in this world, and he had people willing to confront him if he ever went too far. He gripped Poe’s shoulder in a mirror of the gesture the pilot had extended to him. “Thank you.”

#

They clustered in the cockpit as Chewie flew the Falcon towards the surface of Myrtah, and Ben told the others what he’d seen.

The knowledge was already etched on his bones and branded on his soul, and maybe it would have been more merciful to keep them in the dark, but he didn’t. He and Rey had always dealt in unflinching truths—there was no value in heading into a potentially dangerous situation without everyone knowing what they were up against.

So he told them everything: the torture Rey had experienced, the way she’d cried for help before losing lucidity, Hux’s new legs, the key to her cuffs hanging around the Supreme Leader’s neck. Rose started crying halfway through, and the others looked grim and nauseated.

“What’s your assessment of her likely mental state?” Poe asked.

Ben scrubbed a hand over his face, feeling ancient. The callouses snagged on the rough edges of his scar. “It’s hard to say. The loss of lucidity could be a blessing—it often was for me, before I got used to being tortured.”

Finn winced at the matter-of-fact statement. “You can get used to that?”

Ben shrugged uncomfortably. “You can get used to anything if you experience it often enough. Anything that distances you from the pain makes it easier to overcome, but Rey hasn’t experienced torture like that before. Even if she was able to disconnect her mind... she might not want to come
back to reality again for a while.”

“Then what do we do? How do we help?”

“We love her,” Ben said simply. “We stay patient, and we make sure she never feels alone.”

Passionate and pure love for his goddess washed through him, mixing with the grief and anger until it felt like every pulse of his heart squeezed around a jagged stone. He couldn’t live without her, and he swore she would never feel alone again as long as he drew breath.

“But Rey’s strong,” Ben continued, seizing that small thread of hope. “She survived her nightmare of a childhood, and she’s survived countless battles since then. She even survived me, back when we were enemies. If I had to guess, I’d say that Rey will come back to reality quickly—and that she’ll be hungry for a fight.”

Chewie grunted, letting them know they were fifteen minutes away from landing. He was guiding them towards the forest on the outskirts of Labryyk, since the First Order had taken over the major spaceports. Making their way into the city would take precious time, even on the speeder bikes Chewie kept stowed away for emergencies, but they still had an hour before the coronation. Ben knew Hux would want to save Rey’s execution for after he wore the crown.

He returned his attention to the group. “All right. We have very little time, and we need to craft a plan. Chewie, can you get the Resistance strike team on the radio? They should be in place, operating on the usual secure channels.”

Chewie grunted in confirmation.

“Let’s find out how they plan to infiltrate the building,” Ben said. “We’ll work with them if we need to, but my focus is on getting inside as quickly as possible so we can stage a rescue.” He paused, eyeing the team with a little trepidation. “We likely won’t get access to Rey until they bring her out at the coronation. Which means…”

Poe’s mouth quirked. “It’s going to get dramatic?”

“Extremely.”

There was a savage edge to the pilot’s grin. “Then sign me the fuck up.”

The others echoed his enthusiasm, and Ben’s adrenaline began pumping at the thought of all the things he could do now that he was no longer constrained by the need for subtlety.

Kylo Ren hadn’t done subtle. Ben Solo didn’t, either.

Hux had no idea what was coming for him.
As the prisoner transport shuttle descended towards Myrtah, medical droids tended the worst of Rey’s injuries. She flinched under their prodding, despising the feel of metal against her skin, even though they were knitting her back together. They slathered bacta over her bruises and cuts, and Rey exhaled shakily as some of the agony receded.

Why were the droids healing her?

Her head was foggy, and she couldn’t seem to stop crying, even though the worst of the pain was over. They’d stopped slicing her open a few hours ago, but she still couldn’t manage to focus on anything. When she tried to think about her life before her capture, all she could see was the splash of blood and the whirling metal of a torture droid’s arm. It was enough to make her retch, although there was nothing left to vomit up. A thin stream of acid trailed down her chin and dripped onto her torn and bloodied shirt.

Why had the torture stopped?

Nothing made sense to Rey. She was drifting and lost, trapped in a nightmare that never ended. The First Order still had her: six stormtroopers surrounded her, their blasters leveled on her as the droids did their work. Rey wondered hazily which one of them had hit her. Maybe they all had—it had grown so fuzzy in that cell, the white helmets of troopers doubling and tripling in her vision until she might have been surrounded by an entire squadron.

What was happening now? Where was she going?

Maybe she knew the answers, but she couldn’t focus enough to access them. Every time she tried, her mind hit a wall, and she was launched back into visceral memories of Hux’s fists and the droids’ scalpels. Her heart thrummed light and fast, and blackness encroached on her vision. How long had she been awake? Was she even really awake?

Nothing seemed real. It was like viewing the world through clouded glass. She was trapped alone in a cage on the wrong side of reality, drowning in fear and confusion, and somewhere in her head a small, shrill voice wouldn’t stop screaming.

After the shuttle landed, a black bag was thrown over Rey’s head. She was pulled roughly to her feet and shoved forward, the end of a rifle nudging into her spine. She tripped and fell down the boarding ramp, and one of the troopers laughed.

“Get up, Jedi,” he sneered.

Rey staggered to her feet, the sharp fear of being hurt again sending a surge of panicked strength to her trembling legs. As the rifle prodded her forward once more, the trooper’s words echoed in her mind: *Get up, Jedi. Jedi. Jedi.*

Was she a Jedi? She didn’t have access to the Force, and that distant, grieved thought was enough to make her remember the cuffs fastened around her ravaged wrists. Force-suppressing cuffs. Cuffs that Hux had the key to.

Awareness was returning in spits and bursts. Hux had the key, but he wasn’t anywhere nearby, and Rey was desperately grateful for that, despite not being able to escape the cuffs. If she had to look at the Supreme Leader’s sneering mouth and cold eyes one more time, she had a feeling she would start screaming again and never stop.
Supreme Leader. That’s right—Hux wasn’t on this shuttle because he’d left to prepare for his coronation. Rey was going to the coronation, too… but why? What had he said in those last moments, as she’d quivered bloody and broken in her shackles? She’d hadn’t been able to focus on anything, his voice mostly just a buzz in her ears.

Something about her being the entertainment.

Another scrap of memory fluttered by on an invisible breeze. She was going to be executed. She knew because when Hux had said it, the meaning had managed to penetrate the flame-fierce pain and the ringing in her head. For a moment, she’d felt pathetically grateful.

Hadn’t there been another time, long ago, when she’d been grateful for her imminent death? Rey couldn’t remember. She had a feeling she’d changed her mind, but maybe not. Maybe she was dead already, or maybe dying just seemed to last forever, and this was the same moment stretched out unbearably long.

No, Rey was fairly sure she hadn’t really wanted to die. There had been someone waiting for her that time, someone who’d brushed her with cool water and whispered in her ear… but who?

The knowledge nudged at her, driving her insane. There were things she needed to remember, things she needed to know…

Rey moaned as she fell to her knees again, her legs giving way. She couldn’t do this; she wasn’t strong enough. A stormtrooper shouted at her and hit her shoulder with the butt of his rifle, and Rey whimpered in terror, cringing away from the blow. Don’t hurt me, don’t hurt me, don’t hurt me… She couldn’t speak the words out loud. Her throat felt shredded and raw.

Don’t let them win. The thought was her own, but the voice she imagined whispering it didn’t belong to her. It was deep and urgent, dark and rich. Some fragment of a shattered memory come to haunt her, mixing past with present in her subconscious.

It helped, though. Somehow, Rey got to her feet again.

She imagined that voice urging her on, step after step, and he kept her on her feet despite her nausea, pain, and fatigue. Had she called out to him during the torture? She couldn’t quite remember, but the voice was stirring something in her brain. Some great, all-encompassing truth was struggling to rise through the murk and fog.

She staggered onward through the nightmare, wishing she knew how to make it end, but it just kept going. On and on and on and on and on…

That jostled loose another piece of knowledge from her malfunctioning brain. I’ll make it end, she’d promised a man as he’d knelt on broken glass, delirious and in pain. His dark eyes had been teary and desperate, and his voice...

Ben.

The name detonated in her brain like a bomb going off, burning away the shadows, and memory came rushing back. Ben Solo, the man she loved. The man who had endured torture for years. Her other half, her missing piece, her heart and soul and past and future and everything.

She was still stumbling forward in inky blackness, tripping periodically as the troopers forced her over uneven surfaces with sadistic glee, but the majority of her attention was fixed on the memory of his solemn, handsome face. She’d kept her promise that night, ending his nightmare by conjuring up a scene of light.
Rey wasn’t sure she could remember any scenes of light from her own life at the moment, but Ben was bright enough to start clearing the fog away all on his own. The residual pain from torture intensified as her mind grew sharper and her consciousness anchored back in her body, but Rey would rather feel that pain and know who she was than stay lost in the labyrinth of her own mind.

She was Rey of Jakku, scavenger and almost-Jedi, Resistance member and lover of Ben Solo. She had never given up on a fight in her life.

Rey started to get angry.

Hux had tried to break her. He’d torn her open gleefully. He’d drugged and demeaned her. He’d tried to get her to betray her allies.

He’d *enjoyed* her debasement and suffering.

The echoes of their footfalls changed, and the air grew artificially cool. She was inside a building now—probably wherever the coronation was being held. Someone grabbed her arm, and Rey instinctively tried to headbutt them. Her forehead cracked against plastoid composite armor, and okay, maybe the fog hadn’t totally cleared yet, because that had been a terrible idea.

The stormtrooper she’d hit grumbled and punched her.


Behind the hood, Rey bared her teeth. Why should they care? She was already marked—the bacta gel would help, but there was no way it could erase everything that had been done to her.

The bloodstained memories almost sucked her under again, her rising horror flooding her mouth with a metallic taste, but Rey muscled the fear down and focused on her rage, instead. It burned hot and pure, giving her strength.

She wanted to make everyone who’d hurt her *suffer*.

The bag was tugged off her head, and she found herself in a large fresher with a tile floor and multiple showerheads. The trooper behind her prodded her forward. “You’re going to shower,” he said.

He got the water going and pushed Rey under fully clothed. She shivered under the icy spray, but the cold woke her up even more. She watched the reddish-brown swirl of her blood disappearing down the drain, alarmed by how much of it there was. No wonder she was lightheaded. The sight of her essence washing away provided more fuel for the fire of rage, and Rey gladly embraced it. So long as she burned, part of her would remain untouchable.

Her body may have become someone else’s property, but her hatred belonged to her alone.

A spindly droid carrying a tray of bottles and cloths approached her, and Rey flinched away from it instinctively, raising her bound hands before her in protest. It chirped a reassurance before beginning to soap her hair and skin. Rey shivered and tried to hold still, wondering if she’d ever again be comfortable around unfamiliar droids.

Why did the First Order want her clean?

Rey winced as the droid soaped over her still-tender cheekbone. The bacta gel application had reduced the swelling, but it couldn’t repair a broken bone—that would take time or full immersion in a bacta tank. Luckily, the droid quickly moved on.
It followed its ministrations to her skin with spritzes of an unknown liquid to the bloodstains covering her flight suit. To Rey’s astonishment, the blood lifted from the fabric and flowed away in another rust-colored torrent.

When the shower was done, the trooper ordered her to stand in front of a dryer. Hot air blasted around her, drying her skin, hair, and clothes. Rey stared at her reflection in the fresher’s full-length mirror, unable to reconcile the person she saw with how she felt inside.

The Rey in the mirror looked desperate and gaunt, with a black eye and some healing lacerations on her face, but there was no real evidence of everything that had happened to her. No marker that Rey had screamed and begged and suffered; no indication that the pain had forced her to retreat so deeply into her head that she’d been unable to remember what was happening or who Ben was. Her camouflage flight suit was torn but clean—unless someone took note of every single rip, they wouldn’t know how many times the torture droids had burned and cut her.

Seeing the flight suit made another memory click into place: Rey had ridden a speeder bike alongside Rose, tearing over the countryside at a breathtaking pace. They’d had a wonderful, hilarious morning together before a bounty hunter had ruined it all.

Rey wanted to kill that bounty hunter. She wanted to tear him apart with her bare hands.

The stormtrooper studied her, masked head slightly tilted. “You’ll do,” he said.

“Do for what?” It was the first time she’d spoken in an eternity, and her voice was shockingly hoarse. The screaming, right. There had been a lot of that.

“For your execution, what else?” He grabbed her arm and muscled her forward, and they rejoined the other stormtroopers in a narrow, brightly-lit hallway. This time they left the hood off—wherever she was, they didn’t care about her seeing her surroundings or anyone recognizing her. Probably the latter, since she was scheduled to be killed.

Rey’s mouth twisted in a sneer as she realized why they’d cleaned her: Hux didn’t want his audience to see exactly how brutally he’d hurt her. Apparently not everyone in the First Order was as sadistic as Hux—either that, or Rey’s gender might stir pity in the more traditionally-minded.

Or maybe Hux just wanted her to be recognizable: a symbol to be executed quickly and cleanly.

Rey was still dizzy and weak, her body throbbing from injuries and her mind fogged and slow, but she knew one thing.

She wasn’t going to let Hux get away with this quickly or cleanly. She wasn’t going to act like a meek, downtrodden symbol of his victory over the Resistance.

Rey was a scavenger, a fighter, and a survivor. She was going to make this hard for Hux. She would kick and scream; she would rip out his throat with her teeth if she needed to. And even if she lost, even if this was where her life ended, he would have to fight her for it.

Even if her memories were fuzzy, Rey knew who she was.

She would not go quietly.
Chapter 60

Ben parked his speeder bike a few blocks away from the concert hall where the coronation was being held. Since there were only three bikes, Rose had ridden behind him, while Finn had hung on to Poe. Chewie and BB-8 had taken the third bike, and it was astounding that the round droid had managed to stay on, but BB-8 had a seemingly endless number of extendable arms.

“Wow,” Rose said as she slid to the ground. “You sure drive fast.”

Finn whooped a little as he got off Poe’s bike. “That’s what I’m talking about. Although I’m pretty sure I left my stomach behind somewhere back there.”

Ben lifted a hand, cutting off the chatter, and the group clustered around him. Chewie hiked the bag of weaponry he was carrying higher on his shoulder. Rose, Finn, and Poe were still in their First Order uniforms, but while Ben wore the bounty hunter helmet, he was dressed once more in his traditional black attire, complete with cape and leather gloves. When the time came, he wanted to be recognizable.

“The strike team is already in place,” Ben said. “We have five minutes to make it to the loading bay so someone can let us in.”

The Resistance strike team had been extremely irritated when the Falcon had hailed them over a secure frequency. A variety of colorful sentiments had been expressed:

“You lunatics! We already have a plan, and it doesn’t involve you.”

“You stole a fucking ship.”

“Kylo Ren wants to do what?”

At that last complaint, Poe had grabbed the mic. “His name is Ben Solo,” he’d said acidly, “and you can either work with us or enjoy the show when we do what we want anyway.”

Ben had cracked a smile for the first time in what felt like years. Fuck, he actually liked the pilot. How had that happened?

Eventually, they’d hammered out the details of their now-converging plans. The Resistance members had used their underground contacts to determine which bakery was providing the cakes for the post-coronation reception in the lobby, then carried out a swift and brutal takeover. They were now in possession of a multitude of baked goods and, more importantly, behind-the-scenes access to the concert hall.

The plan from there was, as always with the Resistance, a hodge-podge of wild hopes, vague logistics, and earnest aggression. Someone would try to shoot Hux from the wings of the concert hall, and if that didn’t work, maybe someone else could kill him on the way to the reception, and if that didn’t work, there was always the option of poisoned cake, and if that didn’t work, perhaps they could smuggle a grenade into a tart.

Ben had rolled his eyes as the hypotheticals had poured out through the crackling speakers, but he’d held his tongue. The strike team wasn’t going to get anywhere near Hux, anyway.

The strike team had finally made one concession: they would open the loading bay just long enough for Ben and his team to slip inside. After that, they would go their separate ways. “You disobeyed
the general’s orders,” someone—Ben didn’t know or particularly care who—had told them. “We want nothing to do with this.”

That was fine, because Ben wanted nothing to do with a bunch of incompetent idiots who had chosen masquerading as bakers as the best strategy for assassinating the most powerful man in the galaxy.

His lip curled at the thought of Hux claiming that title. The man had ambition, true, but his temper was brittle, his approach too rigid, his charisma nonexistent. If he hadn’t already been marked for a violent death, someone would no doubt have assassinated him within the year.

The irony of Ben Solo judging someone else’s temper and lack of charisma didn’t escape him, but at least he had brought a certain flair to the position of Supreme Leader.

The streets around the concert hall were crawling with First Order officers and stormtroopers, as well as a variety of dignitaries from occupied worlds. Above the diverse crowd, the white stone edifice of the theater glittered in the sunshine, and its copper dome stood in stark contrast to the azure sky. Like most Labryykan architecture, the building was delicate and bright, but the black-and-red First Order banners hanging between the columns of the portico were an ominous reminder that the planet was under brutal occupation.

After a few tense minutes spent navigating through the throng, they reached the back of the theater. The steel loading bay door was shut against unwanted intrusions, but an unmarked door next to it cracked open right on time. The group hurried inside, and the door slammed shut behind them.

The space was dimly lit, and it took a few moments for Ben’s eyes to adjust enough to make out the features of the Resistance member currently scowling at him. Her blonde hair was pulled up in two buns, and she was wearing a ridiculous white apron. Kaydel, he wanted to say, or maybe Kayden? She’d attended a few of his combat lessons, but they’d never directly interacted before.

“Do not mess this up for us,” she said in a vicious undertone before stomping away.

Chewie grumbled a little, and Ben couldn’t help but agree with his assessment of the Resistance’s stubborn shortsightedness. They had four different plans for how they might kill Hux, yet none of them had room for the dark Force user who was about to go on a rampage through this building.

The room they stood in was large and utilitarian, with concrete walls, exposed wiring, and piles of boxes and equipment. Two hallways led in either direction, and Ben chose the one to the right. They couldn’t linger; they needed to act like they belonged here.

Harried workers rushed through the corridor, carrying props and cables or urgently discussing last-minute logistics. Most wore First Order uniforms, but some appeared to be locals, which Ben was grateful for, as the mix of people would make them stand out less. Chewie garnered a few startled looks, but considering the general chaos, no one seemed inclined to ask questions.

“This place is massive,” Poe muttered.

It was true—their corridor had branched out into other ones, and although they’d been navigating the labyrinth for what seemed like an eternity, passing storerooms and green rooms, closets and dressing rooms, Ben still had no clue where the stage was.

A pink-skinned Qiraash was directing the actions of dozens of underlings, so Ben approached her during a lull. Her blue eyes fixed on him, and she scowled. “Who are you?” she demanded.

Ben flexed his fingers subtly. “That isn’t important.”
“That isn’t—” She shook her head hard. “What?”

_Fuck._ Ben hadn’t anticipated anyone backstage possessing the strength of mind to resist a Force user. He put more persuasion into his tone. “I’m no one.”

“You’re no one,” she repeated.

The words sent a stab of pain through him. It was too close to “you’re nothing,” which reminded him of how he’d hurt Rey. Everything reminded him of Rey, to be fair. For her, he would gladly be nothing and no one, but he knew his generous goddess would never want that.

“Where is the stage?” he asked, bringing all his persuasion to bear.

She rattled off a series of directions, but Ben could feel her mind pushing against him, trying to resist the compulsion. He only had one more question, but he needed to ask it fast.

“Where is the Jedi being kept?”

The Qiraash recoiled. “Jedi? What Jedi?”

Ben slipped into her mind to assess her sincerity. Surprisingly, she truly had no idea. “Where would a sensitive prisoner be held?”

She huffed. “Not in a concert hall.”

Ben pushed harder, and the Qiraash made a distressed sound. He caught flickering images from her mind—long, brightly-lit corridors, a basement full of set pieces, dressing rooms, refreshers, the catwalks high above the stage—but nothing like a prison cell. He sighed and removed his influence from her brain, ordering her to forget the encounter before gesturing for the team to follow him.

“She didn’t know about Rey,” he said in a low voice as they headed towards the stage. “And there are so many places she could be.” Panic threatened to choke him—his beloved was in this building, awaiting her execution, with no idea that he was here to rescue her. Was she afraid? Angry? Resigned?

Was she even conscious?

Ben fisted his hands hard, resisting the urge to punch the nearest wall.

“We only have ten minutes before it starts,” Rose whispered. “That’s not enough time to search.”

She was right, which meant their priority needed to be getting into position for the ceremony itself. The next time he saw Rey would likely be in front of an audience of thousands.

He came up with a plan: Rose and Poe would head for the catwalks, where they could provide blaster coverage of the stage, while Finn would stay backstage as backup. Chewie, BB-8, and Ben would get as close as they could to Hux.

They finally reached backstage proper, where the walls were painted black and the noise of the audience swelled like a distant sea. Ben’s attire worked in his favor here, since the stagehands scurrying about were dressed to blend in with the darkness. They had emerged stage right, near the edge of an enormous backdrop that depicted the First Order’s logo in black and crimson. A tangle of ropes hung from the distant ceiling, and far above, Ben saw a hint of movement as either Poe or Rose crawled over the catwalk.
The stage itself was pitch-black and buffed to a glossy shine. Just beyond the shadows where Ben stood, sharp red and white spotlights slanted down, the beams looking almost solid in the swirl of dust motes. Orchestral music wafted through the air.

A man approached the ropes, then recoiled at the sight of them. “Who are you?” he whispered. “This isn’t your position.”

Ben flicked his fingers and knocked the man unconscious, and Chewie dragged his limp form further into the darkness before dropping him inside an empty crate. Ben took up the position at the ropes, with BB-8 nestled next to his feet. Belatedly, he realized he had no idea if that man had actually been supposed to do something with the ropes, but a peek out at the stage showed that the curtain was already up, so he decided not to worry about it.

Chewie returned to Ben’s side just in time. The orderly clomp of boots echoed from further backstage, and the theater workers froze in position, their heads lowered in deference. Ben did the same, although he kept his head tilted so he could watch the doorway. It swung open, and a procession of red-armored stormtroopers marched in two by two.

The boots sounded in perfect unison, but a metallic echo followed behind. When a gleaming steel leg emerged from the doorway, Ben’s body flooded with a hot deluge of pure hate.

_Hux._

The spider contraption he’d strapped himself into was ridiculous, but would admittedly look terrifying to anyone who didn’t know the former general. His red hair gleamed in the reflected light from the stage, and his lips held the same sneer Ben had hated for years.

Why, why, _why_ had Ben let Snoke keep him on a leash with this man? Why had he willingly become a puppet? Why had he tolerated _any_ of the last decade? Faced with the reminder of his past, it was hard to remember how he’d let his life slip so far into someone else’s control.

Ben was still the same person in many ways—still angry, still sharp, still hungry—but his goals had changed entirely. He no longer wanted to make himself a mirror of a long-dead past; he wanted to craft a brighter future.

And there was one incredible person he wanted to craft it with.

He tensed as Hux passed, nearly close enough to touch. Ben could have killed him right then—could still kill him using the Force—but he didn’t know where Rey was. He kept an eye on the scarlet procession, hoping she would appear, but when the final stormtroopers marched through the door, no one followed.

Ben clenched the rope so tightly that something overhead creaked. He forced himself to loosen his grip one finger at a time, not wanting to send a backdrop crashing to the stage just yet.

He could tell when Hux emerged on the stage, because the music abruptly ceased. The applause started with a few sharp cracks of sound, then swelled into a roar that filled the theater. It echoed off the walls, resonating in his bones. Ben listened, feeling contempt for the diplomats who chose to feign enthusiasm for the First Order, rather than fighting.

Then again, he supposed not everyone had the luxury of defiance. Some people just survived, no matter what. When the First Order fell, these people would probably applaud their next overlords just as enthusiastically.

_It just goes in circles …_
He’d told Rey that, what felt like an eternity ago. It had been the day their bond had first exploded into passion—the day he would forever celebrate as the beginning of his new life. At the time, Ben hadn’t realized that he was capable of breaking the pattern he’d fallen into as a desperate young man.

Rey had known, though. Rey had always known, because she was strong and resilient and refused to let others dictate the direction of her life. She hadn’t let him hide behind his cynicism.

So while history tended to follow the same patterns, and while there would always be conquerors and rebels, the ambitious and the complacent, the idealists and the pragmatists—nothing was carved in stone. There were no destinies other than the ones people created or seized. There were no rules, only possibility.

It was frightening, in a way, because it meant every person was responsible for living a well-examined life. It meant choosing which futures to pursue and bearing the consequences of those decisions. It meant being fully alive and fully aware.

Ben was alive. He was aware. He was awake. For the first time in his miserable life, he wasn’t denying his own agency in favor of drifting from master to master.

Ben Solo was a monster, a rebel, a traitor, a son. He was a warrior and a lover. He was flawed and furious, tainted by darkness, kissed by light. He was his own man—and hers.

And today, he was going to destroy the First Order.

#

Hux’s speech was as overblown as Ben had expected. There were promises about “a new era of leadership” and “establishing order in the galaxy” and “the mighty hand of the empire providing both discipline and guidance.” Ben peered out at him periodically, just able to catch the glint of the stage lights on his spider legs from this angle. The auditorium beyond the stage was hazy and dark, but the crowd was audible even in its silence, emitting a constant susurrus of rustles and coughs.

He gripped his hair in both fists, nearly ripping it out at the roots. Where was Rey? Hux hadn’t even mentioned the Resistance, except for one jab at “pathetic adherents to the failed concept of democracy.” He had never been one to downplay his own victories, so when was he going to mention that he’d captured the most valuable woman in the galaxy?

Something moved in the darkness on the opposite side of the stage. Ben narrowed his eyes, squinting at the shapes gathering there. Officers in dark uniforms, it looked like, followed by the contrasting white-and-black armor of stormtroopers. The stormtroopers weren’t marching, but staggering out of unison, as if struggling with something caged between them.

Ben’s heart raced. He looked up at the catwalk, making a signal and hoping either Poe or Rose would see it. Chewie whuffed a quiet inquiry and leaned forward to look, then made a slightly-too-loud noise of displeasure.

Rey. They had to be escorting Rey.

“Thank you for your support,” Hux said. “It is an honor and a privilege to wear this crown, which symbolizes my undying service to the First Order and my commitment to creating a stable, regimented galaxy.”

Hux had finally come to the end of his speech, but Ben couldn’t rip his eyes away from the commotion on the far side of the stage. He could run across right now and cut through everyone keeping him from Rey, but a rash attack would likely get both of them killed, and he still needed to
get the keys to her cuffs from Hux. Besides, even if they escaped, there would just be another bounty set.

No, Ben needed to end this, once and for all.

Chewie reached into his bag and pulled out a few smoke grenades, and Ben unclipped his bounty hunter mask and placed it on the floor, making sure to keep his face in shadow as much as possible. The hilt of his lightsaber felt heavy and solid in his palm, and he focused on that tactile sensation, rather than the panic threatening to carry his breath away.

More applause, and this time it was so loud that Ben flinched. He’d been listening for Rey’s voice, but the roar of the audience was eating up all the available air. He stared at the cluster of troopers across the way, willing them to move so he could see her.

Would she look as bloody and hurt as she’d appeared in the stormtrooper’s memories?

“And now,” Hux said when the applause finally died down, “I have a very special announcement. We have captured one of the First Order’s greatest enemies. When she dies, so too will the last hopes of the Resistance. I present to you: the last Jedi!”

The applause was scattered this time; apparently not everyone found the news as pleasing as Hux had presumably expected. Ben waited with his heart in his throat as two stormtroopers emerged from stage left, dragging a struggling Rey between them. She was alive and unbowed, her head held high, her eyes spitting fire.

Ben nearly collapsed to his knees in gratitude. “They didn’t break her,” he whispered to himself. He’d feared seeing a vacant shell, or that she’d be so hurt she couldn’t move. He should have known Rey wouldn’t let anyone destroy her spirit. Whatever damage had been done, inside or out, his girl was still fighting.

They wrestled her to her knees beside the podium, and the sound of her kneecaps hitting the stage made Ben wince. Utter silence fell over the audience as Hux stepped over to her on those spindly, nightmarish legs. Ben didn’t miss the way she flinched away from Hux, and bile rose in his throat at the remembered images of what had been done to her.

“Jedi,” Hux said, hardly about to refuse an opportunity to give a speech. “What a charming surprise. How does it feel, knowing that the First Order has won?”

She didn’t answer, just kept staring into the audience. Ben couldn’t tell what expression she wore, but he guaranteed it wasn’t friendly.

“Your little Resistance is as good as dead. Your friends are being hunted down as we speak. You have nothing left, and no one is going to save you.”

Ben clenched his fist, gathering energy around his fingers in an electric crackle of potential.

“There are thousands of people watching, Jedi. They’re all going to watch me kill you, and millions more will see the holovid in the months to come. Any last words before I take your life?”

Rey finally turned her head to face Hux. “You’ll never win,” she said, her voice so cold and sharp it was almost unrecognizable. “You’re weak and pathetic, and you will never be safe. The Resistance is coming for you.” She raked a glance over him, then spat, the glob of her saliva striking one of his legs. “Now fuck off, Hux.”
Hux’s face twisted in rage. “Why, you—”

Ben froze him in place with the Force, sending a second tendril out to rip the silver chain and its keys from around his neck. The keys went to BB-8, and Chewie rolled his canisters onto the stage. As black smoke began hissing from them, Ben strode out of the shadows and into the hot glow of the spotlights.

“Surprise,” he said as he walked towards Hux, spreading his arms out as if presenting himself. “I’m back.”
“How does it feel, knowing that the First Order has won?”

Rey stared out into the crowd, trying to look confident and calm, even though she was shivering uncontrollably. Black spots danced in her vision, and she blinked them away, feeling nauseated by the contrast between the searing lights and the dim audience.

She could see their faces. Rey had never been on a stage before, but somehow she’d imagined she wouldn’t be able to see anything beyond it, like being trapped in a box made of light. This was far worse. Most of the auditorium held regimented rows of First Order officers, the insignia of those in the first rows clearly visible. The First Order’s highest echelons were sitting mere feet away, staring at her like she was an insect. Towards the back of the enormous theater, the black uniforms gave way to other colors that must belong to diplomats or visitors from other worlds.

The heat of the spotlights felt heavy on her skin. She thought she might faint.

“Your little Resistance is as good as dead,” Hux said. “Your friends are being hunted down as we speak. You have nothing left, and no one is going to save you.”

The words hurt, as much as she wished they didn’t. Rey had wanted to be strong for this, to go down fighting, but she barely had the strength to stay kneeling upright, and the devastation of what Hux had just said felt like a punch to the gut. Her eyes blurred, light and dark swirling together.

No one was going to save her.

Rey had hoped for it, in some secret corner of her heart. She’d hoped the Resistance would mount a rescue and free her, but here she was, at the end of her life, and no one had come for her.

Ben hadn’t come for her.

She bit her lip hard enough to draw blood, because otherwise, she was going to fall apart, and if she had to die alone on a stage as some gruesome piece of entertainment for the First Order, she was going to do it with dignity.

And she did have something left that they would never take from her. She had her memories. Ben wasn’t here in person, but he was always in her heart, and she knew with certainty that he was still looking for her, still fighting to get to her. Ben would never abandon her.

It wasn’t his fault that he was too late.

“There are thousands of people watching, Jedi,” Hux said, leaning closer. Her skin crawled at his nearness, and she flashed back to him laughing as a droid had cut open her stomach and inserted thin metal tendrils that had wriggled just beneath the skin. Rey had screamed and screamed, and this monster had laughed.

She flushed hot with a mix of horror and fury, and her stomach clenched around nothing, sending bile burning up her throat. Rey swallowed hard, refusing to vomit. She seized the fury, instead, letting it burn as hot as the spotlights. This, too, was something they would never take from her. Her hate would keep her warm when nothing else was left.

“They’re all going to watch me kill you, and millions more will see the holovid in the months to come. Any last words before I take your life?”
What words would be adequate? Rey wasn’t even sure she was capable of speech. She was shaking and sick, hanging on to sanity by a bare thread, kneeling at the edge of a precipice. A few moments more and she would tip over, and that would be the end of Rey of Jakku. She’d been alone for so long; perhaps this was just a natural extension of that isolation. A return to what she’d always been, after a few months of blissfully imagining she had found a place to belong. A person to belong with.

*You have no place in this story. You come from nothing. You’re nothing.*

It was a fitting end for a scavenger. She would cling to these final few seconds, greedy as ever for more time, for some *reason* why she’d lived at all. She would wield her anger one last time like a weapon and hope that someday, someone would watch the holovid of her murder and find inspiration for fresh defiance.

“You’ll never win,” she said, forcing the words through a throat that ached as if she’d swallowed broken glass. “You’re weak and pathetic, and you will *never* be safe. The Resistance is coming for you.” She spat the last mouthful of bloody bile onto one of his gleaming spider legs, watching with vicious satisfaction as it trickled down the metal. There it was: her last mark on the world. “Now fuck off, Hux.”

That was it. That was all Rey had left.

Her shoulders slumped, and the pain of her injuries finally broke through the wall of furious defiance she’d built. Maybe Hux wouldn’t need to kill her himself, after all. Her vision was darkening, her body having used up the last of its reserves.

“Why, you—”

A strange hissing sound resonated across the stage, and Rey wondered for a delirious moment if it was coming from inside her, the noise of some essential organ giving up. But no, Hux must have heard it, too, because he’d frozen above her, his face contorted with alarm.

A patter of binary met her ears as a droid rolled up to her side. Rey flinched, then blinked, hardly believing her eyes. “BB-8?” she whispered. The little ball had one of its arms extended, and clasped in that metal grip was a familiar key. The smoke roiled around them, concealing the droid’s actions from the audience.

Gasps and shouts echoed from the crowd, and some of the watchers leapt to their feet. They looked terrified, but what could possibly have caused that—

“Surprise,” a voice said behind her, and the world fell away as Rey’s attention fixated on it like iron drawn to a lodestone. He sounded like darkness and starlight, like danger and belonging. Like *home.* “I’m back.”

She snapped her head around to look, and the sudden movement nearly made her pass out. When she blinked the encroaching blackness away, there he was, striding across the stage with his arms outstretched and his cloak billowing behind him like an extension of the smoke.

*Ben.*

Rey started to cry.

His eyes were fixed on her, and she saw his rage and his devotion reflected there. He’d come for her. She wasn’t alone.

A blaster went off, the red light lancing between them, and Rey’s joy at seeing Ben again warped
into horror. What was he doing, walking out onto a stage in front of the entire First Order? She tried to push to her feet, but she was too weak, and BB-8 was still fiddling with her cuffs.

*Her cuffs.*

More blaster fire, and this time Ben raised a hand and froze the bolts in mid-air as he stepped up to the podium. “Enough,” he growled into the microphone. “I have a few things to say.”

Hux was sweating and trembling, obviously resisting the Force hold Ben had put him under. Rey silently begged BB-8 to go faster; Ben was strong, but he couldn’t maintain a hold on the blaster bolts and Hux’s body forever, and this ceremony was almost certainly about to erupt into more violence.

The key clicked in the lock, and the cuffs fell away. Rey shuddered and toppled over as the full power of the Force rocketed through her. It felt like being electrocuted, like pure gasoline had been pumped into her veins and then lit on fire. The psychic signatures of the crowd battered against her mind, and she was too disoriented to tune any of the commotion out.

Rey. Ben’s voice was in her head again at last, cutting through the din. Rey closed her eyes for a moment, shivering as she fixed her attention inward. The fog had cleared—the bond was back, golden and strong, and Ben burned like a star at the other end of it. *I’m here.*

She opened her eyes and saw nothing but smoke. She was lying on her side, enveloped in the black swirl, and for a moment she felt like she was floating, hovering at the bleeding edge between day and night.

“As you can probably tell, the rumors of my death were greatly exaggerated.” Ben’s voice rang loud and clear through the microphone. That dry edge to his tone, the sheer arrogance of it all, was familiar enough to anchor Rey once more in reality. She struggled onto her knees again, her head breaking through the smoke.

Ben stood with one hand braced on the podium and one extended almost casually, holding at least ten blaster bolts frozen before him. “Hux tried to assassinate me, and he nearly succeeded. We’d had a disagreement about the fate of Myrtah, you see. Hux was in favor of obliterating everyone on this planet.” A murmur rose through the room, and Ben let it swell before leaning closer to the mic. “I refused.”

The sounds of a scuffle came from backstage, and Rey turned in time to see Finn clobber someone over the head with the butt of his rifle while Chewie flung an officer across the stage. A troop of stormtroopers poured out from backstage, only to be cut down by a torrent of blaster fire from the catwalk.

Ben hadn’t come alone.

Rey somehow managed to stagger to her feet. She gripped her gut, which ached from wounds that hadn’t fully healed. Everything hurt so badly; she was so kriffing weak —

Ben sent the frozen blaster bolts ricocheting into the crowd, killing a few officers who had drawn their guns. He held out one gloved hand to her, and it was so much like the time he’d reached for her in Snoke’s throne room that she felt dizzy. *Goddess,* he whispered in her mind. *Join me.*

She stumbled towards him without hesitation and slipped her hand into his. Ben lifted it to his lips and kissed it, maintaining eye contact even as blaster fire and screams echoed behind them. His eyes glistened with tears, and his smile was heartbreaking. Rey couldn’t smile, but she nodded in
acknowledgement, knowing he would understand. Then she focused on the crowd, determined to start fighting.

“I am no longer willing to serve the First Order’s monstrous cause,” Ben announced into the microphone. “I have severed all ties with them and joined the Resistance.”

More gasps and protests filled the auditorium, and a general in the front row raised his blaster. Before he could fire, Rey gripped him in a Force choke. She hadn’t had access to this power in what felt like an eternity; now that it was back, wielding it felt as thrilling and volatile as riding the waves of a tempest-tossed sea. She inadvertently squeezed hard enough to crush the man’s throat.

Vicious joy filled her as he dropped to the ground. Yes, this was what she needed. Vengeance. She fixed her attention on the next man to draw a weapon, invading his head with a psychic probe brutal enough to make him scream. She reached for his deepest fears and unleashed them, and he collapsed to the floor, sobbing and raking at his face with his nails.

*Careful,* Ben said in her head. *The dark…*

Rey didn’t care about the dark. She only cared about revenge and power.

She ripped a blaster out of someone’s hand, then sent it into the next man’s head. Snoke had done that to her with a lightsaber, knocking her to the floor, and the memory of that humiliation infuriated her so much that the next time she sent a blaster flying, she crushed someone’s skull.

Ben’s grip on her hand tightened enough to make her bones ache, and Rey didn’t know if it was a warning or a symptom of the moment’s intensity. She didn’t care, so long as she could keep unleashing the desperate fury that had accumulated since her abduction.

“The First Order dies today,” Ben said, the words tumbling out of him at a faster pace, and she felt his anxiety spiking across the bond. Anxiety about *her,* for some reason, even though Rey hadn’t felt this powerful in a long time. “If you’ve ever doubted the cause, or if you’re willing to work with the Resistance to reestablish freedom and democracy in the galaxy, I urge you to lay down your weapons and leave. The First Order is dying, but you don’t have to die with it.”

“Traitor!” someone shouted. Rey used the Force to grab the speaker by the neck and throw him against the wall, feeling dizzy with triumph as his body crumpled to the ground. Ben squeezed her hand even tighter, but that wouldn’t stop her. Nothing could stop her.

Hate had been the only thing keeping her upright, and now that the Force had returned to Rey, that hate exploded into something all-encompassing and deadly. She was a grenade with the pin out, a bomb about to go off, a missile launching towards the enemy. Rey was going to burn this wretched place to the ground; she was going to tear it apart stone by stone, and it didn’t matter how much blood she spilled, because her blood had been spilling for *days,* and everyone who wore a black uniform might as well have been in that cell with her.

“I am happy to have betrayed the First Order,” Ben said, even as his concern for her surged across the bond. *Hang on, love,* he said internally. *Almost done, and then we can fight our way out of here.* “My only regret is that I joined at all. I betrayed my family, my values, and my own soul in the name of evil. But if I can turn back to the light and seek a better future, so can any of you. Together, we can restore peace and hope to the galaxy.”

It was an inspiring speech, Rey supposed, and would probably make a very compelling holovid, but she couldn’t focus on anything but the dark tidal wave sweeping over her. She was growing stronger with every kill, her failing body kept upright by the power seized from each fallen enemy. She
sucked it in like water in the Jakku desert. She’d been starving, thirsty, dying without this, and even if she was drowning, she couldn’t stop sinking deeper into the dark side of the Force.

Rey’s eye snagged on something resting on a shelf of the podium: a long, shining cylinder. Her lightsaber. Her heart leapt, and she yanked her hand out of Ben’s and called the saber to her. It lit up, purple and beloved, slicing through the smoke as she twirled it. One of the stormtroopers backstage turned from the fight to aim at her, and Rey bared her teeth, bracing herself as he fired. She deflected the bolts with ease, reveling in the hot slash of the saber. A moment later, Chewie snapped the trooper’s neck.

Hux had probably meant to execute her with her own weapon. The thought made Rey turn on the former general, who still stood frozen beside the podium. Ben eyed her with alarm, then backed away from the podium and ignited his own blade, apparently deciding the time for making speeches was over. Careful, he repeated again in her head. You’re too close to the edge. Don’t let the dark take you.

Rey ignored him. This kill was hers.

The fight spilled over onto the stage, and more members of the Resistance had appeared to battle the advancing stormtroopers. They were wearing aprons for some unknown reason, but Rey couldn’t be bothered to wonder why. Her attention was fixated on Hux.

“You pathetic worm,” she spat as she stared into Hux’s frightened eyes. “You’re going to die slow.”

Distantly, she was aware of Ben standing guard over her, deflecting blaster bolts with his blade and launching enemies away with the Force. Not too slow, he said in her head. We need to get out of here.

Rey grimaced. At least he wasn’t trying to stop her from claiming this vengeance. She seized Hux’s throat in a Force choke, enjoying the way his pale skin reddened, then purpled. She released him just before he passed out, laughing at the tears that trailed down his cheeks. “What, you can deal the torture, but you can’t take it?”

Rey. Ben’s voice was firmer this time. Finish it now.

“I’m not done,” she snapped back. The dark howled inside her, greedy for blood and screams.

Ben moved abruptly, circling behind Hux and laying his scarlet blade at the side of the man’s throat. He pulled the saber back as if about to strike, and Rey was not going to let him steal this kill from her, so she gritted her teeth and swung for Hux’s midsection.

Their blades cut through the general at the same time, slicing him into three pieces. His head and torso toppled to the floor, the cuts sizzling audibly.

Rey had thought killing Hux would satisfy her need for vengeance, but it wasn’t enough. The rage burned too hot to contain, a conflagration that had swelled far beyond her control. Beyond the spotlights, the theater had emptied of most onlookers, but there were still hundreds of First Order officers left. They advanced towards the stage, weapons in hand and murder on their faces. Ben was channeling huge amounts of energy to repel their blaster bolts, but he wouldn’t be able to maintain that level of effort forever.

Kill them… The dark sang to her, promising strength and safety, promising she would never be weak again if she just gave in…

Ben was shouting her name over and over, but his voice was only a small drop in the maelstrom.
This was power beyond anything Rey had ever experienced, and she shuddered in ecstasy as the walls trembled and the chandelier hanging above the seats rattled and chimed.

Rey screamed, unleashing the full force of her fury. The chandelier ripped free from the ceiling and plummeted to the seats below in an explosion of crystal and mangled metal. Cracks spiderwebbed across the ceiling over the seats, and Rey watched in agonized bliss as plaster and stone rained down over the mob. The First Order officers who had been surging forward to attack were now scrambling over each other in an attempt to flee.

*Pull back from the edge, Rey—it isn’t too late—*

Rey’s body trembled, too weak a vessel to sustain the volume of power flooding through her. Her vision failed, and something inside her gave way, tearing wetly. The pain mixed with the power, fueling it to even more intoxicating heights. Before the last of Rey’s consciousness slipped away into the howling void, she reached up, gripped the stones far above the rows of seats, and brought the ceiling crashing down.
Ben didn’t know if he’d ever seen anything as terrifying and awe-inspiring as Rey ripping apart a building. She stood with one hand extended high in the air, her lightsaber burning purple at her side, and when she shrieked in bloody rage and clenched her fist, the ceiling above the theater cracked and broke apart. Chunks of stone, plaster, and wood plummeted into the seats, crushing First Order officers by the dozen.

Her thin body trembled as she channeled the devastating power, and then her eyes slid shut and she collapsed. Ben was there in an instant, catching her before her head could strike the floor. He curled himself over her, wincing as shrapnel from the destruction pelted his head and back.

When the initial tumult had passed, Ben finally dared to look at what Rey had wrought. An enormous hole had been torn in the domed roof of the theater, and sunlight speared through the clouds of dust rising from the seats. The entire auditorium was buried in rubble—there was no way any First Order officers had survived. The ceiling above the stage was still intact, but the remnants of the building groaned, and pulverized plaster slithered down the walls as the structure shifted.

They had to get out of here.

Ben turned off Rey’s lightsaber and clipped it to his own belt, then hefted her in his arms. The fighting was mostly done—piles of dead stormtroopers littered the stage, along with a few Resistance members, and he heard pounding footsteps as stragglers fled from the destruction. Finn and Rose stood gaping at the demolished theater, while Poe finished off a final trooper.

“Let’s go,” Ben said shortly.

Somewhere in the distance, he heard Chewbacca’s familiar war cry, and relief flooded him. A series of beeps and whistles announced that BB-8, too, had made it through the battle.

They sprinted through the narrow corridors of the theater as the building shuddered and lights flickered. Poe went first, firing at any troopers or First Order officers who remained, while Finn and Rose guarded the rear. Ben reserved his focus for the woman in his arms. Rey was so pale, and he’d felt the burst of fresh agony across the bond when she’d channeled that devastating power. She was badly hurt, her heart fluttering in an unsustainable rhythm. Blood stained her clothing where wounds had been ripped open.

Chewie met them in the loading bay, holding the door open for the group to file out. As they reached the pavement, a roar sounded behind them as the building finally collapsed in on itself.

They ran hard and fast, keeping ahead of the spreading cloud of debris. The streets were chaos, filled with screaming locals and lost-looking First Order members. The ones who noticed Ben immediately dropped their weapons or fled, and Ben left them alone, too caught up in Rey. She was fading in his arms, her pulse growing weak as blood trickled from her mouth. Ben wasn’t adept enough at Force healing to save her; he needed to find a doctor now.

Chewie roared and pointed out a distant sign, and Ben ran toward it faster than he had ever moved before. He was jostling Rey, but it was too late to worry about that—she needed a bacta tank within the next few minutes, or neither of them would survive. His lungs burned, and he tugged on the
Force to launch them into flight when running wasn’t enough. Panic washed over him in thick waves, trying to suck him under, but he fought to restrain the rising darkness. Rey needed him to stay in control.

He burst into the doctor’s office, startling the receptionist and the patients already lined up. No one appeared to be bleeding that badly, and Ben wouldn’t have cared, anyway. He shoved to the head of the line, then forced his way into the treatment area, screaming for a bacta tank.

It didn’t even require Force compulsion. The doctor, a tough-looking woman with pitch-black eyes and tiny horns, took one look at Rey and began barking orders.

Ben nearly wept when they took her from his arms. He followed, ignoring all attempts to get him to return to the lobby. When one nurse grew too aggressive in her efforts to impede him, he ignited his lightsaber, and that did the trick. After that, no one dared come near him.

He sank to his knees in front of the bacta tank as Rey was lowered into the blue liquid, a mask strapped to her face and tubes winding up from the baggy white undergarments they’d put her in. Her hair floated around her, and her expression was almost peaceful, but Ben could find no solace in the sight. Bacta tanks didn’t always work—sometimes a body had been damaged so badly that even bacta couldn’t heal it in time.

Half-healed cuts littered her exposed skin, along with the kind of bruising that indicated internal bleeding. It was enough to make Ben wish they hadn’t killed Hux so quickly. He would have torn the man apart piece by piece. It would have taken days.

But Rey had been succumbing to the dark side of the Force, and not even vengeance on Hux had been worth that, so Ben had intervened. He’d done everything he could to pull her back from that precipitous edge, to keep her on the right side of the balance between light and dark.

He’d failed.

But Ben would love Rey no matter what, even if the darkness took her for a while. Even if it took her forever. She was his, and he was hers. And once Rey’s body was healed, Ben would do everything in his power to help heal her mind and soul.

He clenched his hands tightly in front of him, looking up at her still face like it was the pole star the constellations moved around, the one light that could guide him home. “Please live, sweetheart,” he begged. “I can’t survive without you.”

#

Days passed.

Ben watched and waited from his position on the floor, curling up at the base of her tank to sleep and only eating when Chewie forced food into his hands. The nurses had tried to move him once, but whatever deadly expression they’d seen in his eyes had sent them skittering away, and now everyone left him alone.

Ben didn’t mind the discomfort. He had been parted from Rey for too long; he was physically incapable of letting her out of his sight.

The scars on her skin healed bit by bit, until they were just a patchwork of white and pink. There were dozens of them, and Ben grieved for what she’d been through. He knew from experience that even once the physical wounds had healed, the mental damage would linger.
There was some good news, though. Although she’d suffered broken bones and a few perforated organs, most of the damage was superficial. Hux hadn’t gotten around to truly invasive methods of torture yet. A small mercy, since all of Hux’s methods were devastating, but it could have gotten so much worse in ways that were nauseating to think about.

The hours passed agonizingly slowly, broken up only by reports from the Resistance. The First Order was in chaos, with most of the governors, generals, and other high-ranking officers killed in the theater. The Resistance, a few other rebel groups, and even some lone actors had taken advantage of the power vacuum to carry out targeted strikes on Star Destroyers and military installations. When the holovid of Ben’s speech had been followed by one from Finn discussing his defection, stormtroopers had deserted the First Order en masse, and Finn was currently spearheading the effort to integrate them into normal society.

The First Order was truly dying. Since Ben’s darkness had helped that evil rise, perhaps it was fitting that Rey’s darkness had caused its fall.

It was impossible to wrap his mind around the rapidly shifting galactic politics, so Ben focused on Rey’s serene face instead, contemplating all the years ahead of them. It brought him more peace than he had ever found through meditation.

On the fourth day, Rey woke.

A pulse of awareness rippled down the bond, and her eyes fluttered open. Ben shot upright, pressing his palms against the glass as his heart pounded in tripletime. Rey blinked sleepily, and then her sweet voice flowed across the bond.

Ben?

I’m here, he told her, nearly weeping in relief. You’re safe.

Ben could sense the potent mixture of self-recrimination, anger, and fear rising through her muddled mind. Tears welled behind her mask. But I… I did…

Shh, he soothed as Rey’s shoulders trembled. You saved the galaxy, Rey. You saved everyone.

She tried to shake her head, but she was still sedated, and the tubes around her limited her range of motion to a few twitches. But the dark… I remember…

He stroked a hand down the glass, wishing he was touching her skin, instead. Do you remember how much I love you? Do you remember that I’m never going to leave you, no matter what?

Her eyes shone with the glassy fear of a wounded animal, and Ben vowed to dedicate his entire existence to easing the pain reflected there. I went dark, she said. I am dark.

I love you, Rey. Dark or light, you are perfect to me. Do you believe me?

Her mouth quivered, and then her chin dipped in a tiny nod, and that was enough for now. Ben smiled and leaned his forehead against the glass, crowding forward until he was as close to her as he could possibly get.

I love you, he repeated. And you’re never going to be alone again.

Finally, the nurses pulled Rey out of the tank and took her away to shower off the gel. Ben paced
like a caged beast outside the ‘fresher. He needed to hold her so badly that his hands shook.

The door slid open, and there she was, wide-eyed and damp, her tiny body swathed in a towel. Ben swooped, wrapping his arms around her before she’d taken more than one step outside the ‘fresher. He ignored the doctor’s grumbles as he clutched her tightly, and when her arms slid around him in return, it felt like a homecoming. He was bathed in light, awash in divine wonder as every atom that made up his universe snapped into perfect position. The stray pieces of his shattered soul settled back into place, and for the first time since Rey had been kidnapped, Ben was whole again.

“I love you,” he murmured as his tears soaked into her hair. “I love you so much.” His entire universe fit within the circle of his arms.

She pressed her face into his shoulder, sobbing hard enough to make her whole body shake, and Ben knew she felt it, too.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Your comments bring me joy.

I've been really sick, so I'm not writing at my usual pace, but I'm working on the remaining chapters! We're so close to the end, which is both exciting and depressing.
Rey felt terrible.

Not physically—the bacta tank had healed her many wounds—but in the days since she’d emerged, it had become clear that something was wrong in her mind. Her euphoria at being reunited with Ben had quickly shifted into more treacherous territory. She was dissatisfied and moody, torn between snapping at Ben over inconsequential matters and clinging desperately to him late at night, certain that at any moment he would disappear. Her sleep was plagued by nightmares, and her waking moments felt strangely disconnected from each other, as if she was viewing her own life from a distance.

At all hours, the dark side of the Force whispered to her, although Rey couldn’t understand what it was saying. She sensed the sinister undercurrents, though, and the perpetual hum of that ravenous energy contributed to her unease.

Reality had changed profoundly during the four days she’d been unconscious. Despite knowing on some level that she’d been responsible for much of the change sweeping the galaxy, Rey had the oddest feeling of having missed something essential. Time had lurched forward while her eyes had been closed, and Rey had fallen behind.

She didn’t know where that left her. She didn’t know what her role was anymore.

Most of the last few days she’d spent in bed in the captain’s quarters on the Millennium Falcon, alternating between sleeping and brooding, but Ben had finally put his foot down and demanded that she join him in the cockpit. She’d been irritated at the time, wanting nothing more than to bury her head under the pillow, but as she stared at the stars over Ben’s shoulder, she couldn’t remember why it had mattered so much.

Nothing really seemed to matter.

She was suffocating under this heavy malaise, but the moments it broke weren’t any better. Furious impulses drove her to lash out, breaking things without really meaning to. Other times she suffered from dizzying spells of panic that left her on her hands and knees, gasping for air. All the emotions that should have filled her foggy head apparently lived inside her body now, where she couldn’t understand or process them.

Ben had been patient with her—brining her water, stroking her back, and whispering comforting things in her ear—but even that upset her. He was treating her like she was fragile, and it made her want to grind her teeth and scream at him, even though he was right.

Now Ben smiled at her as she took the co-pilot’s seat. “We’re almost there.”

She didn’t know where Ben was taking her, and she hadn’t asked. That in itself should have been alarming—Rey had always been curious—but she wasn’t sure it mattered. She grunted in acknowledgement.

“How are you feeling?” he asked softly.

A spike of fury stabbed through her brain—Rey hated being an object of pity—and she slammed her
fist against her thigh. The pain felt good, so she did it again and again.

“Hey,” Ben said, and then he was kneeling beside her, placing his palm beneath her fist so she would be forced to hit him instead. Rey stilled, even though she was tempted to keep going. “Why are you hitting yourself?”

“I’m not a child,” she snapped.

His brow creased, and he eyed her like she was a puzzle he was trying to work out. “I don’t think you’re a child,” he said after a long pause.

“Then don’t treat me like one.” Rey crossed her arms and stared out the window, feeling huffy in a way she had to acknowledge was not entirely unchildlike.

Kriff, she hated this.

Ben was nudging along the bond now, gently probing to find out what she was feeling. She let him in, although she bared her teeth in irritation. If she couldn’t even figure out what was wrong with her, what was he going to accomplish?

“It’s natural to feel upset,” he told her. “You’ve been through a lot, and—”

Rey abruptly shoved out of the chair and started stalking out of the cockpit. He caught her before she’d made it more than a few paces, his hand cinching around her upper arm.

“Don’t run,” he said in a far less gentle tone.

“Don’t order me around,” she snapped back, tugging in an attempt to remove his grip. He didn’t let go, and she found that she enjoyed the bruising pressure of the struggle. It was the most real she’d felt in days.

“If you’re going to act unreasonable, I’m going to order you around.”

Her jaw dropped, and turned on him in outrage. “You’re seriously lecturing me about being unreasonable? I hardly think you’re qualified, considering your perpetual state of high drama.”

“That’s exactly why I’m qualified,” he said, maintaining a damnably calm expression despite the hard grip of his hand and the tension in his voice. “I’ve experienced exactly what you’re going through right now.”

“Oh, yes?” she sneered, struggling against the urge to headbutt him. The need for violence coiled tightly in her chest, and the dark whisper in her mind intensified until she could almost make out the words. “And what am I going through, pray tell?”

“You were tortured,” he said flatly. “And then you gave in to the dark.”

She recoiled, hating how bluntly he laid the truth out. Her eyes pricked with welling tears, but she refused to give in to them, so she ripped her arm out of his grip and seized the hot burn of anger instead. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He barked out an incredulous laugh. “Are you sure about that, Rey? Because, as I recall, you tore down a building and killed a bunch of people.” He tapped his lip, taking on a considering look that was far too patronizing for Rey’s liking. “Now, where have I heard that story before?”

Rey couldn’t help it—she lashed out at him, her palm swinging towards his face as she shouted.
“Shut up!”

He caught her wrist before she made impact, and his grip tightened to the point of delicious pain. Rey squirmed, exhilarated by the fight in a way she hadn’t been in days.

“There you are,” he said, leaning closer to her. “There’s the fire.”

His eyes seemed to burn into her, and Rey shivered. “What do you want from me?”

“I want you to acknowledge what’s happening,” he said, stepping even closer. He was only a foot away—close enough to kiss or knee in the testicles, depending on Rey’s mood. She currently felt perverse enough to do both at once. “Stop running from this. Stop hiding in the bedroom. Fight me if you want to, shout at me, whatever you need, but you have to face this.”

“Why?”

“Because you can’t process trauma you can’t acknowledge.” A flash of pain crossed his features. “You taught me that. You made me face what I’d done, and you were there every step of the way. Every nightmare, every argument. You helped me through.” His throat bobbed. “Please let me be there for you.”

Rey was mesmerized by the intensity reflected on that hard, handsome face. She wanted to cry. She wanted to lash out again. She wanted to bury her pain down deep, except she didn’t know if there was a place deep enough to conceal it. “I don’t understand myself.”

Ben nodded. “But at least now you can admit you need something.”

She glared at him. “Smug prick.”

One corner of his lush mouth tilted up. “Always. But come on, Rey, is that the best you can do?”

“You want me to insult you?”

He crowded even closer, dipping his head until his mouth rested on the juncture between her shoulder and neck. She tilted her head automatically, then gasped when his teeth sank into her skin. “I want you to fight, Rey,” he murmured against her. “Give me everything you’re feeling. Take it out on me. I’m not afraid of you.”

The words were thrilling and terrifying all at once. The sensitive place between her legs throbbed. “I don’t want to hurt you,” Rey forced herself to say.

It was true, but not entirely. She wanted to struggle beneath him. She wanted to scream her unholy rage loud enough to echo through the Falcon. She wanted her hands wrapped around his throat and his cock buried deep inside her.

And that wasn’t the entirety of it. I don’t want you to leave me. She couldn’t help the needy, desperate thought. What if he hated her like this? She wasn’t a whole person anymore; there was something wrong with her...

The dark whisper told her it was a possibility. You’re nothing, it said, louder this time, and you have nothing besides what you seize and what you break. He doesn’t understand you. He’s going to leave you, just like everyone else—

Ben released her wrist only to grab her by the shoulders and shake her a little. “Stop it,” he ordered.
“Don’t fall into that trap. I’m not going anywhere.”

She glared at him through a sheen of unshed tears. “Then prove it.”

He lunged in and bit her again, hard enough to make her moan and jerk against him. “What, do you want an engraved invitation? I guess the calligraphy would finally come in handy. Dear Rey, you are cordially invited to fight me or fuck me at your earliest convenience.”

Rey would actually quite like to see that invitation, but when Ben sucked a punishing bruise into her skin, the thought was swept away by a hot rush of arousal.

Ben drew back, panting. His cheeks were flushed pink, and excitement shone in his dark eyes. “Come on, Rey. Just take what you want.”

Something in Rey snapped at those words. She threw herself at him, knocking him back against the wall as she crushed her mouth against his. His arms banded around her, strong and unyielding, and he grabbed a handful of her ass to pull her hard against him. The press of his erection against her lower belly made her moan.

“That’s it,” he said against her lips. “Fight me for it, scavenger. Take control.”

The word ‘control’ hit her with the sharp clarity of a key slipping into a lock, and Rey realized it was exactly what she needed. She’d been vulnerable for too long—vulnerable to the bounty hunter, to Hux, to the First Order, to the pull of the dark, to the fragility of her own body. She was fucking tired of being out of control.

She pulled away, finally sure of what she wanted. “Take off your clothes,” she ordered.

He laughed, the infuriating ass. “Make me.”

Oh, Rey was going to make him. Exhilaration mixed with anger and lust as she gripped the bottom of his shirt and tore it up the middle. He sucked in a startled breath as she yanked the shredded remains off him, then moaned when she raked her nails hard down his chest, leaving raised pink lines behind. Rey gripped his erection through his trousers. “Are you ready to do what I say?” she asked, squeezing him harder than she normally would have dared.

“Not nearly.”

Rey wanted to smack that smug grin off his face. And then, realizing he’d already given her permission, she slapped him hard enough to snap his head to the side. He grunted, and the twitch of his penis in her hand told her how much he liked that.

She gripped his chin and forced his face back to her, then stood on her toes and bit his lip. “You’re going to do what I tell you to,” she said. Before he could deliver a rebuttal, she reached inside his trousers to grab his bare cock. He wheezed at the sudden contact, and she reveled in the sense of power that came from holding his most sensitive part in her hand. She tightened her grip, then turned around and headed for the captain’s quarters, dragging him behind her.

She stopped just outside the door and released him—not because she was done with his cock, but because she wanted to shove him into a wall again. She liked the solid sound his shoulders made striking it; it was a visceral reminder of just how powerfully built he was.

He pushed off the wall and advanced towards her, so she knocked him into it again, this time pinning him there with the Force. “Behave,” she admonished. She switched her hold to a light Force choke, leaving his hands free. “Now take off your pants.”
He shivered, his eyes going heavy-lidded with arousal as he undid his belt with excruciating slowness. The leather slid out from the loops with a hiss, and the buckle clanked when he dropped it on the floor.

“Faster,” Rey said, squeezing his throat tighter. This aggressive passion play was feeding some deep need inside her that went beyond control. She felt powerful, hungry, dominant, free. No longer detached and unhappy, but fully alive.

Ben grinned at her order, but his fingers trembled as he undid the fastenings and shoved his pants and underwear down until they pooled around his ankles. With her still holding him against the wall with the Force choke, he couldn’t undo his boots to step out of the garments, and Rey reveled for a moment in the sight of him undone at her hands. His pale, chiseled torso gleamed with a hint of sweat, and the powerful muscles of his thighs quivered a little. In between, the most exceptional cock in the universe jutted out, proud and hard.

Drunk on having control over him, Rey approached and dropped to her knees in front of him. She took off his boots, then lifted his feet one at a time to remove his trousers. He was definitely trembling now, and the shaking only intensified as she brought her mouth close to his cock and let him feel her breath.

“Rey…” Her name came out on a moan.

Rey suppressed a triumphant grin. “Yes, Ben?”

“Please suck me.”

She blew over the tip, which was already slick with precum. “I don’t think you deserve it.”

Then she stood up, leaving him untouched.

He moaned, so she tightened the Force choke until he couldn’t make a sound anymore. She grabbed him by the cock again, dragging him into the bedroom. By the time they reached the bed, she could sense his lightheadedness across the bond, so she loosened the choke. She shoved him to his knees beside the mattress, and he went easily, gasping for air as his hips twitched in a way that made his cock bob. “Fuck, Rey. You’re amazing.”

The praise made her uncomfortable, so Rey tightened the grip on his throat again. While he choked and shuddered, she removed her tunic, trousers, and undergarments. Then she slung one leg over his shoulder, grabbed his hair in a fist, and pulled him towards her cunt. “Make me feel good,” she commanded.

Ben dove in enthusiastically. Rey could feel his ravenous hunger across the bond as he sealed his mouth over her. She wound her fingers into his hair, gripping at the roots as she ground against his face.

Ben’s hands were on her ass, his nose brushing her clit, his tongue swiping over the entirety of her pussy. He was sending her feelings and thoughts across the bond more aggressively than normal—*fuck, this is everything I need and tastes like paradise and own me, Rey, fucking destroy me.*

Rey moaned and clutched him tighter, squeezing her leg around him like a predator drawing her prey closer. He was the one eating her out, but she felt like she was consuming him. His passion and determination resonated like a battle march across the bond.

Rey was his guiding star, his goddess, his reason for being… His devotion crashed over her in waves
even more devastating than the ruin he was currently visiting on her body.

*I’m yours*, he told her mentally. *Body and soul. All of it is yours.*

Rey’s hips jerked uncontrollably, and then she was falling, clenching, bursting into orgasm. She ground against his mouth, tearing at his hair as she screamed her victory to the stars.

#

Ben lapped at Rey’s cunt, wishing this would never end. He loved the taste of her, the feel of her, the way her calloused heel dug into his back as his fingers squeezed her ass. He loved the triumph and bliss emanating from her.

The bond between them hummed with rightness. Rey hadn’t known what she’d needed, but Ben had guessed, and he felt proud to have been right. The road back from the dark would take time, love, care, and probably some violence, but he was determined to see it through. He would give her everything she needed, no matter the cost.

Today, Rey had needed to be jarred out of the detached gloom she’d fallen into. She’d needed to reconnect with her body and her emotions in a way that made her feel passionate, powerful, and loved.

Ben kept licking her clit after she came, worshipping her with his mouth for as long as she would let him. Soon enough, though, his scavenger grew impatient. “On the bed,” she ordered, and Ben suppressed a delighted smile at having her command him like this. Rey didn’t normally crave control in the bedroom, but when she did, he was more than happy to cede it—after a fight, of course.

Rey didn’t just need to be in control right now—she needed to *seize* control.

Ben laid back on the bed, arms and legs spread wide as he waited for her to decide what to do with him. He would take all of it gladly, even if she needed to beat him or cut him open. He knew Rey would never crave anything beyond rough sex, sparring, or the occasional duel, but Ben was willing to offer her anything, anyway. His heart on a platter. The heads of her enemies. His own head, for that matter, if he could guarantee his death wouldn’t hurt her.

She eyed him with hot intensity, running her hands over her breasts and squeezing her nipples in a way that made Ben’s cock twitch.

A proper Jedi mentor probably would have told Ben that indulging Rey’s violent passion right now would only encourage her to succumb to the dark side of the Force, but proper Jedi mentors were full of shit. Forgiveness, humility, peace… those lightsider concepts sounded nice in the abstract, but after an acute trauma like Rey had just experienced, they were a load of nonsense. She didn’t need any more impossible expectations set for her.

Right now, Rey needed to be angry, to lash out and vent her frustration on the world—on Ben, if he had his way. She needed to feel alive. Angry and hurting, yes, but alive. Loved. Needed and wanted, flaws and all.

Passion was a kind of hope, although the Jedi had never realized that.

Ben braced his heels on the bed and thrust up to draw her attention to his erection. “Come on, scavenger,” he said tauntingly. “Make me give you more.”

Rey’s eyes lit with challenge, and her teeth sank into her lip. She scanned his body hungrily, then lifted a hand and flicked her fingers, applying just enough pressure to keep him prone. Then she
climbed over him and started licking and nibbling at his chest, and Ben realized he wouldn’t be able to maintain his composure for very long.

Then again, wasn’t that the point? Ben’s submission was his gift to her.

He opened his mind all the way, and Rey surged inside greedily, seizing his thoughts and emotions. *Mine*, she thought, her possessiveness wrapping around him like the most welcome bondage. The energy pulsing through her was still dark and furious, but the passion between them had changed the focus and outlet of that rage.

It was enough for now. This was Rey’s first step out of the dark.

Ben relaxed into the pinned position, groaning as she nipped at his hipbone. Her mouth was hot and wet, and she kissed him with confidence, making her way aggressively towards his cock. When she reached it, she didn’t bother teasing him—she just gripped his balls firmly and opened her mouth around him.

“Fuck!” Ben jerked as she took him all the way to the back of her throat. He desperately wanted to fist his hands in her hair and guide her pace, but she had him pinned. He’d done this to her before—forced her to take pleasure without being able to reciprocate—so he knew exactly what she was feeling as she bobbed her head up and down, tugging on his sac with a gentle brutality that undid him. Her triumph rang through his mind like a bell, amplifying his own desire.

She sat up, fisting his erection and pumping it hard. “Who does this belong to?” she asked, staring down at him with a fierce expression. Her rosy lips glistened, and her cheeks were flushed.

He moaned as she twisted her hand on the head of his cock. “Pretty sure it’s mine,” he managed to say.

She trailed the sharp edge of a nail down his erection, too lightly to break the skin but hard enough to have him swearing at the sharp pleasure-pain. “Try again.”

“Definitely my cock,” he gasped, unable to resist pushing her further.

Rey leaned forward and slapped him with the hand not currently tormenting him. Ben sucked in a needy breath, loving how the pain spread in hot waves over his skin. “More,” he demanded, and she grinned fiercely before backhanding him hard enough to make him cry out. A lightning strike of pleasure traveled from the site of the blow down to his lower abdomen.

Fuck, he was going to come if she kept this up.

Rey stopped stroking his erection, and he moaned at the loss. The Force pushed him harder against the bed, until he couldn’t even twitch his hips. Then Rey straddled him, hovering so only the tip of him touched her drenched folds. She braced one hand on his chest as she grabbed his cock and held it in position.

“Whose cock is this?” Rey asked again. She was panting and trembling, clearly as keyed up as he was.

“Yours,” Ben groaned, giving in to her possession fully. “Everything I am is yours.”

Rey sank down on him with one smooth motion, taking his cock to the hilt. Their moans mingled in the sex-scented air as pleasure spilled like warm honey across the bond.

*I want to touch you*, Ben said in her mind. *Please.*
Rey took mercy on him, lifting the Force hold, and Ben gripped her hips, marveling anew at how small she was compared to him. She flexed her thighs and rose up before slamming back down, and the noise that burst from her lips was one of the most erotic things Ben had ever heard.

She rode him mercilessly, resting her hands on his chest as her hips pumped over him. Ben braced his feet against the bed, bucking up to deepen the penetration. A filthy cacophony filled the room: the slap of skin on skin, the slick sounds of his cock sliding into Rey’s drenched cunt, their grunts and whimpers of pleasure.

Ben kept his mind twined with hers, needing to feel her as deeply as possible. She was dark and needy, covetous and possessive, dominant and demanding, and he loved every piece of her equally. Rey needed a reminder of the light, though, so he slipped words of love and affirmation into her head. Beautiful girl. You’re so good, so perfect. I need you; I’m going to love you forever; I’m yours...

Rey moaned and leaned forward until her breasts pressed against his chest and her head rested beside his own. She bit his neck, then sucked a bruise into the skin. She couldn’t ride him from this position, so Ben took over, gripping her ass in his hands and rocking her hips over him while he thrust up into her.

My darling, he crooned mentally. You’ll always be my light.

The words made her moan, although Ben felt her stab of grief as she remembered how far from the light she’d drifted. He kept going, taking advantage of her open emotional state to plant more words of affirmation in her mind.

You amaze me, sweetheart. You’re so strong. You’re going to get through this.

She shook her head and buried her face deeper in his neck, although she slid one hand between their bodies to rub her clitoris. She didn’t want him to stop talking, not really.

I love you, Rey. Just as you are. No matter what.

Rey groaned loud and long, and her body clenched around him as the shuddering waves of her orgasm rippled through her pussy. With their minds tied so tightly together, Ben felt her exploding pleasure like a star going supernova, and he jerked and cursed and thrust blindly up into her as her orgasm triggered his own.

They lay tangled together after it was over, panting and slicked with sweat. Ben gripped Rey close, pressing kisses to her hair.

He felt the cool moisture of tears slipping down his neck, and then Rey sobbed. He hugged her tighter, rocking her slightly as she cried. “It’s all right,” he soothed, stroking a hand over her tangled hair. “I have you. I’m here.”

“Don’t leave me,” she whispered into his skin.

“Never.” It was a sacred vow. “I’m never going to leave you, no matter what happens.”

They stayed like that for a long time, Ben murmuring promises and praise while Rey wept out the tangled emotions she’d been unable to acknowledge since Myrtah. It was only the first step on the journey towards healing, but Ben knew from experience that the first step was the hardest one.

“I’m so proud of you,” he told her when she finally stilled. She lay limply on top of him, exhausted from the emotional release, and he was happy to bear her weight, would gladly bear it every second
of every day. He stroked her back as she fell into slumber.

Ben Solo might be the light side’s least likely ambassador, but he was tenacious, devoted, and just the right amount of insane, and he was going to drag Rey back into balance by whatever means necessary.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading and commenting! You may have noticed that the chapter count is creeping up... That's because I want to make sure Rey gets the healing she needs, but also because I want to cram as much smut and fluff into the end of this work as possible. I'm not sure yet exactly how many chapters it will be, but expect a lot of sex and feelings!
Rey’s veins were on fire.

She writhed as much as the chains at her wrists and ankles would allow. She needed to get away from the flames, but she was helpless, trapped as tightly as a Sarlacc’s prey. She couldn’t move, couldn’t escape the burning anguish, couldn’t do anything but shriek.

“Our doctors invented this compound a few years ago,” Hux said conversationally. “It’s one of our most effective non-invasive torture techniques.”

Rey opened her eyes just enough to glare at the general. He was smirking, his cheeks flushed with what looked like excitement. Being this close to him made her want to vomit, and panic rose with the fire, burning her throat with acid. She retched, and bile dribbled over her chin.

Hux eyed the liquid with distaste. “Of course, there are drawbacks. The chief among them being that I much prefer the invasive techniques.”

She bit her tongue until it bled, thrashing against the pain searing her from the inside out. It felt like being branded, like her blood had turned to razor wire, like a swarm of hornets was stinging her all over. If this was considered non-invasive, she wasn’t going to survive whatever sick methods Hux liked better.

“Where are the remaining members of the Resistance?”

The truth serum urged her to speak, and Rey’s mouth opened without her permission. “They’re together,” she managed to say.

“Where?”

“Somewhere safe.”

Hux backhanded her, and Rey spit out blood this time. The Supreme Leader looked furious, but also strangely gleeful. “Someone trained you well,” he said. “Who?”

“General Organa.” There was no reason to keep that information secret.

“And where is General Organa?”

“The command center, probably.” Rey could picture Leia now, leaning over the display screens, her hair drawn up in an elegant bun and a frown of concentration furrowing her forehead.

Hux motioned, and a stormtrooper punched Rey in the gut, making her grunt and cough. “Where is the command center located?”

“Inside Resistance headquarters.”

Rey was dizzy and sick with more than just whatever compounds Hux had injected her with. Something was wrong. She’d been here before, hadn’t she? She thought she’d suffered this pain and that it was over. It had been such a relief to have it end…
Her vision warped, and the next time she looked down at her body, she could see red, weeping wounds through the tears in her shirt. When had that happened? Metal glinted: Hux was slicing down her abdomen so slowly, splitting the skin open in a brutal crimson line. Rey screamed, half in hate and half to drown out the pain. If she screamed loud enough, maybe she could shatter whatever awful spell she was under.

“Rey.” The voice didn’t belong to Hux or the troopers. It was a balm over her nerves, soothing and cool, and it cleared away the feverish haze for a blessed instant. “You’re dreaming.”

Rey clung to the comfort that voice offered. This was a dream, just a dream, and all dreams ended eventually. Now that she knew what this was, she could tear the nightmare open and return to the land of the living.

But no matter how she tried, it wouldn’t end, wouldn’t end, wouldn’t end… A torture droid approached, its metal arms whirling, each topped with a shining blade, and then it was slipping one arm inside the incision Hux had made, and if being cut had hurt before, that had been nothing compared to this. Rey shrieked until her throat was raw.

“Sweetheart, wake up. Wake up, please.” A familiar, black-clad figure stepped between her and Hux. Dark hair, pale skin, desperate eyes…

“Ben,” she croaked.

“We’re ending the dream,” he told her, and then he miraculously grabbed the torture droid and pulled it off her. It shattered into a thousand pieces as he blasted it, Hux, and the stormtroopers away, and then it was just him and her in the blood-spattered cell. He cupped her face in his hands and leaned in to kiss her. His love spilled over her in waves of radiant light that burned away her chains. “I have you,” he murmured against her mouth. “You’re safe. Let the dream end.”

Rey’s eyes shot open. It was dark, and she was warm, and her body didn’t hurt anymore. She sucked in frantic breaths, trying to grasp hold of reality again.

Bed. She was in bed with Ben on the Millennium Falcon.

Ben wrapped one strong arm around her and pulled her close, and Rey buried her face in his chest as her eyes flooded with tears. He stroked her back, whispering endearments against her hair. He told her she was safe, that he was here, that he would never let anyone hurt her like that again.

How could he promise that, though? Rey had thought she’d been safe on that day she’d stupidly left the base. As a Force user and trained fighter, she’d felt invincible.

She’d been so very wrong.

“There’s no more bounty,” Ben reminded her, picking up on the panicked direction of her thoughts. “Hux is dead. The First Order is falling apart. They can’t touch you anymore.”

The words were rational, but they didn’t stick. Rey’s heart was pounding so hard it felt like a small animal scrabbling to get out of her chest, and her lungs couldn’t seem to suck in enough air. She moaned and clawed at Ben’s shirt, trying to bring him even closer.

“Try to take a deep breath,” he said, as if it were that simple.

Fuck off, Rey thought weakly in response. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t fight the surging fear drowning her alive. Her skin tingled with an echo of the torture droid’s blades; it had gotten inside her, and it was never coming out...
Ben abruptly disentangled himself from her and rolled off the bed, and Rey’s terror spiked. He was leaving her like this—

“I told you I’ll never leave you,” Ben said as he stripped the blanket off the bed. He wound it around her until she couldn’t move her arms or legs, then scooped her up, cradling her against his nude chest. “Come on. Let’s go look at the stars.”

He carried her to the cockpit and sat in the captain’s chair with her bundled against him. The constraining pressure of the fabric was soothing, and as Ben wrapped his arms tightly around her and rested his cheek against her forehead, Rey’s heart rate began to slow. He rocked her gently, and her panting inhalations smoothed out. Finally, her ribs unlocked, and she was able to take a deep breath.

“There you go,” he murmured, kissing her forehead. “You’re safe.”

The words spurred a fresh bout of crying, and Rey buried her face in his shoulder. She was soaking him, the tears a cold contrast to his hot skin, but she couldn’t stop. Her life had always been dangerous, and she’d been forced to make her way alone for most of it. Now Ben was here. He was her companion and partner, the one person she’d ever trusted completely, and only in his embrace did she truly feel safe.

The tension drained from her with the tears, and after a few minutes, Rey was finally calm enough to stop crying. She relaxed, sinking into the heat generated by his body. “Sorry,” she whispered.

He cupped her cheek, forcing her to meet his eyes. They were dark and compassionate, so full of love that Rey felt a moment of wonder. How could he look at her like that when she was such a disaster?

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” he said.

“I fell apart.”

“You remember my dreams, don’t you, sweetheart?” When she nodded, he kept talking. “I had panic attacks, too, and it was even worse before I met you. Torture isn’t something you just get over. It takes time to heal from mentally, and even then, sometimes the memories bubble up. That’s normal.”

“I hate it.” She felt weak and afraid, like her mind wasn’t her own. Like her body wasn’t, either.

“If you didn’t, I would have concerns.” Rey managed a tiny smile at that, and Ben continued, more serious now. “Your mind and body are still your own, Rey. They always will be. Someone did something to you against your will, but that doesn’t mean they own you, or that they’ve taken a piece of you away. No one has the power to do that.”

It was such a simple sentiment, and such a profound one. Rey had been feeling like things had been stolen from her: her peace of mind, her bodily autonomy, her sanity. She sighed and nuzzled him. “I don’t know how you managed it,” she admitted honestly. “I went through this for years, and I experienced one measly torture session and—”

“Don’t,” he said, pressing his forehead against hers. “Don’t diminish what happened to you. It isn’t a competition.”

“Thank the Maker for that,” she said dryly. But she still felt inadequate, somehow. Ben had been tormented for years and emerged stronger than ever. She’d only spent a day with Hux, and she felt like she would never be the same.

She was thinking all of this with her mind wide open to Ben, and he responded as if she’d been
making the points out loud. “It took me a long time to come back, Rey. You know that. I went so far into the darkness it’s a miracle I even came out, and I wouldn’t have without you. And yes, I’m stronger now, but doesn’t that mean you’ll end up stronger, too?”

She blew out a breath. “It’s so strange when you’re the reasonable one.”

He nipped her ear. “Naughty scavenger.”

She snuggled closer, comforted by his words and his solid, reliable presence. He was the most perceptive person she had ever met. He always seemed to know what she needed, whether it was a hard fuck or to be swaddled like an infant. “Thank you,” she said after a long period of comfortable silence. “For this and for last night.” Rey swallowed hard, remembering how intense the sex had gotten. Her body still ached from riding him.

“I’ll give you anything you need, Rey. Always.”

She knew that; she truly did. But the dark was still whispering in her subconscious, and even if rationally she knew their bond was unbreakable, her emotions were volatile. When she felt like this, it was hard not to fear that the previously solid ground of their relationship had become unstable.

You’re a monster, the dark murmured, rising into the space cracked open by her doubts. You were made to break things and hurt people. You like doing it.

It was true, wasn’t it? Rey had enjoyed taking vengeance on Hux and the First Order. She’d felt drunk on that heady power; even now, when she knew she ought to be sickened by what she’d done, a spark of dark pleasure remained at the thought of tearing apart the concert hall. She’d lashed out hard enough to topple an empire. She’d made the First Order afraid of her—as afraid as she had been of them.

And her lust for violence hadn’t stopped there. She squirmed miserably, remembering how she’d struck Ben during sex. She’d loved it, and he had seemed to like it, too, but he could have been pretending for her sake. What if last night was a sign of a growing sadistic streak? What if her behavior escalated until she truly hurt him?

“Hey,” Ben said, jolting her out of the self-recrimination she was spiraling into. “I told you to fight me, didn’t I? I pushed you into it because it seemed like it would be good for both of us. And it was. I loved seeing you seize control, Rey. It was so sexy, and it felt amazing. I want to do that again.”

She sighed, trying to suppress the dark whisper. “There’s this voice in my head telling me that I’m going to hurt you, or you’re going to leave me.” She shook her head. “Maybe it’s stupid, but I can’t stop worrying about it.”

“That’s the dark side of the Force, sweetheart.” Ben moved his lips from her forehead to her temple and down to her cheek. “When you go too far towards the dark, it’s hard to hang on to healthy thoughts. You succumb to rage or despair and start destroying anything that tethers you to sanity, because the farther you fall, the easier it is to commit yourself to that path. Your darkness wants that, Rey. It wants you to believe no one will ever love you.”

“You believed I loved you when you weren’t light,” she said, not wanting to excuse her own weakness. Ben had wept when she’d told him, but at least he’d believed her.

“Only because you practically bludgeoned me over the head with it. You think I never doubted it? That I never thought you would leave me?”

“I would never leave you.” Rey made the promise vehemently, because as broken as she was, that
was one truth as constant as the stars. “Even before, when we were... well, whatever we were. I don’t know—it’s like you’re written on my soul or something.” Her cheeks heated at the poetic words; he was much better at articulating his thoughts than she was, but she didn’t know how else to explain it.

Ben squeezed her against his chest. “I feel it, too. Like your name was etched on my heart the moment I was born. That all my life, I was just waiting for you.”

How could she doubt him when he said things like that in his smoke-and-starlight voice? His eyes burned into hers, and Rey was lost to him. His name was etched on her heart, too. “Thank you,” she said as the too-familiar sting of tears rose in her eyes. “Maker, I don’t even know how to say everything I feel. Just... thank you.”

He clutched her tight and rocked her again, and Rey might have been a mess, but she was the luckiest mess in the galaxy. Even torn between light and dark, consumed by doubts and nightmares, someone loved her no matter what. Someone would catch her when she fell.

“This is making me think about the light and dark sides of the Force,” Ben said in the tone he used when he was about to go off on a scholarly tangent. Maybe the shift in mood should have been surprising, but Rey was happy to follow wherever Ben led. This academic curiosity was part of him, too, as much as the emotion and intensity were. “The Jedi and Sith didn’t encourage romantic love, but I don’t think it was just because love is a distraction. I think it’s easier to commit yourself fully to light or darkness when you’re alone.”

Rey considered the thought. “So Force abilities amplify when there’s no emotion to hold them in check?”

He shook his head. “Not quite. The Jedi and Sith defined and limited their emotions: anger and lust for the Sith, peace and compassion for the Jedi. The important concept for both was purity of feeling. But I love you and lust after you, and we’re both somewhere in the middle of light and dark, and I don’t feel any less powerful than I was before.” Ben paused, staring out at the black expanse of space, although Rey knew his attention was fixated on his internal musings. “If I’m still as strong as I was when I was fully dark, that tells me that it doesn’t matter how we access the Force, just what we do with it.”

“Luke told me it isn’t a power,” Rey offered. “It’s the fundamental energy of the universe.”

“It isn’t a power,” Ben agreed. “But if I manipulate it to pursue my goals, I start thinking of it that way. It’s hard to stop—even now, I think about my Force abilities as something inside myself, rather than something external. I think the Jedi and Sith both fell into the same trap, except the Jedi told themselves self-denial would make them strong, whereas the Sith thought indulging their worst impulses would make them strong.”

“But it isn’t about strength,” Rey said, picking up on the thread of his argument. “The Force is the same no matter what—it’s how we interface with it.”

“Exactly.” Ben was still frowning, obviously lost in thought, and Rey loved the pensive expression on his grave, elegant face. She liked to watch him puzzling things out. “The Force unquestionably has emotional components,” he said. “It’s a tapestry of every living thing, after all, and emotions are a constant in living things. When a Force user goes fully dark, they feel validated when they channel the Force in ways that are destructive, but I think that comes from the wielder, not from the Force itself.”

Rey wasn’t sure how this had transformed from a cuddle session into an academic treatise, but she
wasn’t going to protest. She leaned into him, enjoying his muscles and the even beat of his heart beneath her ear. “So dark users succumb to their worst instincts, and light users try to be their best selves, but since the Force contains the entire spectrum of human emotion, it’s up to the user which part manifests?”

Ben nodded. “You’re so clever, Rey. I love it.” Before she could do more than blush, he plowed ahead. “The point is, romantic love shouldn’t matter. If the intention comes from the Force user, they should be able to incorporate their feelings into whatever the outcome is. Which means the Jedi and the Sith weren’t confident in their abilities to balance love and power. Rather than trying to deal with a complex situation, they decided it was easier and better to be alone.”

Rey nibbled at Ben’s chest. “So you’re saying millennia’s worth of Force users were wrong, but the two of us have it all figured out?” She agreed, but there was a breathtaking amount of arrogance in the claim.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” He smiled down at her, and she was captivated by the crinkles at the edge of his eyes and the divots in his cheeks. He was the handsomest man she’d ever seen.

“The Jedi and the Sith are gone,” Rey said. “We might be the only two trained Force users left in the galaxy.”

“Good,” Ben said decisively. “We’ll start over. We’ll make a new world where emotion and intimacy are welcomed. No more Jedi, no more Sith. No more choosing the light or the dark.”

It sounded like paradise. Rey relaxed further, awash with adoration and admiration for her thoughtful lover and his radical politics. “Can you imagine what all those dead Jedi masters and Sith lords would think if they could hear us now? We’re reshaping an entire belief system because of our relationship.”

Ben’s shrug jostled her a little. “So? Clearly the old way of doing things didn’t work. Relationships are about compromise, and the Jedi and the Sith didn’t understand that.” Ben kissed her chin, then the tip of her nose. “We’re going to do better. We already are.”

She grinned into his collarbone. Kriff, she liked when he got sentimental. “How are we compromising?” she asked, wanting him to keep talking about their relationship forever.

“Well, I stopped terrorizing the galaxy, and you stopped trying to murder me.”

Rey giggled. With his thoughtfulness, affection, and humor, Ben had successfully lifted her mood from the pit she’d fallen into after that nightmare. “You also wore brown for me a few times,” she pointed out. “And I let you show me the dark side and finger me with your gloves on.”

He chuckled. “Darling, are you pretending that’s a concession you made for me? Because if so, I see we need to revisit our conversation about your kinks—”

Rey laughed and silenced him by pressing her lips to his. For a few minutes they just kissed, slow and languorous. It was nice to do this without any expectation of it leading to sex—although obviously Rey enjoyed when it led to sex, too. But it had been a while since they’d just tasted each other for the sheer joy of it. They brushed lips and tangled tongues like they had all the time in the world, and the taste and scent of him was both familiar and miraculous.

She’d missed this over the days they’d been apart. She’d missed him. “I never want to be parted from you again.” she whispered against his lips.

“You never will be.”
When the kissing finally ebbed into comfortable snuggling, Rey remembered why he’d originally brought her here. “Tell me about the stars,” she said.

He shifted her so they could stare out the window together. The star field spread out before them, a blanket of black velvet spattered with diamonds. Ben lifted a finger and moved it through the air as if tracing a constellation. “Do you know what those stars represent?”

She frowned. “Well, some of them have planetary systems, and a lot of them have probably already died, but the light hasn’t traveled to us yet...” She trailed off when he chuckled and squeezed her more tightly.

“Each and every one of those stars is a possibility,” Ben said.

Maker, she loved his mind. “How so?” she asked, intrigued by the direction of his thoughts.

“The galaxy is incredibly vast, Rey. You’ve only barely begun to see what it offers. There are so many worlds out there, places so strange and beautiful you would never dream them up.”

She felt a pang of longing for all the worlds he’d seen. He was so knowledgeable and well-traveled, and she was just a scavenger who had fallen into a destiny that still sometimes felt like it belonged to someone else. “I wish I could visit them all.”

“That’s the point, Rey. You can.” He used the finger that had been painting constellations in the air to tilt her chin up to him. His smile was soft as the dawn, and it kindled a gentle glow in Rey’s chest. “I’m going to take you on an adventure.”

Her eyes widened. “Right now?”

He kissed her nose. “No, right now we’re going to Ahch-To so you can meditate and relax. But once you’re ready, we’re going to take the Falcon and explore the galaxy together.”

Excitement flooded her on a giddy rush, and Rey stared out at the stars with wide eyes, wondering which specific ones they would visit and when. “I’m ready now,” she said urgently.

Ben chuckled. “Patience, sweetheart. Meditation first.”

“When did you get so boring?” she demanded, softening the words with a smile.

“When you insisted I do all that kriffing self-improvement,” he said, nipping at her ear. “Just think of it as motivation. The faster you meditate your way back to the light, the faster we’ll be able to explore.”

“You’re horrible.”

“Terrible,” he agreed. “So terrible that right now, I’m going to get on my knees in front of you and kiss your beautiful pussy while you dream up adventures for us to have.”

Rey made a choked noise at the abrupt conversational shift. “What?”

Instead of answering, Ben stood up with Rey in his arms, then transferred her back into the chair. He loosened the blankets until they draped around her like a cloak, leaving her front entirely bare. Then he sank to his knees in front of her, smirking like he had just scored a victory in a game Rey hadn’t even known they were playing.

“You... I...” Rey's head spun as Ben leaned in close and pressed a kiss to the inside of her right
thigh. How had their conversation turned into sex so quickly?

“This is how you process feelings,” he said, parroting the words she’d once spoken to him. “I’m particularly incentivized to help.”

Rey’s laugh turned into a moan as he sucked on the sensitive flesh a few inches down from her pussy. His sinful mouth moved to her other thigh, licking and sucking so close to where she wanted him to be. The transition from tears to deep conversation to sex was disorienting, and Rey gripped his hair as if that would anchor her to reality.

“Ben, I’m kind of a disaster,” she whispered as he kissed up to the crease between her pussy and inner thigh. It was half excuse, half plea—I’m sorry I’m such a mess, but please lick me, please...

“Great,” he said as he trailed kisses over the patch of hair covering her mound. “I am, too.”

Then his mouth was on her fully, his tongue gliding over her clitoris, and Rey was lost. She gasped and tipped her head back, staring sightlessly at the ceiling. “Ben, I—”

“Shh.” The admonition vibrated against her clit. “Let me make you come.”

“But I’m—and you—” Rey couldn’t seem to form words. She gripped his hair tighter, grinding against his face. Force, he was so good at this.

“I’m starving for you.” His lips moved against her pussy in a way that made her gasp and arch her back. “You’re so fucking delicious, Rey.” He licked a long stripe from her core to her clit. “You’re everything I’ve ever wanted.”

Rey whimpered. She had already been emotionally raw, and now she was physically exposed, too. A spurt of panic had her clutching harder at Ben’s hair, trying to guide his movements.

He defied her grip and pulled away, then blew a stream of cool air over her clit. “You need to let go. Don’t try to guide this. Don’t question it. Just let me pleasure you.”

Rey moaned, his words doing as much for her as his tongue had a second ago. Still, dried tears caked her cheeks, and she’d just been an absolute mess. He shouldn’t want her right now—

“I always want you,” he said vehemently, following the words with an aggressive suck on her clitoris. Rey bucked against his face, dying for more of the sensation. “You seem to think I only care when you’re perfect,” he continued, licking her between words. “But I always care. I always need you. You could be ninety years old and I would still want to kiss your pussy. You could be covered in dirt and blood and I would demand you let me make you come.”

Rey’s eyes flooded with tears. “You mean it? Even when I’m ninety?”

“Especially when you’re ninety,” he promised. “I’m going to worship your cunt forever, Rey, the same way I worship your generous heart and your brilliant mind. You deserve happiness, and I’m going to do everything I can to give it to you.”

He dedicated himself wholeheartedly to eating her out after that, and Rey was left gripping his hair and staring out the windows of the cockpit as her hips pumped and tears trailed down her cheeks. She couldn’t seem to stop crying, but it wasn’t a bad thing. It was a dam breaking, and the flood held pain and joy all at once.

Ben would love her when she was old and wrinkled. She hadn’t even realized that was a concern until he’d reassured her so bluntly: You could be ninety years old and I would still want to kiss your
“I’ll want you forever,” she promised him as he slid his tongue inside her. “Even when you’re ninety. Especially when you’re ninety.”

She felt his smile against her sensitive pussy lips. “Can you imagine?” he asked. “We’re going to be the filthiest, most aggressive old people the galaxy has ever known.”

And oh, oh, oh—strange as it was, those words brought her as close to orgasm as his clever mouth. She’d never had the luxury of imagining herself as an old person. Jakku consumed people and spat them out long before they got gray hairs, and members of the Resistance didn’t exactly have a long life expectancy. Now, though…

She could grow old with Ben.

Right then, Ben sucked her clit in the exact right way, and she burst into a million pieces. She gasped and clawed at his scalp, her hips jerking with the force of her release. “I love you,” she moaned.

“I’m yours,” Ben vowed against her cunt as he licked her through the spasms. “I’ll love you forever.”

Chapter End Notes

I had a house guest this weekend, but I’m finally free to write again! Thanks for reading, and if you’ve been liking the story, I’d love it if you left some comments. Reading them makes me very happy. ♥
Chapter 65

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ahch-To was just as dreary as Ben remembered. They’d been on the planet for nearly a week, and it had yet to stop raining. Even the porgs seemed distressed—they huddled in sodden clumps outside the Millennium Falcon, staring at Ben as if he had personally betrayed them.

“I’m not letting you onboard the Falcon,” he informed one of them as it hopped optimistically towards him. “I saw what happened to Chewie.” The blasted things were cute, but he had no desire to be stalked by porgs for the rest of his days.

He was soaked through from a morning of meditating with Rey, although his waterproof parka had helped somewhat. For whatever reason, Rey insisted on being outside while meditating, and while Ben would have preferred staying warm and dry, he had to admit that it was easier to connect with the energy of the universe while sitting on a rock overlooking the ocean. Unfortunately, meditating in the rain had the side effect of plastering his hair to his skull, making his ears stand out even more than normal. When he’d grumbled about it, Rey had just giggled at his vanity and kissed them, and Ben would endure any amount of mortification for that.

He retrieved a ration pack and a thermos of hot tea from the Falcon, then made his way back up to the promontory where Rey still sat. Her face was serene, and he watched her for a few minutes, admiring the sparkle of raindrops in her eyelashes. He had no idea how she managed to look so elegant while he resembled a drowned womp rat, but the sheen of moisture on her skin gave her an ethereal air.

Rey’s eyes fluttered open. “Oh, tea. Thank you.”

He handed her the thermos and rations, then sat next to her on the rock. “You were wasted on a desert planet. You look beautiful like this, like you’re coated in diamonds.”

She smiled at him, and his heart thumped a happy beat at the sight. Every day, her smiles grew brighter. “I think you’re biased, Ben Solo.”

“Nonsense.” He sniffed pretentiously, hoping to provoke a laugh from her. “I’m a connoisseur of the arts. My taste is highly refined.”

“I’m soaking wet.”

“Just how I like you.”

Rey guffawed, and Ben smirked in victory. “Pervert,” she accused, beaming at him over the rim of the thermos.

They ate and drank together, and Ben felt content despite the sodden state of his hair. The rain smelled fresh and alive, and the green of the island seemed especially vivid in contrast with the slate-gray sky. A year ago, he never would have imagined feeling so happy about such a simple scene. Of course, a year ago, he never would have imagined feeling happy at all.

“You changed my life, Rey,” he said, feeling a surge of emotion. He was lost to her, pathetically infatuated and desperately devoted. She made him feel both strong and weak, like he could take on armies but would gladly fall to his knees in surrender if she asked him to.
She leaned her head on his shoulder. “Are you feeling sentimental, sweetheart?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said, concealing a smile even as his heart thumped at being called _sweetheart_. “I’m a very intimidating and dangerous man.”

She nuzzled her cheek against him. “Maybe on the outside. On the inside, you’re soft as a kitten.”

He hid a grin in her hair. What an absurd statement: Kylo Ren, former galactic dictator, soft as a kitten. The rest of the galaxy wouldn’t find him anywhere near so sweet, but Rey was the one person who got to see every part of him, both good and bad.

The day rolled onward in a gentle cycle of meditation and conversation. Ben sat with Rey in the rain long past the point when he was freezing. She’d tolerated his meditation for weeks, after all, and even if it hadn’t been rainy then, he’d still been a moody bastard.

Rey, in contrast, was mostly pensive during her dark moments. Over the last week, she’d had a few outbursts of aggression, but overall, her angst was directed inward. It wasn’t necessarily better than Ben’s explosive mix of grief and rage, even if it was more subtle. Ben felt how precarious the balance between light and dark was in her mind and heart, and it required constant vigilance on his part to make sure he was providing the right sort of support at the right time.

Every night, Rey relived her torture during nightmares, and every night. Ben witnessed her suffering before trying to change the dreams to ease her pain. Seeing her tortured made him want to destroy things, but he restrained his own worst impulses for her sake. She had enough to worry about without him adding to her burdens.

Day by day, though, she’d been feeling better. He sensed it across the bond and saw it in her increasingly frequent smiles. The residual trauma of the torture would linger for a long time, but Rey was as resilient as the desert flowers she’d tended back on Jakku. His beautiful girl never stopped fighting.

That night, Ben held her close in their bed on the Millennium Falcon, her back to his chest and their legs intertwined. She was quiet, and he knew it was because there was something on her mind. He waited, knowing she would share her thoughts when she was ready.

“I’ve been thinking,” she said at last.

He nosed through her loose hair, grateful as ever for the chance to express even the simplest of intimacies. “About what?”

“About the people I killed.” Her body tensed at the words.

Ben stroked a soothing hand down her side. They hadn’t talked about this yet; the torture Rey had suffered had been top of both of their minds. It was bound to come out eventually, though. “Tell me.”

She sighed and turned her face into the pillow. Her next words were muffled. “I killed people during the war. Lots of people. And I guess—I never thought about it that much. It felt bad, but it also felt necessary. But the more time goes by, the more I realize that those stormtroopers might have been just like Finn. I might have killed dozens of people who would have happily left the First Order.”

“Yes,” he said, because there was no arguing with facts. “But you didn’t have time to ask all of them how they felt about the First Order. It was war. If you hadn’t killed them, they would have killed you.”
She shook her head, her cheek rasping against the pillow. “But… how did I even get to that point? How did I go from being alone on Jakku to killing on behalf of the Resistance?”

It wasn’t a question Ben could answer, so he stayed silent, waiting for her to continue.

“What happened on Myrtah,” she said at last, “was just an extension of everything I’d already been doing. I killed hundreds of people in that theater, Ben. I was happy to do it.” Her voice was thick with self-revulsion. “What does that say about me?”

He squeezed her more tightly, wishing he could bear this burden of doubt for her. His crimes were of a magnitude far beyond hers, and while he’d asked himself the same questions, there were no easy answers. “You fought for the Resistance because you believed in the cause. Even on Myrtah, that was part of it. The torture might have caused you to lash out, but you wouldn’t have killed just anyone. You only targeted members of the First Order.”

“Do we know that, though? Are we sure there were no diplomats or staff members left in the theater?” She exhaled gustily. “And even the First Order officers—they had families, too. Not all of them were monsters like Hux.”

Ben was quiet for a moment, because she was right. She was always right, and it shamed him that he’d rarely questioned who might have been waiting at home for all the anonymous people he’d killed. “They weren’t all like Hux,” he agreed. “But you saved countless more lives by killing them, Rey. You brought about the end of the First Order.”

She turned over, wrapping an arm around him while she pressed her face against his chest. Ben held her close, wanting to give her anything she needed. “That wasn’t why I did it.” Rey’s lips brushed his skin. “I did it because I was angry and wanted revenge. I did it for me, not for the Resistance or the galaxy or anything else.”

“But if the outcome is good… isn’t that still worth it?”

She sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

Ben had never been overly concerned about the means he employed to achieve the outcomes he wanted. As Kylo Ren, he’d been a despicable despot, but although he was a far better man as Ben Solo, he would never be as ethical as Rey. He’d blasted his way out of the First Order without caring who he killed, and he’d only given the stormtroopers a chance to escape because he’d thought it was something Rey would have wanted. He gladly would have murdered Hux slowly and painfully had Rey’s sanity not hung in the balance, and in her position, he wouldn’t have lost any sleep about killing the First Order officers on Myrtah.

Rey was different, though. She was fundamentally good. “The fact that you’re even asking these questions says a lot about your character,” Ben told her. “It would be easier to just say that everything is justified in war.”

“That’s the thing, though.” She nuzzled against his chest, seeming to take comfort from the gentle contact. “I don’t know if anything the Resistance did is justified. I don’t know if I was justified. Just because the First Order did worse things… does that excuse me from blame when I killed hundreds of people? I don’t think it does.”

“Maybe not. I couldn’t say.” Ben had been formed for war; he wasn’t used to this sort of questioning. It made him uneasy, if he was being honest. He’d killed more people than he could count, and Rey’s conscience was a reminder of exactly how much of his humanity Ben had rejected. Even now, he couldn’t view the world with Rey’s level of compassion.
“You can’t change what happened,” Ben said, focusing on hard facts. “You tore down that ceiling and killed hundreds of people, and as a result, the First Order is in ruins. But whatever the galactic implications, no matter if ultimately the outcome is good, I think the most important thing is how you feel about it. How you learn to live with what you’ve done.”

Rey’s sigh puffed against Ben’s neck. She clutched him closer, her fingers winding into his hair. “I don’t feel good about it,” she admitted.

“And that’s fine. Better than fine, probably.” He kissed the top of her head. “This is going to sound strange, but Luke told me something that resonated with me.”

She drew back, wrinkling her nose at him. “Luke did?”

“As a Force ghost,” he clarified. “When he wasn’t chastising us for all the sex.”

Rey’s lips quirked, and then she buried her head in his chest again. “What did he say?”

“He said if I was conflicted, I was living a well-examined life.” Ben blinked rapidly, remembering the profound feeling of absolution that had settled over him at those words. It had been perhaps the kindest thing Luke had ever said to him. “We’ll never be perfect, Rey. At least if we’re conflicted, we’ll know we’re actually thinking about what we’re doing.”

She hummed a little. “I like that. Being conflicted sounds right for gray Force users.”

“Exactly.” Put like that, the philosophy fit neatly into the existing tapestry of their lives. “We’re already balancing light and dark and thinking more about the Force than probably most of the Jedi ever did. We’re doing hard work to be the best people we can be.”

She sighed again, but this time it sounded like a release of tension, rather than an expression of melancholy. “I still feel bad about killing those people.”

“You probably always will. Maybe that’s the point. It’s certainly not something a darksider would feel.”

They fell into silence after that, each of them lost in their own thoughts. Ben didn’t dip into Rey’s mind, instead letting her process their conversation in relative privacy. He was doing his own thinking, holding his life up against Rey’s example and wondering if he could ever become not just a better man, but a truly good man.

It was a question with no immediate answer. Ben was inherently flawed in ways Rey wasn’t, and maybe he would never entirely fix those flaws, but he could probably change the behaviors they produced. Maybe he would never have her acute sense of compassion, but he could act like a man who did, and that might be close enough.

Or maybe compassion, like hope, was a muscle that grew stronger the more it was used. Maybe he really could change on a fundamental level, even more than he already had.

For now, there was conflict and hard work, and Ben wasn’t afraid of either. Not anymore. He had an entire lifetime to figure things out and the best partner imaginable to walk at his side through the challenges to come. They would grow, change, and learn together, and Ben honestly couldn’t think of a better way to spend a life.

#

The skies over Ahch-To finally cleared, and as Rey watched the buttery light of dawn spill over the
island, she felt like it was a metaphor for her own mind. Days of meditation and deep conversation with Ben had blown the black clouds of torture and terror away, and she was finally coming out the other side of the storm feeling like herself again. The dark no longer muttered threats and insecurities, and although she still felt guilty about what had happened on Myrtah, she was mostly at peace with who she was and what she’d done. She couldn’t change the past, but she could work to make a better future.

Ben was still asleep on the Falcon, since she’d worn him out with carnal demands at an extremely early hour of the morning. Rey should have been exhausted, too, but instead she felt invigorated and alive. She’d never spent so much time being still and focusing on her own well-being. She didn’t have to worry about how she would feed herself or what was happening to her friends elsewhere in the galaxy. The war was over, and Rey had nowhere she needed to be.

She had plenty of places she wanted to be, though.

Footsteps sounded on the stone steps behind her, and Rey smiled. It was a beautiful morning, and the only thing that could make it better was swiftly approaching.

Ben sat next to her on the meditation rock. “It finally stopped raining.”

She turned her head, studying his bold profile. A soft smile played on his lips as the wind ruffled his dark hair. When she’d first met him, he’d looked ill, his skin deathly pale and his eyes underscored by purple shadows. Now his cheeks held a flush of pink, and the shadows were gone.

He looked good like this. Better than good. He looked perfect.

“Are you ogling me?” he asked, and Rey realized she’d been staring for an exceptionally long time.

She grinned and looked back out over the crashing sea. “Always.”

She leaned her head on his shoulder, and he slipped an arm around her. It was so easy to fall into him, to let him care for her, and Rey marveled anew at how different this was from the way they’d started their relationship. It had begun with anger and want, with reckless impulses and self-destructive tendencies, but over time, the connection between them had mellowed and deepened into something essential as sunlight and constant as the tide.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

She hummed and opened her mind to him, inviting him in. He brushed against her thoughts gently, taking what she offered and no more. She felt his contentment swell at what he found. “You’re happy.”

“Yes.”

He kissed the side of her head. “Good. In that case, I have a question for you.”

She pulled away enough to look at him again, her curiosity roused. “Oh?”

The grin that split his face was beatific. “Would you like to explore the galaxy with me?”

She made a happy squeaking sound and fell on him, knocking him back onto the rock. She climbed on top of him and peppered him with kisses, and his deep chuckle rumbled through her as he kissed her back.

“Absolutely,” Rey said against his mouth. “Take me on an adventure, Ben.”
So close to the end! I considered heading straight into the epilogue at this point, but the smut goblins at The Writing Den requested more saucy scenes, so looks like there's some heat still to come.

Thanks for reading, and please let me know how you feel in the comments. ❤
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Months later, Rey stood at the edge of a gleaming terrace, staring out over a vast lake. Sunlight glittered off the water, nearly blinding her, but she couldn’t stop looking. Verdant hills rose around the deep blue water, and strange birds cawed and dove in the distance.

“It’s beautiful,” she told Ben.

He leaned against the ornate railing beside her, a slash of elegant black against gray stone. A profusion of red flowers tumbled from a vase set atop the railing at his elbow, and dappled shadows moved over his face as a cool breeze rustled the leaves of the tree overhead. He seemed nervous, although she didn’t know why. This was just the latest stop in their whirlwind tour of the galaxy, and while the estate of Varykino in Naboo’s Lake Country was gorgeous, it wasn’t any more or less impressive than the dozens of other places he’d taken her.

Everything he’d shown her was equally amazing. They’d traveled to ice worlds and desert worlds and everything in-between, from the gleaming skyscrapers of Coruscant to the wild tangles of forest on Endor’s moon. He’d taught her galactic history along the way, conveying both the beautiful and the horrific with his customary eloquence. Rey loved listening to him—he made history come alive in a way it never had before, and she couldn’t help but marvel at her own role in a saga that had lasted for generations.

Now they were on the lush planet of Naboo, at a beautiful lakeside villa topped with copper domes, but he’d been surprisingly reticent about the history of the place.

“Do you like it?” she asked, wondering what was causing his strange moodiness. “If you don’t, we can—”

“My grandmother stayed here,” he said unexpectedly.

“Really?” Rey turned to face him, leaning her elbows back on the railing. She knew his grandmother, Padmé Amidala Naberrie, had been Nabooan royalty, but they hadn’t talked very much about that generation, other than when they’d discussed his previous attachment to Darth Vader’s legacy.

Ben nodded, staring down at his entwined fingers. He’d been more fidgety than normal today, too. “The Naberries didn’t come from much, but Padmé was elected queen and then became a senator, and they rose in the world. They owned this place.”

Rey focused all her attention on Ben. He didn’t often talk about the past, except in moments of regret, so if he’d brought her here, it was for a reason. “Have you been here before?”

“When I was very young, but not for a long time. My mother still owns the property. She’s all that’s left of the Naberrie bloodline.”

“Except for you,” Rey pointed out.

Ben made a face. “Except for me. But I never really identified with Padmé. She was the template for my mother, not me.”
Rey had never experienced what it was like to be part of a bloodline. Blood had very little to do with legacy, in her opinion, but Ben’s entire life had been shaped by those familial expectations. “You identified with Anakin, instead.” The man whose volatile emotions and overwhelming power had led him to be tempted by darkness in ways the Jedi had never understood.

“His passion always felt more honest to me,” Ben admitted. “Padmé was a politician, just like Leia, and even though I understand my mother now, I didn’t as a child. That was never going to be my path. But I wasn’t going to be Han, either, relegated to the fringes and resentful of being forced into someone else’s story. I wanted to be my own man, but what I was didn’t fit any of the roles available.”

So he’d fallen into the role that had seemed to fit the best. Rey knew all about wanting to belong, even if she didn’t know what it was like to be part of the nearly mythical Skywalker-Solo-Organa family line. “So why are we here now?” she asked, knowing this conversation was only brushing the surface of whatever Ben was feeling and thinking. “If you didn’t identify with Padmé and never knew her, why are we here at Varykino?”

Ben bit his lip and fidgeted again, shifting from foot to foot while his fingers wound around each other. “I understand Padmé better now,” he said. “She was brilliant and truly wanted to help people—she was a lot like you, in that way. Good and smart and tenacious.”

Rey blushed at the compliment but didn’t say anything, wanting to see where this train of thought led.

“She loved Anakin as much as he loved her,” Ben continued. “It ended terribly, but she loved him. So as for why we’re here...” He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “This is where my grandparents got married.”

“At Varykino?” Rey asked, intrigued by the revelation.

“Right here on this terrace. Threepio was there; he knows. It was a secret marriage.”

“Wow.” Rey looked around again, viewing the terrace and the flowers and the lake with new eyes. “So this must feel like the place you were formed, in a way.”

He made a small huffing noise. “Not really, to be honest. It’s more...” He broke off and paced away, driving his hands through his hair. “Kriff, I don’t know how to say any of this.”

Rey cocked her head, both concerned for his well-being and fascinated by this glimpse into his family history. “Take your time,” she said. “There’s no rush.”

His lips quirked. “Says you.” Before she could ask about that odd statement, he rushed onward. “I didn’t bring you here because it’s some echo of the past. Or, I sort of did, but not for that reason.”

She squinted, unsure why her normally eloquent lover was suddenly nigh-inarticulate.

“I told you we should let the past die.” Ben advanced on her, stopping an arm’s length away. His dark eyes were wide and earnest, and she thought he might be trembling a little. “That we should kill it, if we had to. But the truth is, we can’t get rid of the past. It doesn’t just vanish because we want it to. The whole time I was with the First Order, I was looking back, instead of forward. I was thinking about everything I came from, rather than what I could be in the future.”

It was a profound sentiment, but Rey still didn’t understand why he’d brought her to Varykino or why he was unburdening himself now—not that she minded, of course. “So why did you want me to see the place your grandparents got married?”
He sucked in a deep breath, and Rey barely had time to worry that he looked about to faint before he sank to his knees on the terrace.

“Are you all right?” she asked, crouching beside him and placing her hand on his back. Kriff, he really was shaking.

He laughed a little, and his cheeks flushed. “Rey, please stand up. Please. I’m fine.”

She didn’t understand why he was behaving so oddly, but she acceded to his wishes, slowly returning to a standing position. If he was feeling faint, she wanted to take care of him...

“I love you,” he said bluntly. “I love you more than I think Anakin ever loved Padmé—not that that matters, because it’s our love story, not theirs—but I love you enough to want to live with you forever. I love you enough to spend my entire life trying to be a good man for you. I love you so much that even though I could raze galaxies in your name, I’m not going to, because that’s not what you would ever want.”

She blinked, taken aback by the abrupt flood of sentiment. “I love you, too, Ben. And I’m happy you’re not razing galaxies—”

He raised a hand, cutting her off. Maker, he was red now, his forehead dotted with sweat. “Just... Rey, you’re the best person in the universe. The best person I’ve ever known. The only person I could ever love. The person I want to grow old with.”

Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes, but she blinked them away, wanting to see his face throughout the entirety of this speech, even though she didn’t understand where it was leading.

Ben clasped her hands in his and looked up at her earnestly. “We can’t kill the past, but we can improve on it. We can make a fresh start. So here I am, on my knees in the place where my grandfather fucked everything up, because I want to do everything better with you. You’re the brightest star in my sky, the love of my life, the other half of my soul. You’re so intelligent and beautiful and courageous, and fuck, it’s hard to believe you’re real sometimes. I want to worship you for the rest of my days, to wake up with you and fall asleep with you and spend every hour in-between showing you exactly how precious and important you are.” He swallowed hard as tears started trailing down his cheeks. “Rey, will you marry me?”

Rey gasped, absolutely stunned. Marriage hadn’t been popular on Jakku or in the Resistance, and it wasn’t a universal concept across the galaxy. She’d never given much thought to it, and when she had, she’d never imagined it might happen to her.

Her entire body heated, and she felt as luminous as a shooting star. She sank to her knees in front of Ben, wrapped her arms around him, and started bawling. “Of course,” she gasped against his neck as she shuddered in his arms. “Of course I will. I want to be with you forever, no matter what.”

Ben sucked in a relieved, half-sobbing breath, and then they just held each other and rocked back and forth, lost to the dizzy rush of emotion. His tears soaked into her hair, and hers saturated his neck and shirt, and it was the best moment of Rey’s life.

Marriage wasn’t just wanting to be with someone. It meant permanently belonging. Even if it was just a ceremony, it held tremendous weight for the scavenger who had never belonged anywhere in particular but had always yearned to belong to someone.

“I love you,” she whispered against his skin. “I love you so fucking much, Ben.”

“I love you, too.” Then his mouth was on hers, his lips salty with the taste of their combined tears.
Rey opened for him eagerly, wanting nothing in the world so much as him. He was her sun, her galaxy, her magnetic north. He was every impossible dream she’d never imagined might become reality.

He was her first and only home.

Chapter End Notes

A short chapter, but hopefully an enjoyable one. ❤ Let me know what you think!
They decided to get married on Takodana. No one else quite understood why, but Ben and Rey were adamant. It was a beautiful location, but more importantly, it was where they’d first met.

“ Didn’t you abduct her there?” Poe asked skeptically when Ben invited him to the wedding.

“Would we be together now if I hadn’t?” Ben shot back. There was no longer any reason for the Resistance to remain in hiding, but it was still strange to meet Poe for coffee in broad daylight like the two of them were normal people, rather than sworn enemies, reluctant allies, or wanted criminals.

Poe inclined his head, pressing his lips together in a way that reluctantly acknowledged a reasonable argument. “You have to admit it’s a little disturbing.”

“Hey,” Ben said. “You’re dating two people at once. I don’t think you get to cast judgment.”

Poe grinned. “And someday soon, I’m going to marry two people at once.”

Ben perked up, intrigued by the idea. “When? Is that even allowed?”

“Depends on the world.” Poe shrugged. “And even if we can’t make it official, I want a ceremony, anyway. I want to be with the two of them forever. I’m going to ask them soon.”

Being friends with Poe was a bizarre development, but over the past few months, Ben had realized that his connection with the pilot was important in a way that had nothing to do with Rey or his mother. He’d never really had friends before, so Ben was still getting used to the honesty and camaraderie that Poe offered. Rose and Finn were also his friends, but admittedly, Ben felt a kinship with the pilot that went beyond that. The two of them were similar in many ways, and their former rivalry had turned into an easy—if occasionally competitive—friendship.

“Do you think they’ll say yes?” Ben asked.

Poe leaned back in his chair and winked like the cocky ass he was, but Ben knew him well enough by now to sense the nerves he was hiding. “Why wouldn’t they? I’m a catch.”

Ben snorted. “Good luck, then. May they be as forgiving of you as Rey was of me.”

Poe leaned in, looking curious. “So the whole Kylo Ren thing—she just... got over it? Simple as that?”

Ben smiled, although the feeling flooding his chest was achingly bittersweet. “It certainly wasn’t simple. But she knows who I am now, and that’s the important part.”

The ceremony was held in a forest clearing that might or might not have been where Ben had abducted Rey—both of them had been too distracted at the time to note the particulars. Late afternoon sunlight speared through the canopy, and the air was heavy and warm, spiced with the rich scents of greenery and dark earth.

The guest list was small: just Leia, their closest friends from the Resistance, and some tiny, wizened
being with enormous goggles who weirdly greeted Ben by saying, “You came back.” He didn’t have time to get properly offended by her presumptuousness before she launched into a vague speech about belonging. Ben still didn’t understand why Maz had been included on the guest list, but Rey had insisted that the creature had given her excellent advice once, so he left it alone.

With greetings taken care of and the guests seated in rows of wooden chairs, Ben was left standing alone, fidgeting under the weight of their stares. He didn’t like being on display for even this small crowd, and he would have been more than content to skip the ceremony altogether, but he wanted Rey to feel seen and appreciated. His scavenger deserved to feel like royalty.

Sweat beaded on his brow, and he tugged at the cuffs of his formal black tunic. His mother had insisted on helping him with the styling, and although she’d bemoaned his abiding love for black, she had managed to make this outfit look sophisticated. His tunic was patterned with black velvet vines, and his cuffs were held together with pristine silver cufflinks designed to look like dice. “It’s so Han can be part of this,” Leia had said when she’d given them to Ben a few days ago, and he had promptly broken down in tears.

Now, while he waited for Rey’s arrival, Ben contemplated the strange way this moment echoed the past. He had once played the villain in this forest, hunting down the scavenger girl who held the information he needed. Now, he waited for her to find him, and this time, they were pledging themselves to each other.

A bluish glow at the edge of the clearing drew his attention, and Ben bit his lip, torn between happiness and grief. The Force ghost of Luke Skywalker stood beneath the trees, out of view of the rows of seated guests—although Leia must have sensed him, because she looked over her shoulder and smiled. He raised one hand in greeting, and Ben nodded back, acknowledging his former mentor’s presence. He hadn’t been sure if Luke could—or would—attend, but now that he was here, Ben was grateful.

Luke had witnessed the most pivotal moments in Ben’s life, from his turn to the dark to his return to the light. He’d even seen the blossoming of Ben’s relationship with Rey, because if Ben had to define the moment when their story had become a love story, it had been when they’d touched hands across the universe.

Ben had wondered if any other Force ghosts might appear, but when Luke remained alone, Ben felt relieved. He knew there was a possibility he’d meet Anakin Skywalker at some point, a prospect he had extremely mixed feelings about, but now wasn’t the right time. This wedding was about Ben and Rey and their shared future, not about Ben’s place in the Skywalker legacy.

And Rey…

A glint of white shone between the trees, and Ben’s eyes were drawn to her the way the tides followed the moon. She was irresistible.

And so fucking gorgeous.

He gaped as Rey entered the clearing. She was smiling shyly, her cheeks burning red from the attention, and he’d never seen a more beautiful sight. Her high-necked white gown shimmered in the sunlight, the diaphanous fabric swirling around her ankles as she picked her way over the mossy ground. Her arms were bare, revealing the faint scars that traced her tanned skin—one from their fight with the Praetorians, several from Hux—and Ben was proud of her for displaying her resilience so openly.

As she drew closer, Ben realized the gown was slit high on the left side. Flashes of muscled thigh
showed with every step, and it was nearly enough to send Ben into cardiac arrest. Kriff, how was she so beautiful? Was she trying to kill him? It would be appropriate, he supposed, since this Takodanan forest was where he’d first threatened and then abducted her. Now, though, he was utterly at her mercy. Her beauty and strength held him hostage.

The assembled guests were standing now, but Ben couldn’t spare a second to see if they looked as awestruck as he felt. The gravity well of her presence was too deep for him to escape.

After what felt like an eternity, she stopped before him, smiling big enough to dimple her cheeks. “Hello,” she said.

Ben grabbed her and kissed her soundly. He was vaguely aware of hooting, hollering, and a few protests as he bent her backwards—”Not yet, buddy!” was Poe’s contribution—but he didn’t care. Rey existed, therefore Ben’s mouth had to be on her.

When he broke away, they were both panting. Rey’s eyes were luminous, the same dappled brown-gold-green as the forest around them, and the brightness of her grin rivaled the sun. Her hair was up in a simple bun, and, as per usual, she hadn’t worn cosmetics. Ben was grateful he got to see her bare face. They were emotionally naked before each other right now, and if they hadn’t had guests, Ben probably would have tried to convince her to be physically naked, too. They might as well have been the first woman and the first man, facing a galaxy full of possibility.

The vows were simple, a mix of Alderaanian marriage rites, Jedi philosophy, and personal sentiment. Neither had wanted to make the ceremony too elaborate or long, since no words could adequately express the depth of their bond—not to mention that every extra word lengthened the time before they became husband and wife. Besides, once the formal vows had been spoken, they spoke different vows across the bond:

*I want to love you and protect you and fight for you as insanely as possible.*

*You're mine forever, mine to protect and fight and fuck and worship.*

Ben slid a ring onto her finger—a simple twist of black and silver metal—and she followed suit, gifting him with a matching one. They’d chosen the rings together, wanting something practical that reflected their intertwined souls and the complicated balance they’d found in the Force. When the metal settled at the base of Ben’s ring finger, it felt unbelievably right. He had always been destined to bear her claim.

They grinned at each other, lost and tumbling in giddy, desperate love. They couldn’t stop staring, even after Poe shouted “Okay, now is the appropriate time to kiss!” This moment was perfect, pure potential—the held breath just before the exhale, the weightless pause before the fall. They were preserved in amber, just the two of them, caught forever in the space between wanting and belonging.

And then Ben leaned forward, and Rey leaned, too, and their mouths met, and it was suddenly the after. Their friends and family cheered, and the entire forest seemed to riot with life and light, although Ben and Rey had no attention for anything but each other. Lips meeting lips, bodies pressed together, minds locked tight. This perfect kiss simultaneously symbol, indulgence, and vow.

*I belong to you.*

#

Ben wanted to spirit Rey away immediately after the ceremony so he could make passionate love to
her, but for some deluded reason he’d agreed to hold a reception. His mother had seemed keen on the idea, and Rey always loved food, so it had seemed logical at the time. Now, though, he was kicking himself for the choice.

Maz Kanata had offered to host the reception. As they approached an enormous castle that looked decidedly the worse for wear, Ben eyed the fire-blackened edifice with guilt—he recognized it now as the structure the First Order had left in ruins the day he’d first met Rey. Renovation work was clearly ongoing, since scaffolding had been erected all around the castle.

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly as Maz ushered them inside.

“The old passes away in favor of new beginnings,” the tiny woman said, reaching up to pat his shoulder. “And your father did a fair amount of property damage in his time. It’s a Solo family tradition.”

Maz had known his father. Ben’s heart clenched at the revelation, and he nodded, unable to form words. Later, when he had time, he would return to Takodana to ask her about Han Solo.

The reception was held in a large, candlelit dining hall. Gaudy scarves hung from ropes that criss-crossed the ceiling, and the tables were decorated with clumps of greenery and ancient-looking pottery and artifacts. Ben and Rey were given their own small table, while the other guests seated themselves at a long table parallel to it. Both tables looked about to collapse from the weight of food heaped on them.

Ben marveled at the odd assortment of friends and family that had somehow found room for him in their hearts (or circuitry): Leia, Chewie, Poe, Finn, Rose, Paul, C-3PO, R2-D2, BB-8… and wait, was that a porg nesting in the centerpiece? It was a small group, but their affection was more than Ben had ever expected. More than he deserved.

Rey squeezed his hand. “You do deserve it, Ben,” she said, looking up at him with a tenderness that took his breath away. “You deserve their love—and mine.”

He kissed her, pulling away with a grin when her stomach grumbled. “Let’s eat.”

Ben ate slowly and sparingly, appreciating the delicate flavors of the green salad and the spicy meat of whatever local avian had been sacrificed for their meal. Rey, though, inhaled the food with her customary enthusiasm. Ben winced as sauce went flying, then proceeded to drape as many napkins as he could over her beautiful white dress. She grinned up at him through a mouthful of food, and her table manners were appalling, really, but he was so far gone for her that he found it adorable.

“I’ve never seen you in a dress,” he commented when she finally leaned back in her chair with a contented sigh.

“That’s because I’ve never worn one.” She removed the napkins, piling them next to her plate, then smoothed her hands over the shimmering fabric. “It’s pretty, I suppose, but it isn’t very practical. I had to ask the seamstress to add the thigh slit in case I had to fight.”

Ben’s eyebrows shot up. “You thought you might have to fight at your own wedding?”

She smirked at him. “When you’re involved, there’s always the potential for violence.”

He flicked her nose. “Brat.”

“Really, though,” she said, leaning in closer as she teased him. “What if you’d challenged me to a lightsaber duel at the altar? I couldn’t let you win just because of my poor choice of attire.”
He gaped at her. “Are you—do you really have your lightsaber right now?” He ran his eyes over her silhouette, wondering where she could possibly be hiding it. The bodice clung to the swells of her breasts, and surely he would have noticed a bulge if she’d strapped a weapon to her thigh...

She laughed, bright and exuberant, the sound drawing affectionate smiles from the guests seated at the adjacent table. Ben grinned at her, too, utterly besotted. “No, you ridiculous man,” she said. “I’m not hiding a lightsaber under my skirts.”

The mention of her skirts had Ben’s eyes drifting down to her lap and the golden gleam of her thigh where the fabric split just below her hip. His cock twitched with interest, and a reckless, delicious idea came to him.

The tablecloth hid their lower halves from their guests, which meant no one noticed when he settled his hand on Rey’s thigh. She twitched, then relaxed and smiled at him, clearly assuming he was just being affectionate. He waited until she took a sip of sparkling wine before sliding his fingers under the fabric, curving them down towards her inner thigh.

Rey coughed, spewing wine over the table, and Ben bit the inside of his cheek to stop from grinning.

“You’re all right, Rey?” Rose asked, looking over at them with concern.

“Yes,” Rey gasped, her cheeks flushing red. “It just went down the wrong pipe.” She turned wide eyes on Ben and lowered her voice to a fierce whisper. “What are you doing?”

“Demonstrating how dresses can be practical,” he said innocently. “You’re right, the thigh slit was an excellent addition.” He squeezed her inner thigh, then slid his hand up a few centimeters, until he could feel the heat radiating from her pussy.

*Our guests are* right there, *Ben,* Rey said telepathically, even as her thighs widened a little. And it was true—even though the tablecloth shielded their actions, less than two meters separated them from their guests.

*Then you’ll have to stay quiet, won’t you?* Ben brushed against her with his knuckles, then swore under his breath. *You aren’t wearing underwear?*

Now it was Rey’s turn to look smug. *It ruined the line of the dress. Besides, this way whenever you remember our wedding, you can think about how I stood in front of everyone and pledged myself to you with my pussy bare and waiting for you.*

Oh, the little tease. His cock was unbearably hard, and he shifted in his seat, trying to make room for it in his trousers. He rubbed her again, reveling in the brush of her intimate hair against his knuckles. He used the back of his middle finger to part her pussy lips, biting back a groan when it met slick skin. *You’re wet, sweetheart.*

*I have been since I saw you in the forest.*

*Fuuuuuuuck.* Ben made a choked sound and reached for his wine with his free left hand. He took a healthy swallow, hoping his face wasn’t turning as red as he thought it might be. *I’m never going to be able to forget that fact.*

She grinned, spreading her legs even further. *Why would you want to?*

*Fair point.* He rotated his wrist until he could curve his fingers over her hot pussy. *Naughty scavenger,* he said as he stroked her soaked folds. *Your dress barely covered this lush paradise. I could have slipped my hand under the fabric and been knuckle-deep in you within a second. A fresh*
rush of moisture coated his fingers as Rey reacted to the filthy words, and Ben grinned as he rubbed a slow circle over her clitoris. *Would you have liked that? Having me finger fuck you in front of everyone?*

Rey moaned, and Ben coughed to cover the noise. *Quiet,* he admonished her. *You don’t want them to find out, do you?* He rubbed her clit harder, until she was shivering, then dipped two fingers to her entrance and slid them inside.

She jerked, her hands gripping the edge of the table as she panted softly. *Kriff, Ben…* Her soft inner walls fluttered around his fingers.

Ben stroked her slowly, wanting to draw this out. The illicit thrill of what they were doing had him nearly as wound up as she was. His beautiful bride was drenched for him, and he was fingering her right in front of all their friends. He was going to make her come for him in her wedding dress in public.

He couldn’t get his fingers as deep as normal from this angle, but Rey didn’t seem to mind. She worked her hips against him, rocking in time with his slow thrusts. Ben sipped his wine with his free hand, attempting to look casual even though his skin was hot and his cock was about to bludgeon its way out of his trousers.

*Touch your clit,* he ordered Rey across the bond. He couldn’t do both from this angle—at least, not competently—and he wanted her to orgasm.

Rey shuddered and hiked her dress up until she could join his efforts. She glided two fingers over her clitoris, rubbing in firm little circles that had Ben sweating. *Fuck,* she was perfect. A compact package of beauty and will and ferocity who took his commands so sweetly in some moments and fought him with exquisite passion in others. He wanted to worship at her feet.

He briefly contemplated it—dropping a fork so he could go to his knees under the table and lick her cunt—but the chime of cutlery striking a glass made him pause.

“A toast,” Poe Dameron announced, standing from his spot at the table, and Ben was going to murder that pilot, he really fucking was. “To Ben and Rey Solo, who seized love from war.”

Rey shuddered beside him, and Ben could tell from her mental signature that it wasn’t just his fingers that had caused the reaction. Awe swept over her, bleeding over into him on rays of sunlight. *Rey Solo,* she thought. *I have a last name.*

And kriff, he wanted to weep for the deprivation she’d endured, either that or pound his chest in triumph that this, too, was something he could give her. His heart, his soul, his body—she already had those. But his name, the name that had been anathema to him for so long, was rendered suddenly beautiful by her need for it.

“You do,” he whispered, pausing in his attentions to her pussy long enough to press his forehead against hers. *Rey Solo. Everything I have, everything I am, is yours.*

She made a little sobbing sound, and when Ben drew away, her eyes were flooded with tears. “Thank you,” she said, pressing her mouth to his. “Thank you for giving me a family.”

He would give her anything, but the choice of words made a new possibility bloom in his heart. A family…

He could give her children, if she wanted them.
Ben Solo had never imagined having children. But with her, with Rey, it suddenly seemed not just natural, but right. Destined.

“Look at those two lovebirds,” Poe said, raising his glass even higher. When Ben chanced a look at him, he saw a suspicious smirk on Poe’s face. “They’re madly in love, and it’s obvious to anyone with eyes.”

Was Ben imagining the emphasis Poe placed on the word ‘obvious’?

“I was… reluctant to accept Ben at first,” Poe said, and Ben snorted at the understatement. “I couldn’t look past my own anger. But once I did, once I truly got to know him, I realized that he’s a good man. Not a perfect man, but a good one, the kind who works every day to shape himself into a better person.”

Now Ben’s eyes were blurring, and fuck, he absolutely refused to cry at the fucking pilot’s speech while he still had two fingers buried in Rey’s pussy. Focusing on that, rather than the sentimental nonsense Poe was spouting, he resumed the slow pump of his hand. Rey sighed breathily and began rubbing her clit again, and holy shit, this was even hotter now that everyone was splitting their attention between them and Poe.

“And Rey,” Poe said, “you’re one of the bravest, kindest, most interesting people I know, and I’m so glad you’re happy. You’ve given so much of yourself to the Resistance; you deserve to take something for yourself now. Not to put too fine a point on it, but there literally isn’t another person in the universe capable of doing what you’ve done.” A few chuckles met the words, and Ben focused on Rey’s pussy and the taste of red wine, not wanting to acknowledge the complicated brew of emotions this speech was provoking. “You had compassion for a man everyone else was afraid of. You looked at him, really looked, and then you took a chance on him. And you were right.”

Fuck, how was it possible to feel aroused and regretful and grateful and blissful all at once? Ben couldn’t separate the threads of what he was feeling, so he devoted his attention to fingering Rey, who had been the one constant through everything. His heart and mind were a mess, but he felt so lucky to be with her—so blessed, even, if Ben believed in any sort of divine benevolence, which he almost could when faced with the miracle of her—that any other concerns faded away.

She shifted against his fingers, her blush deepening. Maybe their guests would think it was from emotion.

Poe sat down, and there was a brief pause while their guests argued over who was giving a toast next, so Ben used the moment to send a hasty order over the bond. Make yourself come. The last thing he wanted was to keep Rey in sexual agony while every person at the table spoke some ridiculously emotional drivel that made either Ben or Rey cry. He worked his fingers into her, deep and firm, and grinned at her as she rubbed her clit with frantic intensity.

Good girl, he told her telepathically. She met his eyes, her own wide and dazed. Now be quiet when you come.

Rey bit her lip, and then she was trembling as her pussy fluttered around his fingers. She gasped, her hips jerking a few times, and Ben covered her mouth with his as she rode out the orgasm. Hopefully the passionate kiss would cover up what was actually happening, but Ben needed the taste of her on his lips and tongue, too.

He pulled back at last, grinning at her like an absolute fool. He was still hard as stone in his trousers, and someone had launched into a speech he wasn’t paying attention to, but he couldn’t care about anything but the goddess in front of him, with her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. Without
breaking eye contact, he lifted his hand from her lap and sucked both fingers, enjoying the tart taste of her. Not the most subtle move, but when she made that breathless little moan in response, he couldn’t regret it.

He turned his attention back to their guests, ignoring Poe Dameron’s incredibly arched eyebrows—the man’s face screamed ‘seriously?’—as he focused on the kind things Rose was saying about Rey. He couldn’t stop smiling, and kriff, when had that ever been true of Ben Solo?

He’d never imagined being this happy. Never. It was like discovering an extra arm or something—the realization that he could feel this much bliss and not break apart. That he might have earned this bliss.

*How long will this reception last?* Rey asked in his head.

His cheeks hurt with how wide he was grinning. *Until they’ve all given speeches, I imagine.*

She huffed. *That’s too long. Can I touch you?*

He wrapped his arm around her and kissed her forehead. *Patience, sweetheart. We have our whole wedding night before us.*

Ben settled back in his chair, his heart singing as he held the love of his life against his side and listened to their friends—their real, actual friends—tell them how much they cared about them and how bright the future would be.

This was far better than ruling a galaxy.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay with this one! I started a new job, so things have been hectic.

You'll note the chapter count went up—that's because I initially intended the wedding night to be part of this chapter, but then Ben got handsy at the reception and¯_(ツ)_/¯. That means the next chapter will be entirely smut! And then there will be an epilogue to wrap up the story. (And omg this means it's going to be 69 chapters yessssss)

Thank you so much for reading. Please let me know what you think in the comments!
Chapter 68

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It killed Ben to wait even longer before Rey was in his arms, but he hadn’t wanted their wedding night to be on the Falcon. Not that there was anything wrong with making love to her in their home—because that was what the ship had become—but he wanted this to be a fresh start. He wanted to take her somewhere beautiful, somewhere worthy of her presence, and then spend hours, days, weeks demonstrating his devotion to her.

Takodana was a lively planet, popular with smugglers and travelers due to its nearness to the trade routes between the Inner and Outer Rim, but it held a few secrets. One of them was this hidden chateau in a mountainous region in the far north. It was surrounded by an alpine forest, and even though it was summer, drifts of snow remained at the higher elevations.

Normally the hotel hosted several well-to-do travelers at a time, but Ben had spent an astronomical amount of money to purchase the entire building for a week. The staff had cleared out after leaving enough provisions to keep Ben and Rey well-fed should they choose to remain in bed for the duration of their stay—which seemed likely.

As they hiked up the slope from the hangar where they’d left the Falcon, Rey gasped at the delicate stone towers that rose out of the forest ahead of them. The sky had turned a deep blue-black, but the stars were bright, and warm light shone from the chateau’s windows. “It’s gorgeous.”

Ben grinned. “Just wait.”

He’d wrapped her in a blanket, since the air was chilly at this latitude even during summer, but they wouldn’t have to worry about the cold for long. They entered the chateau through the ornate front door, and the second it shut behind them, Ben’s patience finally broke. He barely had time to notice the roaring fire in the hearth before he’d scooped Rey up in his arms. She giggled as he practically ran towards the staircase leading to their final destination.

They emerged at the top of one of the towers, in an ornately decorated bedroom that was open to the sky. An invisible climate-control shield where the roof would have been kept the room pleasantly warm, and two of the walls were covered in fragrant climbing roses. Rey gasped in delight, and Ben put her down so she could run gentle fingers over the petals and inhale their sweet scent.

Overhead, the moon shone like a polished coin, and a small fire burned in one corner. The faint illumination gave the room a romantic ambiance. Cool silver and warm gold merged, and as Rey shrugged off the blanket, her dress took on the same ethereal glow.

“This is amazing, Ben,” she said softly, looking around with wonder.

It was, and there would be more marvels to come, but he’d waited long enough to touch her. Ben stepped forward, loving the way her attention instantly snapped back to him. They were like magnets, drawn together on a molecular level. He’d felt her pull long before he’d even known she existed. Every lonely night, every yearning dream, every torturous second of feeling incomplete without understanding why. As a young man, he’d thought it was a grand destiny he craved. Now, though, he wondered if he’d sensed her in the Force all along and known, if not the specifics, the sheer magnitude of what he was missing.
He trailed a fingertip from her cheek to the high collar of her dress, and Rey shivered as goosebumps rose over her exposed skin. “Cold?” Ben asked, his voice deepening with arousal.

“No.” Her eyes were heavy-lidded, dark with desire. “Burning.”

He leaned in, pressing his smile against the delicate shell of her ear. “Not yet, sweetheart. But you will be.”

He pulled the pins out of her bun, and her hair unraveled like a rope over her shoulder. Then he moved behind her and began unfastening the row of pearly buttons that marched along her spine, starting at the nape of her neck. The fabric parted, and he dropped a kiss against the small slice of revealed skin. Every new button undone earned another brush of his lips. By the time he reached her lower back, Rey was panting.

“Do you like this?” he asked, licking a long stripe up her spine. He moved one hand to her front and massaged her breast slowly. He was being soft and gentle—too soft, he knew, but that was part of the game.

She arched her back, shoving her breast into his hands. “More,” she ordered him.

He smiled and nipped at the juncture between her neck and shoulder, then removed his hand from her breast. “Not yet, sweetheart.”

The buttons slid loose, one after another, while Ben painted a trail of kisses down to the base of her spine. Rey had been supporting the fabric in front while he undid the buttons, but when he gave a gentle tug against the dress, she let go, and it slithered down her body to pool on the floor. Moonlight limned her bare shoulders, and Ben desperately needed to see all of her.

He walked around her, dragging his eyes over her naked skin. The flicker of firelight cast intriguing shadows in the dips of curves and muscle, while the moonlight painted her an angel from above. Her eyes were dark, the pupils blown wide from passion, but she stood still for him, letting him circle her like a predator eyeing his prey.

Such a contradiction, his Rey—sin and redemption, power and submission, light and dark. Even though he knew her intimately now, he still felt like an explorer faced with an undiscovered planet. He alone would chart this terrain; he would catalog her every texture and sound, would experience her in every way it was possible for a man to experience a woman. He could dedicate a lifetime to learning her, and even that wouldn’t be enough.

“You’re stunning,” he told her, stepping close enough to run the backs of his fingers down from her throat to her breast. He circled one tightly budded nipple with the pad of his finger, then moved to the other. “We’ve explored the galaxy together, but nothing out there is more beautiful than what’s in this room.”

“Ben.” She sighed his name, and her hand rose to cover his as her eyelids fluttered closed. She flattened his palm against her chest, and he felt the rapid patter of her heartbeat beneath his fingertips. “You’re beautiful, too,” she said, lifting her lashes to gaze up at him earnestly.

He smiled, squeezing her breast affectionately before pulling back to keep teasing her. He trailed his fingers down her taut stomach, stopping just above the patch of hair at her groin. When Rey pushed her hips forward, seeking more of his touch, he dragged his fingers back up to her breasts to pluck at her nipples again.

“You’re going to kill me,” Rey said, reaching for his tunic and unfastening it. He indulged her,
stripping his clothes off until he stood as naked as she. Then he lowered his head to her breast, licking and sucking more forcefully as he trailed a hand up her inner thigh. Again, he stopped just shy of where she wanted him.

“Why are you teasing me?” she whined, bucking her hips. Her fingers laced in his hair, and she tugged hard enough to raise a delicious sting in his scalp.

“Because we have an entire lifetime ahead of us,” he told her. “We’re married now. We can go as slow as we want.”

“That doesn’t mean we have to go slow,” she huffed, but he felt her pleasure at the reminder that they were now bound together permanently in every way.

He slid his fingers up a little more, then swore when he realized she was so wet it was already trailing down her thighs. “You’re drenched, sweetheart.”

One of her hands shot forward, and she grabbed his cock firmly. Ben jerked and cursed again at the sudden pleasure. “And you’re hard,” she said with a devious smile. “So come on, Ben. Give me what I want.”

His erection twitched in her fist, and Ben couldn’t deny her anything when she commanded him so boldly. He straightened and scooped her up, striding to the bed in the center of the room. He tossed Rey onto the crisp white sheets, and she bounced a little, giggling in delight. He followed her down, pinning her with his weight and kissing her soundly. Her laughter was like honey in his mouth.

“Force, you’re perfect,” he said, trailing greedy kisses over her neck. “I’m the luckiest man in the galaxy.”

She wrapped her arms around him and twined her legs with his. He hadn’t settled fully in the cradle between her legs; one of his thighs brushed against her wet curls, and he shifted it against her. She rocked back, smearing her moisture over his skin. “Ben, Ben…” She grabbed his head and forced his mouth back to hers, kissing him ardently.

They’d had sex countless times before, but this time felt different. Ben trembled as he rubbed his thigh against her and traced her contours with his hands. Their kiss was desperate but sweet, clumsier than normal. It was like they were coming together for the first time, but it also felt like the culmination of something. Like he’d known her forever, yet in her arms, he was reduced to a virgin again, frantic and fumbling.

“Do you feel it?” he asked against her mouth, opening his mind as wide as it could go so the feelings would transmit to her. He would be happy to have her live inside his head.

She nodded, sucking his lower lip between her teeth. “Like starting over, but not.” Her own mind blossomed like a flower, inviting him in as if he were a curious bee. He slid his tongue inside her mouth as he slid his mind inside hers. They’d done this before, too, but it was even more intimate this time. He felt her wonder and joy, her lust and need, everything painted in shades of gold. For a moment, they were lying in the grassy field from his dreams, naked bodies exposed to each other in the open air and sunlight. The next moment, they were back in this dim room, tangled together on white sheets under the benevolent light of the moon.

He broke away to press hot kisses against the elegant line of her throat, and she tipped her head back, welcoming his attentions. He was intoxicated by the feel of her against his lips, the salty-sweet flavor of sweat and skin and Rey. He nibbled down to her collarbone, then descended to the mark on her arm from the battle with the Praetorians. It looked like two hands reaching for each other—he’d
noticed that before, but never had it seemed more poignant than now, as they met as husband and wife.

“I’m going to kiss every single one of your scars,” he told her, his eyes pricking with tears at the thought of her strength and courage, the things she’d been through.

“Oh, Ben…” She trailed off, stroking his hair, and when he looked up at her, there were tears in her eyes, too. “Thank you.”

She didn’t need to thank him. This was an offering, freely given, and he wasn’t doing it just for her. He needed to map her with his lips and tongue, to chart every contour of her lithe, strong body. *I see you*, he told her across the bond as he licked along a thin white line over her ribs. *I know you. I adore you.*

He kissed the spaces in-between, too, moving from scars to smooth skin, nipping at the edge of her ribs and dipping his tongue into her belly button until she squirmed and pushed his head away. He ghosted a breath over her pussy—then dropped to her toes and kissed them one by one, enjoying her pleas for him to please just put his mouth on her.

“My mouth is on you,” he said, sucking gently at a spot on her right calf.

“You know what I mean.”

“Hm.” He licked the sensitive skin behind her knee, then pulled back, adopting a considering expression. “No, I don’t think I do.”

“Kiss my pussy,” she ordered him, finally losing patience. But her Force signature bubbled with mirth, and she couldn’t quite stop the smile blooming on her rosy lips. “Make me come with your tongue.”

“Well,” he said, surging up to suck a bruise into her inner thigh as she wriggled and moaned, “why didn’t you say so in the first place?”

Her indignant rebuttal immediately died as he sealed his mouth over her pussy. He licked her lips open, then pressed his tongue deeper, needing her taste like a drug. He slid his tongue into her, then moved up to her clit, circling it firmly.

Rey cried out and gripped his hair in both fists, using the leverage to grind against his mouth. Her legs hooked over his shoulders, and her heels dug into his back as she rocked against him. He smiled and sucked her clit, loving the way she tried to guide him with her hands and hips and legs. Rey was never content just to receive; she wanted to take, too.

“You taste so good,” he told her, burying his face deeper. His nose brushed her clit, and her tart sweetness burst on his tongue. She filled his senses; he breathed her in and tasted her and bathed in the unholy sounds pouring from her lips. He could do this forever, the need for air or sustenance or sleep be damned.

“Ben, fuck!” Rey jerked against him, and he knew she was going to come soon.

He nudged her clit more firmly with his nose, then pulled back to look up at her. “Yes, sweetheart?”

The sound she made was half-laugh, half-groan. “I don’t suppose I can convince you to fuck me right now?”

He smirked. “Not a chance.” Then he dove back in, working her clit with purpose as he slid two
fingers inside her. Her pussy squeezed him tightly, and he was as astounded as ever by her passionate responses to him. He ground his erection against the sheets, gasping his own need against her cunt.

“Ben.” She moaned his name as her legs twitched and her hips bucked. He placed his free hand on her belly to pin her down, stopping her from writhing away from his tongue or fingers. He wanted her to take every bit of pleasure he could provide.

Rey arched her back as much as she could with him pinning her hips, and then she screamed. Ben licked furiously as her cunt pulsed around his fingers, drawing the orgasm out.

Rey came down on a series of shuddering gasps that made Ben feel like the strongest, most talented man in the universe. He basked in the feeling, stroking her until she pushed at his forehead.

He grinned up at her. “Should I fuck you now?”

Rey’s face gleamed with sweat, and her chest rose and fell with rapid breaths. “Not yet,” she said, sounding winded. “Now you lie on your back.”

Ben rolled over instantly. As much as he’d teased her earlier, tonight wasn’t about complicated power dynamics or sensual games. It was about the two of them coming together in whatever way felt right.

Rey straddled him, then leaned down to lick the entire length of the scar that stretched from Ben’s chest to his forehead. He grunted and thrust up against her, wanting her tongue to trace him all over.

“This is mine,” Rey said, dragging her tongue over the mark again.

“All of me is yours.” Ben gripped her narrow waist and ground up against her.

She moved away from the scar, kissing her way down his abdomen to the bands of muscle that arrowed to his groin. She traced the stark lines with her tongue, taking her time as she gazed up at him with wicked intent. She was teasing him now, and Ben was delighted.

Then she opened her mouth over the tip of his cock and swirled her tongue around him, still staring at him, and Ben was going to lose his mind if she did that for very long. She bobbed her head down, taking half of him in her mouth before sliding back up and licking the head again.

“Fuck, sweetheart.” He stroked her with a shaking hand, groaning as she slid back down, taking him even deeper this time. He gathered her loose hair in his hands, holding it so it wouldn’t get in her way or impede his view of this miraculous sight. Rey smiled at him in gratitude, then applied herself earnestly to the task of trying to fit as much of him in her mouth as possible. Her hands cradled his balls, her palms an intoxicating mix of softness and calluses against his sensitive skin.

She wrapped her free hand around the base of his cock, pumping in time with her mouth’s hot slide. Soon he was panting and cursing under his breath, barely restraining himself from bucking up uncontrollably. “I need you, Rey,” he gasped. “Please, let me love you.”

She pulled off him, then crawled up his body. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly against his chest as he expressed his passion with ardent, desperate kisses. He felt like a youth again, all trembling eagerness and desperate longing, but unlike in his youth, the object of his desire was here and real, and she matched his passion with her own. Little hums and moans bubbled up from her throat each time she brushed her lips against his, and he reciprocated with his own grunts and gasps. It was like speaking a secret language, this harmony of sound and movement as they took each other in.
Ben rolled her to her back, then settled between her thighs. She hitched her knees up, making room for him. For a moment, he just stared down at her, marveling at her beatific smile and the freckles that dusted her cheeks and the reflection of the moon in her eyes. She was starlight and sunlight, sweet and strong, and he was going to love her forever.

He kissed her again, softly. “I’m going to make love to you, Rey.”

All talk of fucking was forgotten; this was something else entirely. The sealing of the contract made between them earlier in that forest clearing, and long before that. They were always going to end up like this.

“Please make love to me, Ben,” Rey said, returning his kiss with one of her own. “I need you inside me.”

Ben fitted himself against her, holding his breath in anticipation. Then he slid inside, smooth and slow, and it was like touching her for the first time. She took him so easily, gave of herself so generously, and as Ben stared down at Rey’s open, beautiful face, he felt a level of awe on par with watching a star be born. She wrapped her arms around his neck, smiling up at him as her body gloved him in wet heat.

He pulled out and pushed back in, and she followed the movement with a rock of her hips. It was like a dance, the way their bodies moved in tandem, but it was also an act of creation. They wove together delicate strands of love, respect, desire, and devotion, crafting a tapestry beautiful enough to make their joined hearts sing.

Ben couldn’t look away from her eyes. The unfathomable pleasure he felt moving inside her was mirrored by the joy of just staring at her. She met his gaze, smiling softly, and raised her hands to cup his cheeks in her palms. He shifted, bracing his forearms on either side of her head so he could tangle his hands in her hair.

There was always an urgency to sex, the need to race towards the culmination, but he found himself wishing this moment of intimate connection could last forever. He moved slowly, feeling no need to accelerate the pace or thrust harder. There would be time for that; for now, he just wanted to stare into her eyes and worship her with his body.

Her pleasure melted across the bond and into his mind like molten honey. He fed her his own in return, letting her feel his joy, hunger, and awe.

“Ben,” she breathed, parting her lips around a ragged breath. This prolonged eye contact was intense, especially when he could feel her body cinching tighter around him and her mind beginning to blur in anticipation of an oncoming orgasm.

Ben moved one hand down between them to rub her clit. He picked up the pace, rolling his hips into her until she jolted up on the bed a little with each thrust. His balls tightened, and a familiar tension was growing in his lower belly and prickling up his spine; he wouldn’t be able to hold on much longer.

“Come with me, love,” he said as he thrust again and again, working his thumb and his cock in tandem to bring Rey to the precipice. He was still staring into her pleasure-darkened eyes, still maintaining that intense intimacy even as his movements grew hard and jerky.

He felt Rey’s orgasm before it happened—a rush of desperate need in her mind, the tightening of her body around him—and then she was squirming and gasping and crying out, her eyes going half-lidded as joy rippled from her body into him. Ben let go with a final thrust and a shout, the tension
snapping as he poured himself into her on hot waves.

“Sweetheart,” he groaned as the orgasm went on and on, a release so profound that his toes cramped and his vision briefly whited out. When he came back to himself, Rey was smiling up at him. Two tears were suspended in her eyes like stars in the night sky.

“That was perfect,” she told him, stroking his face before leaning up to kiss him. “Thank you, Ben. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” he breathed against her lips. “Rey Solo, I love you so much.”

#

They cuddled in bed after that, talking about everything and nothing: the wedding, their friends, places they wanted to see, hopes and dreams and random musings. Above them, the sky blackened further, and then a ribbon of green light danced across it.

Rey gasped and sat bolt upright. “What was that?”

Ben grinned at her enthusiasm. He’d been waiting all night for this, anticipating just how excited she would get. “The aurora. It’s an effect of the solar wind disrupting the magnetosphere—charged particles are emitted by the sun and strike particles in the upper levels of the atmosphere, which causes—”

Rey burst into laughter. “Ben Solo, are you turning an extremely romantic moment into a science lecture?”

He blushed, then grinned as he tugged her back down. “Maybe a little.”

They lay side by side, staring up at the dazzling display. Green, blue, and violet arced across the midnight sky. It was brighter than any aurora Ben had ever seen, and he was delighted that the entire universe was conspiring to make their wedding night perfect.

“Did you know this would happen?” Rey asked as a flicker of yellow chased an emerald wave across the sky.

He turned his head to press a kiss to her cheek. “Why do you think I brought you here?”

Rey sighed and snuggled closer, resting her head on his shoulder. “You really are astounding, you know. If I ever tried to plan a romantic date, it’d probably involve us scaling the wreckage of a Star Destroyer.”

“I would love that,” he said honestly. “I’ll love anything, so long as I get to do it with you.”

“You good, sweet man.” Rey nuzzled him, kissing one of the many scars peppering his torso. “Luckily, you never have to do anything without me ever again.”

As a comfortable silence fell over the room, Ben marveled at his incredible life. A year ago, he had been… well, that wasn’t something to dwell on on his wedding night. But he certainly hadn’t been this— happy, hopeful, wildly in love. He’d never imagined that a beautiful woman would call him a good, sweet man, much less that he would actually believe it.

Above them, the sky sang with curves and glimmers like jewels strewn across the dark. Inside this warm, cozy room, Ben held his own jewel in his arms. A galaxy of possibility awaited them, and he felt the echoes of that potential everywhere. The future lay in the stars, but it was also here, in this
bed, in the form of a woman. She was the question he’d been asking his entire life. She was the answer, too.

How did a man redeem himself?

Through love.

Chapter End Notes

How was that for a wedding night?? There's just the epilogue left now! Thank you so much for reading, and I hope you enjoyed this chapter! As always, comments are very much appreciated.

Thanks to nancylovesreylo and MyJediLife for giving me advice on this chapter and the epilogue!
Five years later

“Open yourself to the energy of the Force. Do it without judgment—just sit, breathe, and feel it moving through you. Then, when you have an idea of it fixed in your head, I would love it if you shared that perception with me.”

Rey moved up and down the rows of students, correcting meditation postures here and there. Her pupils ranged in age from six to sixteen and possessed varying levels of Force sensitivity. Nancy, seven years old and prone to meditating with her eyes screwed shut and her forehead creased in a glower, was the most recent addition, having been referred to the Solo Force Academy after an unfortunate incident involving a levitating Loth-cat. Nic, the eldest, had been studying with Ben and Rey for four years now, as long as the school had been open. She dipped frequently into the dark side of the Force, but with Ben’s guidance, she’d been managing the balance well.

“I see it,” Nancy said, her brow furrowing even more. “It’s a tree.”

Rey crouched down before the little girl, intrigued by the description. “You see the Force as a tree?”

She nodded. “With white and black leaves. It’s a good climbing tree.”

“That’s excellent,” Rey said, marveling again at how diverse her students’ visualizations of the Force were. Spiderwebs, oceans, starfields, circuitry… now apparently a tree. “Focus on the leaves of the tree. Study both the white and black ones, and think about the wind moving through them and how the tree’s life force connects all of them.”

The door at the back of the classroom opened, and a grin bloomed on Rey’s face as she saw a familiar, black-clad figure silhouetted there. Ben’s broad shoulders filled the entrance. It was raining outside, and he stopped to wipe his boots off and shake his hair out like a dog. Then he moved soundlessly to the side of the room, leaning against the wall to watch. Rey blew him a kiss, smiling when he snatched it out of the air.

Rey tended to run the meditation sessions, since she had more patience for it than Ben did. Ben taught history and politics, and they both worked with the children on combat, philosophy, and Force powers. The curriculum was flexible and changed frequently, depending on the interests and needs of each child. There were currently twenty children enrolled, most of whom lived on the premises of the sprawling complex on the outskirts of Labryyk.

They’d chosen Myrtah as their new home for a few reasons. There was a Force nexus in the surrounding forest, and the planet was undeniably beautiful, but Rey also appreciated the chance to give back to the community after destroying the concert hall. Besides, this was where the First Order had finally been broken—it felt right to start a new beginning here.

And the Solos definitely wanted this to be a new beginning—not just for themselves, but for future generations of Force users. They taught balance, encouraging their pupils not to fear the dark, but to learn how to navigate it. To avoid the abandonment issues that had pushed Ben towards Snoke, the Solos insisted that parents visit their children frequently, and students spent their summers at home. Those without happy homes to return to were, of course, welcome to stay at the Academy, where
they spent the summers playing and rambling over the forested campus. It was Rey’s personal mission to ensure every pupil had a healthy, happy childhood.

The Academy had had a slow start, since many parents were loathe to trust their children to the unusual combination of the last Jedi and the former Supreme Leader of the First Order, but as time passed and the Academy garnered nothing but positive reviews, the mistrust had settled. Now, five years after they’d destroyed the First Order, the Solos were highly respected members of the community and employed many Labryykan locals.

Myrtah wasn’t the only world that had settled into comfortable new rhythms. The galaxy was at peace at last, now that independent governance had been re-established on the worlds the First Order had conquered. Democracy wasn’t universal, and, as always, the wildly disparate individual worlds often struggled to negotiate and collaborate, but overall, things were running smoothly. Leia Organa was a crucial voice in the newly re-established Galactic Senate, although she always made sure to spend a few weeks a month at home in Labryyk, close to Ben and Rey, who lived on the grounds of the school in a cozy cottage surrounded by Rey’s favorite flowers.

Rey wrapped up the meditation session, and the children opened their eyes and stretched, talking in excited whispers about what they’d seen in the Force and what they were looking forward to that day. Aurora and Jenthyr, ten-year-old Lekku twins, squeaked when they saw Ben and rushed at him, demanding “giant hugs.” The little Lekku were infatuated with the man they’d christened their “giant,” and Ben might roll his eyes about it in private, but Rey noticed the pink flush that raced over his cheeks any time they demanded hugs. He enjoyed the attention, even though it still baffled him that children could trust him so implicitly.

“Don’t they know I’m a recovering galactic dictator?” he’d grumped after the first time a child—rambunctious, mischievous Riri—demanded a piggyback ride. But he’d given the piggyback ride with galloping enthusiasm, and it was at that moment that Rey had decided she definitely wanted children with this man.

The students filtered outside to play and practice Force levitation with each other, none of them particularly minding the rain. Rey watched them go fondly, then shut the door behind them—and locked it.

“Well, well,” Ben said, a smirk tilting his plush lips. “Looks like you have plans for—”

He didn’t get a chance to finish the sentence, because Rey ran at him and leapt into his arms, smashing her mouth against his. He staggered back against the wall, laughing into her impatient kisses, and gripped her ass to hoist her higher. Rey wrapped her legs around him, grinding against his already-stiffening erection. She plunged her fingers into his damp hair and traced the tips of his ears.

“Did you miss me?” he asked, chuckling against her lips. “I was only gone for a few days, sweetheart.”

He’d been on a “boys’ trip” with Finn, Chewie, Paul, and Poe, which Rey was still rolling her eyes over. Ever since the bachelor party for Poe, Finn, and Rose’s wedding four years ago, the men took a few days off every year to engage in a variety of irresponsible shenanigans. One year had featured a womp rat sniping competition, another had included pod racing, and all of them had involved alcohol.

“A few days is too long,” she told Ben, peppering his face with frantic kisses.

He seemed to agree, because he slid his tongue deep into her mouth, devouring her with ferocious
hunger. He carried her to a pile of meditation cushions and set her down, quickly settling between her legs and caging her in with his arms. He rolled his hips against her, and Rey gasped at the sharp shock of pleasure that rocketed through her.

“I missed you so much.” Ben broke away from her lips just long enough to strip her gray tunic off, launching the breastband after it. Rey reciprocated, tugging his tunic off over his head. Then it was skin-on-skin, their bodies moving in familiar rhythms as they eagerly soaked each other in.

“So for Kirsten and Nic’s upcoming quest to explore the dark, I was thinking—” Luke, the school’s resident Force ghost and another instructor, broke off with a yelp. “Seriously? Again?” When Rey glanced to the side, the glowing blue outline of her former mentor had his hand over his eyes.

“Do Force ghosts ever knock?” Ben wondered out loud, and Rey buried her laugh in his shoulder.

“Do you two ever get tired of fornicating like porgs all over the place?”

Ben considered for a few moments. “No.”

Luke shook his head and laughed. “I’ll come back later.” He vanished, and Rey resumed attacking Ben with her mouth and hands.

“I love you,” she told him between frantic kisses.

He trailed a hand over her back, then cupped her ass, pulling her more firmly against him. “I love you, too. Coming home to you is like seeing the sun again after days of rain.”

At the sweet words, Rey burst into tears.

Ben stilled, then drew back to look at her face. Upon seeing the sheer amount of liquid pouring from her eyes, his expression became alarmed. “Sweetheart? Is everything all right?” He sat up, tugging her with him until they knelt facing each other.

“All amazing,” Rey sobbed. Her shoulders shook, and she couldn’t stop smiling even through the deluge of tears.

“Okay…” Ben still looked baffled and a little panicked. He pressed a hand to her cheek, then touched her shoulder, then stroked along her side, as if he couldn’t decide what would be the most comforting. “You say everything’s amazing, but you’re crying like it’s not.”

“I know.” Rey laughed, then hiccuped, then cried some more. She shook her head at how ridiculous she was being, but she couldn’t stop. “You know how I’ve been moody lately?”

“Yes?” Ben’s brow furrowed. “But that’s nothing to be ashamed of. You’re still only half as moody as me on my good days.”

Rather than attempting more words, Rey grabbed his hand and pressed it flat against her stomach. Ben’s brow furrowed as he studied his fingers… and then his eyes shot comically wide. He looked up at her with the most excited, nervous expression Rey had ever seen on his handsome face. “Are you saying… is that…”

“Yes!” Rey grinned and nodded, a fresh wash of tears blurring her sight. Then she was being tackled back onto the pillows, Ben’s strong arms wrapping around her.

“Rey, oh Force, kriff, fucking fuck—” He reared back in alarm. “I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t be manhandling you—”
“It’s fine,” she assured him, tugging him closer. “I won’t break.”

He rocked her back and forth, babbling incoherent sentences against her hair. “My beautiful girl, oh holy fucking shit, you’re—you did—and I—there’s a baby in you!”

Rey laughed at the way he nearly shouted those words. “There is. I found out yesterday when I went to the doctor.”

He kissed her hard, then pulled away to look down at her. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there with you.” Now his eyes glistened with tears. “I should have been there.”

“Shh.” She traced his beloved face with the pads of her fingers. “This way was fun, too. It was exciting having this big secret—although I had planned all these elaborate ways to tell you, but then my hormones got in the way, and I ruined it by crying all over you.”

He shook his head. “You could never ruin it. Force, Rey, I’m so happy.” His cheeks were pink, and his goofy smile matched her own. “I’m amazed it happened so fast.”

“Well, we have been trying rather enthusiastically.” Not that much more enthusiastically than normal, to be fair—neither Ben nor Rey had lost their insatiable appetite for each other—but they’d been having so much sex over the last few months that occasionally Rey had found herself walking bowlegged and wincing through combat drills.

“We’re going to be parents,” Ben breathed. “I never imagined I would be a father.” A flash of pain abruptly crossed his face, and Rey knew he was thinking about Han.

“You’re going to be a good father,” she told him, raking her fingers through his damp hair. “I have no doubts about that.”

“But what if—”

His sudden vulnerability hurt Rey’s heart, so she gripped his face in both hands and forced him to look straight into her eyes. “What if nothing,” she said firmly. “You are the best man I know, Ben Solo, and you’re going to be the best father. You and I are going to shower this child with so much love. They’ll never know hunger or deprivation, and they’ll never feel less valued because of who they are or their Force abilities.”

He nodded, and some of the distress on his face bled away. “You’re right. We’ll give them everything.”

She kissed him softly. “Honestly, Ben, I think what you’ve been through—what we’ve both been through—will make us better parents. We know how dangerous and lonely this galaxy can be. We know what it feels like to grow up in less-than-ideal circumstances. And who could protect a child better than us?”

“No one,” he vowed fiercely. “I’d butcher anyone who tried to hurt my kid.”

Rey giggled and kissed him again. “We might not have to jump straight to butchery, but that’s exactly the point. She’ll be so safe—”

Ben’s jaw dropped, and his eyes widened. “She?”

“Oh.” Rey bit her lip and smiled up at him. “Did I forget to mention that? The doctor says we’re going to have a little girl.”
Ben looked dazed. “A little girl,” he repeated. “I’m going to have a daughter.”

“I hope she has your hair.”

“I hope she has your _everything_,” Ben said vehemently. “You’re so brave and wonderful and strong and… oh, fuck, Rey, I think I’m going to cry again.”

“Me, too.”

They held each other for a long time after that, alternately crying and laughing, kissing whenever they weren’t speculating about what their daughter would be like. One thing was clear: she would never be normal, not with parents like Rey and Ben.

No, she would be _extraordinary_.

“Ben,” Rey said in the lull between kissing and talking, “I really did want to have sex with you.”

“Oh!” Ben propped himself up on his elbows and grinned down at her. “Then by all means, let’s finish what we started.”

He stripped her with reverent care, then shucked off his own trousers with less ceremony. Once they were naked, tangling limbs and tongues and minds together, he rolled over until Rey was on top. “Like this,” he said. “But you have to sit on my face first.”

Rey laughed, her heart soaring like an X-wing even though her body pulsed with earthier needs. She scooted up gladly, sighing blissfully when Ben seized her hips and tugged her down to his mouth. He was as enthusiastic as ever, his licks, nibbles, and sucks accompanied by groans and filthy compliments. This time, though, the dirty talk included a mix of giddy sentiments that Rey probably would have found funny if she hadn’t been so close to orgasm.

“You taste so good, sweetheart… Fuck, I could lick this sweet pussy forever. You’re going to be the best mom, oh, fuck, _kriff_, I can’t believe I put a baby in you… Yeah, that’s it, move on me. Give me everything. I want to eat you alive, my gorgeous, amazing, _wonderful_ wife, oh holy _shit—_”

Rey broke when he slid two fingers inside her while nibbling at her swollen clit. She spasmed over him, drenching his chin, and he growled and lapped at her like she was the best thing he’d ever tasted.

When Rey finally came down, winded and throbbing, she tried to lift off him, but he just pulled her tighter against his mouth. Huffing out an amused breath, Rey tugged at his hair until he finally let go. He pouted up at her, all glossy red lips and sex-hazed eyes. “I was enjoying that.”

“I was, too.” Rey grinned at him. “But now I want to ride you.”

His face lit up like she’d just announced an impromptu holiday that incorporated all his favorite things. “Whatever my wife wants, she gets.”

Rey would never get tired of hearing those words: _my wife_. She moved back until she was straddling his thick, perfect cock, and then she gripped him to hold him still while she sank down on him. She moaned a little as she took him to the hilt.

“Fuck,” Ben said, kicking his head back into the pillows. “Rey, this is… _so_…”

“I feel it, too.” They had done this a thousand times—probably far more than that—but every single
time she felt a visceral thrill at how big he was and how perfectly he filled her. Her body stretched to accommodate him, and it was nigh-miraculous how their mutual pleasure swelled across the Force, building like a tidal wave.

She lifted up on her knees, her intimate flesh gripping him as if it didn’t want to let go. Ben made a choked sound, and when Rey sank back down again, he groaned loud and long. His fingers dug into her hips as she rode him, and she sensed the moment he panicked about touching a pregnant woman so roughly, because he jerked his hands back as if they’d been scalded, his eyes going wide.

Rey grabbed his hands and returned them to her hips. “Seriously, Ben. You have to treat me the same as you always have.”

“I am not going to challenge you to a duel.”

Rey laughed. “All right, maybe no more duels or extremely aggressive sparring. But Ben… this doesn’t change who we are. I’m not fragile just because I’m pregnant.”

Another grin burst over Ben’s face, brilliant as the rising sun. He squeezed her, then bucked up into her hard enough to make her gasp. “You’re very talkative right now. Maybe I’m not distracting you enough.”

“Maybe,” she agreed, but then Ben really applied himself to the work of distracting her, and Rey lost the capacity for speech.

His hips pumped, his hands guiding her movements. Rey braced a hand on one of the pillows, gasping at the way he’d seized control from the bottom. His fingers drifted to her nipples to pinch and twist, then dropped to her clit, and Rey was lost.

“Ben, please—” she moaned as she rocked against him, loving the intensity he’d abruptly unleashed. “Make me come again, please.”

He rubbed firm circles against her clit, and Rey found herself slamming down to meet his urgent thrusts. The hand that wasn’t braced against the pillow stroked his hair, his face, his scar. She’d never felt the future echoed so profoundly in the movements of their bodies. She was his, and he was hers, and now they had created another person to belong to.

“You’re everything,” Ben said as he worked Rey towards the orgasm of her life. “Rey… I never knew life could be this good.”

Me, neither, she thought across the bond as tears welled in her eyes and her heart sang a chorus just for him. I’m so happy, Ben.

I am, too.

They devolved into gasps and stuttered movements, both of them too close to the edge to maintain control. And then, and then, and then…

Rey burst into ecstasy like a ship breaking atmosphere. She was aloft, weightless, suspended in infinity as her body clenched and shuddered. The noises pouring out of her mouth were nonsensical, but she released them gladly. Everything she had belonged to Ben.

He followed with a few grunts and a long, strangled moan. Rey basked in primal possessiveness as his release pulsed into her. He had given her his essence, and although he’d done it before, each time was as sacred as the last.
They came down with gasps and passionate whispers, their sweat-slicked chests pressed together. Rey kissed Ben with her whole heart, marveling at the path her life had taken. From Jakku to the Resistance to Ahch-To to this.

*Join me*, Ben had said so long ago, his hand held out to her.

Now, Rey had. And in so doing, she’d finally found the thing she’d been searching for all her life.

A family.
So they did eventually find the word for what they are: family. ❤

Well... here we are. The end of this truly massive fic. It's been exactly three months since I started it, which means exactly three months since I discovered this amazing community and the joy of writing Reylo. This has been a truly fulfilling experience, and while it's bittersweet to say goodbye to this story, there are many more to be told!

Thank you so much for reading and commenting. You encouraged me and cheered me on at a time when I wasn't feeling great about my writing, and I am eternally grateful for the support. Thanks to House Flydam and everyone in The Writing Den, especially my fellow sprinters, who are part of the reason this updated so quickly. Thanks to the Reylo Fanfic Book Club for supporting me, thanks to Beautiful_and_Broken for the lovely moodboard, and thanks to everyone who has let me know that this fic meant something to them.

I would love to hear what you all thought of this epilogue, as well as everything that came before! Did it wrap up the way you expected? What were your favorite moments? Favorite sex scenes? Any and all comments bring me joy. I'll try to catch up with old comments, now that I'm not sprinting to get this done!

If you want to find me online, I'm on Twitter at @Andabatae1 and sort of on Tumblr (aka I made one post once and have no idea how it works) at @andabatae-writes

I'll be tackling some fun, short AU pieces next, but if you haven't checked out my one-shots yet, here they are!

First Touch - inspired by the teaser trailer for The Rise of Skywalker
Nighttime Confessions - inspired by the good people of The Writing Den, who requested a fic with simultaneous flying, crying, and sex.

It's been such an honor writing this. Thank you all so much again! May the Force be with you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!